

AN AUTHOR CONSTRUCT THERE MUST BE WILLIAM IRWIN

I. Introduction

One of the most important contributions in recent discussion of authorship is the simple distinction between the historical producer of a text and the mental construct of the producer we form in interpreting that text.¹ While a number of theorists have made this distinction, none has argued that all texts have author constructs. In this paper I shall argue that we do indeed form an author construct for any entity we recognize as a text, and, in fact, much of what we ordinarily think to be part of the text itself is actually part of the author construct. To situate our argument we shall examine Gracia's recent work on issues of textuality.

II. Gracia's Definition of 'Text' and the Necessity of the Historical Author

Gracia defines a text as a group of entities used as signs selected, arranged, and intended by an author in a certain

¹ Michel Foucault, "What Is An Author?" in Paul Rainbow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 101–120. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 142–148. Jorge J. E. Gracia, *A Theory of Textuality: The Logic and Epistemology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995). Jorge J.E. Gracia, *Texts: Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Audience* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 91–140. Alexander Nehamas, "Writer, Text, Work, Author," in Anthony J. Cascardi ed. *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 265–291. Peter Lamarque, "The Death of the Author: An Analytical Autopsy," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30 (1990), pp. 325–328. Here Lamarque gives an excellent discussion of what he calls the author function thesis.

context to convey a specific meaning to an audience.² With this definition in hand, Gracia has argued that we cannot have texts without historical authors.³ The kind of question which prompts the argument is, for example: Is a literary masterpiece randomly typed by a monkey, a text?⁴ At first it appears difficult to deny that it is a text, for it can be used as such.⁵ The problem is that it is not produced by a historical agent and hence has no historical context. The signs which compose such a document were not selected, arranged, and intended by an agent in a certain context to convey a specific meaning to an audience. The document therefore does not meet the definition of a text, although it may be used as a text. To put it simply, having a historical producer is a necessary condition for being a text, and a group of signs without such an author is not a text.⁶ As Gracia argues, regarding entities which resemble texts but which lack historical producers,

[T]he meaning of the signs of which the typescript is composed is not clear because signs, like texts, are historical entities, the products of conventional uses whose meanings change from time to time.⁷

Our conclusion, then, is that texts do need historical authors, for texts without authors are texts without history and texts without history are texts without meaning; that is, they are not texts.⁸

Gracia argues that although all texts have historical producers (historical authors in his terminology), not all texts have

² Gracia (1995), p. 4. Gracia argues at length for this definition considering each of the necessary conditions, pp. 4–30. For the sake of economy and because of its merit we shall simply adopt Gracia's definition of 'text'.

³ *Ibid.*, Cf. pp. 121–128.

⁴ This example has been around for some time. A more timely example would be a computer generated text.

⁵ We can read it, treat it as literature, and, if we are unethical, attempt to pass it off as our own.

⁶ Gracia (1996), pp. 119–126. See also Gracia, "Can There Be Texts Without Historical Authors?", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1994), pp. 245–253.

⁷ Gracia (1996), p. 125.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

author constructs. Gracia defines his version of the author construct, the pseudo-historical author, as "a mental construct that is believed by an audience—or constructed by someone (sometimes the historical author) to lead an audience to believe it—to be the historical author."⁹ It seems quite obvious that not every text generates an author construct. As Gracia says, "In our everyday experience we are acquainted with scores of texts that have no pseudo-historical authors."¹⁰ Particularly in the case of short and simple texts it seems as if we give no thought to who the author is, and so form no author construct. But, as we shall see, this is not correct.

III. The Necessity of the Author Construct

All texts have authors, historical agents who produced them. An entity without such a historical producer is not a text although it may resemble one. Do all texts have author constructs, however? The immediate and obvious answer is no. Gracia holds that it is logically possible for any text to have a pseudo-historical author, but in point of fact many texts do not. We do not ordinarily form any conception of the author of the text "No smoking," for example.¹¹

I shall argue that we do generate an author construct for every text we confront.¹² The detail in which we form the construct varies greatly. At the very least, however, we assume that the author wrote¹³ in the language in which we are read-

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 117. Nehamas is even more restrictive in the range of texts which he believes have "authors" (as opposed to writers). "[S]ome texts are essentially incapable of having authors, and therefore of being interpreted. [W]e can read texts, learn from them, and perhaps even like or dislike them without necessarily interpreting them" (p. 275). Nehamas has a very strict conception of what constitutes interpretation and thus generates an author. He in fact suggests that much popular fiction may be "authorless" (p. 275).

¹² That is, for every text recognized as such and read by a reader. In some cases the text may not actually have to be read but simply recognized as a text.

¹³ Of course not all authors have always literally "written" their texts. The Homeric epics, for example, were produced and carried on orally for a time. When I speak of writing, then, I mean to include all ways of composing texts. See Gracia (1996), pp. 18–26 for a discussion of physical and nonphysical texts.

ing or was read by someone who translated his work into that language. (As we shall see, we ordinarily presume conventional use of language as well.) This is not a lot of information, but it is a start. It can be the first weave in the tapestry which is to become the author construct. My point is simply that we do begin to form the author construct immediately, even if only in simple and pre-reflective terms.

This psychological argument may not at first be fully convincing, but we can confirm it on logical grounds. If we accept Gracia's definition of a text as a group of entities, used as signs, which are selected, arranged, and intended by an author in a certain context to convey some specific meaning, then by definition all texts have authors — "an author there must be."¹⁴ Does the presence of an author, then, logically imply the presence of an author construct? Indeed it does, whenever we recognize something as a text. To recognize an entity as a text is (in part) to recognize it as having an author, a historical producer, and to recognize an author is (as we shall see) to recognize an author construct.

To recognize a text as having an author is to recognize it as having an author construct because any thought of the author (whether reflective or pre-reflective) gives rise to the creation of an author construct.¹⁵ It is only the author construct and not the author which ontologically speaking can be contained in our thoughts. The author is a real person not a thought content. The author construct, on the other hand, is not a real person but is precisely a thought content. In sum, to recognize an entity as a text implies recognizing it as having an author, recognizing a text as having an author is (in part) to give thought to the author, and to give thought to the author is to

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁵ There is a notable difference in ontological status. The author is or was an actual person whereas the author construct is a mental entity—a thought content, one which can be described in words. Consequently the author construct can never be exactly the same as the author. Disregarding the difference in ontological status, however, we can have greater and lesser matches between the two entities.

form an author construct. All texts recognized as such, therefore, have author constructs.¹⁶

We tend to form the author construct through our pre-reflective assumptions about the text we confront. As mentioned above, one way in which we do this is in making assumptions about the language in which the text is written. Another important way in which we do this is in assuming that the producer of the text was a rational human being using the language in a conventional way.¹⁷ For this reason, the power of the text to determine its own meaning is often overestimated.

It is routinely taken for granted that the author was rational and that his word choice and sentence structure were standard. Such assumptions are, of course, defeasible, and it is in cases in which they are shown to be false that we come to realize how reliant upon the author we actually are.¹⁸

The text itself can tell us much less than we are inclined to think. Without at least pre-reflectively assuming a rational author who makes conventional use of the language, we cannot even get off the starting block. We make such assumptions so regularly and habitually, however, that they ordinarily go unnoticed. As a result, we tend to think texts themselves tell us more than they really do. In point of fact, however, a text cannot necessarily tell us whether it is indeed a text; we must refer to an author to confirm this.¹⁹ As Gracia has shown, entities that resemble texts can be mistaken for texts. The text itself cannot even necessarily tell us what language it is in (see note 21). For example, the reader of this text likely assumes that its author or translator produced the text in English. How

¹⁶ We can, of course, mistakenly begin to form an author construct for what turns out not to be a text.

¹⁷ What is conventional will vary according to the genre in which we place the text. Placing a text in the genre of poetry will usually be quite different from placing it in the genre of ordinary discourse.

¹⁸ An example follows below.

¹⁹ Practically speaking we can usually be quite sure, though theoretically speaking we cannot be certain until the entity is shown to fulfill the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a text. See Gracia (1995), pp. 182–189. Here he suggests that organization, repetition, and abstraction are frequently good indicators of textuality.

does the reader know for certain without reference to the author? Many short texts are identical in different natural languages, and it is at least theoretically possible that long and complex texts could be identical as well. Artificial or conventional languages could, in fact, be designed to imitate a natural language, and so cause just the kind of confusion I suggest. Consider a simple example. A friend of mine not long ago noticed a contemplative look on my face, and asked what was on my mind. I responded "*Lust*." He immediately assumed I meant the English word 'lust' and wondered why I was dwelling on such a subject. In fact, though, I meant and was considering the various uses of the German word '*Lust*', which denotes desire but not ordinarily of a lascivious nature.

The above example illustrates how limited the text alone can be in its power to inform. We cannot even know for certain if an entity is indeed a text by an examination of the entity alone, or, if it is a text, what language it is in. (Though of course we can usually be quite sure.) Without reference beyond the text we could not know the meaning of any text whose apparent textual meaning can be taken in more than one way (and I know of no text which could not be taken in more than one way). Consider for example, "Andrew is a nice guy." Does this text mean that Andrew is an agreeable fellow? Or is it a sarcastic remark which suggests he is a rotten human being? On the face of the text the meaning could be either of these two, and certainly others as well. Did Swift's *A Modest Proposal* advocate cannibalism, or was it ironic and satirical? The text alone cannot answer the question. Some of Swift's contemporaries were indeed aghast at what they took to be his suggestion of cannibalism. Stylistic analysis of a text may provide some hint (or even a good indication) as to whether it is satirical or not, but it cannot give a clear answer in most cases or a final answer in any case.

The text itself is of only limited use in indicating its own meaning. The text itself will allow for a vast plurality of possible meanings, including conflicting and contradictory meanings. Fortunately, we rarely, if ever, have simply the text alone. In reading a text we instinctively form an author construct, usually making the defeasible assumption that the

author was a rational being making conventional use of the language.²⁰ The application of the interpretive criterion "the text alone" is rather inconclusive—even arbitrary. It does not limit the meaning of the text in any final way. In accord with it we can, for example, follow the antonym rule; after all, 'bad' can sometimes mean 'good'.²¹ Why is the apparent verbal meaning of the text preferable to the antonym meaning? Verbal meaning is preferable because it generates possibilities which often strike us as possibly right. As Knapp and Michaels say, "the verbal meaning rule limits interpreters to meanings that may go beyond the author's intention but nonetheless seem plausibly related to it."²² We assume that the text means what it appears to mean until and unless some indication suggests otherwise. That is, our formation of the author construct for a given text generally starts as a rather imprecise one, and tends to grow more precise with the accretion of details.

To be clear, I am not denying that we can often be quite successful in interpreting a simple text, or even a complex text, on the basis of "the text alone." We do not interpret texts in a state of mass confusion. As a rule we assume that a text means what it appears to mean. We assume, for example, that "He shot an elephant in his pajamas." means that the shooter, and not the beast, was wearing sleeping attire. Still, we are always open to the possibility that the text means something other than what it at first appears to. This is the case in ordinary discourse and it is the case in interpreting written texts of all kinds as well. We are, and must be, sensitive to clues from what we know of the author and the context which imply that the meaning is other than what the text at first seems to suggest.

²⁰ Not a monkey and not a madman.

²¹ Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory 2: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1987), p. 57. They also make the point about the language in which a text is written.

²² *Ibid.*

IV. The Will to Construct

The drive or will to form the author construct is natural and pervasive. We must fight it when circumstances call for authorial anonymity. Consider the guidelines for preparing a manuscript for blind review. In most cases not only is the author's name to be omitted but all self-references as well. It is not enough that the author leave his/her name off the manuscript. If s/he even leaves a clue as to who s/he is the reviewer may be tempted to follow up the clue and identify the author. Such is the interpreter's instinct. Given an anonymous text s/he wants to identify the author, something inside urges him/her to do so.²³ Consider the grading of essay exams and term papers. Despite the ideal of impartiality, we teachers are influenced by the authors of these texts. We may give the benefit of the doubt to a student we consider bright or hard-working, or refuse the benefit of the doubt to a student we consider mediocre or lazy. Any teacher who grades without any consideration of the author has gained this ability only through considerable effort. It is not natural.²⁴

The interpretation of any type of text logically implies the formation of an author construct. The degree of effort we put into and are satisfied with in this construction will vary a great deal, however. One cause of the variability will be the interpreter's degree of concern about being faithful to original intent. This is indirectly connected to another cause of the variability, the type of text being interpreted. We will ordinarily be satisfied with little or no effort in the case of simple anonymous texts such as "Please Wait in Line." Here we presume a rational author and conventional word use, and go no farther in forming our author construct. For more complex texts we will generally be satisfied with only more complex author

²³ Anonymous texts, for example, are dated in anthologies to give us some idea of who the author is and, possibly, what is meant.

²⁴ One must make an effort to rid oneself of this tendency, or make an effort to guard against it. If one has trouble overcoming this natural tendency in grading there are, of course, alternatives. One alternative is to have students use ID numbers rather than names as identifiers. Handwriting and other personal eccentricities can still be a problem though.

constructs. Still, how complex the author construct must be depends on our own interpretive aims. For example, I may be highly concerned or relatively unconcerned with the formation of the author construct of a newspaper article. I may make little effort in forming the construct of a general information piece, while I may make substantial effort at the formation of the construct of a controversial editorial. I ask myself who was the person who wrote the editorial and why would he say such things? Of course I could ask myself the same things about the author of the general information piece, but I am less likely to do so. I am more likely to simply presume a rational author who gives me conventional word use and sentence structure.

In closing, we should note that some texts seem to be designed to avoid the production of an author construct which resembles the historical producer. Kierkegaard, for example, was concerned that his audience not read some of his texts as his. Hence we get the pseudonyms of *Either/Or*.²⁵ Hume expressed much of his thought on God in dialogue form, rather than in the form of a treatise. Perhaps he did not want *everyone* to know what he, Hume, thought, and so instead put words into the mouths of dialogue characters.²⁶ Even in these cases, however, the author construct is too seductive a temptress to forgo. Has not philosophical scholarship sought to form the author construct of Hume despite the author's efforts to hide? Cannot much the same be said of Kierkegaard? Plato and his literary relation to the Socrates character has, of course, been a source of endless author construct speculation.

And, so we conclude, an author construct there must be.²⁷

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²⁵ Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard and the Anxiety of Authorship," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1994), pp. 6-22.

²⁶ At the very least this is one way that Hume could avoid "blame for his blasphemy."

²⁷ I owe this title phrase to E. D. Hirsch, Jr., "Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory," *New Literary History* 25 (1994), p. 551.