
Situating Authorship: Insights from Contemporary Literary Theory

The nature and function of “authorship” (and its agent, the “author”) have been hotly contested in contemporary literary criticism. Although in what follows I cannot pretend to give an exhaustive account of these contestations, several of the main currents within recent debates over authorship are germane to the questions of theological authorship that I will be addressing. This is so because, as we shall see, much of the problematization of theological authorship touted by twentieth-century literary theorists and by contemporary theologians is located at the intersection of individual authorial creativity/innovation and the claimed legitimacy of authoritative (author-izing) institutions; therefore, the question of the theological author’s relationship to the institution by which she is authorized (such as the church or the academy) becomes a subset (albeit a unique one) of a larger problematic. My goal, then, is simple: given that I will be contending that inquiry into the nature and function of

theological authorship is inextricable from questions of institutional authority, I would like to demonstrate that contemporary literary theory makes the same point, writ large, about authorship in general.

Indeed, we can go so far as to posit that the situation that Jacqueline T. Miller describes concerning the early Renaissance context holds true in our own day:

Authority and authorship are sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting concepts, and the motives and strategies that work to merge or separate them take various complex forms. Their complexity mirrors the difficult relation that exists between a writer's desire for, on the one hand, individual authority or creative autonomy and, on the other hand, the authoritative sanction that external sources provide. Authority, both when it resides with the author and when it does not, implies restraint as well as freedom, limitation as well as power. A claim of personal authority may liberate and validate an author's activities; it may also restrict them, since it carries with it a constraining burden of responsibilities and is often acquired through an act of submission. Conversely, an external authorizing principle may threaten the writer's position, leaving him little or no space in which to function; yet his representation of something different from himself may be what motivates and enables him to write.¹

In this chapter, I will be arguing that many of the key twentieth-century debates around “the institution of authorship”² can helpfully be interpreted in precisely these terms: the internal authority of authorial creativity and the ambivalent desire for and revulsion toward the external “sanction” by that which stands over against the individual writer. The negotiation between internal and external sanction is the commerce of authorship in all fields, theology

1. Jacqueline T. Miller, *Poetic License: Authority and Authorship in Medieval and Renaissance Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

2. See Peggy Kamuf, *Signature Pieces: On the Institution of Authorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

included. But outlining the particulars of this negotiation has been the task of literary criticism for many decades now.

Old Authorities: The Auctorial Past and Its Legacy

As we will see when we turn to our discussion of Barthes and Foucault, this literary-critical task certainly has been constructive and philosophical. But it has also been historical; that is, there has been a recognition on the part of historians and literary theorists that any responsible appraisal of authorial theory in our own day must proceed on the basis of the best historical insights possible concerning how previous epochs have understood the nature of authorial creativity. To that end, even though “the history of authorship is yet to be written,”³ the later twentieth century has witnessed the publication of a whole host of studies investigating evolving views of authorship from the perspective of legal theory (particularly copyright law), history, literary analysis, history of religion, semiotics, and numerous other disciplines. Although any sort of complete summary of these various findings is a task well beyond the bounds of this chapter, it is possible to indicate briefly some basic lines of consensus among historians of authorship in the West.

For the most part, one can give qualified assent to the view of Thiel (mentioned in the introduction) that the romantic period represented a substantial shift toward a positive valuation of novelty and creativity on the part of individuals. This in turn gives rise to what the word *author* generally connotes in our day; as Martha Woodmansee puts it, “[A]n ‘author’ is an individual who is solely responsible—and thus exclusively deserving of credit—for the production of a unique, individual work.”⁴

3. Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London: Routledge, 2005), 31.

4. Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 35.

Part of the reason why the romantic period's celebration of the novelty put forth by the individual genius stands out in such great relief from what came before is that numerous forces in play in the West during the ancient and medieval periods contributed to a kind of stasis regarding authorial invention. Scholars of ancient literature ranging from Homer to Socrates to the New Testament have long been aware that the confluence of oral culture, folk narrative, and free use of pseudepigraphy makes establishing a given "author" of, say, *The Iliad* or the letter to the Colossians a difficult task.⁵ The most intensive period of theorization regarding intentional checks upon individual creativity, however, was the medieval period and its celebration of *auctores*.

As both A. J. Minnis and Donald Pease have suggested, the medieval Western theory of authorship was dominated by the legitimacy ascribed to *auctores*, or ancient authorities whose work was understood to set the boundaries (formal and material) by which further work in a given discipline could proceed.⁶ Each discipline within the trivium, for instance, had its own *auctores* (Cicero in rhetoric, Aristotle in dialectic, various ancient poets in grammar), and other disciplines had theirs as well (for instance, the biblical authors and church fathers were clearly normative for theology). Indeed, it would not be wrong to say that theology was the foundation of *auctor* theory, because the respect given to *auctores* generally proceeded by way of analogy to God as Author: just as the human writers

5. Indeed, even the etymology of the noun *auctor*, from which the term *author* is derived, is uncertain. Critics are generally in agreement that there are four possible antecedents, all of which comport with the functioning of the medieval *auctor* and none of which describes the sort of creative generation characteristic of the romantic author: three Latin verbs (*agere*, "to do or make," *augere*, "to grow or cultivate," and *auire*, "to tie or bind") and one Greek noun (*autentim*, "authority"). See Donald Pease, "Author," in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. Seán Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 264.

6. See *ibid.*, 264ff.; and A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (London: Scolar Press, 1984).

of Scripture possessed unimpeachable authority because the ultimate Author of the biblical texts is God, the *auctores* of the disciplines possessed a kind of transcendental authority that rendered their work decisive.

For the most part, this transcendental normativity given to dead *auctores* ensured that the modern concept of “author” as a virtuoso, independent, and self-present creative subject had little place in medieval theory.⁷ One of the most dominant modes of writing was commentary, and these commentators, for the most part, had little pretension of having their own work enshrined as auctorial. Simply put, auctorial theory in the medieval sense seems largely to have precluded authorial theory in the romantic or modern sense. Thus, innovation was by no means a goal in the medieval tradition; the idea of “new truth” would have had a slightly oxymoronic quality.

As I have noted, and as will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2, this suspicion of innovation had far-reaching implications for theology, particularly during the crisis of the Reformation. It is clear that the Reformation can be (and certainly has been) viewed as a dispute over innovation, with both the Reformers and their Roman opponents struggling mightily to demonstrate that it was the other party that was guilty of innovative authorship, and thus heresy. In the various polemics surrounding the Reformation, the notion that innovation was heresy was rarely if ever called into question; the only question was who was being innovative and who was being faithful to proper authority (which, of course, implies the concomitant question of where that authority was to be found). Although the Reformation debates certainly rearranged, and perhaps qualified, the material features of medieval auctorial theory, from a

7. See Burt Kimmelman, *The Poetics of Authorship in the Later Middle Ages: The Emergence of the Modern Literary Persona* (New York: Lang, 1996), esp. 20ff.

formal standpoint it not only did not displace its logic but in fact strengthened it.

However, as literary historians have been quick to note, the medieval system of auctorial check upon authorial creativity was not without its cracks, and through these cracks shine precursors to what would become the romantic celebration of the innovative individual. Minnis's groundbreaking study of late-medieval biblical commentaries advanced the theory that increasing focus on the part of commentators upon the human *auctores* of Scripture allowed for greater appreciation of literary style and human authorial intention than was possible under the primacy of allegorical interpretation in previous centuries.⁸ Miller points out the ambiguity surrounding the image (first offered in the twelfth century by Bernard of Chartres) of contemporary authors' "standing on the shoulders of giants," that is, past *auctores*; although this image enforced the notion of auctorial authority, almost immediately thinkers such as John of Salisbury extended the image to suggest that the higher vantage point afforded contemporary "dwarfs" the chance to see farther and more clearly than their predecessors.⁹ A particularly fascinating suggestion comes from Pease, who posits that a major impetus toward authorial innovation came from late-medieval European explorers' encounters with the New World:

Auctorial sanction and monarchical rule remained more or less unquestioned until late in the fifteenth century, with the discovery of a New World whose inhabitants, language, customs and laws, geography, and plant and animal life did not correspond to referents in the *auctores'* books. . . . [An effect of this] was the appearance of what Renaissance historians now refer to as "new men," individuals within Renaissance culture who turned the "news" sent home from freshly discovered lands into forms of cultural empowerment for unprecedented political actions

8. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, esp. chap. 1.

9. Miller, *Poetic License*, 9–16.

and their personification by new agents within the culture. Among these new cultural agents were “authors,” writers whose claim to cultural authority did not depend upon their adherence to cultural precedents but on a faculty of verbal inventiveness. Unlike the medieval *auctor* who based his authority on divine revelation, an author *himself* claimed authority for his words and based his individuality on the stories he composed.¹⁰

To the extent that auctorial theory rested upon comprehensiveness in explanatory ability, the encounter with otherness (however saturated with cultural and physical violence)¹¹ necessitated the emergence of new kinds of verbal inventiveness. This theme has substantial implications for theological authorship, as we shall explore in subsequent chapters.

These and other factors would eventually undermine the authority underpinning the auctorial system; the result would be the celebration of individual authorship familiar in the Enlightenment and the romantic and modern periods. That story is well known. However, for our purposes, the main point to consider from the history of authorial theory in the West is how contemporary authorship inherits an uneasy conscience concerning the relative value (or even verity) of individual authorial innovation. The shift from an authorial culture suspicious of innovation to a culture (our own) that takes such innovation as an almost unqualified good has been, historically speaking, rapid enough that one might have predicted that certain species of uneasiness around the authority possessed by individual authors might reemerge once the authority structures underpinning modernity themselves have begun to fray around the edges—as they have in our day.

10. Pease, “Author,” 265–66.

11. See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

Seán Burke has categorized the variegated twentieth-century debates around authorship as belonging to four main lines of inquiry:

1. The relation of the writer to tradition understood as literary history, literary language, conventions, genres, textual systems, etc.;
2. a suspicion of expressivist notions of literature combined with a general rejection of biographicist criticism;
3. concern with the relevance or irrelevance of intention to evaluation and/or interpretation;
4. a subordination of the question of authorship to that of reading in such a way that the former is refracted through the latter.¹²

As Burke has suggested,¹³ in agreement with other scholars,¹⁴ these issues are all more or less encapsulated in the two essays generally credited with reigniting debates over authorship in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries: Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1967)¹⁵ and Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (1969). Foucault's salutary correction of Barthes' initial proclamation of the author's "death" will set the stage for our later consideration of specifically theological authorship; thus, we will begin there.

12. Seán Burke, "The Twentieth-Century Controversy," in Burke, *Authorship*, 65.

13. Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

14. "In many respects, these essays [by Barthes and Foucault] have dominated discussions of authorship during the decades since their first publication: they have largely set the terms of the debate and have in equal measure been applauded for their radical reinterpretation of authorship and criticized for their alleged incoherence, inaccuracies and anachronisms." Bennett, *Author*, 5. See also Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Polina Mackay, eds., *Authorship in Context: From the Theoretical to the Material* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3–4.

15. In what Bennett calls "an understandable act of linguistic chauvinism" (*Author*, 9–10), Barthes' essay is often represented as having first been published in its French version during the heady days of 1968 in France (thus tying Barthes' theoretical "revolution" to what was happening in the streets, even though, to quote the anonymous blackboard sage, "structures [and presumably poststructures] don't hit the streets"). However, Barthes' essay was first published in 1967, in English, as part of the experimental U.S. journal *Aspen*.

To anticipate, the case that I will be making is this: Foucault's essay helps to move the focus of authorship's problematization away from questions of textual interpretation (questions that dominate Barthes' rather simplistic view of authorial control) and toward more substantive questions of how "the author" functions as a kind of authority-effect that implicates texts in certain economies of power from the moment of their production up through and including their legacy of being interpreted by readers. The problematization of theological authorship by the ecclesiologists whom I will be considering in subsequent chapters is best understood as a specifically theological commentary upon this economy, even if it is often framed in terms quite different from Foucault's. Thus, for our purposes, the most helpful legacy of twentieth-century literary investigations into "the author" is the insistence that *the authority (internal and external, as per Miller's description) claimed by authors is inextricable from specific negotiations with institutions whose own authorizing capabilities are never entirely stable.*

Death of a Romantic (Author): Barthes' Deicide

Barthes' "The Death of the Author," with its explicitly "anti-theological"¹⁶ agenda of freeing the reader from the tyranny of the "Author-God" and the hierarchy of the critical establishment that benefits from the fiction that texts are univocal expressions of a single meaning intended by their authors, is an essay with fairly proximate (if not shallow) historical roots; that is, Barthes' explicit target is the view of authorship dominant since the romantic period and the inability of early-twentieth-century criticism to escape its problematic. As I have noted, a critical consensus exists that it is

16. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," reprinted in *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. William Irwin (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 2002), 6.

indeed the romantic notion of the author as a creative genius whose act of innovation brings something new into being (with the concomitant notion, by no means a given, that such innovation is a praiseworthy act) that has set the tone for both the connotations and denotations of the concept of “author” that is regnant today. Briefly put, the romantic and postromantic author are imagined to be solitary (in the sense of being fundamentally independent from the authority of traditions or institutions), to be fully self-present at the time of the text’s composition (thus guaranteeing what Barthes and, later, Derrida would call the “theological” notion of a single intended meaning of a text), and to have rights as the “owner” of the produced work (thus giving the author a privileged vista from which to render a judgment as to a text’s meaning).

It is worth noting that Barthes is here able to exploit what Andrew Bennett, following a host of studies on authorship in the romantic period, highlights as a consistent tension in that period’s understanding of the sources of authorial creativity.¹⁷ To the extent that the romantic period viewed the author as fully present to her or his own work, theorists and poets of the time were actually synthesizing two *prima facie* incompatible (and perhaps ultimately so) streams of thinking about authorial inspiration: the Enlightenment strand of the author as a rational, autonomous subject capable of creating via specific stylistic and aesthetic choices; and the strand, present at least since Plato’s *Ion*, of the author as “rapt” outside of herself and thus merely a conduit for the “divine” or the “sublime.”¹⁸ Put simply, the romantic tradition could never quite

17. See Bennett, *Author*, 55–71. For a detailed study of this synthesis and its instabilities, see Gerald N. Izenberg, *Impossible Individuality: Romanticism, Revolution, and the Origins of Modern Selfhood, 1787–1802* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

18. As we shall see when we turn to Hütter’s work, this notion of the author as “rapt” into something external to her own creative capacities made a substantial comeback, albeit in highly modified fashion, in his theology.

decide whether the author's "inspiration" should be credited to the self-present virtuoso subject (the author's rational, creative interior) or to something exterior to the author for which the individual was merely the conduit.

Barthes' essay, while perhaps exploiting this instability, is not particularly sensitive to the potential complexities it brings to the notion of the "romantic" author and her inheritors; instead, Barthes attributes the ideal of self-presence to the romantic author without paying too much attention to the ways in which the second strand (that of external "inspiration") corresponds in many respects to the antiauthorial ideal that Barthes' essay commends. For Barthes, the influence of twentieth-century literature (especially Mallarmé and Proust) had achieved a revolution in literary thought, the effect of which was to put to rest the idea that texts are expressions of the single intended meaning of an "author"; instead, the individuals to whom works are credited are simply "scriptors" in the thrall of the real productive force of texts: *écriture*, or the structures of language itself.¹⁹ Texts, then, are simply "tissues of quotations" or "tissues of signs" that operate wholly independently of the burden of some intended "meaning" by an "Author-God" tyrannically dictating their interpretation.²⁰

This has deep implications for criticism as well, which leads to the second precursor stream (in addition to the romantic tradition) to

19. Neither of the English words *writing* or *language* functions as an adequate translation for this term as it was wielded (and, indeed, overdetermined almost to the point of parody) by the poststructuralist tradition. With *écriture*, Barthes is describing a transcendental linguistic entity with more than a passing similarity to Aquinas's vision of God as the "First cause" of all creation. See Seán Burke, "Reconstructing the Author," in Burke, *Authorship*, xvi–xvii.

20. Barthes, "Death of the Author," 6. As many have pointed out, a major tension within Barthes' essay has to do with his seeming ambivalence over whether he intends for his work to be read as a funeral oration (the author *is* dead) or as a call to deicide (the author is alive, but textual liberation requires that He be killed). On balance, his rhetoric tends toward the latter. For a discussion of the subsequent career of this thesis—including numerous substantial revisions of it—in Barthes' later works, see Burke, *Death and Return of the Author*, 28ff.

which Barthes' essay was a reaction: the rise of the literary-critical establishment in the Western academy. For Barthes, the theological fiction of the self-present Author-God had licensed the professional establishment of intentionalist literary criticism that extended the Author-God's tyranny over the reader, this time in the form of an "authorized" critical task: if a text's single meaning as produced and legitimated by its "author" exists, then the critic achieves legitimacy by piecing together, often using esoteric intellectual tools, an account of what this intended meaning must be: "victory to the critic."²¹

Part of what makes Barthes' essay such an interesting historical intervention into the history of literary criticism is that he is here able to critique, with equal force, two strands of literary methodology that also present themselves as incompatible alternatives: the biographicist tradition, on the one hand (with its emphasis upon gathering details about a given author's *Sitz in Leben* and life story in order to discern how her texts reflect those details),²² and the formalist tradition (or, in America, "New Criticism"), on the other hand, which—as articulated most influentially by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in their 1946 essay "The Intentional Fallacy"²³—denied the validity of the biographicist tradition and eschewed the task of searching outside of the text for "clues" as to the author's meaning. It is easy to see how Barthes' dismissal of the Author-God would

21. "Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allowing itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic." Barthes, "Death of the Author," 6.
22. Barthes' essay also roughly coincides with the rise of the auteurist impulse in French cinema, in which directors increasingly began to see themselves (and demanded to be seen by critics and audiences) as "authors" of their films. I am not aware of any discussion of the extent to which Barthes might have been reacting to this trend as well; however, it is certainly the case that Barthes' and Foucault's essays have become canonical texts in the discipline of film studies.
23. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," reprinted in W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3–18.

serve as an attack upon the biographicist tradition; however, his text runs the risk of being misread as a uniquely French contribution to the established formalist impulse. To call Barthes a formalist, though, depends upon a misreading of his essay, because it ignores the fact that Barthes regarded New Criticism as having only “consolidated” the fiction of the author.²⁴ Here, he seems to have in mind something similar to what Bennett describes as the covert authorial privileging enacted by formalism: if, as Wimsatt and Beardsley claimed, a text is to be evaluated solely on whether or not it succeeds as a text, with the value of the author’s work being assessed solely on that same basis, then the implication that the text is an expression of a single privileged meaning underwritten by the author not only is retained but is in some respects heightened (because, in that case, the author’s meaning just is the text’s meaning and vice versa, the success of which is, once again, within the judgment of the critic).²⁵

If Barthes’ intention is to liberate texts from the fictional Author-God and the reign of the critics (clerics?) who benefit from belief in such a deity, then who benefits from the liberation? It is the reader (one might be tempted to say “the Reader”). In Barthes’ memorable closing phrase, “[T]he birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”²⁶ For Barthes, the text’s meaning comes not in the act of authorial composition but in the act of reading itself. Based on Barthes’ critique of the critical establishment, “the reader” here is a somewhat populist figure who is outside the established (indeed, author-ized) bounds of that establishment. If the text is a free-floating tissue of signifiers, then Barthes likewise is imagining reading and textual interpretation as a free-floating activity unbounded by the

24. Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 4.

25. See Bennett, *Author*, 77.

26. Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 7.

tyranny of the author or the constraints of either intentionalist or formalist criticism.

Even the most sympathetic reading of Barthes' essay quickly discloses that it is riddled with a host of tensions. For instance, regarding the critical establishment, we can observe that it is certainly not clear whether the sort of poststructuralist criticism to which Barthes' theory of *écriture* is generally ascribed is any less culpable (on Barthes' stated terms) as an enterprise of established literary criticism. In this sense, the main contemporary debate of which "The Death of the Author" is a precursor is that concerning the sovereignty of the critic in so-called deconstructionist strands of theory: is deconstruction a matter of observing what the text does to itself (as Jacques Derrida seems to present Rousseau's *Confessions* in his *Of Grammatology*),²⁷ in which case the critic plays a fairly passive role, or is it a matter of the critic performing a kind of unfalsifiable act of deconstruction upon the text, in which case the critic's regnancy is shown to be no less weakened by proceeding on an "atheistic" (that is, outside the fiction of the Author-God) basis?

A more substantive issue concerns the extent to which the "Author" against which Barthes is railing is in fact a straw man. As Burke puts it in his stringent critique of Barthes' essay, "Roland Barthes in 'The Death of the Author' does not so much destroy the 'Author-God,' but participates in its construction. He must create a king worthy of the killing. . . . What is happening in this procedure is that Barthes himself, in seeking to dethrone the author, is led to an apotheosis of authorship that vastly outpaces anything to be found in the critical history he takes arms against."²⁸ Burke's point is that even in the most heavily auteurist and biographicist trends, Western

27. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998).

28. Burke, *Death and Return of the Author*, 26–27.

literary criticism knew how to add shades of nuance and distance between authorial intention and the final interpretation/evaluation of textual meaning, a fact that is completely effaced by Barthes' hyperbolic rhetoric. Thus, "The Author in 'The Death of the Author' only seems ready for death precisely because he never existed in the first place."²⁹

Besides failing to do justice to the thematic complexities of previous modes of literary criticism, this hyperbole on Barthes' part creates even more problems, particularly as regards the level of abstraction created in the descriptions of both the Author and his successor, "the reader." It is clear that "the reader" in which the essay places its prophetic hope ultimately is no less reified, abstract, and ephemeral than the authorial deity being displaced. This abstraction leads Foucault to remark that visions such as Barthes' are themselves "romantic" in the pejorative sense.³⁰ That dismissal of Barthes' optimism concerning the liberation that becomes possible with the disappearance of the author forms the heart of both Foucault's essay and the trajectories of ideological criticism to which it gives rise.

Foucault and the Author-Function

As we have seen, Barthes' interest in the overcoming of the "author" has largely to do with his agenda of liberating interpretation of texts—"birthing" the reader, who is free to engage in acts of interpretation absent the single, centralized, author-ized meaning

29. *Ibid.*, 27. Burke goes on to catalog the various ways in which the "author" returns to a more prominent place within Barthes' later works, such that the vehement antiauthorialism of "The Death of the Author" is all but left behind.

30. "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." Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979). We will discuss this quotation and its implications presently.

signified by the Author. Foucault, in a lecture given fewer than two years after the publication of Barthes' essay,³¹ shifted the focus of the desire for authorial anonymity away from the supposed freedom of the reader (of which Foucault was, as we shall see, skeptical) and toward the realm of discursive production and regulation—that is, into the areas where Foucault's own critical philosophy was beginning to probe at the time of his essay's publication.³²

The quotation from Beckett that opens Foucault's essay "What Is an Author?," "What does it matter who is speaking?," signals the philosopher's initial desire to dislodge the "author" from the realm of the inevitable; that is, one of Foucault's main goals in the essay is to show how the notion that texts need an "author" to serve as a principle of coherence and authority is itself a notion that has a history. And, like all historically determined concepts (that is, for Foucault, all concepts!), the history of authorship depends upon a series of contingent choices marked by changing distributions of authority-granting structures within a given society. From the outset of our discussion, we can note that, to the extent that Foucault's project rests upon the legitimacy of that point, subsequent critical engagement both with his essay and with the history of the institution of authorship has allowed his text to perform an intriguingly continuous self-confirmation: that is, even as literary historians have challenged the particular historical assertions that Foucault makes in his essay (such as the idea that premodern scientific texts did not benefit from authorial ascription), the very act of

31. "While nowhere explicitly citing or referring to Barthes' essay, nor indeed directly engaging with or challenging Barthes' pronouncements, Foucault's essay is nevertheless heavily indebted, pervasively and antagonistically influenced by that precursor text. . . . Barthes' essay may be said to be Foucault's unstated premise, his silent progenitor and antagonist, his 'intertext.'" Bennett, *Author*, 19–20.

32. For a useful discussion situating Foucault's work on authorship within his well-known methodological shift from archaeology to genealogy, see Burke, *Death and Return of the Author*, 62ff.

engaging the history of authorship continues Foucault's own project and thus perpetually legitimates it. In other words, since the appearance of "What Is an Author?," all attempts to improve on Foucault's analysis have proceeded more or less on the terms that he himself stipulates in that essay.

Like Barthes, Foucault is concerned to overcome the romantic image of the author as a solitary, self-present creative subject; however, whereas Barthes did so by inflating the status of the author to that of an easily discreditable deity, Foucault recasts the author as a "function" of discourse, and more specifically of discursive control. "The author," in Foucault's account, is both an ascription borne by and an effect stemming from certain configurations of discourse. As he puts it,

[T]he author's name is not simply an element in a discourse. . . . [I]t performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts. . . . The author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author's name, that one can say "this was written by so-and-so" or "so-and-so is its author," shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it is speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status.³³

What Foucault is describing are the ways in which "authorship," both as an act of ascription and as a label wielded by certain instances of discourse, serves as a kind of strategy to allow discourse to achieve certain things. The fact that, as with many of Foucault's writings, "discourse," and not a given individual or group, assumes the

33. Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 147.

subjective, agential role in many of his arguments simply reinforces the slippery nature of the author-function.

The political advantages of associating authorship with discourse operate on multiple levels. Foucault, like Barthes, is interested in the ways that the literary-critical establishment's procedures for interpreting texts depend upon historically conditioned criteria for detecting "successful" readings. Drawing from *De viris illustribus* of Saint Jerome, he identifies four authorial "definitions" that remain decisive, defining the author as "a constant level of value," "a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence," "a stylistic unity," and "a historical figure at the crossroads of a certain number of events."³⁴ Read at this level, the essay's historical probing concerning the historically variable functions of authorship themselves validates the essay's closing desire for a return to something like authorial anonymity: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" To the extent that Foucault has successfully shown that the "givens" of how the author-function affects society's treatment of texts within an established authorial oeuvre are the result of contingent and interested choices, such deconstruction of any sense of the author as a transcendental category of self-present genius renders the "author" altogether less determinative for textual production and interpretation. So far, so congenial to Barthes.

And indeed, in its original form (given as a lecture to the Société française de philosophie in 1969), the essay's modest concluding suggestions for future directions in research do remain at the level of textual interpretation and transmission. However, as Josué V. Harari points out, the more widely anthologized version of "What Is an Author?" is in fact a revised version that ends with a brief but suggestive meditation on the politically coercive dimensions of

34. Ibid., 151.

authorial ascription: “This divergence [from the first version of the essay to the second] is crucial to an understanding of Foucault’s work in that it reveals the shift from his former fascination with language to his more recent politico-historical work [namely, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*].”³⁵ Indeed, my contention is that these later political arguments are what set Foucault’s analysis of authorship on a more promising trajectory than that plagued with the debilitating tensions of Barthes’ essay (described earlier). This trajectory—the analysis of institutionally deployed ideologies of authorship—has in fact been decisive for post-Foucauldian literary theory, and will be equally decisive for this book.

In the revised essay’s appended remarks, Foucault argues that, in addition to the “theoretical” importance of analyzing the historical and contemporary functioning of authorship, “there are reasons dealing with the ‘ideological’ status of the author.” He goes on to describe this status in terms that initially hew closely to the previously stated concern with textual interpretation:

The question then becomes: How can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world? The answer is: One can reduce it with the author. The author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations within a world where one is thrifty, not only with one’s resources and riches, but also with one’s discourses and their significations. The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.³⁶

Foucault then argues that, if the author does indeed function as a principle of thrift rather than plenitude, then the “traditional idea of the author”—that is, the romantic conception of the self-present individual who creates meaning in virtuoso fashion—must be turned on its head. Such inversion allows Foucault to articulate what has

35. Josué V. Harari, “Critical Factions/Critical Fictions,” in Harari, *Textual Strategies*, 43.

36. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 158–59.

become his essay's most pervasive and enduring thesis: "[T]he author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses."³⁷ On the basis of this argument, the notion of the author-function as, among other things, a check upon the proliferation of interpretive possibilities has become an entrenched item within the lexicon of contemporary literary criticism.³⁸

The preceding quotation also brings up a quandary that admits of no simple resolution. As we have already seen, and will have occasion to see further, a pervasive question in literary theory is whether debates about authorship, such as the one under consideration here, apply only to texts that clearly warrant the appellation "fiction," or whether other texts (such as those produced within the disciplines of history, or philosophy, or science) bear the author-function in similar fashion. The lack of consistency on this point is apparent in Foucault's own essay in that he seems to privilege the "danger of fiction" qua fiction in the second edition's coda, but only after he has analyzed the construction and deployment of the author-function in relation to texts from science, philosophy, psychology, and fiction, and has done so in more or less indiscriminate fashion. Most literary theory that has been influenced by the twentieth-century debates

37. *Ibid.*, 159. In his 1970 lecture "The Order of Discourse," Foucault modifies the *prima facie* extremity of this thesis as follows: "It would of course be absurd to deny the existence of an individual who writes and invents. But I believe that—at least since a certain epoch—the individual who sets out to write a text on the horizon of which a possible oeuvre is prowling, takes upon himself the function of an author: what he writes and what he does not write, what he sketches out, even by way of provisional drafts, as an outline of the oeuvre, and what he lets fall by the way of commonplace remarks—this whole play of differences is prescribed by the author-function, as he receives it from his epoch, or as he modifies it in turn." Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," in *Untying the Text: A Post Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 59.

38. "The Order of Discourse," which was given as Foucault's inaugural lecture as professor at the Collège de France and details the total direction of his later research program into genealogies and "cartographies" of power, names authorship—along with commentary and disciplinary division—as one of the three "internal" principles by which discourse regulates itself.

on authorship has demonstrated its willingness to apply analysis of given instances of “author-functioning” to nonfiction texts, much as Foucault himself did in his own later works. Indeed, this is consistent with the overall thrust of his thesis: surely a given social configuration has as much interest in placing checks upon the hermeneutical possibilities associated with Heidegger or the gospel of Mark or *The Origin of Species* as it does with explicitly fictive texts, given that the politically explosive interpretive possibilities associated with the three former texts alone are well attested historically. Thus, although it is clearly the case (as Foucault points out) that the ascription of authorship of a philosophical or scientific treatise might “function” differently in a given epoch than that of a fictional text, any strong separation between fiction and nonfiction—particularly as regards the presence of “danger”—is unwarranted. Such, at least, will be the operating assumption of what follows.³⁹

Returning to Foucault’s essay, we have seen that to this point his analysis, although unfolding in a less hyperbolic and more historically nuanced key than Barthes’, does not seem in its political implications to have departed radically from the latter’s call for the death of the “Author-God.” However, in a crucial qualification to his own call for a reversal of the “traditional” view of the author-function (and thus the attenuation of the author’s ability to function as a hermeneutical constraint in the manner described), Foucault offers the following caveat:

39. Theological authorship—the subject of the chapters to follow—presents a further set of complicating factors in that the discipline of theology, at least since the Enlightenment, itself has oscillated between understanding itself as a *Wissenschaft* on the order of empirical disciplines (as in the work of Schubert Ogden and Franklin Gamwell), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, regarding the status of its truth claims as being more on the level of metaphor or imaginative construction, and thus closer to “fictive.” This particular tension, as we shall see, has had extensive influence upon contemporary anxieties about specifically *theological* authorship.

In saying this, I seem to be calling for a form of culture in which fiction would not be limited by the figure of the author. 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. . . . [G]iven the historical modifications that are taking place, it does not seem necessary that the author-function remain constant in form, complexity, or even existence. I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author-function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemic texts will once again function according to another mode, but still within a system of constraint—one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced.⁴⁰

The charge of “romanticism” against those who anticipate that the evacuation of the romantically construed author-function would produce a bright new dawn of freedom in textual production and interpretation adds substantial political weight to an earlier charge in the essay: that attempts to replace the author with such transcendental categories as *écriture* (and here Foucault clearly is referencing his “intertextual” opponent Barthes) fail to comprehend the extent to which the author-function is simply one instance, albeit a historically powerful one, of the ways by which power inevitably asserts control over discourse. Here again, one can easily expand the discourse in question beyond fiction and into all sorts of discursive instances for which proliferation of meaning (on the side of both production and interpretation) threatens the interests of given configurations of power.

Thus, although Foucault agrees with Barthes that the romantic theory of authorship is sufficiently bankrupt so as to pave the way for the death of that particular form of constraint (and thus to give birth, if not to the hypostasized and transcendental “Reader,” at least

40. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 159–60.

to a discursive space in which discourses “develop in the anonymity of a murmur”),⁴¹ his essay represents a major advance on Barthes’ in that it moves discussion of the “death of the author” away from singular focus on interpretation and toward a richer engagement with another line of inquiry: the sociopolitical relationship between discursive production and institutions affecting or being affected by that production. What modes of control are in place to “tame” discourse to certain ends? How does the “functioning” of authorship further these ends, and how does it subvert them? How does authorial creativity regulate itself, and how is it regulated? What do “authors” gain and lose in these negotiations with power? In short, Foucault points toward a line of critical questioning that would situate the question of authorship within that of ideology, and the issue of ideology within the need to probe how and to what ends institutions authorize and are authorized by acts of authorship.

Future Directions

This line of questioning is taken up and helpfully expanded by Burke, who is skeptical about declarations of the death of the author not simply because of his sense of the inability of Barthes, Foucault, and others to pursue their own projects without recourse to the author⁴² but also because he views retention of the author as the best means of addressing the aforementioned ideological questions of power

41. *Ibid.*, 160.

42. Burke’s *Death and Return of the Author* offers a series of close readings of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida en route to his conclusion that these authors’ subscription to the desire for the author’s disappearance (or, in Foucault’s case, the disappearance of the author-function in favor of “anonymity”) represents a “blind spot” in their work: “A massive disjunction opens up between the theoretical statement of authorial disappearance and the project of reading without the author. What their texts say about the author, and what they do with the author issue at such an express level of contradiction that the performative aspects utterly overwhelm the declaration of authorial disappearance” (172).

and institutional authorization raised by the mid-twentieth-century debates:

One can see that so many of the problems that bedevil the author-debate arise from the failure to realize that the notion of the author has been falsely analogized with the transcendent/impersonal subject and that the only way to deconstruct this subject is not to replace it with theories of language, *différance*, anonymity, *écriture féminine* and so on, but to reposition authorship as a situated activity present not so much to itself as to culture, ideology, language, difference, influence, biography.⁴³

This is especially true given that many of the contemporary modes of criticism that have emerged in the wake of the mid-twentieth-century debates (such as feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial) have sought to question the imposition of universalizing subjectivity or totalizing discursive systems upon both texts and human populations. According to Burke, it is precisely an understanding of “situated authorial subjectivity” that is the best safeguard against such strategies:

In each case, a rigorous rejection of the universal subject must imply a reassertion of the subject in his/her particularity. . . . The need to (re)situate subjectivity is prime among the many callings facing political theories as well as those facing the cluster of discourses we refer to as the postmodern. To refuse totalizing histories or accounts of human nature should be itself to refuse the impersonalizing consciousness that purportedly establishes such stories to be told. . . . Conversely, and by the same token, postmodern emphases on “islands of discourse,” on little narratives, language games, the locality of discourse, *should acknowledge the situated author as principle of locality par excellence*. When we consider that the war on totalities must be a war waged on the transcendental/impersonal subject through whose putative construction totalities emerge, it becomes clear that the great crises of postmodernism are crises of authorship even if they still disdain to announce themselves as such.⁴⁴

43. Burke, “Reconstructing the Author,” xxvi.

44. *Ibid.*, xxviii–xxix (emphasis added).

Burke's argument here should not be understood as a call for a return to auteurist or biographicist criticism, nor should it be read as a wholesale rejection of the interrogation of the romantic author pursued by Barthes and Foucault. What is being rejected is the idea that rigorous investigation of the ideologies and discursive strategies in play in a given instance of author-functioning, along with the consequent rejection of any simple view of the author as a self-present creative genius with full autonomy over the production and interpretation of texts, must be carried out in such a way that the author as specified agent is replaced with impersonal anonymity. Burke, therefore, is affirming the "situation" of authorial agency in such a way that the irreducible locality of authorial functioning actually heightens the need to investigate how major discursive forces ("culture, ideology, language, difference, influence, biography") are being strengthened or subverted within specific acts of creative textual production. And, as we learned from Foucault, investigation into discourse entails critical examination of the institutions that authorize and are authorized by discourse at work.⁴⁵

To anticipate a theme that will become important when we turn to contemporary theology in the chapters that follow, one of the institutions (or, better, entities) whose influence upon the ideologies of author-functioning since the rise of authorship as a profession

45. In a somewhat dated yet still useful investigation of the nature of "authority" in our time, Bruce Lincoln has argued that authority should not be construed as some static possession ("such as an office or a charisma") of a given speaker or discourse. Rather, authority is a contextual and conjunctive reality that depends upon a whole host of factors coming together in the form of an event; authority "is best understood in relational terms as the effect of a posited, perceived, or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or—an important proviso—to make audiences act *as if* this were so." Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4 (Lincoln's emphasis). In reflecting upon how the "effect" of authority might manifest itself in contemporary societies in manners different from those of past societies, Lincoln posits that the major difference is authority's diffusion into a variety of "stages" upon which this conjunction of factors adding up to an authoritative effect might occur. We will have occasion to explore this point further.

has become the topic of a range of scholarship (much of it in the Foucauldian vein) is that of the marketplace. In a useful study, Woodmansee has demonstrated that the notion of the marketplace as a “tribunal” (to use Schiller’s term) that could serve as an alternative to the patronage system as a source for the legitimation of a given author’s literary efforts has had a powerful influence upon contemporary conceptions of the author as creative genius.⁴⁶ As we shall see when we turn to contemporary anxieties over theological authorship, our own day has witnessed the reemergence of venerable fears about the potentially corrupting influence of the marketplace as contrasted with putatively purer or more legitimate sources of discursive authorization.

Conclusion

This brief survey of key moments in contemporary debates over authorship has allowed us to highlight several points, all of which I am offering in order to suggest that this book’s investigation into the relationship between ecclesiology and theological authorship stands within a trajectory of ideological criticism that is well established yet still developing within the field of literary studies. My main suggestion has been that the “death of the author” debates, functioning as an encapsulation of the crises of authorial identity brought about by the weakening of both auctorial and romantic models of authorship, do at their best eventuate in the need to retain the notion of authorship precisely as the best vehicle through which to carry out the sort of “thick” investigation into the nuances of given instances of author-functioning that responsible scholarship

46. A discussion of Schiller’s appeal to the book-buying “public” as a rival tribunal (rival to that of wealthy patrons or governors) before which the quality of his literary work might be vindicated is in Woodmansee, chapter 2, “Genius and the Copyright,” *Author, Art, and the Market*, esp. 40ff..

necessitates. This is Burke's main point, and I am both endorsing it and signaling my intention to examine contemporary ecclesiology's unease about authorship in the manner that such an operating principle would entail. That is, we will retain the theological "author" so as to best understand how loss of faith in both *auctor* theory and the romantic self-present virtuoso might influence and be influenced by specific ecclesial realities.

Another reason why this chapter has focused so heavily upon the "death of the author" debates is that, as we shall see, the desire (largely implicit, but no less real for that) to eschew romantic modes of author-functioning in favor of something like Foucault's anonymity is evident, or at least implied, in the work of some contemporary theologians who have addressed the topic of theological authorship directly. The possibility of a return to something like a more auctorial mode has also been kept alive within the same theological circles. Meanwhile, as we have noted, much of the negotiation among contemporary proposals for romantic, auctorial, and anonymous portrayals of the act/vocation of ecclesially located theological authorship has centered on anxieties concerning the gradual encroachment of the marketplace as a rival authorizing space—rival, that is, to the church.

Having thus situated my projected within ongoing multidisciplinary investigations into the nature and function of authorship in general, we are now in a position to turn to specifically theological considerations of ecclesiology and authorial creativity.