

Text Summary

of Michel Foucault's *What is an Author?*

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In *What is an Author*, Michel Foucault addresses the relationship between author and text. In addition, he wants to focus on the manner in which the text points to the author-“figure”. Foucault acts on the suggestion once made by Beckett. The latter once asked, “What does it matter who is speaking?” Foucault concludes that this exclamation bears the essential ethical principles of “écriture”-meaning contemporary writing.

Rules for contemporary writing

For this notion, Foucault divides his thesis into two rules. Firstly he claims that the writing has freed itself from the breadth of expression because it only refers to itself. Foucault uses the game-metaphor to explain this idea. Writing unfolds in the same manner, in which a game unfolds, by braking through its own set of rules by disappearing while creating space through writing.

Foucault's second rule consists of a relationship between the writer and death. It is not a novel theme, as this relationship has emerged in the Greek epic. The hero, who is a central character of Greek epics, seeks perpetuation of his immortality. The manner in which immortality is brought about, results in the early death of the hero. His willingness to die young magnifies him. Therefore the narrative hazards this consequence in order to glorify the hero. The Greek epic is one example by which the death of the writer is discussed. An additional one is found among the Arabian tales. Foucault draws upon *One Thousand and One Night* where Sheherazade seeks to forestall death by telling stories during the entire night.

Foucault suggests that his examples, that the idea of perpetuating or postponing death in the case of the Greek epic and the Arabian tales were metaphosed by the Western society. Just as Sheherazade sacrificed a night's sleep to combat death, the writer sacrifices his very existence. Foucault reverts

to Western writers that have their authors die. He mentions Flaubert, Proust and Kafka. What these three have in common is that their characters become absent at a certain point in the story. The game of writing, as Foucault discusses earlier in his text, results in death.

The privilege of the author

Foucault questions the notion of work. What is the idea of work, or what elements a work is composed of are key questions that are difficult to determine. To make his point clear he refers to the Marquis de Sade, who in his lifetime was not considered an author. The common perception of him was that of a deranged human being who had the urge to manifest his desires by way of writing them down. If the readers should have this idea about the Marquis, then, and this is the question that arises, are his writings merely rolls of scribbled paper? Foucault takes this question to a further stage when he tries to establish a rule that would meet the requirements of a work. Taking into consideration all written forms, then, it is difficult to determine whether writings such as drafts, addresses, etc. are works.

In a further passage the author discusses the notion of writing. In Foucault's view, writing is neither concerned with the art of writing nor its indications. *Écriture* allows to outwit reference to the author and to situate his current absence. In addition it is space and time that play an eminent role in the reader's perception of a text. Foucault suggests that readers try to imagine the space in which the text is diffused and the time in which it unfolds.

The difficulties of an author's name

The problem that arises from a proper name, such as that of the author, is that one cannot turn it into a pure and simple reference. Foucault points out that the author's proper name equals a description. He uses the example of Aristotle and concludes that when hearing that particular name, one instinctively and *specifically* links it to one of Aristotle's famous works. He concludes, that “[t]he author-function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation,

and functioning of certain discourse within a society”. (148) It follows that potential readers of a text find themselves biased towards a literary work when reading the author’s name on the cover.

Foucault isolates the author-function into four different characteristics. 1) The penal appropriation: In the historical context, written documents, such as texts, books and discourse began to have authors. But the discourse could be transgressive and the author could be punished for his writing. Discourse was seen as a “bipolar field of the sacred and the profane” (148). With the introduction of author’s rights (copyright) between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century the potential danger of transgression that is linked to writing took on. Thus, written text was now rightfully attached to its author. 2) The second characteristic of the author-function is that it does not affect all discourse universally. Foucault points out that in our civilization it was never the case that the same kind of texts acquired attribution to their author. Ancient texts were considered to be true. “[T]heir anonymity caused no difficulties” (149) because their mere existence was considered as sufficient, as opposed to texts about science, such as cosmology and medicine. These texts were only legitimate when signed by the author. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century scientific texts were considered valid if written by a member of a systematic ensemble. Yet the texts were anonymously produced. The function of the author diminished and the author’s merely stood for the theorem. 3) The author function of today is very important since literary anonymity has become intolerable. Readers have a way to construct the author. Foucault notes that critics try to give authors a realistic status by way of projection. To quote Foucault, “we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice.” (150) Foucault compares the author construction to the manner in which Christian tradition used to authenticate the work of an author. If his texts differ in the style, or correlate with his doctrine, then it is not the work of the author in question. Therefore the author functions as a principle of a certain homogeneity of writing. 4) Foucault writes briefly about the reference to the author in a text. He claims that each literary text is encoded with signs that refer to its author and

that they appear as personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjugation. However, they cannot be taken for granted. Foucault reminds the readers that the use of the first person pronoun nor the first present indicative refer to the actual author of the text, but to an alter ego that mediates between space and time. In addition the self of *I conclude* or *I suppose*, etc does not relate to the actual person who wrote the text, because the time and place of his or her writing is off. The *I*, in this case, refers to someone who in a particular instant fulfilled the task of *concluding* or *supposing*. Secondly, the *I* could stand for any kind of human being who would perform the same task, provided that he or she shared the same insights. On a third level the self can also function as voice that speaks the meaning of a work. It sits in the field of already existing mathematical discourses or in such that have yet to appear.

Marx and Freud as the founders of discursivity

An interesting factor, as Foucault points out, is that Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud were not just functioning as authors of their texts, they have produced possibilities and formations of other texts. They differ greatly from a novelist in that respect, because the latter is no more than the author of his own work. Marx and Freud open a new field of divergences of their own discourse. In Freud's example, the divergences all sprung up from a psychoanalytical approach, -that is from his own texts, concepts and hypotheses. To be more precise, the discourse of Marx and Freud are applicable to other fields, yet a novel cannot be applied to another discourse. To make an own example, Marxist theories can be applied when analyzing the contents of the novel, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. But one cannot analyze Marxist theories with the novel, *A Christmas Carol*.

In his conclusion, Foucault notes that the notion of discourse is not homogenous but culture-bound. Every society has its own understanding of discourse.

Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. *What is an Author*. In: Harari, Josué V. (ed) *Textual Strategies. Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*. New York: Cornell University Press. 1979.