



**What/Who is an Author?**

*Exploring the relationship between the 'writer'  
and the 'work' in Foucault's 'What is an Author?'*

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**Behavioural Studies Working Paper Series 2009/01**

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## Abstract

Problematizing the notion(s) of the 'author', the notion(s) of 'writing', and the notion(s) of an author's 'work', Foucault seeks to make a particular sense of intellectual discourse and discursivity in his piece 'What is an Author' (1984). As (I believe) Foucault struggled with his engagement in such notions – throughout his life, and throughout the biography of textual narratives which he left behind – so too, I find myself asking questions of a similar vein: For what and why do I write? What does that writing mean? Who am I to write and how am I constructed as I do? What is the purpose of my work? And what can, will, should/could make me an 'author'?

This paper is currently a *work-in-progress*, developed out of a need to explore and clarify/strengthen my own position as an academic researcher of social and cultural behaviour and experience. Subject-positioning is no doubt a fluid, on-going, never-ending process but at various points in time it becomes useful (to me at least), to stand up and take stock of who I am (in this context). What I offer here is a close – very close – reading of Foucault's text as a way to map a specific, or particular, sort of terrain from which I might gain that necessary, albeit temporary, perspective which I am looking/searching for. It is hoped that I might then be able to incorporate this into the research that I do: an exploration of the relationship between an author and his/her work into the larger mosaic of subject/self discursive positioning within which I intend to work.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, what is an author, author function, writing, academic work

*On Being and Becoming an Author*

Michel Foucault argues that ‘the coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences’ (1984, p. 101). Compared with the fundamental unit of the author and the work, any reconstruction of the history of the concept, literary genre or school of philosophy seems relatively weak and/or secondary. My task here is to unpack the notions associated with being an author and, in doing so, perhaps, unpack some of the meanings of such notions in useful and productive ways. For what is Foucault, if not an author? And what function does that create as we embark upon our own individual ‘authorship’?

At this point in my career, I am only just emerging as a budding academic, growing intellectual, insecure subject. As I have begun to work through and develop a research project for myself, almost immediately, I became confronted with issues and problems concerning my voice(s), role(s), position(s), subjectivity(ies). Foucault’s work, appears to provide a window of opportunities: abilities—not necessarily answers—but rather capacities with which I might engage with issues of the self as my-self, the self as researcher, and the potential future-self that, like Foucault, might leave behind and beyond my resting body. Self-centredness aside, this piece is, more importantly, geared towards developing an ethic toward writing/constructing the object of my proposed study. And it is because of this that I am driven to explore such notions of the ‘author’, the ‘writing’, and the ‘work’.

In ‘What is an Author’, Foucault (1984) does not offer a socio-historical analysis of the author’s persona. Certainly, he suggests, it would be worth examining how the author has become individualized in a culture such as ours: what status has been given to the author, at what moment studies of authenticity and attribution of the author began, in what kind of system of valorisation the author is involved, at what point we began to recount the lives of authors rather than heroes, and how this fundamental category of ‘the-man-and-his-work’ criticism began (1984, p. 101). However, Foucault instead wants to deal solely with the relationship between the text and the author: ‘the manner in which the text points to this ‘figure’ that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it’ (1984, p. 101). It is this ‘figure’ which writes whom Foucault is interested in.

At the core of this paper is a need to develop my voice, and in this particular instance, to develop it from a strictly (read: primarily/‘pure’) Foucauldian work. Methodologically I am, and have been, in a

more general sense developing a framework from which to study mothers, mothering and discourses/representations of motherhood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I began my journey toward this in feminism and feminist theory, and subsequently, found myself constructing a heavily feminist lens from which to ask such questions of authorship and ‘for whom’ am I, will I be, writing? In this context, a gendered, sexual, feminist space, those questions take on particular forms, different in part, to whether I asked those same questions in other contexts such as postmodern or psychoanalytic contexts for example. It is with this realisation that I have chosen to write here from what might be considered one specific, ‘isolated’, possibly/probably limited context. Foucault’s suggestion of ‘this thing that writes’ is useful insofar as it provides a ‘single aspect’, a ‘one part’, a ‘fragment’ to which many other pieces, thoughts, understandings about the issue of authorship might be added, and to which it might add. Indeed such issues arise across a number of disciplines and activities, both within the academy as well as beyond it. It is therefore an interesting, if not curious, inquiry of investigation for a wide range of pursuits.

Following Foucault’s text closely, I traverse among such questions of what matter it makes about who it is that is speaking, and whether or not the author has, as some might argue, really ‘disappeared’. Along with Foucault I discuss a number of notions associated with the issue of authorship: notions of the work; the writing; an author’s name; and the function of the author. I ask repeatedly, throughout this piece, the question of what is an author? But, like Foucault, I do not promise, nor intend to provide, any definitive answer to that question. Indeed I find myself questioning who, then, Foucault is and whether or not he considered himself (as well as whether we can consider him now) an author? Of what relationship does he/do we share between that of our selves, our writing, and our work? And in what means do these issues, problems, notions become constructed and embodied, enacted and performed, throughout the ‘bigger discursive picture’ of that which is all around us: the work it is that we are doing, and its relationship to the work of others.

*So what does it matter who is speaking?*

Beckett formulates the theme with which Foucault begins to explore the indifference which appears to be one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing. By calling it an ethical principle of writing, Foucault sees this indifference not so much about a trait characterising the manner in which one speaks and writes, but rather as being a kind of ‘immanent rule, taken up over and over again, never fully applied, not designating writing as something completed, but dominating

it as a practice' (1984, p. 101). 'What does it matter who is speaking?' is perhaps a dilemma of detachment between the paper and the pen, the practices of which occur between those spaces of an author and his/her writing.

Tracing two major themes of this indifference principle, Foucault argues first of all that we can say 'today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression' (1984, p. 102): it refers only to itself and is identified within its own unfolded exteriority. This means that it is in an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier. 'Writing unfolds like a game (*jeu*) that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits' (1984, p. 102). In writing, suggests Foucault, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, i.e. to pin a subject within language, but rather, to create a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears. The words will speak for themselves.

Secondly, he notes the familiar relationship that writing has with death. The link, suggests Foucault, subverts an old tradition exemplified by the Greek epic, intended to perpetuate the immortality of the hero: 'if he was willing to die young, it was so that his life, consecrated and magnified by death, might pass into immortality; the narrative then redeemed this accepted death' (1984, p. 102). The theme of a 'narrative' or writing, (and telling stories) became something designed to ward off death, 'to postpone the day of reckoning that would silence the narrator... to keep death outside the circle of life' (1984, p. 102). In this sense, Foucault argues that writing has become linked to sacrifice, to the sacrifice of life even in that it is now a 'voluntary effacement which does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer's very existence' (1984, p. 102). The work, suggests Foucault, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill – to be its author's murderer:

Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing. (1984, p. 102-103)

But none of this is recent, Foucault says; criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance—or death—of the author some time ago. The issue, he finds, is that the consequences of this 'discovery' have not yet sufficiently been examined. Nor have their imports been accurately measured: 'A certain number of notions that are intended to replace the privileged position of the

author actually seems to preserve that privilege and suppress the real meaning of his disappearance' (1984, p. 103). Foucault goes on to examine two of these notions behind the disappearance of the author – the idea of the work, and the idea of writing (*écriture*).

1. The notion of 'the work'

The task of criticism is not to bring out the work's relationship(s) with the author or to reconstruct a thought or experience through the text itself but rather to analyse the work through 'its structure, its architecture, its intrinsic form, and the play of its internal relationships' (1984, p. 103). This much may be familiar, but the problem becomes that of when we might ask: 'What is a work?' What is designated, called, and privileged as being 'a work', and what elements compose it? Do we call a work something that an author has written? What then of the writing by someone who may not be called 'an author'? Can a collection of remarks, and notes, commentaries and personal tid-bits be called a work? ('When Sade was not considered an author, what was the status of his papers? Were they simply rolls of paper onto which he ceaselessly uncoiled his fantasies during his imprisonment?' 1984, p. 103). And what then when an individual has been accepted as an author? Does that entail that everything this individual—as an author—has ever written, said or left behind becomes a part of their work?

The problem here, Foucault argues, is both theoretical and technical. When we speak of one's work, where do we – can we – create some boundaries? In undertaking the publication of an author's works, where should we stop? From published materials to rough drafts, plans, deleted passages and notes at the bottom of pages might all surely count, but *where should we stop?* When we find a workbook with references, a meeting appointment, a laundry list? Is this a work, or not? Why not? At what points do we define the contributions of an author to his/her 'work'?

'How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after his death? A theory of work does not exist, and the empirical task of those who naively undertake the editing of works often suffers in the absence of such a theory' (1984, p. 104). Consequently, a multitude of questions arises with regard to this notion of 'the work' and Foucault argues that it is simply not enough to declare that we should do without the writer (the author) and only look to the work itself. 'The word *work* and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author's individuality' (1984, p. 104).

2. The notion of 'writing'

Foucault suggests that writing is another notion which has hindered us from taking full measure of the author's disappearance. When rigorously applied, he argues, the notion of writing should 'allow us not only to circumvent references to the author, but also to situate his recent absence' (1984, p. 104). Writing is concerned with the meaning which someone might have wanted to express, and we try, when we read, with 'great effort, to imagine the general condition of each text, the condition of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds' (1984, p. 104). At the same time however, writing seems to transpose the empirical characteristics of the author into a 'transcendental anonymity' (1984, p. 104). What this means is that we seem to be happy to efface the more visible marks of the author's empiricity by characterising writing as either critical or religious in approach: 'Giving writing a primal status seems to be a way of retranslating, in transcendental terms, both the theological affirmation of its sacred character and the critical affirmation of its creative character' (1984, p. 104).

The notion of writing here for Foucault has become, by the very history that made it possible, subject to the test of oblivion and repression. It represents the principle of hidden meaning (which requires interpretation), and the principle of implicit significations (obscured contents which give rise to commentary). To imagine writing as *absence* thus seems to perpetuate an *excess* of the work's survival, based on an aesthetic principle, which lingers on beyond the author's death. Foucault argues that the notion of writing runs the risk of maintaining the author's privileges under the protection of writing's *a priori* status: 'it keeps alive, in the gray light of neutralization, the interplay of those representations that formed a particular image of the author. The author's disappearance...is subject to a series of transcendental barriers' (1984, p. 105). It would seem, Foucault suggests, that there is an important dividing line between those who believe that they can still locate today's discontinuities (*ruptures*) in the historico-transcendental tradition of the nineteenth century, and those who try to free themselves once and for all from that tradition. The words do not – can not – just speak for themselves.

*So what then, if the author has, as it would seem, really disappeared?*

It is not enough, argues Foucault, to simply repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. We would be better instead to 'locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this

disappearance uncovers' (1984, p. 105). Foucault seeks to open this problematic in two ways, first by exploring the use of the author's name, and secondly through a description of the author's function.

### 1. What's in a name?

Foucault indicates some of the difficulties presented from the use of an author's name in asking: What is an author's name? How does it function? The author's name will no doubt be a proper name, and therefore, he suggests, will raise the problems common to all proper names' (1984, p. 105). A proper name, for Foucault, can not simply be turned into a pure and simple reference. It has multiple indicative functions and is more than just a gesture towards someone – the proper name becomes a *description*. This description is complex in that it modifies the link of destination: '[t]he proper name and the author's name are situated between the two poles of description and designation: they must have a certain link with what they name, but one that is neither entirely in the mode of designation nor in that of description' (1984, p. 106). This *specific* link, argues Foucault, is particularly difficult for the author's name because it (the proper name) signifies something different to the individual being named.

For Foucault, the author's name is not simply an element in a discourse (capable of being either subject or object, of being replaced by a pronoun, and the like), 'it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function' (1984, p. 107). In using an author's name we are permitted to group together a certain number of texts and define them, differentiate them from and contrast them with others. The name behind this group also allows us to establish a relationship with this author's works amongst other texts. The author's name serves to characterise a certain mode of being, and of discourse – so much so, that a discourse can be called by so-and-so's name, i.e. 'this was written by so-and-so' (1984, p. 107). The point then becomes that this speech must be received in a certain mode, and as Foucault suggests, in a given culture, this speech, by a particular author must (and inevitably does) receive a certain status.

### 2. The author function

The author's name, for Foucault, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it. Instead, the name seems to be always present – it marks off the edges of the text and reveals – or characterises – its being: '[t]he author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture' (1984, p. 107). Thus, the author's name is different – perhaps special?

– in that it has a particular function. It has no legal status, nor is it located within the fiction of the work, but is instead, located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct and its particular being. ('A private letter may well have a signer—it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor—it does not have an author. An anonymous text posted on a wall probably has a writer—but not an author' 1984, p. 107-108). The function of the author therefore is characterised by the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society at a particular time, in a particular context/s.

The 'author function' that Foucault is describing here is based on his analysis of discourses as 'objects of appropriation' (1984, p. 108). In seeking to characterise a discourse containing the author function, he suggests that we can isolate a number of aspects that allow us to see how this sort of 'author function discourse' might be different from another/other discourses. Within this idea of discourses as being objects of appropriation, Foucault argues that ours is/was a culture where the appropriation – or ownership – of a particular product, a thing, a kind of goods meant that you were subsequently indicted to penal appropriation as per that particular item. Thus, when texts, books and discourses began to have authors (as opposed to the sorts of ancient mythological texts, narratives, stories, epics, tragedies which would not identify the script's origin), those authors then became subject to 'punishment' (or at least, as Foucault suggests, to the extent that those discourses could be transgressive).

While, historically, a discourse was not originally intended to be a product, or thing of appropriation, once such a system of ownership for texts came into being – with the development of strict rules concerning the author's rights, author-publisher relationships, rights of reproduction, and other such related matters around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – it was as if the author, in line with the possibility for transgression that became attached to the act of writing, compensated for the status that he had thus acquired. The author's writing now guaranteed the benefits of ownership. At the same time, the author could now also be held responsible for such ownership over his/her writing.

Once such literary discourses involved this author function – the attachment of a name to a piece of written text – we learned, suggests Foucault, to ask such questions of the work: 'From where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, of beginning with what design?' (1984, p. 109). The meaning ascribed to the work – the value accorded with it – depends, argues Foucault, on the manner in which we answer these questions. But it is these sorts of questions that give way to

Foucault's third characteristic of the author function: that 'complex operation which constructs a certain rational being which we call 'author'' (1984, p. 110). What designates an individual as being author is but a projection according to Foucault, in more or less psychologising terms, of the operations that we 'force' texts to undergo in our attempts to make connections, establish traits, and recognise continuities within them. These operations, he argues, will vary according to periods and types of discourses but the point is that we become involved in, and participate in particular rules of author construction – or construction of 'the figure of the author' (1984, p. 110).

The author function is not however, just a simple reconstruction made second-hand from a text given as passive material. The text, Foucault suggests, will always contain a number of signs that refer to the author: 'personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjugation' (1984, p. 111). It is the author who, in his/her writing, provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their 'transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications' (1984, p. 110). Indeed, the author provides a certain unity to the writing (by principle of evolution, maturation and/or influence). Foucault argues that the author also serves to 'neutralize' the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts – that there must be, as some level, a certain expression of the author's thought, desire, consciousness or unconscious. This expression is a point where contradictions can/may be resolved; it is a point at which modern criticism brings the author function into play.

Another function of this 'game' that is being played is an ability to reflect multiple, and/or shifting selves:

Everyone knows that, in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly either to the writer or to the moment in which he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. (Foucault, 1984, p. 112)

The self that is the author, or the author's self, is neither identical in its positioning nor its functioning to that self which speaks out loud in demonstration. 'I' refers to an individual, but at various points, the 'I' might appear in different forms (I suppose, I conclude, I argue...) These various 'I's' – or selves – indicate particular times and places, instances and systems that work together to speak the text's meaning: 'the obstacles encountered, the results obtained, and the remaining problems...' (1984, p. 112). The author function operates to effect the dispersion of these

simultaneous selves in order to tell a story that is characteristic of, and becomes characterised by the meaning of the work itself.

In summary, the author function, according to Foucault (1984, p. 113), shares the following traits:

1. It is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses;
2. It does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilisation;
3. It is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but rather by a series of specific and complex operations;
4. It does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects – positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals

*So what is Foucault talking about? What is an author?*

Foucault admits to having given the ‘author’ too narrow a meaning. He discusses the author ‘only in the limited sense of a person to whom the production of a text, a book, or a work can be legitimately attributed’ even though, he suggests, it might be easy to see that within the sphere of discourse, one ‘can be the author of much more than a book—one can be the author of a theory, tradition, or discipline in which other books and authors will in their turn find a place’ (1984, p. 113). This ‘transdiscursive’ space, as Foucault called it, establishes an endless possibility for discourse: it opens up opportunities for the formation of other things, other texts, and other authors – the author becomes more than the sum of his work, he/she becomes more than just the author of his own text. (‘Freud is not just the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams*; Marx is not just the author of the *Communist Manifesto* or *Das Kapital*’ 1984, p. 114).

The author function can seek to *exceed* the author’s work, suggests Foucault, by making possible (if we think for example of the likes of Freud and Marx whose work lives on in debate to this day), a certain number of ‘divergences’ or ‘characteristic signs, figures, relationships, and structures which could be reused by others’ (1984, p. 114). It is to the extent of these sort of uses and applications

that Foucault is attempting to demonstrate the complexities involved with that of being an 'author': the author function is 'complex enough when one tries to situate it at the level of a book or series of texts that carry a given signature, [but] involves still more determining factors when one tries to analyse it in larger units, such as groups of works or entire disciplines' (1984, p. 117).

To understand what is an author provides for Foucault an approach to a typology, or historical analysis as it were, of discourse itself. To study 'the modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation of discourses' (1984, p. 117) in the context of their relationship (or nonrelationship) to the author/s associated with them offers a unique capacity to explore particular discursive properties and the manner in which they become articulated (in different cultures and according to different social relationships). Foucault argues that to explore the author and the activity of the author function is to be able to 'reexamine the privileges of the subject' (1984, p. 117) and that in doing so—or at least starting at/from this point—would be to 'grasp the subject's points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies' and allow for an analysis of the subject as a variable and complex function of the discourse (1984, p. 118).

The determination of Foucault is not to elevate or bring forward the role of the author. Indeed, he would rather see that discourse, in whatever 'their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected' would develop in the 'anonymity of a murmur' (1984, p. 119). The author, for Foucault, is not the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning – in fact, the author does not precede the work – he simply limits, excludes and chooses. It could be said that the author is no more than an ideological product, suggests Foucault, that he/she is a 'figure by which one marks the manner in which we *fear* the proliferation of meaning' (1984, p. 119, my emphasis). In an exploration of the author, what we might find for ourselves in doing so is that we are in effect, developing a deeper capacity to understand the discourse of the author, the discourse of his/her work, and the discourses that become inextricably linked to other authors and their discourses through particular notions of circulation, appropriation, subject function. The author *is* the discourse. And as such, it should not matter who is speaking, what matters then, are (and can be) new questions, new ways of thinking and new means of discourse.

*So who is Foucault?*

*Foucault does a number of things in his essay – he elucidates those notions to which he believes are ascribed an author and discusses the roles, historically, and ideologically, of that which the author*

*plays. His analysis is situated between the level of the individual who 'writes' and the larger discursive structures within which the author's 'writing' is located. The significant and complex question for Foucault, of what does it matter who is speaking? is examined through such notions of the work, the writing, the author's name and the author function. These things, suggest Foucault, are and have been limiting to discourse in the past. What he offers here instead, is an opportunity to use these same things transgressively insofar as we attempt to elevate the consciousness of the author who is writing – not by him or her self as an individual, but rather, as a being in the space and the shape of the wider discourse – choosing and committing, developing and churning, producing and exceeding discursive authorial fingerprints throughout cultural/historical social trajectories.*

### *Concluding Remarks*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore the character of Foucault's author-self. Indeed, that could be another paper entirely on its own. What I have done towards the end of this paper instead is to hint at the circumventational nature of Foucault's writing that allows him to open up a space in which to stand and talk, write, think, produce. It is this ability to unpack a variety of notions associated with being an author, with writing, and with conducting research that is what I find to be the most significant achievement of this text. To question and be critical of one's position and subjectivity is of simultaneous importance and consequence. It affects the entire research process from the researcher's self, to the work that he/she does and, in this case – for my project – the people who may or may not be affected by the work that I do and way in which I write about it.

These questions that I have asked here, the questions that Foucault was asking in the 1970s and 1980s are certainly complex and, it would seem, require an ongoing commitment to their exploration and understanding. No quick definitions or answers here, but rather a gesture towards the need, and importance of asking such questions in the first place. Am I/Can 'I' be an author? Foucault has elsewhere suggested that 'each of [his] works is part of [his] own biography' (1982, p. 11). So, possibly, in asking such questions we can explore some of the limits and possibilities—the discursive and biographical *fragments*—that emerge from and shape research and writing practices: without holding onto the hope that testing the character of these limits and possibilities will eventually provide some final answer to 'What is an Author?'

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