Summary of "The birth of Author-Function"

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Literary Criticism, which had focused until the middle of 20th century on intentions of author with his/her biographical details having a bearing on the meaning of his/her work of art, now began to give way to new and radical currents and Barthes' theory was one of the major currents of the times. In line with his then-newly adopted Post-Structuralist approach, Barthes rejected the figure of author as a definitive concept, de-centering its importance for understanding the text. He brought the Reader to the fore, as the site where generation of meanings takes place, thereby effectively 'killing' off the author.

But Foucault, in his essay "What is an Author?", finds problems with Barthes' complete rejection of the author and seeks to bring back the author as a function of the text which works as "regulator of the fictive" by limiting the discourse within which all interpretations of the work would get subsumed, thus preventing the text from bursting into limitless interpretations and meanings. Foucault asserts that the notions of Work and Writing, which were initially touted as replacements of the figure of author, actually reinforce the author's position. Rejecting the Realists' conception of author as a "panopticon", to use a Foucauldian term, which provides the author a tyrannical control over meaning-making of a text, but not going as far as Barthes, Foucault makes the author "a variable and complex function of discourse", and this discourse "encompasses meanings that are recognized beyond the borders of the author's creation", thereby saving the text from "pure romanticism" of endless meaning-making, by assigning certain characteristics to a particular discourse that gets developed around an author. This allows the reader to approach a work of an author with a certain expectation and understanding of the fabric of his oeuvre.

The name of the author is an important constituent of the discourse that develops around an author, because it helps in assigning certain qualities peculiar to that particular author and thus helps in building the discourse, which can also be labeled as the author-function. In that sense, the name is not only designating but also defining.

Foucault looks for a golden mean between the tyranny of "Author-God" and anarchy of the democratic figure of Writer that Barthes espouses, thereby bringing in some coherency and consistency to the discourse that builds around an author.

The birth of AUTHOR-FUNCTION

Roland Barthes proclaimed the disappearance of the figure of author-god from literary works in 1968, in his seminal essay "The Death of the Author". Since this essay marks Barthes' transition from the structuralist theoretical viewpoint to post-structuralist thought, this essay also encapsulates certain key ideas of the latter, the main of them being that it is "language which speaks, not the author" (Barthes 3), therefore interpreting the text according to author's intentionality is seen as limiting and hence the title itself suggests a "liberation of the literary work from authorial intention and control" (Vallath 47). Resonating with pre-modern writers such as Mallarme, Valery and Proust, Barthes tries to de-centre the author as the proprietor of

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his works and bring the reader into limelight – "birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the author" (6) - who is the generator of the meanings of the text and therefore the original 'author' of the work in question. Rejecting this outright rejection of the author, Michel Foucault replies to Barthes in his lecture "What is an Author?" in which he tries to bring back the figure of the author, albeit not as a definitive figure but rather as a function of the text. Pondering over such questions as "who is that delimits discourse so that it becomes recognized as a work that has certain value and status" (qtd. in Raj 2), Foucault asserts that it is the "author-function" which does that, and he also accords it the status of the "regulator of the fictive" (Raj 2).

Echoing Barthes, Foucault argues that the figure of the author arose only with the onset of Capitalism, as with itself, it brought along concepts of ownership and individual property, the markers of a bourgeois capitalist economy. This concept of authorship as a distinguishing phenomenon gained coin only after 18th onwards in the dawn of Age of Industrialization. As Barthes states,

> The author is a modern figure, produced no doubt by our society insofar as, at the end of the middle ages, with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the Individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the "human person". (2)

Beginnings of this trend are really to be seen in the Renaissance period when the importance of the individual reached unprecedented heights and it is a corollary of this development that made the "fundamental category of "the-man-and-his-work-criticism"" (Foucault 141) so much popular and prevalent. And it is only after this that the writer of a text came to be known as the author of that particular text. Therefore the concept of authoring a text is a fairly recent one but once it came into being it swept aside all before it. To quote Barthes again, "the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions" (2). But as is to be seen in recent times, and Foucault and Barthes again concur on this, this emphasis on an individual has given way to an indifference to the voice present in the text, and this indifference, as Foucault suggests, is now "one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing [ecriture]" (141). Recent criticism has realized the "necessity of substituting language itself for the man who hitherto was supposed to own it" (Barthes 3). But Foucault is wary of the implications of such an "essentially verbal condition of literature (Barthes 3), as we shall see later.

Foucault continues in the Barthesian vein, by examining the examples of Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka, how writing could result only after an "effacement of the writing subject's individual characteristics" (142) which leads to his disappearance from the fabric of the text. But, he says, this is not any new discovery as questions of writing and authorship have already been taken note of in philosophy some time ago but the full import of this disappearance has not been dealt with in detail or even understood, which he sets out to do. He also tries to determine and evaluate the space that has been left empty by the writer's 'death' in post-structuralist framework. He asserts that the two notions of Work and Writing (Écriture), which were originally intended to dethrone the author from his privileged position of earlier times, have only served to keep the position intact by "preserv(ing) that privilege and suppress(ing) the real meaning of his disappearance" (143) and he looks at the problems

inherent in these two concepts. He problematizes the category of "work" itself. What exactly is a Work and how is it to be considered literary? Are there any inherent qualities of some works which make it literary? Is an address or a laundry list or a shopping list mentioned by an author in his itinerary to be considered a part of his literary production? He concludes that the category of Work is not as straight-forward and simplistic as it comes across because the very qualifying criteria for something to be considered a Work is indeterminable because of an absence of a theory about it. "The word "work" and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author's individuality" (Foucault 144). Furthermore, Écriture, which is thought to evade reference to the author's persona and to manifest his current absence, in fact "keeps alive, in the grey light of neutralization, the interplay of those representations that formed a particular image of the author" (145). This is because of the inherent quality of the language which, by its very nature, is always "creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears" (142). But this is not an absolute absence but a series of absences which at the same time, paradoxically enough, keeps us aware of the author's presence as well. This is in keeping with the Deconstructionist notion of a trail of absences signifying a presence, through which we come to know of any object's presence; it is the way our semiotic machinery, language, works.

To appropriate Foucault's term which he in turn borrowed from Jeremy Bentham in the first place, the author of the Realistic tradition of writing used to function as a "panopticon", from whose vantage point everything could be seen very clearly, who had a disciplinary and constrictive effect on the meaning-making of the text and who controlled every thread as he deemed right, or atleast so it was thought. Foucault argues for a return of the author-figure, although not as an all-dominating, ubiquitous, all-pervasive authoritarian figure that Realists wanted it to be but as a mere function of the text, supported by instances which bring to the fore the "subject's points of insertion" (158) in the text, thereby making the reader aware of presence of the author, albeit as a part of the author-function only and not a tyrannical figure imposing any rigid framework for the reading of the text. It is here that Foucault could be seen as diverging from Barthes in that for the former the author is not completely dead. In this way he is closer to Wolfgang Iser and L. M. Rosenblatt, the Reader Response theorists, as they also give back some agency back into the hands of the "scribe" of the text and bring him back from his grave, which was dug out very effectively by Barthes. For Foucault, there are many ways in which the specter of the author keeps coming to the fore in his works. The author becomes "a variable and complex function of discourse" (158), the discourse being termed as author-function.

Foucault was never directly interested in Literature, unlike Barthes and Derrida, but in one of his books, "Death and the Labyrinth", which is his only book on Literature, he discusses the works of a French writer, Raymond Roussel. Foucault uses this as an entry point to evaluate Literature as discourse, where he looks at the discursive formations around the literary works which are responsible for the generation of a field of production of meaning. He asserts that after a point of time an author becomes a discourse but he does not lose his identity so much as to become so fluid that he dissolves completely and only the works that he has written remain significant. For example, the organizing principle of Shakespeare is Shakespeare largely and this organizing principle is not the person who was the writer named Shakespeare but the

author-function Shakespeare which "encompasses meanings that are recognized beyond the borders of the author's creation" (Raj 4). There is also an element of boundedness in this discourse around Shakespeare in that it unifies certain relevant ideas, at the cost of excluding others which are considered superfluous, to create meaning – "the author…is a certain functional principle by which in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses…by which one impedes the free circulation…of fiction" (Foucault 159). Towards the end of his essay, Foucault unravels a problem about the author as we, the readers, understand it and the author as he really is. In the first case the author becomes an ideological product because we tend to impose our interpretations, which are influenced by our various ideological and class affiliations, and because these are manifold it is only convenient to kill the author, as Barthes does. But in the second case Foucault sees the author, when he is a part of the author-function, as a limiting agent, a functional principle of the text which prevents a text from bursting into meanings, which he terms as "pure romanticism" (159).

As Foucault sees it, the author's name becomes an integral part of the discourse around it rather than being "simply an element in (the) discourse" (147) performing only a classificatory role without any effect on it whatsoever. It does have serious ramifications on how we view the author. As Zanotti points out "…potential readers of a text find themselves biased towards a literary work when reading the author's name on the cover" (4) because the discourse that forms around an author's name does not allow the it to become as insignificant as the poststructuralists like Barthes would like it to be. However it is important to remember that the name of the author is not the same as author-function. While the name is only taxonomical the author-function is constructed of various historical, psychological and social features and is a "sequence of specific and compound processes" (Raj 4). Fernando Pessoa, after he had finished his writing career, had 88 different names for himself but the author-function around his works is only one. His author-function obviously includes the various subjectivities of an author who deemed it fit to use so many different names and this fact certainly informs the function, but nevertheless it remains only one and unique. The name of the author is also not as unimportant as any random proper name because anyone can write anything and be a writer (Écrivain) of that particular piece but that does not make him an author to reckon with (Écrivant). To be an author, one needs to have an author-function around one's works which "manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture" (Foucault 147), as it elevates it above the status of common, everyday-speech, thereby making it prestigious and more canonical than other not-so-important utterances. Therefore the author's name is constitutive as well as a constituent of the author-function.

The author's name is designating as well as descriptive. It designates because it elicits, on the part of the author, an exercise of having written certain texts which have gained cultural and social currency, but this is not as important as its other function of being descriptive. It describes in the sense that it refers to certain qualities peculiar to the author-function around it which aid in establishing a "relationship of homogeneity, filiation, authentification" (147) in the discourse and consequently allows the reader to expect a certain standard of quality and a characteristic mode of writing ascribed to that particular name. As Zonotti points out, "the author functions as a principle of a certain homogeny of writing" (4) and this homogenizing

nature of name of the author is not be understood as a repressive principle which forces a reflective meaning on the text but only as a "unifying principle whereby the discourse is…directed for purposes which are specific" (Raj 7) to the author-function which is the external limit determined by various facets of an author's life, his intentions, circulation and reception of his works. Foucault is not trying to homogenize the text but only limit the heterogeneous nature of its signifying quality, which automatically follows the use of language, so that it does not end up becoming indeterminable by bursting into limitless possibilities of meaning, as deconstructionists would have it. This allows for a more concentrated and focused reading rather than a scattered one, which would have been the case had the meanings been allowed to proliferate without any discretion. The author-function therefore emerges as a more beneficial category than killing and doing away with the author altogether as the latter leads to a futile "inexhaustible world of significations" (Foucault 159), which may have been pleasurable for its own sake but also has the potential of having a little to no bearing on the text becoming aesthetically "konkretisiert (realized)" (Iser).

In Barthes' argument, the author of the bygone era is replaced by the writer who is presented as a more democratic figure than the tyrannical author who used to impose unilateral significations on the text in Realist period. Foucault, although he favors this democratic figure and obviously eschews the "Author-god" who tries to release a "single "theological" meaning" (Barthes 4), is trying to find a golden mean between the tyranny of the latter and anarchy of the former since a text could be fruitfully analyzed only when it is read within useful domains than pertain to the making of a text. These domains constitute the discourse around a text and are concerned only with the really significant aspects of a text. These notions of usefulness and applicability are also at work when a teacher in a class chooses to go over only some aspects (be it themes, motifs, theory-based-analysis etc.) which he deems important for explication of the text while glossing over others. Even though there is no regulatory body which standardizes this selection, there is a general consensus about what is more important to some texts than others. For example, questions of Race in "Othello" and Imperialism in "The Tempest" are more significant than the other way around. However this is not to advocate a "stop-clause" (Barthes 5) but setting of a limit on the possibilities of meaning therefore giving a set framework within which a text's readings could operate, proliferation of which is not necessarily a good thing.

The two poles of a literary work, as illustrated by Iser, are the "artistic" (the text as created by the author)and the "aesthetic" (the realization of the text by the reader) and Foucault invents the author-function as a mediator between these two poles so that even though "reading is a subjective process designed by the distinctive personality of the individual reader" (Vallath 220) with which he fills in the gaps, blanks, lacunae- "leerstellen", as posited by Iser in book "The Act of Reading: A theory of Aesthetic Response", the author's intentional acts do control reader's responses. This saves it from multiplying into unlimited significations and thereby keeping it within the realm of the meaningful, which is not only fruitful but also desirable for the proper appraisal of a text. Foucault, by introducing the regulatory concept of author-function, brings back to the arena of literature some stability and consistency, which is not to be confused with passivity, the term abhorred by modernists and post-modernists alike, critics and writers alike.

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