Chaucer the Author

Using the example of Chaucer, I intend in my remarks today to examine a seldom noticed but inextinguishable sidelight to Foucault's now axiomatic notion of the author as "a discursive function." This notion is a privative one. Given its definitive shape by Foucault it actually coincides both with Roland Barthes's view in "The Death of the Author"—the essay which was the target Foucault—and with the New Critical rejection of authorial intention, formulated most memorably in Wimsatt and Beardsley's "Intentional Fallacy." This view takes the figure of the author to be an extrinsic blockage or constraint on literary form and its complexities. As Foucault explains,

the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work . . . he is a certain functional principle by which . . . one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction. . . . The author is . . . the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning. (159)

I am less interested in contesting this characterization than I am in arguing that the author as external limit is part of a composite whose extrinsic functions depend on the author as an intrinsic formal feature. Whatever regulative or constraining force the concept of the author exerts on the text as external principle, one also can locate an analogous, internal feature which enables and facilitates the exfoliation of the text in all its complexity. As the name for this formal feature, the author is a mode of dispersion and deferral, rather than of blockage and constraint.
Externalist views of authorship depend on a static opposition between inside and outside which goes largely uninspected. Few would deny that literary form is irreducibly diachronic, yet that recognition rarely extends to the problem of authorship. A writer writes in anticipation of the reader. An intention to be read necessarily entails an intention to be interpreted, a will to semiotic multiplicity that can never be separated from the desire to find a readership. I locate my argument in England's first *auctor* to drive home the point that the formal desire for readership and the concomitant multiplicity is as old as authorship itself. I am aware this claim flies in the face of some settled historical presumptions as well as formal ones, including the conviction, following Foucault, that modern authorship is essentially the product of the early modern period, and the even older, much more widespread conviction, dating back to the advent of New Criticism, that medieval literary culture has little connection to that of subsequent periods. Yet such historical presumptions, like the formal ones are belied by the very complexity of form they claim to embrace.

Barthes redefines the internal workings of authorship according to Benveniste's theory of enunciation: "Linguistically, the Author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a 'subject' not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together', suffices that is, to exhaust it." Barthes would restrict fullest realization of this principle to modern writing, but Foucault rightly recognizes that as a formal structure it is inherent to the concept of authorship itself. Noting that the author function "can give rise simultaneously to several selves," he goes on to explain that "personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place and verb conjugation" effect the internal "dispersion" of authorial selves, be they the variety of narrative positions possible within a literary work, or the variety of speaking positions an author
may assume within a non-fictional work like a mathematical treatise (152-53). As a cultural ideal the author may well constitute a constraint, but as a formal structure it seems a kind of pronoun. It is a type of deixis. A quintessentially open semiotic structure, deixis defines itself by its anticipation of the extra-semiotic contingencies of historical experience. Paradoxically, the material efficacy of a deictic semiosis proceeds from the radical abstraction of the process, its referential emptiness. Deixis offers a formal boundary that defines itself by its permeability.

Between the twelfth centuries and the fourteenth the Latin auctor began passing into Western European vernaculars. This development did not bring names to hitherto purely anonymous literary culture. While medieval culture had a high tolerance for anonymous texts, one can still find texts which name their producers in every period, vernacular tradition, and nearly every genre. Translations of auctor brought with them not the sheer fact of self-nomination but the values associated with it, that is, both the cultural prestige and the sophisticated conceptualizations of ecclesiastical tradition. The migration of the Latin term coincided with a marked increase in vernacular textual production, both in devotional and in more literary genres (a distinction that is often fuzzy, inasmuch as the latter often had large devotional ambitions). Reflections on the moral and social value of vernacular authorship can be found throughout this corpus. That is particularly true of the fairly coherent tradition of encyclopedic works that begins with the school of Chartres, which then gets reoriented for vernacular poetry in Jean de Meun's portion of The Romance of the Rose. This tradition features striking moments of self-canonicalization, of comparisons with Ovid, Virgil and other ancients, of meditations on the moral value, social utility, and even sacral significance of lay writing in the vernacular.
Chaucer clearly belongs to this tradition. Modern scholars have always struggled to square his monumental canonical presence with the bumbling persona he affects throughout his career, and with the complex ironies that typically characterize an unusually elusive authorial voice. Chaucer also offers in one of his most famous passages a striking instance of the paradoxical interdependence between author as external discursive function and author as internal structural form. I speak of the apology he offers in his own voice toward the end of the *General Prologue*. That this apology is ironic will come as news to no one. At the same time, to my knowledge, no one has ever noticed the anomaly it offers in relation to Donaldson's famous dichotomy between Chaucer the Pilgrim and Chaucer the Poet. The apology begins with a flurry of second person pronouns makes it clear Chaucer is speaking directly to his readership; in his own voice, as it were, as the poet ultimately responsible for this narrative. These pronouns also tie this passage back to the portraits, inscribing Chaucer the Pilgrim and Chaucer the poet within the same narrative utterance, and indeed within the same narratorial position, however uneasily. Readers suddenly find themselves face to face with Chaucer the poet, whom they have only been inferring through their ironic distantiation from Chaucer the Pilgrim. Moreover, the consistent pronominal address insists on the further irony that the Pilgrim has actually been the poet all along. The pronouns make the role of these readers explicit, calling attention to a deictic aspect of all narrative which is generally hidden. But because the pronouns do so in the course of this direct, ironic identification of the poet, they extend the deixis beyond the formal properties of narrative as a discourse to the ostensibly external conditions of its production.

As the apology continues, the deixis encompasses the mimetic ideal itself, as well as the peculiar form of authority that ideal produces:

For this ye knowen al so wel as I:
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot rehearse as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thing, or fynde wordes newe.
He may nat spare, although he were his brother;
He moot as wel seye o word as another.
Crist spak himself ful brode in hooly writ,
And wel ye woot no vileynye is it.
Eek Plato seith, whoso kan hym rede,
The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede.

(730-42)

The constraint to which Chaucer the poet here lays claim—that he must repeat the speech of the pilgrims word for word—actually only makes sense for Chaucer the pilgrim. It is only within the tissue of fiction which Chaucer the pilgrim inhabits that the pilgrims can be said to have spoken words which could be repeated. In fact, those words, like the pilgrims themselves, are all products of Chaucer the poet. This repetition of the collapse of poet into pilgrim renders impossible any stable point to which Chaucer’s ironies might be referred. Chaucer the poet becomes something much closer to an infinite regress than an ascertainable delimited external entity. If there is regulation here, it is hard to see how it works. On the contrary, it seems more like irony all the way down.
Works Cited

