

## THE VIRAL AUTHOR

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### Resumen:

La idea moderna de la "figura de autor" debe mucho, de manera irreversible, a los dos ensayos de Roland Barthes y Michel Foucault, "La muerte del autor" y "¿Qué es un autor?". Ellos proporcionan un marco útil para una investigación sobre la aparente ausencia del autor en el mundo del web, nos permite preguntarnos si la autoría es congruente con los nuevos medios de comunicación, y si algún modelo puede ser establecido por su presencia. Se argumenta que el autor es de hecho presente, pero con su presencia y modalidades de actividad desplazadas a la figura del usuario.

**Palabras clave:** autoría, la figura del autor, internet, web

### Abstract:

The modern idea of the author-figure owes much, irreversibly, to the two essays of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, "The Death of the Author" and "What is an Author?". They provide a useful framework for an investigation into the apparent absence of the author-figure in the online world, allow us to ask whether authorship is congruent with online media, and whether some model may be established for his presence. It is argued that the author is indeed present, but with his presence and modes of activities displaced, perhaps counter-intuitively, to the figure of the user.

**Keywords:** Authorship, author-figure, internet.

Approaching the half-century of their publication, it is all but impossible to discuss the author figure, or indeed his continued existence, other than in the shadow of Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author"<sup>1</sup> and Michel Foucault's "What is an author?"<sup>2</sup>. Fifty years is, of course, sufficient time for some of their assertions – problematic and contestable even in their day – to appear dated. Literary criticism has moved on, one hopes, from that situation described by Barthes wherein "criticism stills consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice"<sup>3</sup>. And the assertion that

the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us<sup>4</sup>

had surely already been challenged by Modernism almost half a century before Barthes was writing. Yet in popular, casual discourse, both are still broadly true: witness the prominence of the author's name on a typical bestseller, or how heavily a film may be promoted on the basis of being directed by such and such. Of course, it is in this identification of a work with a person, a name – succinctly, a proper noun – that the author exists, and it exists precisely in this process of classification, as Foucault points out, with his definition of 'écriture' - "the play of representations that formed a particular image of the author", and as he expresses directly:

an author's name is not simply an element of speech (as a subject, a complement, or an element that could be replaced by a pronoun or other parts of speech). Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification. A name can group together a number of texts and thus differentiate them from others.<sup>5</sup>

Actually, it might be said that the author exists not in this process of classification, but in how his or her works are classified: "the fact that a number of texts were attached to a single name implies that relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentication, or of common utilization were established among them"<sup>6</sup>. This discourse then takes on an active role, a life of itself:

The author's name characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse. Discourse that possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words.

Ultimately, "A text has an inaugurative value precisely because it is the work of a particular author, and our returns are conditioned by this knowledge<sup>7</sup>."

There is little that is controversial here; Foucault is expressing a self-evidencing scheme which has existed, albeit in differing forms, and forms which are far more flexible than either Foucault or Barthes seem to realise or even imagine, since the pre-medieval era, as a cursory glance at Dante, for example, would substantiate. Yet, having survived the move from vellum to parchment to paper, and adapted to and nourished itself from the printing press, the typewriter and so on, the figure of the author might be seen to be threatened in the present day by the internet. The power to disseminate has, of course, challenged traditional modes of “ownership” of a work in a legal way, legal procedures being, as both Barthes and Foucault recognize, the foundation of the figure of the author. The power to, specifically, to copy without limit or, crucially, expense, and the breaking of the link between “a copy” and a material artifact – a book, a disk – has challenged those legal and mercantile structures which supported the association of a work with a progenitor. However, quite apart from this, there might be seen to be a general antipathy towards the traditional model of authorship inherent, in the Internet.

This may be seen simply through the new vocabulary engendered by the new technology: there is the “meme”, for example defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (the RAE still does not include it, despite its widespread use in Spanish) as

A cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene

expressed in the Internet through the rapid proliferation of, for example, images or videoclips, usually with modifications with humorous or satirical intent. This itself may be termed the idea of “virality” the almost unconscious tendency towards this proliferation. This seems to be wholly at odds with the conventional idea of the author figure as understood culturally, and expressed by Barthes and Foucault, that of a “father” of a work; indeed, it could be perceived as being analogous to Barthes post-authorial idea of “écriture” as criticised by Foucault, wherein are transposed “the empirical characteristics of an author to a transcendental anonymity”.

It is worth noting also the unparalleled opportunities that the internet offers for anonymity. Non-attribution of texts, whether intentional or not, has of course always been with us, yet the ability the internet offers to adopt a pseudonym, or, more commonly, pseudonyms, and attach them to easily disseminated texts or other output is unprecedented. A pseudonym in itself is, of course, no factor in the diminution of the authorial figure: George Orwell is an author just as much as, for example, Pablo Neruda, it is simply the case that Neruda the author shares a name with Neruda the private individual, whereas Orwell and Eric Arthur Blair do not. Orwell is an author

because he fulfils, for example, the demands set out by Foucault: Orwell, or “Orwell”, performs “a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function”, his name in itself permitting one to “group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others” and allowing the establishment of “a relationship among the texts.”

None of these demands are met by, for example, the typical “blogger”, who may adopt as many pseudonyms as necessary, change their tone, register, style of writing and so on as is fit. The binding coherence of the Author is not present.

The authorial absence of almost all websites is striking: it seems so obvious as to not need stating that one knows the painter of one’s favorite painting, the architect of one’s favorite building, the director of one’s favorite film. As ever, it ought be stated, of course, that authorship is not dependent on originality, as demonstrated by reinterpretations of folk-songs, oral poetry and so on, where authority is expressed through the particularities of interpretation. Yet in a world where 78% of the people of the developed world are identified as “internet users”<sup>8</sup>, and where YouTube, for example, has over a billion individual users<sup>9</sup>, the number of producers of web content known to the general public – who might be considered the “authors” of their output – is exceedingly small. Indeed, the Internet tends towards irony in this: the two personalities most identified as the proprietors of particular websites, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Jimmy Wales of Wikipedia, are quite obviously not the creators of the content of their websites, that being the general public. It is as if the internet unconsciously rejected the author function as a concept.

It is not immediately clear why this should be so. What is to stop a person adopting an authorial person and creating a website, one which is directly attributable to him and dependent, in some part at least, to his authority? I am of course here talking in terms of having an authority over a conceptually distinct website in its entirety, rather than, for example, a photographer using a website to exhibit their photographs, which have an existing and well established structure of authority.

More striking still, why is there such an absence of that instinct against anonymity which Foucault mentions that pervades one’s approach to almost all other cultural output?

Questions of authorship are deeply confusing and, at times, contradictory, when limited to literature, or, more broadly, the established and traditional arts. This amply demonstrated by the fact that a polemic discourse might be maintained – without resolution – over whether something, in this case the author, is dead or not. The

difference with the internet is not the question of the existence or not of the author, but the interest in his existence: that desire to identify to associate a work with its father (or mother) is apparently absent.

It would be very easy to try to be overly simplistic here, and offer the internet as the proof of the death of the author, or at least a concern with the authorial figure - which would of course be for both Barthes and Foucault the same thing. But to do so would be to use that same simplicity of which both Barthes and Foucault are guilty: he author figure, authority, authorship and so on are not terms which lend themselves to a binary, black/white, dead/alive distinction.

Both Barthes and Foucault offer extremely limited versions of the history of the author-figure. That of Barthes is a deeply unsatisfactory mini-istory of the author, even when it is taken into consideration that this was not the main thrust of his work. He declares:

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 the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, or, to put it more nobly, of the “human person<sup>10</sup>”.

Foucault slyly refuses to give his version of events, stating “I want to deal solely with the relationship between text and author and with the manner in which the text points to this figure that, at least in appearance; is outside it and antecedes it”. This does not stop him, however, from stating that, in Greek and Arab literary culture, “one spoke, telling stories into the early morning, in order to forestall death, to postpone the day of reckoning that would silence the narrator”, contrasting this with the culture of his own time, which “has metamorphosed this idea of narrative, or writing, as something designed to ward off death”, being now

a voluntary effacement that does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer's very existence. The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author's murderer, as in the cases of Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka<sup>11</sup>.

The ahistoricism, insufficiency, randomness and plain falseness of these accounts is rarely commented upon, but, to cite some rather obvious examples, San Buenaventura, in his “Commentary on the “Sentencias of Pedro Lombardo” gives a coherent statagem and overview of the thirteenth century conception of authorship:

The method of making a book is fourfold. For someone writes the materials of others, adding or changing nothing, and this person is said to be merely the *scribe*. Someone else writes the materials of others, adding, but nothing of his

own, and this person is said to be the *compiler*. Someone else writes both the materials of other men, and of his own, but the materials of others as the principal materials, and his own annexed for the purpose of clarifying them, and this person is said to be the *commentator*, not the author. Someone else writes both his own materials and those of others, but his own as the principal materials, and the materials of others annexed for the purpose of confirming his own, and such must be called the *author*<sup>12</sup>.

Dante, to use a further obvious example, shows a subtle and nuanced understanding of the subject. In the entirety of his canonical works, the Latin and Italian words for author and authority and their derivatives appear one hundred seventeen times – one more if the Epistle to Cangrande is recognized as Dantean<sup>13</sup>. These terms are almost always used to indicate supreme institutional authorities, above all the temporal authority of the Emperor and the spiritual authority of the Pope, but also canonical classical writers, especially philosophers and poets, especially Aristotle and Virgil, poetic authorship taken in isolation, and, of course, God as supreme Author and Authority, and, in subordinate relationship thereto, the authority of the Bible and the Church fathers. Merely in the confluence of these various authorities with textual authority, Dante is showing a conscious awareness of the state and possibilities of authority and, crucially, the author figure that not only make Foucault and Barthes' attempts at history look scanty at best, but rhetorically deceitful at worst. Indeed, the vital thing is that Both Bonaventura and Dante quite clearly appreciated that authority was a construct, and at once a social, literary and practical one: at various times, it denominated a practical role in the production of a text, a social role, and of course, the requirements of an authorial role in the compilation of works, the lending of them an identity; Boccaccio and Chaucer, with the Decameron and Canterbury Tales, and their exercising therein of the compiler-as-author show how clearly widespread the understanding of this author-function was. In the early middle ages, authority was being questioned and undermined, consciously adopted as role, and as a construct.

Despite their faults as historicists, what Barthes and Foucault have in common with Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer and Bonaventura is, of course, an appreciation of the importance of authority, what it is and was, what it did and does; moreover, they share an implicit belief that this figure, that of the author, is of importance culturally, socially, and in the understanding of an individual text.

This concern is precisely, I think, what seems to be missing from the internet. Indeed, it is as tempting to give to Barthes and Foucault credit for their prescience as it is to criticise them for their historical ignorance, and see the internet as a coming-into-being

of the author's death: a fulfilment, or perhaps self-fulfilment - of Barthes and Foucault's views. I am far from sure that this is the case, but before dismissing it, it is necessary to examine what kind of future the two Frenchmen envisaged, and whether, in fact, the internet complies with their postulations.

Barthes cites in his essay Mallarmé, who said that "it is language which speaks", and recognises Marcel Proust as being "concerned with the task of inexorably blurring...the relation between the writer and his characters"; the Surrealist movement for employing the practice of "automatic writing" to express "what the head itself is unaware of"; and the field of linguistics as a discipline for "showing that the whole of enunciation is an empty process".<sup>14</sup> It is certainly tempting to state that the internet is, in fact, the realisation of these ideas: a perpetual, twenty-four hours a day, aimless maelstrom of an authorless, self-paralysing language; a place of self-characterisation, where to make a text is to make a character of oneself, or indeed characters, all easily – so easily as to be unremarkable – conflated with, or doing away with the need for, an author; might we see in social networks like Twitter and Facebook, in their inherent simultaneity of writing and publishing – at times, regrettably, and all too obviously, “things that head itself is unaware of” – a realisation of the Surrealist ambition to dodge the interference of an author: indeed, is the internet, with its aimlessness, its lack of a single, ultimate and unifying “what for”, the ultimate manifestation of “the whole of enunciation (as) an empty process?

And what does Foucault have to say on the matter? In the conclusion to his essay, we might find ourselves considering the internet as a fulfilment of his imagined post-authorial culture. He states:

We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form, or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in a pervasive anonymity. No longer the tiresome repetitions:

“Who is the real author?”

“Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?”

“What has he revealed of his most profound self in his language?”

New questions will be heard:

“What are the modes of existence of this discourse?”

“where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?”

“what placements are determined for possible subjects?”

“Who can fulfil these diverse functions of the subject?”

Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference: “What matter who’s speaking?”<sup>15</sup>

This would, indeed, appear to vindicate such a view of the internet, would explain the absence of enquiry into or preoccupation with questions of authorship of online material; would foreshadow the existence and prevalence of the meme, the viral; and would encompass the ability of the internet to almost get rid of the notion of “self”, especially in terms of “self” as expressed through language. Indeed, those “new questions” are and have been those asked about the internet, about the emergence of new platforms such as file-sharing, social networks, and so on: their circulation, their control, are precisely those questions which have been raised for the last ten to fifteen years by everyone from the concerned parent, to the sensationalist journalist, to the serious-minded academic. And insofar as the internet has a *raison d’être*, it would appear to be the self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating creation of “placements...for possible subjects”, and the fulfilment of the “diverse functions of the subject”.

But Foucault is surely being either idealistic or pessimistic – depending on one’s opinion of the utility and validity of the author-function. He states that we can “easily” imagine one of the domineering or guiding principles of the last 1000 years of literary culture being utterly inverted, its core value reduced to a “murmur of indifference”. This invites the speculation that Foucault is both simplifying and overstating his case: he would not, of course, be alone among twentieth-century French philosophers in doing this.

In fact, it might be interesting to consider whether, in fact, the author is truly absent from the internet. All of the demands made by Barthes and Foucault in their definition of the author are met by one figure, in a way that might simultaneously permit a liberation from the restrictions of control and appropriation incoherent with new and emerging technology. That figure is the user himself. Barthes of course, proposed a new model for the producer of a text, the “scriptor”, as distinct from an author.<sup>16</sup> This figure, the “modern writer” as Barthes calls him, – can only mimic “a gesture forever anterior, never original” by recombining what has already been written (note the similarity of this definition with that of Buenaventura, and Barthes’ wholly unironic use of the word “modern”). Whereas the “Author-God” maintained with his work “the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child,” the scriptor “is born simultaneously with his text”: for him, “there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text

is eternally written here and now". As Barthes puts it, apropos of Mallarmé, "it is language which speaks, not the author" – or the scribe for that matter. The key to a text is not to be found in its "origin" but in its "destination": "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author". Yet it is precisely in how the user of the internet differs from Barthes' "scribe" that we may see the "survival" of the author. Does a user of the internet "recombine" in a quasi-passive way, such as Barthes' scribe? Of course not. The modern user of the internet, sitting at his computer, looking at his smart phone or in any way, employs those authorial techniques that would have been familiar to Buenaventura and Dante, Boccaccio and Chaucer: there is the direct equivalent of the medieval practice of glossing in the "comments" sections of articles on any newspaper's website; frequent collaboration and intertextuality in the meme; he compiles, constructing a narrative – I hesitate to use the word text, much less "texte" – in the act of moving from one webpage to another, or physically, in sites such as Instagram, Pinterest, much as a scribe of the late medieval period would gather "auctoritates"; indeed, the "authorless" commentaries, sometimes irreverent and comical, on many medieval transcripts could, in their undermining of the meaning of the original text, be seen as the precursor of the species of meme which parodies an original image or videoclip. Above all else, in its inherent virality, the dissolution of one person's work from another, we see not the dissolution of the author figure as imagined, in different ways, by Barthes and Foucault, but its displacement, its popularisation and dissemination, and its reconfiguration from a vertical construct – the work as "revelation", from God or Aristotle in Dante's use of authority, for example, to a lateral, egalitarian idea of authority. This is not without historical precedent.

Barthes' articulation of the death of the author is a radical and drastic recognition of the severing of authority and authorship. Instead of discovering a "single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)", readers of a text discover that writing, in reality, constitutes "a multi-dimensional space", which cannot be "deciphered", only "disentangled"<sup>17</sup>. Refusing to assign a 'secret,' ultimate meaning" to text liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases. But this does not describe the internet: therein, we may see a return to the true, multilayered and interactive expression of authority – social, literary or generally artistic and textual – the preceded them. That there is no immediate author figure in internet culture is because, in a postmodern, democratic and unhierarchical society, and in the postmodern, democratic and unhierarchical nature of the internet, he is that which is "hors du texte", or rather, "hors du écran". The only difference between the internet user and author figures of the past is, necessarily through the nature of the

technology, the absence of a tangible, final product, no physical text. Yet it is still he who performs the functions of the author: who gives coherence to the variety of texts encountered, who gives them a coherent group identity. If, to paraphrase Beckett as quoted in Foucault's essay, it does indeed matter "who is speaking", then the answer is that we are all speaking. And if the author of the postmodern, secular and destructured world of the internet is dead or not, he may still be seen. Not, as Dante would have, "through a glass, darkly"; but in the reflection of a switched off screen.

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5 Foucault, p.210

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