

THE AUTHOR[‘S] REMAINS:
FOUCAULT AND THE DEMISE OF THE “AUTHOR-FUNCTION”

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I believe this version is either very close, or exactly the same as what was published there.

In “What is an Author,” Michel Foucault quotes Samuel Beckett: “What matter who’s speaking, someone said, what matter who’s speaking?” (Foucault 1977b, 115). Foucault cites this statement in reference to an “indifference” that characterizes contemporary writing, an indifference that reveals “an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears” (116). Yet this “indifference” is introduced in a decidedly non-indifferent way: though the statement proclaims itself as anonymous -- “what matter who’s speaking, *someone said . . .*” -- its source is explicitly identified in Foucault’s text as Beckett.¹ Why does Foucault name his source for the indifference that “someone” has expressed, when this indifference signals the death of the author? Why not attempt to preserve the potential anonymity implied by the purposeful identification of the original author as unknown, lost, or intentionally hidden behind the word “someone”? Perhaps because, despite Foucault’s own indications to the contrary, it *does* (still) matter who is speaking; because if it was simply “someone,” few might be willing to listen in the way they would to Beckett, or to Foucault himself.²

There may also be another dimension to Foucault’s name-dropping, to his citation of Beckett as an author: in tracing to an anonymous source Beckett’s (and his own) statement of the author’s demise, Foucault points to a lack at what is supposed to be the origin of the idea. *Someone* has said it, though “the signs of [the author’s] particular individuality” have been cancelled out (Foucault 1977b, 117). The author’s particular individuality has been sacrificed in the murderous process of writing itself, his identity is “a victim of his own writing.” Foucault’s repetition of Beckett’s repetition of the anonymity of the above-cited question works to enact the

point that at the origin of the cited quote is no author in particular – there is only an empty placeholder, the authorial role with an anonymous “someone” playing it.³

Yet this placeholder, the space where the author is expected and looked for, is still significant. If there is no proper name to fill this space, it is labeled merely as “someone” – signaling, in Foucault’s terms, the continued existence of the “author-function.” The author-function remains alive and well, though Foucault seems to hope for its demise along with the author, for the disappearance of the placeholder still indicated by the insistence that “*someone* has said, what matter who’s speaking?” We may be witnessing the death of the author as a specific individual into the movements of the text, but the author-function remains to the degree that we speak of the author at all, even as only an anonymous “someone.” That Foucault looks towards a day when even that last vestige of the author-function disappears is expressed in the last line of “What is an Author?”, where “someone” is now silent, replaced by “little more than the murmur of indifference: ‘What matter who’s speaking?’” (Foucault 1977b, 138). This time, there is a murmur without an author, without even the expectation of one that would result in an insistence that “someone” had uttered it.

But working to bring about the demise of the author-function is not an easy task, and it is not clear how it might best be brought about. Foucault seems at times to suggest a strategy of anonymity on the part of the author, a succumbing to one’s own death as an author at the hands of the text. To accept and further the effacement of his or her identity, the author might refuse to be named as an author at all. Though such gestures seem to be indicated at times throughout Foucault’s writings, in this essay I argue that they may not produce the desired change in the institutions and individuals calling for an author for texts. Further, how might we reconcile Foucault’s occasional calls for authorial anonymity with his tendency to reiterate in interviews what his concerns are and what he is trying to say -- thereby indicating “who he is” as an author? In this essay I argue that if one hopes to change the author function, even to the point of its elimination, one is more likely to succeed by taking up this function in order to transform it from within than by negating it altogether. This strategy is expressed in Foucault’s later work on the

aesthetic creation of self, and it provides a more promising strategy for changing the author function than an attempt at authorial anonymity. I conclude that efforts to achieve the (eventual) loss of the author-function may actually be furthered by the continued expression of "who one is" as an author, at least temporarily. Along the way I discuss why Foucault may have thought such a change in the author-function would be a worthy ethical and political goal, thereby indicating why we might wish ourselves to take it up.

I

Foucault answers the question, "What is an Author?" by arguing that it is "a function of discourse" (Foucault 1977b, 124). The name of an author does not simply refer to a particular individual; it signifies a role that is created by the ways discourse is treated in the culture, and it serves a particular function in the circulation of texts. One important aspect of this function is that "the author's name characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse," meaning that texts connected to an author's name exist, are circulated and received, in specific ways that differ from those that are not so connected:

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. Rather, its status and manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates. (123)

Texts that bear an author's name are often treated differently, operate differently within the culture than texts that do not -- and one significant way in which this is the case is that those texts with authors tend not to be simply "consumed and forgotten," but are more likely to be given attention and respect comparable to the status of the author as s/he has been created and sustained through power relations in the culture.

The author-function, according to Foucault, is a product of the power relations that exist within a particular society, and because these power relations are not static, neither is the author-function: "it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture" (Foucault 1977b, 130).⁴ Accordingly, Foucault points to a potential change in this

function in the future, even to the extent of its eventual elimination: “considering past historical transformations, it appears that the form, the complexity, and *even the existence* of this function are far from immutable” (138; italics mine). That the author-function may eventually disappear is expressed in what appears to be a vision of a better future by Foucault:

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. (138)

There would be no more authors, no more need to designate, by whatever changing rules and procedures, who had written what and to whom a particular text belongs. There would simply be texts in existence.

Foucault attempted anonymity himself in an interview with *Le Monde* in 1980, entitled “The Masked Philosopher” (his identity was not divulged when the interview was published) (Foucault 1996i). But his own anonymity didn’t last, obviously, since we now know that he was the subject of this interview. Perhaps his identity was rooted out by an insistence on upholding the current manifestation of the author-function, the requirement that the author be identified through the use of what Foucault calls “tiresome” questions: ““Who is the real author?’ ‘Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?’” (Foucault 1977b, 138). That “someone” had given the interview was not enough -- it was necessary to discover who; and it is the existence and character of the author-function that drives the need not only to name the author specifically, but to insist that there must be “someone” behind the text at all.

It is the demise of the author as “someone” that Foucault seems to envision in his hope for a future of anonymous discourse, where the tiresome questions about the identity of the author would disappear. But Foucault’s own attempt at anonymity brings up one of the difficulties of undermining the author-function: if one attempts to step out of it into anonymity, this gesture alone may not do much to change the ways that the culture approaches and handles

discourse, including its insistence that one's identity as an author be rooted out and solidified. Taking on an authorial anonymity may manage only to bring out the emptiness of the "someone" that still signals the author-function, a space that one's audience may continue to insist must be filled by a particular individual as an author. Accordingly, I argue below that the attempt to eliminate the author-function altogether, by removing one's name from texts and discourse, may not be the most efficacious way to initiate change in current conceptions of this function.

Further, Foucault's attempt at and desire for anonymity seem undermined by the fact that he also takes great pains in numerous interviews to explain what he is thinking and writing about -- even to the point of trying to tie it all together into a coherent whole:

[M]y problem has always been . . . truth. (Foucault 1996d, 215)

If I look today at my past, I recall having thought that I was working essentially on a "genealogical" history of knowledge. But the true motivating force was really this problem of power. (Foucault 1991, 145)⁵

Why continually insist on which problems inform his work when this could so easily be a way to pin him down as an author with a specific identity and particular views? How can we reconcile this with his statements elsewhere that his work cannot be, nor does he want it to be, unified into a systematic whole?⁶ Foucault claims to avoid universalizing what he says, and to hope for authorial anonymity; and yet he speaks at other times in ways that would undermine these claims. I argue that one way to explain such tensions may be to read Foucault as struggling to transform the author-function while remaining within it. But rather than seeing this as a problem, I argue that it may be the most effective way to achieve eventual change in this function, in the role of the "author" in the modern West.

First, however, it is important to consider just why a change might be needed. What might be problematic about assigning texts to authors, so problematic that Foucault looks toward a future where this practice will no longer exist?

II

Working towards the demise of the author-function may be partly a matter of taking the death of the author seriously, of fully exploring the consequences and implications of this event (Foucault 1977b, 117). If the author continually disappears in the work, then there seems no good reason to continue to hold open a place for him/her, a place filled, if not by a particular name, then by an anonymity that yet rests upon the possibility and hope of a future identification -- “someone,” we know not (yet) whom. The author-function works to uphold a system of identifying and circulating texts as if their authors could and ought to be identified, for whatever purposes the culture deems necessary. If this need not be the case -- if, as Foucault suggests, we are coming to recognize that the very notion of the “author” and the ways in which it functions are created, contingent, and malleable -- then with the disappearance of the particular author within the text could also come the elimination of the insistence that “someone,” even if no one in particular, has written it.

The goal of authorial anonymity may also be tied to Foucault's concerns about the political role of intellectuals. Intellectuals in the modern West, according to Foucault, are closely tied to the current “régime of truth” as agents who are entrusted with the location and dissemination of truth and knowledge.⁷ Those who are established as speakers of truth achieve that status through structures and practices of power, and they exercise a certain amount of power *as* authorities on the “truth.” Accordingly, intellectuals and other speakers of truth have the power to alter the thought and actions of those who wish to conform to the true.⁸ According to Foucault, the political role of intellectuals is best conceived as a critical one: rather than acting as agents of the régime of truth, modern intellectuals could effectively act as its critics. Foucault suggests that the role for theory today (and for the theorizing intellectual) could be “to analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power,” and “to build little by little a strategic knowledge” that could be ut into play by those already engaged in struggles against various practices of power (Foucault 1980a, 145).⁹ By addressing, analyzing, and publicizing the specific operations of truth and power within their own areas of expertise, intellectuals can offer

assistance to those who hope to and/or are already resisting the workings of the current régime of truth. Rather than acting as “universal intellectuals,” as spokespersons for universal truth (and telling others what to do on the basis of this), intellectuals are instead to offer criticism of present conceptions of truth and power.¹⁰

The connecting of a text with a specific author may work to support, rather than undermine, the ways truth and power are currently connected in modern, Western societies. A text with an "author" may presently be given more attention than one that cannot be traced to someone whose credentials as an authority on truth can be verified. Further, the more respected the author him/herself as an authority on truth, the more likely it is to be that his/her text is taken seriously. The practice of appending an author's name to a text can thus perpetuate a system of truth and power wherein truth is located, analyzed, disseminated, and to a certain extent owned by discreet individuals who are accorded the status of its “authorities.” Carrying on the social role of “author” can help to ensure that there continue to be individuals who act as agents of truth, whose status as authorities on truthful discourse continue to affect how their texts are received, and who continue to mold the thoughts and actions of their audience through their power as speakers of the true. By eliminating "authors," we may be able to help break down the connection between truth and particular social roles -- intellectual, expert, professional, etc. -- that allow individuals to act as authorities on truth.¹¹

But perhaps the most important reasons why the elimination of the author-function may have been a goal for Foucault can be located by exploring the connection he makes at the end of “What is an Author?” between authorship and subjectivity: the author-function, he claims, is “one of the possible specifications of the subject” (Foucault 1977b, 138). In other words, modern conceptions of subjectivity are closely related to modern conceptions of the author such that both may function similarly. Both may also, according to Foucault, fall together. In his later work on subjectivity and ethics Foucault suggests ways that modern conceptions of the subject might be fruitfully transformed, and considering how and why might help to clarify why

he also suggests that a society without authors would be a worthy goal, and how it might be achieved.

For Foucault, the subject, like the author, is a function of relations of power: we become subjects through “subjection” in power relations, with others and with ourselves. Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality Vol. I* how subjects are constructed through power -- through disciplinary and confessional practices, respectively. These practices work to create individuals as subjects with static, unified “true selves,” in part through writing. One's "truth" as an individual is deciphered through its putting into discourse, in mechanisms of confession and in the documentation of individuals through disciplinary practices such as surveillance and examination.¹² The practices of discipline and confession both continue today, according to Foucault, having spread throughout society to the extent that we are all, essentially, created as individual subjects with static “truths” through power (Foucault 1995, 209-217; 1990, 59). Further, the construction of the subject by power through the requirement of putting its truth into discourse is forgotten as the ubiquity of this practice makes it eventually appear as if it is the “natural” and universal state of the individual that it is a subject with an inner “truth.”¹³

What both disciplinary mechanisms and confessional practices have done, according to Foucault, is to produce an identifiable, stable individual through the operation of relations of power. In an essay first published in 1982, Foucault describes the kind of power that creates subjects:

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. . . . (Foucault 1983b, 212)

Discipline ties us to our individual identity by documenting it and asserting it as the “truth” of the self, one’s true nature and character; and confession enjoins us to find our “true self” deep

inside and express it to others. In both cases one's true self is deciphered out of the discourse into which one's life is translated.¹⁴

Discipline and confession also operate to create individuals who are responsible for their actions, who not only possess an "inner truth," but also a kind of autonomous, creative power to choose or refuse to follow the law, to act on impure impulses or to resist them. Through the documentation of the self in discourse and writing, one learns to take a step back and view one's "truth" from a certain distance, as something towards which one can take a critical or positive stance. The distance from one's "true nature" made possible by its fixation through writing seems to allow one the space to choose whether or not to adhere to it. In other words, what is created through processes of discipline and confession is not simply a subject with an inner "truth" – what I term here a "subject in truth" -- but one that views itself as capable of autonomous decision and action.¹⁵ This now-familiar conception of the subject, according to Foucault, is not the universal, final truth of its nature, but rather a product of particular practices of power.

This version of the subject, moreover, is one that is currently undergoing resistance because of its constraining tendencies, Foucault claims (Foucault 1983b, 211-212). He complains that the view of the subject as possessing an inner "truth," having originated through practices of power such as discipline and the confession, "forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way" (212). In other words, by insisting that the self has a truth to be discovered within, one that is truly our own and that we must therefore adhere to, we become tied to an identity that is fixed within the confines of a static "truth." We may consider ourselves autonomous subjects with the choice of whether or not to adhere to this truth, but its status *as* "truth" brings on a pressure to conform to it – both from without and within the self.

Foucault terms the process by which individual subjects are created through power the "government of individualization," where to be "governed," is to have one's actions and conduct directed, to have one's "possible field of action" designated and structured (212, 221). Clearly,

in discipline and confession, the individual subject has been and continues to be governed by others; but in his later work on the “care of the self” Foucault emphasizes that one can be governed by oneself as well -- one can, in a sense, bring a relation of power to bear on oneself: “Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word . . . is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity between techniques which impose coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself” (Foucault 1997b, 181-182).¹⁶ The construction of the subject, Foucault argues, results from “a subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies,” where the latter play an important role in supporting and furthering the creation of the “true self” (182). One can thus view oneself, and act upon oneself, as if one is conforming to a “true nature” within, thereby helping to construct oneself as a subject with a fixed “truth.”

The possibility of work on the self by the self, of self-modification, may be said to be the result of the construction of self as an autonomous, responsible subject through the operation of power. As procedures such as discipline and confession work to locate and fix one’s “true self” through discourse and writing, a distance is created that allows one to view it with a critical eye, and to respond to it in various ways. One can thus take up a relation of power with oneself, attempt to “govern” oneself in the sense of directing one’s own actions. Within the current régime of truth, where truth is sought and highly valued, many are likely to choose to govern the self in the direction of discovering, designating, and conforming to who and what one is, in truth.

This need not be the case, however. Foucault suggests that we might now take a different route:

Perhaps the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault 1983b, 216)

Noting that the view of ourselves as individuals with a “true nature” is a construct of external and internal power relations, we might now realize that we need not be tied to our “truth,” but can work to construct ourselves differently. Specifically, Foucault suggests that we might create

the self aesthetically: “From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (Foucault 1983a, 237).

Foucault’s later work on aesthetic self-creation may be connected back to his early discussions of authorship, both to show why the elimination of the author-function may be considered a worthy goal, and to conceive of a way to achieve it. Foucault’s analysis of the constraints experienced by a subject in truth can be seen to carry over to the author. An author of published texts, like the author of the self, may feel constrained by an author-function that insists upon, searches for, fixes, and expects conformity to a “truth” of who the author “really” is. Foucault himself expressed frustration at times with such expectations in the reception of his work. He claims to write so as to “tear” himself from himself, “to prevent [himself] from always being the same”: “When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before” (Foucault 1991, 32, 27). He also claims that the work of an intellectual is to “modify not only the thought of others but one’s own as well,” to “render oneself permanently capable of self-detachment” (Foucault 1996c, 461). Thus, when people comment that his work has changed over the years, he replies: ““Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed?”” (Foucault 1996f, 379).¹⁷

The author, like the subject, may experience both external and internal constraints to be faithful to some notion of his/her “true self” as an author. If the institutions, individuals, and relations of power that work to circulate one’s texts and oneself as an author expect and insist that one *be* someone in particular, one may end up constrained in what one can write and publish, and how one is read. One may get tied to a particular, individual “truth” as an author to which one is governed by self and others to conform. Further, the continued emphasis on the author-function in regard to texts is supported by and supports the emphasis on the self as a subject with a singular “truth”: if the subject as author of self has a discoverable “true nature,” then it makes sense to continue to expect the author of texts to have a discoverable “true self,” and vice versa. The author-function constrains authors of texts as well as, and along with, its constraint of authors of the self.

As noted above, Foucault seems to have tried to avoid the constraints of a singular identity as an "author," consciously working to change his own thought and his own projects, and asking others to give him the freedom to do so as well. At the beginning of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* he requests that his audience not demand to know who he is nor demand that he remain consistent: "I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same" (Foucault 1972, 17). But will the attempt to have "no face" manage to alter the author-function? Such an appeal to utter anonymity may not ultimately be effective; but a more promising strategy can be found in Foucault's later work on the aesthetic creation of self.¹⁸

III

How is a change in the author-function to be brought about, according to Foucault? He suggests at times in interviews that we might try publishing books without authors, thereby indicating that a refusal on the part of authors to play the part of "author" might be a step along the way. In an interview conducted in 1984, Foucault laments that his readers sometimes insist on reading his "new books on the backs of the earlier ones," interpreting each through what they have read before. Foucault claims, rather, that "books ought to be read for themselves," and offers a solution: "the only law for book publication, the only law concerning the book that I would like to see passed, would be to prohibit the use of the author's name more than once. . . in order that each book might be read for itself" (Foucault 1996a, 454). As noted above, he attempted anonymity himself in an interview, and there too he proposes the elimination of the author; but this time he suggests it as a kind of game, to be taken on only temporarily: "I will propose a game: the year without names. For one year books will be published without the author's name" (Foucault 1996i, 302). In these interviews, a combination of authorial refusal

and institutional action is suggested as a means of encouraging others to respond to, interpret, and evaluate texts on the basis of the ideas contained therein, rather than on the basis of and through the status and past writings of their authors.

There is arguably some merit to such a suggestion, and the practice of “blind review” by many academic professional societies in choosing manuscripts for symposia, meetings, and publication attests to an already-accepted recognition that sometimes ideas are best judged when their connection to a particular author is unknown. But would a move towards radical anonymity in publications serve to bring about a change in the author-function, such that audiences would begin to no longer require an author for texts, but would instead be contented with the “murmur of indifference” that Foucault cites at the end of “What is an Author?” Such an appeal to utter anonymity may not ultimately be effective, because this does little to change the expectations of others that an identifiable author exists and should be located. If one insists as an author that one has “no face,” then one becomes a “someone” – someone whose identity still exists, but is as yet unknown. This does not necessarily change the insistence, on the part of others, that this “someone” is an author whose individual characteristics – whose “truth” – can and should be discovered and catalogued. That a few authors refuse to show their identity does not necessarily disrupt the structures, institutions, and power relations in a society that requires and designates authors.¹⁹ Such authors may be refusing to play the game, but does this gesture change the game itself?²⁰

As Foucault points out in a revised version of “What is an Author?” published in 1979, what is needed in order to change the author-function is a change in society (Foucault 1984, 119) – as long as one’s audience requires an author, they will work to root one out even if the author attempts to remain utterly anonymous. But can the author him/herself do anything to help speed

this transformation of society along? I think this is possible, and Foucault may have agreed (indeed, otherwise why write about and promote the demise of the author himself?). I contend that we can find in his later work on creating the subject as a work of art a means by which the author may be able to help support a change in his/her audience's expectations of the author-function, and thereby bring about its transformation. This strategy involves taking up the current version of the author-function itself, in a seemingly paradoxical move that might succeed in transforming this function from within.

In his later work on ethics and subjectivity, Foucault suggests the aesthetic creation of self as an alternative to the view of self as a "subject in truth." This creation of the self as a work of art does not require that individuals attempt anonymity by rejecting current conceptions of subjectivity, by refusing to be anything or anyone at all; rather, Foucault seems to suggest a means of altering the current conception of subjectivity from within. He connects the notion of aesthetic self-creation with an "attitude of modernity" that he finds in Charles Baudelaire. For Baudelaire, according to Foucault, "being modern . . . consists in recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it" (Foucault 1997c, 114). The modern attitude does not reject the present, what is happening right now, but neither does it simply accept the present without question; rather, "being modern" means focusing on the present in an effort to change it. But this attempt at change operates *through* the present itself:

For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is. Baudelairean modernity is an exercise in which extreme attention to what is real is confronted with the practice of a liberty that simultaneously respects this reality and violates it. (117).

Foucault points out that this movement through the present towards its transformation does not apply only to traditional art forms for Baudelaire; it also describes an attitude towards oneself.

Foucault finds in this modern attitude towards the self an alternative to the conception of self as possessing a “truth” to be discovered: “Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself” (118).

The modern attitude seems to form a part of Foucault’s suggestion that, as quoted above, we should “refuse what we are” and instead “imagine and build up what we could be” by promoting “new forms of subjectivity.” It would not mean refusing to be anything at all, having no face whatsoever, but rather moving through the present, through how the self is currently conceived, in order to transform it -- through a process that “simultaneously rejects this reality and violates it.” More specifically, we might say that the aesthetic creation of self could involve respecting the conception of the subject as an autonomous entity possessing a “true nature,” utilizing this notion and working within it to bring about its transformation.²¹

Foucault argues that the subject in its present conception is a construct of power, but it is also the case that the subject plays a role in constituting itself through power. We are not only told that we are someone in truth, we tell ourselves the same thing; and through this process we may come to conceive of the self as possessing an autonomous, creative power to choose to be one thing or another (though we ought, we are told and tell ourselves, to adhere to our “true self”). We may then be able to use this view of ourselves to choose to be something else, to govern ourselves in a new way through the relation of power we have set up with the self. In other words, we may use the conception of self as an autonomous, creative unit in order to construct ourselves differently. If this is a plausible description of how we may come to create the self as a work of art, then we could be said to be changing our notion of subjectivity by moving *through* it, by “grasping it in what it is.” We would be appealing to the current notion of the self as an autonomous, “subject in truth” in order to transform it.

There is yet another way in which the aesthetic creation of self takes up the “modern attitude” and moves through the present notion of self in order to change it. It is when we come to recognize that the self is constructed, in part through practices of power brought to bear upon

ourselves, that we may decide to try to construct it differently. In this way, what I call the “aesthetic subject” attempts to change the self by emphasizing “what it is” -- a constructed entity, and one that is therefore contingent and may be constructed differently.²² While the subject in truth may think it possesses, and should adhere to, a “true self” that simply exists “naturally,” the aesthetic subject recognizes that this “truth” is constructed and therefore malleable. The aesthetic subject recognizes that s/he could work to construct a different self, one which would itself be contingent and malleable, subject to further construction and re-creation. Creating the self as a work of art by taking on the modern attitude need not mean refusing the conception of self as subject in truth altogether; rather, it could mean grasping this view of self in what it is -- constructed and contingent -- and using its notion of autonomy and creativity to construct itself differently, multiply, over and over again. It is this notion of aesthetic self-creation that, I believe, can be applied to the author of texts as well as to the author of the self in order to help bring about a change in the author-function.

IV

The problem with attempting a pure anonymity is that if the author asserts that “I am no one,” this does little to change the sense and the expectation behind the “I am” -- one is still utilizing the requirement that one *be* one thing in particular, in truth, and saying that what one is (in truth) is nothing, no one. The rules of the game governing what one *is* remain in place, unchanged, when one simply attaches the “is” to a pure negation. The subject who creates the self aesthetically does not take on such a refusal: s/he acknowledges that s/he *is someone*; it’s just that this “someone” is contingent and in flux. The aesthetic subject, we might say, plays by the rules in a way that may also work to transform them. S/he seems to be adhering to the rules of the game, exhibiting what s/he *is*, in truth; but this “truth” is multiple, heterogeneous. In other words, the aesthetic subject is using the notion that s/he “is” something, but changing the meaning of this claim -- “I am something,” s/he says, “but this something will soon change into something else.” Rather than keeping the meaning of “I am” static by attaching it to a negation

that keeps its reference to a static truth (“I am nothing”), the aesthetic subject attempts to change what “I am” means by attaching it to multiple, temporary and heterogeneous truths.

The author of texts may do something similar. S/he may acknowledge the requirement that an “author” be deciphered within the body of texts s/he has produced: “Okay, I am expected to *be* someone. I *am* someone, but someone multiple: I am one self at one time and another later on.” In so doing s/he may be moving *through* the notion that s/he must be someone in order to change this role and its expectations. S/he could be said to be taking on a “modern attitude” towards the author-function – simultaneously respecting and violating it by aesthetically creating his/her identity as an author. The author as aesthetic subject plays the game of the author-function by accepting its conditions that s/he be a particular, named individual with a certain identity; but s/he also and at the same time works to change the rules of the game by continually changing this identity, constructing him/herself multiply. The author both takes on the role of the current author-function and distances him/herself from it: s/he plays the game just enough to get others to listen, and then brings the audience to question their conceptions of this function by playing the role differently than is usually expected.

This means that the author is also utilizing another aspect of the author-function in order to bring about its transformation: s/he is appealing to his/her authority as author to get others to listen and to follow, while doing so in a way that eventually works to undermine this authority. Recall that one of the aspects of the author-function is that texts with authors are subject to attention and respect, to a degree relatively corresponding to the author’s conferred status. When the author says who s/he is as a multiplicity, others may actually pay attention in ways they might not do for an aesthetic subject who was not given the status of an “author” in the culture. Thus when the author plays the game of the author-function while also working to change it, s/he can get others to listen; whereas if s/he refused to do so, others might simply turn their attention away (towards, perhaps, authors who *are* playing by the rules). But the author as aesthetic subject may at the same time be able to undermine his/her function as an authority -- the more heterogeneously the author defines him/herself, the harder it will be to figure out just “who s/he

is,” to locate the specific figure that is to be followed and whose views are to be adopted. Further, though this author appears to be fulfilling the author-function by identifying him/herself and using his/her credentials as an authority to encourage others to listen, s/he also backs off from this by constructing him/herself multiply and heterogeneously. This author thus reveals him/herself as someone who doesn’t fully fit the dominant picture of an authority, and whose status as an authority may thereby be put into question by his/her audience.²³

Note that we could say the author is thereby changing the author-function by taking on a “modern attitude” towards it, transforming it by emphasizing it in “what it is,” moving *through* it. The author is using his/her position of authority as an author, as part of the current author-function, in order to undermine this position. In addition, s/he is recognizing and emphasizing that the author-function is a creation of power -- constructed by power relations within oneself and between oneself and others. Focusing on what the author-function now is, a creation of power, the author can use power to create it differently. Not only can s/he change the relation of power s/he has with herself – by deciding to create the self aesthetically -- but s/he also works to change the ways s/he is constructed through power by others, by the culture at large: s/he can use the power relation s/he has with others to try to alter the ways they construct him/her as an author/ity.

This is one way in which some change in the author-function might effectively be brought about. As I have argued, attempting anonymity is not likely to lead to such change. Further, refusing to take on the author-function in order to move through it might mean that one is not taken as seriously as if one were to appeal to this role in order to change it. If Foucault, for example, did not speak as if he were someone in particular, did not at times manifest who he is by explaining what problems have informed his work -- if he instead insisted that he was no one -- would those who require authorial identity as a static “truth” be willing to listen to him? Might they not respond instead by saying that he is not a good author since he does not fulfill the correct conception of the author-function, that he therefore need not be heeded? One cannot change the author-function by simply jumping straight to anonymity, nor is it likely that that

such change will come about if one does not “play the game” required of authors to some extent, because otherwise the change one hopes to bring about in others’ views of the author-function might thereby be ignored.

Further, the above discussion offers a way to reconcile the tension between Foucault’s hope for the eventual demise of the author-function with the fact that he still seems to be relying on it to some extent. The tension between (a) Foucault’s statements that he does not try to unify his work, that he hopes for anonymity, and (b) the times when he does say what he is concerned about in a general, almost unifying way and thereby gives a good indication of “who he is,” might be interpreted as symptoms of the difficulty involved in transforming the author-function. If an author is struggling to change this function from within, then there will be times when s/he is taking on the current conception of this function in order to be heeded by those who expect and respect this, acting as if s/he *is* one thing in particular and unifying his/her views accordingly. The author will, however, tend to define his/herself differently at different times.²⁴ That such efforts may not always work to transform one’s audience’s views of the author-function may be evidenced by Foucault’s repeated insistence in interviews that his views not be universalized and his identity as an author not be unified – clearly some of his readers and commentators continued to view him under the dominant conception of authorship.

There is not space here to develop a more precise depiction of how such an attempt to change the author-function might work, nor a thorough evaluation of it. I have not argued that Foucault took on this task explicitly, only that it seems to hold the best potential for success in changing the author-function, and that we can find some evidence of movements in this direction in his work. He does seem to hope for the eventual demise of the author-function while also relying on it, and it is possible to explain this tension by an analysis of what it might take to actually bring about effective change in the author-function.

It may be, then, that while it does not matter precisely who’s speaking, it does matter that *someone* is -- it is important that, at least for now, authors who hope to initiate change in the way they are constructed through power work through their currently-constructed role by

admitting that they are, indeed, someone (even if this “someone” is a multiplicity). Pure anonymity may someday be possible, but attempting it now is not likely to lead to significant change in the author-function. In addition, it may matter very much that it is Foucault citing Beckett when he says, “What matter who’s speaking?” This authorial appeal to authority helps insure that these words are not “immediately consumed and forgotten,” nor “accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words” (Foucault 1977b, 123). Foucault must still rely on his status as an author in order to help bring about the change he envisions in the author-function; and to that extent, it still matters very much who’s speaking.

Notes

¹I have, of course, here added another identificatory mark, attaching this anonymous statement to an author, by here noting that Foucault has said that Beckett has said that *someone* has said, “what matter who’s speaking?” The “indifference” Foucault locates in this statement perhaps fades even further as I connect it with his own work.

²Foucault might of course have given the same quote without identifying Beckett as its source; but then the statement would have received the authority of Foucault’s own “author-function,” as he terms it. “What matter who’s speaking” might then have seemed a statement of some import because it was Foucault himself who chose to (re-)speak it, rather than simply “someone.” As it stands in Foucault’s text, this statement may receive a double imprimatur of value due to its repetition by two authors of some prestige.

³It is not only the question, “what matter who’s speaking?” that rests on a lack where the author should be. The force of Foucault’s claims about the death of the author (which he himself insists are already familiar and thus not original to him) imply that even where an author is directly named, s/he is nevertheless sacrificed within the text, his/her particularity overrun and obliterated by its excesses and transgressions: writing “implies an action that is always testing the limits of its regularity, transgressing and reversing an order that it accepts and manipulates. . . . [it] unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind” (Foucault 1977b, 116). In such a process, whatever the author hoped, meant, or thought s/he was expressing with his/her words is exceeded, and any clear lines through which we could trace the particular characteristics, intentions, and meanings of the author through the text are thereby hopelessly blurred.

⁴For example, Foucault notes that even in Western European civilization there has been a major change in the author-function: whereas in the past it was the case that literary texts were not intimately attached to authors while scientific texts were, the reverse is true today (Foucault 1977b, 125-126).

⁵See also Foucault (1980b, 53; 1988, 15; 1996c, 456; 1996e, 432). Foucault gives different summaries and purposes for his work at different times. This point is actually quite significant for the analysis I give in this essay, as discussed below.

⁶“I wouldn’t want what I may have said or written to be seen as laying any claims to totality. I don’t try to universalize what I say My work takes place between unfinished abutments and lines of dots” (Foucault 1996h, 275). See also Foucault’s description of his work as “fragmentary,” “diffused,” “inconclusive,” “an indecipherable, disorganized muddle” (Foucault 1980d, 78)

⁷Foucault defines “régime of truth” in an interview: “Each society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (Foucault 1980c, 131). Clearly, modern intellectuals are bound up most directly in this definition of a “régime of truth” in their role as those “charged with saying what counts as true.”

⁸In a society that reveres truth, many are likely to want to conform themselves to it. See Foucault (1977a, 207-208) for a discussion of how intellectuals are “agents” of the current “régime of truth,” of the current system of truth and power that tends to quell independent thought and action on the part of others.

⁹ See also Foucault (1977a 207-208; 1980e, 62; 1996d, 225; 1996b, 261).

¹⁰For a discussion of the difference between “universal” and “specific” intellectuals, see Foucault (1980c, 126-133). He argues that it would be better for intellectuals to address the workings of truth and power on a small and local scale, as “specific” intellectuals, rather than offering a “global systematic theory which holds everything in place” (Foucault 1980a, 145). Paul Patton offers a concise and clear discussion of some of the major tenets of Foucault’s view of the ethical and political role of intellectuals (Patton 1984).

¹¹ In “What is an Author?” Foucault seems to be addressing authorship of many types of discourses, whether fictional, scientific, philosophical, etc. In my discussion of the link between intellectuals, authors, truth and power, I am here focusing on authors claiming “truth” for their discourses. The question of which discourses claim to be “true” and what that means is itself a complicated matter; and the relationship between authors of fiction or poetry and truth and power, is even more so. Neither of these do I have the space to discuss in detail here.

¹² In disciplinary mechanisms the documentation of an individual as a “case” from evidence garnered through surveillance and examination produces a body of writing through which an individual and his/her “truth” can be deciphered and fixed. This process allowed for “the constitution of the individual as describable, analysable object . . . in order to maintain him in his individual features . . .” (Foucault 1995, 190). Through methods of confession, an individual subject is constructed when his/her “true self” is required to be expressed to the confessor (in order that one know and purify oneself), in the form of sexual desires, fantasies and fears (Foucault 1990, 21). The injunction to investigate oneself and to confess what one finds treated this otherwise hidden content as a kind of “truth” within, an expression of one’s “true self” (Foucault 1997a, 202-204).

¹³ As the practice of confession has spread, as the ways in which power relations subject us to speak more and more about our inner truths, we begin to lose track of the idea that these truths are required to surface by power, and designated as truth by power; rather, as the power relations that enforce the speaking of these truths proliferate, it comes to appear as if our deep truths force their way to the surface unless repressed: “The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place . . .” (Foucault 1990, 60).

¹⁴ Similarly, it has been and to some extent continues to be common practice to attempt to decipher the truth of the author’s identity, his/her “true self” out of the discourse that s/he has produced in his/her texts and speech.

¹⁵ To what degree this is a “true” picture of the modern subject for Foucault is not clear. This is indeed the view of subjectivity that has been developed through practices of discipline and confession, according to Foucault, and to that extent we tend at least to view ourselves as if we “actually” *are* independent, autonomous, free subjects. Foucault himself is ambiguous on the question of whether this picture accurately corresponds to reality, partly due, no doubt, to the fact that he does not adhere to a correspondence theory of truth (see, e.g., Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983, 120) on Foucault’s rejection of this theory of truth). In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault addresses the question of the “truth value” of our current notion of subjectivity, in a short but suggestive passage about the “soul” as the harbor of our inner “truths”: “It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished – and, in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and corrects . . .” (Foucault 1995, 29). Our modern conception of the subject is a “real” one in the sense that it has been produced by power; but because of that it may seem in a sense to be illusory because “unnatural.” This issue brings up a whole host of complexities that I cannot address here. Rudi Visker discusses some of these in other contexts (Visker, 1990; 1995).

For my purpose here, it is enough simply to note that for Foucault, the conception of the subject as possessing an inner “truth” is a created and contingent one, a product of modern practices of power; and those who self-identify with it can consider themselves capable of autonomous action. This notion of the subject is therefore not only malleable, but it creates a self that is ready to work towards autonomous initiation of a change in itself. That the idea of the self as having a “true nature” is a product of power indicates that somehow asking whether this belief in autonomy corresponds to how we “actually” are (i.e., whether or not we are “really” capable of autonomous action) may be a misplaced question. That Foucault thought possible some degree of autonomous decision-making on our part is evidenced by the exhortation in his later work that we attempt to create ourselves as works of art.

¹⁶ Indeed, as Daniel Palmer points out, the very act of analyzing and designating the “truth” of a specific subject or of human subjectivity in general tends to lead individual subjects to conform themselves to this “truth”: unlike what happens when we build up a body of knowledge about entities that are not self-conscious, “since human beings are

self-interpreting beings they will conform their behavior to the classifications that are used to analyze them" (Palmer 1998, 405). If those in authority say that x or y is true about human subjects or myself in particular, I am likely to tend to conform myself to this – since it is presented, after all, as my “truth.” See Foucault (1996e, 438) for a description of relations of power that the subject brings to bear upon him/herself in order to construct and modify the self.

¹⁷In the interview from which this quote is taken Foucault connects the transformation of self as an intellectual to aestheticism, suggesting a link to the aesthetic creation of self. In what follows I make a more explicit case than Foucault does for authors creating themselves as works of art, as a means of transforming the author-function.

¹⁸ More needs to be said about whether or not authors of texts and selves are indeed best served by moving away from a governmentality that pins them to a true identity. It seems clear that Foucault thought this was the case, and I believe a more thorough investigation can show that he may be right. My main concern here, however, is to discuss whether or not Foucault himself seems to have suggested, or even taken, the best route towards the death of the author-function.

¹⁹ Alternatively, attempting authorial anonymity within the current régime of truth may turn the author into a conduit for universal truth, as this gesture may give one’s discourse the air of objective, universal, and scientific truth. Foucault himself points out in “What is an Author?” that starting in the seventeenth century, scientific texts began to be “accepted on their own merits and positioned within an anonymous and coherent conceptual system of established truths and methods of verification” (Foucault 1977b, 126). This is to a large extent still the case today in the modern West, where the measure of truthfulness of scientific discourse lies less with the author’s name than with the methods used to reach results and the possibility of objective verification. If texts are published without authors, the measure of their importance may tend to default to their scientific or objective verifiability as representations of universal truth. This would replace the author’s authority as an individual with the authority of an impersonal, absolute truth for which s/he serves as a spokesperson; and it would seem to make of the author precisely the kind of “universal” intellectual figure that Foucault criticizes.

Seán Burke makes similar point in *The Death and Return of the Author*, arguing that the loss of the author as a distinct, biographical entity into the text can work to reinforce the notion that the ideas contained therein are not the product of some particular individual, colored by his/her specific context and perspective, but rather an expression of a transcendent, objective and ultimate truth. According to Burke, this is precisely what happens when Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, fails to “inscribe himself within the history he recounts” (Burke 1998, 111). Burke is not speaking about texts whose authors’ names are unknown, but rather those where the author tries as hard as possible to keep him- or herself as a distinct personality out of the text. But it seems clear that similar consequences could arise when an author’s self is kept so far from the text that even his/her name is unknown.

²⁰The same might be said of the subject -- we might, as an above quote from Foucault seems to suggest, utterly refuse what we are: What am I? Nothing. No one. But would such a conception of self work to transform the relations of power that have for centuries insisted that the self is, precisely, something in its “truth”? Might those relations of power not continue to operate, unchanged, approaching one’s refusal to play along as a withdrawal from the game without altering its procedures and rules? “Of course you are something, someone,” these relations of power will likely still insist, “you just refuse to figure out and say whom. We can (and will) help you, though, to find yourself.” One way in which this can be accomplished is through psychological and/or psychoanalytic therapy, which, in some forms, “is supposed to be able to tell you what your true self is” (Foucault 1983a, 245).

It is possible, though, that if enough authors, textual and subjective, refused to play the game by seeking anonymity, this might eventually force a change in the insistence that an author be discovered and fixed in his/her truth. The problem lies in encouraging many people to do this, when the dominant structures of power discourage it. How is such a grand change to be brought about?

²¹Indeed, this may be the only way to make sense of the notion that we might try to create the self as a work of art. One of the oft-noted difficulties with Foucault’s work on the care of the self and its creation as a work of art is that his discussion of subjectivity as a construction by power seems to leave little room for agency, for the subject to decide and take the initiative to attempt to change itself or the relations of power that create it. This criticism is

especially prevalent among feminist commentators on Foucault, as a call for changing oppressive social and political conditions may seem undermined by a theory that eliminates the subject as autonomous agent. See, e.g., Alcoff (1988, 416-417; 1990, 70-75); Hartsock (1990, 163-164). But a number of feminist commentators (including at least one who criticizes Foucault for refusing subjective agency) also argue that it may be possible to move through current views of the subject as autonomous agent towards their transformation -- which is the kind of movement I am arguing we might note in Foucault's work on the care of the self. See Alcoff (1990, 73, 78), Sawicki (1991, 103-104), Oliver (1998, 114-121).

²²One of Foucault's comments about his genealogies of topics like madness and punishment may be germane here: "[T]he return to history makes sense in the respect that history shows that that which is not always was so. . . . What reason considers its necessity or much more what various forms of rationality claim to be their necessary existence, has a history which we can determine completely and recover from the tapestry of contingency. . . . [These forms of rationality] rest upon a foundation of human practices and human faces, because they are made they can be unmade -- of course, assuming we know how they were made" (Foucault, 1996g, 359). The notion of the subject in truth is "made," and once we recognize this we may come to understand that and how it may be "unmade."

²³As my language here indicates, these possible results are quite tentative and unsure (it "may" happen, this "could" result, etc.). Still, when one is committed, as Foucault seemed to be, to avoid perpetuating one's authority as an agent of truth by telling others "what to do," then one seems stuck with either utter refusal of authority -- which, I have argued here, is not likely to work -- and a modest, lukewarm use of it for the purpose of helping encourage its transformation (see Foucault (1996f, 380; 1996b, 262; 1988, 9-10) for his claims that he does not and will not tell others what to do). When one is committed to leaving a "freedom . . . for anyone who wants or does not want to get something done" (Foucault 1996b, 262), one must accept that the results of one's efforts are not going to be fully under one's control.

²⁴ As noted above, one can see this in Foucault's own self-definitions (see note five).