

Author and Authorship: a Barthes-Foucauldian Plural Perspective

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Abstract. With the growth of analytical approaches to literature and the rise of interests in personal responses to arts and poetics, text and textuality have gained momentum to question enduring declarations for the work as the canon of authority. In the setting, author, as the sole point of reference for interpretation and truth in the text, has been at the risk of losing grounds and being reformed by the objects of his target. Integrated to this, is the theories developed in favor of reader and readership to seriously question the claims for the originality and authenticity of meaning in the text. This paper seeks to address this issue by drawing upon the concepts and approaches developed by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Both of the poststructuralist thinkers are at the juncture of struggles to free the text from the dominance and influence of the author. The researcher indicates that both of the theorists are potentially working to open up literature to plural voices, to rival exclusive role of the interlocutor and to decentralize the intended meaning.

Key Words: author, authorship, Barthes, Foucault, plural.

1 INTRODUCTION

By tradition, literary canons have credited the frontiers of poetics with assigning authority, sanctity and power to a selected number of literary and intellectual works. Accordingly, borrowing Roland Barthes's words, author himself is produced by the culture to reflect a society preoccupied with ownership, credit and with prestige of the individual. In that culture, the author has always been closer to his work, in a position of backing his work, its producer and its father. His presence, according to Michel Foucault's reading, has been the sign of power and authority in the practice of social discourse.

In essence, traditional views characterize author by the origin of the work, the source of its message and meaning, and the sole authority for interpretation. In accordance with that, the author represents his intention into a unified reality with the language as a transparent medium to reflect the truth. Thus, the reader would start reading the work with the assumption that there is a route through the language of author to the final signified. He/she is expected to collect all the echoes from the storehouse of the work to decipher the rhythmical voice of the author.

Contemporary thinkers, however, seem to be indifferent to the proposition, and contemporary readers are deaf to the call. It is assumed in this paper that 'if the author compromises over the responsibility and ownership in/of his work, then the text will be the locus for the feast of visions'. The following discussion falls in two parts. At first, Barthes's radical response to traditional notions of author and authorship is conceptualized, and in the second part, Foucault's "author-function" vis-à-vis the historical abstraction is elaborated. At the end, the results will be discussed.

2 ABSENCE OF THE AUTHOR

Post-traditional scholars venture out into the problem to challenge long-established meaning of the concepts like 'author and authorship'. Among them, two intellectuals who showed interest and courage to deconstruct the notion were Barthes and Foucault. More controversial idea is that of Barthes whose paper 'The Death of the Author' (1967) inaugurates, in a radical sense, thinking of the author as absent from the text. Primarily, his every attempt to present new ideas on the issue of writing and to discuss its different aspects has resulted in arguing against and undermining the authority of author figure over his product.

Barthes tries to open the discussion by drawing upon the studies of the linguists who represent that enunciation is not a valid, rather an empty, process. His theory is a radical statement against a need for a "person of the interlocutors", a person to be allowed to the discussion, to express clearly and distinctly what is to go on and what is to be meant in the text. We are invited to commiserate with him over the unfortunate fate of the author who is, linguistically, never more than the instance of writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance of saying I: language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it. (Barthes, 1967, p. 148)

Resting on his position, we find the author missing in the text other than in the process and instance of producing it. Barthes entraps the author in the linguistic domain to, paradoxically, remove his exclusive presence from the text. Through this perspective, the I, either overt or covert in the text, is a single instance of an expression and it denotes the grammatical subject rather than a real person. Language further problematizes the concept when deconstructionists show that author is in the control of language, and, in the literary texts, there are instances when the text means something which was supposed not to be meant or not to be said. Texts have the structures not different from that of language, and language distorts the picture that the author intends to render as reality.

Poststructuralists almost unanimously reject the traditional view that author is the origin of the text, the source of its meaning, and the only authority for its interpretation. They dismiss the claims that he exists both before and after the work, lives and dies for that. Barthes also suggests "In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate ..." (p. 148). In his words, writer exists only in the process of writing and prepares to exit as the text develops into the hands of readers. Discussing the subject of "the dead author", Brian McHale writes in *Postmodern Fiction* (1993) that "Writing, says Barthes, is that neutral composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative, where all identity is lost ..." (p. 200).

On the other hand, Barthes wishes to privilege the readers with the production of meanings in the text. In favor of meaning liberation, he suggests that literature does depend on the perceptions and conceptions of the readers. Borrowing Andrew Benet and Nicholas Royle's (1995) words, in this sense, the "attempt to settle questions of interpretations through appeals to intended meaning of the author should always be viewed with at least deep suspicion" (p. 25). For Barthes, removal of author concurs with the birth of reader and equals to the survival of text. The text would survive since every reader would rejoice at incorporating an echo of him/her in it without a controlling agent. Hence, Barthes's position is a strong urge for the plurality of authorship and absence of authoritative voice in the text. Foucault, as well, claims for partial disappearance of the author from the text.

3 RETURN OF THE AUTHOR

Although Foucault (1969) begins and ends his paper, stating that “What does it matter who is speaking?” and “What difference does it make who is speaking?”, he attributes some functions to the author and endows him with some degrees of authenticity in the text. The questions that he raises and the traits that he associates with his coined term of “author-function” seem not to divert him markedly from Barthes’s radical stance. However, his methodology to sketch out the performance of “author-function” is an attempt to avoid the extremity of both tradition and Barthes.

Foucault pictures those modes of existence for author, which have continued to thrive on particular modes of “circulation”, “valorization”, “attribution”, and appropriation in the post-middle and modern literature. Through the elaborate discussion on “author-function”, Foucault wants to, pre-cautiously, bring to life the dead author. He says: “It would be pure romanticism, however, to imagine a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state, in which fiction would be put at the disposal of everyone and would develop without passing through something like a necessary or constraining figure” (Foucault, 1969, p. 186).

Foucault in his paper argues that author’s function is formed through the complex operation of social, cultural and historical discourses. Even his name functionally differs from other proper names. He notes some serious points about the significance and plurality of proper names; however, with author, he goes on to claim that the names of the authors perform within the social and cultural contexts and serve as a means for classification, grouping, exclusion or canonization of the works. Foucault indicates that “The author’s name is not, therefore, just a proper name like the rest ... an author’s name is not simply an element in discourse ... it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse” (p. 178).

Moreover, he discusses a number of discourses that are endowed with the systems of thought and action. For instance, he states that “author-function” is linked to the legal system, suggestive of the ownership for a work raising a responsibility for transgressive statements which are needed punishment. Sean Burke, in *The Death and the Return of the Author* (1998), claims that for Foucault “... the idea of author exercising a jurisdiction over his own texts has not only been accepted in principle but is seen to be too narrow and restrictive in particular cases: Aristotle is, in a sense, the author of Aristotelianism ...” (p. 91).

Foucault decides that “author-function” does affect the text in some other ways. He makes distinction that “A private letter may have a signer ... it does not have an author. An anonymous text posted on wall probably has a writer- but not an author. The author-function is, therefore, characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society” (p. 179). Besides, Burke argues that if one were only to read the beginning and end of Foucault’s work, one should suspect that ‘What is an Author?’ might be “a no less intransigently anti-authorial tract than Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’”. Yet, having made a number of preliminary and schematic observations on the author-function, Foucault introduces the centerpiece of his discussion” (1998, p. 90) which distances him from Barthes. Foucault considers author as a reality, at least in the past and present texts, and his discussion is a calculated liberation of author from the spell of death sentence.

On the other hand, his discussion on “author-function” is an attempt to deconstruct the existing hierarchy, of ‘function’ as subordinate to ‘meaning’, which has given the work its vitality in certain discourses over the history. Foucault wants to show that it is the mechanics of existence, not the themes or concepts attributed to author, that has set him in motion within the social discourse. To this end, he sidelines the expressive value of the work that has

dominated literary circles over the centuries and perpetuated author's voice. As Foucault anatomizes the constructed role of author and tries to skip the limits of tradition, he reveals that "author-function" has been subject to modifications over the history, hence author-meaning. He states that "doing so [or digging into the performance of author-function] means overturning the traditional problem" which still continues to subsist (p. 185). In this way, we will

no longer (be) raising the questions 'How can a free subject penetrate the substance of things and give it meaning? How can it activate the rules of a language from within and thus give rise to the designs which are properly its own?' Instead, these questions will be raised: 'How, under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules?' (Foucault, 1969, pp. 185-6)

His play with the questions is, in effect, to deprive the author from assuming the role of sole regulator and, hence, assigning thematic significance to the work in the function of discourse. It seems that Foucault would obliquely recognize some aspects of Barthes's statements. He suggests that "The truth is quite contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of signification which fills a work; the author does not precede his work, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses ..." (p. 186). He lays stress on his point, stating that "... we can say today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression.... This means that it is interplay of signs arranged less according to the signified content than according to the very nature of signifier" (p. 175).

As a consequence, Foucault seems to call for a form of culture in which fiction and proliferation of its meaning would not be limited by the author figure. As author starts to lose his grip on the significations of the concepts, and as our look into culture of reading changes, "author-function" and modes of its existence will not remain constant. The polysemic nature of text will function according to another mode and "system of constraint—one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced" (Foucault, 1969, p. 186). What to matter for the readers and users, then, would be: if they can appropriate the discourse for themselves irrespective of who speaks. It will be the time to look for possible rooms for various subjects and subject-functions. Foucault states: "behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: 'What difference does it make who is speaking?'" (p. 187).

4 CONCLUSION

This research sought to reexamine the perseverance of idiom of truth in literary works posited by the authoritative voice of the author. To address this question, the so-called impeccable locutions were re-inspected with reference to the challenging debates put forward recently by two poststructuralist thinkers, namely, Barthes and Foucault. It was shown that both of the thinkers struggle to downturn the vibrating tune of author in the text taking advantage of their particular methodology. As one of the earliest to elaborate on the topic, Barthes contends that text is no longer a secure locus for inscribing an unparalleled message by the scriptor, and the enunciation is void of any value. Barthes adopts subversive approach to the concepts of work and authorship, and engulfs the author to its doom in the text. He replaces the rule of the author with the role of the reader(s) to pluralize the meaning and ownership of the text. Foucault, as well, poses a challenge to the legitimacy of an unrivalled meaning in the text, but he moderates the pace of Barthes by re-inviting author to the text and conceptualizes a collective authorship. His approach is an insight into a pragmatic role of author throughout

the history where, he claims, function preceded meaning. By subordinating author's meaning to his function, Foucault wants to unsettle the hierarchy and pave the way for subsequent consequences: "author-function" has over the history been subject to redefinition from discourse to discourse, hence author's expression. It was shown in this paper that the re-appropriation of the notions of author and authorship, by the two scholars, was an attempt to unsettle the metaphysical signification of author-centricity in contemporary literature. The result is indicative of liberating the text from the spell of exclusively assertive voice.

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