INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS
Spring 2024 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9791222313085, DOI 10.7413/18258630155

AUTHORSHIP (IN LITERATURE)

By Chiara Scarlato

(First published May 31, 2024)

It. *Autorialità (in letteratura)*; Fr. *Auctorialité (dans la littérature)*; Germ. *Autorschaft (in der Literatur)*; Span. *Autoría (en la literatura)*. Authorship is an aesthetic concept that encompasses the complex and diverse set of features that characterize an author as an individual who intentionally creates works of art, whether literary, musical, or artistic in the broadest sense. Works of art are the result of a deliberate, personal, and hopefully original creative acts. Legal responsibility for a particular work of art lies with its author. In addition, the author is in a relationship with any potential appreciator of the produced artwork. The author-artwork-appreciator relationship forms a reciprocal dynamic in which the artwork is essential for establishing the author's function, while the presence of a potential appreciator validates the figure of the author within a specific aesthetic field of reference. It is important to acknowledge that each artistic field can have its own view of the author's function. For example, in music the term "author" may refer to either the composer or the lyricist. As it is impossible to create a universal frame of reference, this entry will concentrate on the author's function in literature. Specifically, it will examine the 20th-century debate on this topic, with particular attention to its development in France and in the United States.

A GENERAL OVERVIEW

On 22 February 1969, Foucault gave a lecture on authorship at the *Collège de France*. This lecture has influenced subsequent debates in both philosophical and literary fields, particularly in French (Paul Ricœur, Pierre Bourdieu, Antoine Compagnon) and English-speaking contexts (Harold Bloom, Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak). Foucault's lecture provides a partial synthesis of his research on literature in the 1960s. One of its main objectives was to eliminate the sacredness of the author's function and establish language as the sole subject of the literary work. Foucault's approach to the authorial figure in literature is more aligned with the theories of Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, and Marcel Proust, who advocated for the separation of the author from the text. This approach prioritised objectivity and avoided subjective evaluations, in contrast to the idea of artistic genius promoted by Charles Sainte-Beuve, and later by William C. Brownell. The idea of dissociating the author from their work was first introduced by the American New Criticism. Its main representative authors – Ivor A. Richards, Monroe C. Beardsley, and

William K. Wimsatt – examined poetry by considering both on authorial intention and on the dissociation between the authorial context and the reader's reception. A few years later, discussions about authorship took place in Anglo-American and French-speaking contexts. Wayne C. Booth made contributions to these discussions, as did Roland Barthes with his announcement of the "death of the author", and Michel Foucault with his seminal essays. The following sections will delve into some of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks in detail.

Communication and Intentionality: The New Criticism

In his *Principle of Literary Criticism* (1924, second edition 1926), Richards argues that artistic experiences facilitate authentic communication between individuals. This is because art, including poetry (which is the privileged object of his analysis), gives voice to "subtle or recondite experiences [that] are for most men incommunicable and indescribable, though social conventions or terror of the loneliness of the human situation may make us pretend the contrary" (Richards 2004, 27). Possible reasons for this phenomenon may be found in Richards' *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (1930), where he maintains his focus on the centrality of the poetic work. Other representatives of New Criticism include W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, who base their argument on the critique of the authorial intention. In their 1946 paper *The Intentional Fallacy*, these authors argue that interpreting the meaning of a poetic text should not solely rely on the search for the author's primary intentions. Rather, they suggest that the effectiveness of the text lies in its ability to crystallize a particular human experience and provide a model for the reader to compare. Therefore, the authorial intention is secondary to the centrality of the text.

Implied Authors: Wayne Booth

In his 1961 work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth distinguishes between the real author and the implied author, arguing that in literature "the writer sets himself out with a different air depending on the needs of particular works" (Booth 1961, 71). To better understand this distinction, it is helpful to consider the author as a real person living in specific spatio-temporal conditions, and the implied author as an individual who attempts to distance themselves from themselves in order to create literary characters. Booth often refers to the implied author as a "second self" who "chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices. It is only by distinguishing between the author and his implied image that we can avoid pointless and unverifiable talk about such qualities as 'sincerity' or 'seriousness' in the author" (Booth 1961, 74-75). These remarks form the basis of the current debate on reliable and unreliable narrators (see the concluding section).

Writers and Authors: Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault

Barthes' essay on the death of the author examines the roles of both the author and the reader. According to Barthes, the concept of the author emerged during the end of the Middle Ages, coinciding both with the

rise of individualism and the idea of a human being as a unique individual. Barthes distinguishes between the *auteur* (author) and the *scripteur* (writer). The author entrusts his/her work to an eternal present, leaving it to language, where writing is constantly reborn without origin or end. Barthes concludes that the reader is the only inheritor of the various lines that constitute writing. This point emphasizes the contrast between Barthes and Foucault. Foucault questions the author's function as something that still requires exploration, while Barthes has already identified a possible replacement for the author in the reader.

In his 1969 lecture titled *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*, Foucault mainly examines issues concerning authors and works by intervening in a discussion established since the late 19th century. Starting from a passage of one Beckett's writings – "Qu'importe qui parle, quelqu'un a dit qu'importe qui parle" (Beckett 1958, 129, trans. "What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking") – he considers authorship by naming four features related to the author's name, the principle of appropriation, the principle of distribution, and the author's position toward their texts. Foucault suggests that discourses can be studied not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations, but also in terms of their modes of existence, such as circulation, valorisation, attribution, and appropriation. These modes vary across cultures and within any specific culture. Reflecting on authorship could provide a new perspective on the concept of subject as a variable and complex function of discourses. In this sense, the author's function is just one possible specification of the subject function, which is equally not essential or permanent.

The research approach described in 1969 is echoed in Foucault's inaugural address to the *Collège de France* on December 2, 1970, which was published as *The Order of Discourse*. On this occasion, Foucault identifies several procedures that characterize the production and circulation of discourses in any society. The first group includes prohibition (*intedit*), division and rejection (*partage*), and the will to truth (*volonté de verité*). The second group includes commentary and disciplines, as well as the principle of the author. The third group lists those procedures that regulate the appearance and circulation of discourses, consisting of ritual, societies of discourses, and doctrines. Concerning the author, they are described as the principle of grouping discourses, serving as the unity and origin of their meanings, and the fulcrum of their coherence. However, the authorial principle restricts discourse to the identity of an individual self. In this regard, Foucault argues that, despite "the productivity of an author, the multiplicity of commentaries, the development of a discipline, as so many infinite resources for the creation of discourses", we should not forget that these are "principles of constraint; and in all likelihood we would be unable to offer an account of their positive roles or their role in proliferation without taking into consideration their function as restrictions and constraints" (Foucault 1981, 61).

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

The topic of authorship in literature has generated interest in various philosophical traditions, including aesthetics, theoretical, analytic, and moral philosophy, as well as research areas such as comparative literature, sociology, digital humanities, psychology, and neuroesthetics. However, it can be argued that all theories developed in authorship research originate from New Criticism and French thought. For example, Alexander Nehamas built upon Foucault's 1969 lecture and contended in a 1982 paper that the

author "is not an independent constraint, forbidding a priori desired but unlawful extensions of literature and authorizing only accurate interpretations. The author-figure puts the very distinction between interpretation and extension, understanding and use, into question" (Nehamas 1986, 691). As a further result of Booth's research, the issue of unreliability in narratives has become highly debated in several different research areas (Nünning 2015). In the field of artificial intelligence, interdisciplinary discussions on creativity have arisen, including the question of whether a device can be considered an author when it produces literary works, ranging from brief poems to more complex texts (Pizzo *et al.* 2024). These last topics were introduced in the early 1990s, when scholars began to question the issue of creativity in relation to computer functionalities (Samuelson 1990) and the nature of virtual texts (Hawkes *et al.* 2000). Equally promising is the field of study that focuses on the issue of distributed creativity, which coincides with the study of group creative processes rather than the concept of personal creativity (Glăveanu 2014).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

C. Barbero, *Filosofia della letteratura*, Roma, Carocci, 2013.

R. Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, "Aspen", 5-6 (1967), accessed April 2, 2024, https://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes.

S. Beckett, *Textes pour rien*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1958.

A. Bennett, *The Author*, London, Routledge, 2005.

W.C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago (IL)-London, University of Chicago Press, 1961, 1983.

G. Buelens *et al.*, *The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

S. Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1992.

A. Compagnon, *Le démon de la théorie. Littérature et sens commun*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1998.

M. Couturier, *La figure de l'auteur*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1995.

J. Farrell, *The Varieties of Authorial Intention. Literary Theory Beyond the Intentional Fallacy*, Cham, Springer, 2017.

M. Foucault, *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*, "Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie", 63.3 (1969): 73-104.

— *The Order of Discourse* in R. Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, London-New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982: 48-78 (orig. ed. 1971).

V.P. Glăveanu, *Distributed Creativity: Thinking Outside the Box of the Creative Individual*, New York, Springer, 2014.

L. Hawkes *et al.*, *The Theory and Criticism of Virtual Texts. An Annotated Bibliography, 1988-1999*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2000.

C. Heibach *et al.*, *Constructions of Media Authorship. Investigating Aesthetic Practices from Early Modernity to the Digital Age*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2020.

W. Irwin (ed.), *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2002.

H. Love, *Attributing Authorship*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

A. Nehamas, *What an Author Is*, "The Journal of Philosophy", 83.11 (1986): 685-691.

V. Nünning (ed.), *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness. Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2015.

A. Pizzo *et al.*, *Interactive Storytelling. A Cross-Media Approach to Writing, Producing and Editing with AI*, London-New York, Routledge, 2024.

I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, London-New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924, (orig. ed. 1926).

— *Practical Criticism. A Study of Literary Judgement*, London, The Edinburgh Press, 1930.

P. Samuelson, *Can a Computer be an Author?* in M.D. Ermann *et. al.* (eds.), *Computers, Ethics, and Society*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990: 299-307.

P. Sayers, *Authorship's Wake. Writing After the Death of the Authors*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2020.

W.K. Wimsatt, M.C. Beardsley, *The Intentional Fallacy*, "The Sewanee Review", 54.3 (1946): 468-488.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

C. Scarlato, *Authorship (in Literature)*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2024 Edition, URL = https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2024/spring/Authorship(inliterature).pdf, DOI: 10.7413/18258630155.

Please note that this URL is fixed, since it belongs to *ILAe*'s archived edition. This allows readers to quote a stable document for academic purposes.

This entry also belongs to the seventh volume of *ILAe*'s printed edition. Each issue of this edition collects the *ILAe*'s Spring and Autumn online editions per year. The proper reference of the printed edition is:

C. Scarlato, *Authorship (in Literature)*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 7, Milano, Mimesis, 2025.