Authorial Presence in the
Works of Poe and Hitchcock

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During the late-20th century, literary critics began to approach the idea of authorship in new and interesting ways, and two primary pioneers in this discussion were Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Both critics rightly questioned the notion of the author as an artist whose intentions supply the meaning of a given text. Barthes and Foucault argue that readers go out of their way to insert an author into a text, using the author's biography or reputation as a means for cultivating and creating meaning. However, something that Barthes and Foucault fail to address is how to approach the author when he or she incorporates him or herself into the work, a technique that author Edgar Allan Poe and filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock both utilize in their works. In Poe's essay "Philosophy of Composition" and in his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as well as in Hitchcock's film *Psycho*, we see an interesting pattern of self-referential techniques that raise problems with the way that Barthes and Foucault challenge traditional conceptions of the author.

Before turning to the texts of Poe and Hitchcock, I want to review the interesting claims advanced by Barthes and Foucault. In "The Death of the Author," Barthes objects to the fact that "the author still rules in manuals of literary history, in biographies of writers, in magazine interviews…the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history,

his tastes, his passions" (3). To Barthes, the interpretation of a literary work is based far too much on the concept of its author, a result of the "capitalist ideology", which has accorded the greatest importance to the author's "person." Barthes compares primitive narratives, which are "undertaken not by a person, but by a mediator, shaman, or speaker, whose "performance" may be admired, but not his "genius," to works by the modern author, who is defined by his "resume" (3). According to Barthes, an author's "person" should be disregarded and his image should disappear during the process of interpretation. When an author begins to write, he claims, "the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins" (4). In other words, writing is not the process of an author revealing personal meaning to us through words. The text should not be seen as an extension of his personality because an author does not "pre-exist" his work, but is "born simultaneously" with it. Barthes perceives the author as a mere "scriptor" of the symbolic system of language "in which utterance has no other content than the act by which it is uttered" (4). The author is not a "person," but rather a "subject" who is "never anything more than the man who writes, just as I is no more than the man who says I" (4). As the author disappears, we are left with a work that no longer needs to be "deciphered" or "explained," for such words convey an author-centered attitude that restricts our understanding of the writing itself. When we reject the concept of the author, writing, and our understanding of it, becomes liberated and we as readers are free to truly make sense of what is written before us (4).

Foucault certainly agrees with Barthes that the concept of the author is dying, or that his presence as an individual who precedes a text is disappearing. In his essay titled "What is an Author," he explains, "Where [once] a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, to become the murderer of the author" (323). Similar to Barthes, Foucault believes writing is "an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier" (322). Therefore, if we are approaching a text in regards of "the very nature of the signifier," or the nature of language and words itself, and avoiding the "content it signifies," often understood as the expression of the author's personality, the author is no longer an important factor; he or she "endlessly disappears" (322). Despite the

given similarities between the two theorists, Foucault takes his theory a bit farther than Barthes and proposes "the themes destined to replace the privileged position accorded to the author have merely served to arrest the possibility of genuine change" (323). To Foucault, the disappearance of the author is occurring, but the approaches chosen to replace the void left by the author's absence have only hindered the development of our understanding of literature and language.

Essentially, Foucault tends to believe that literary critics have failed to go far enough in their skeptical analysis of author-centered reading. He objects, for example, that there still exists a tendency to classify writing as "work," arguing "if some have found it convenient to bypass the individuality of the writer…to concentrate on a work, they have failed to appreciate the equally problematic nature of the word 'work' and the unity it designates" (323). Therefore, to consider a piece of writing an aesthetic "work," separate from other written words such as "a remainder of an appointment, an address, or a laundry bill," is to elevate literature to an elite form of the "symbolic system of language," and thus create a unity between the "work" and the author who creates it. Foucault seems to believe that by conceptualizing an "author" who constructs a "work" we are reinforcing the mystical concept of a creative presence.

To reveal how the author's name has become more than "a pure and simple reference," Foucault establishes what he calls the "author-function" (325). His discussion of the "author-function" has four premises. First, the idea of the author has arisen out of appropriation, as, in the past, a name was attributed to those who wrote transgressive works. As a result, "strict copyright rules were established," granting "the danger of writing…the benefits of property" (326). Secondly, the "author-function" is not universal, and does not apply to all modes of discourse. For example, scientific writing is not accepted based on the presence of an author, but on its scientific merits alone. However, literature is typically judged according to the validation of its author, as well as the time and circumstances it was written in. As Foucault notes, the "meaning and value attributed" to a given text usually depend "on this information" (327). Thirdly, the "author-function" occurs through the projection of traits onto the individual him or herself, "the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent,

the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice" (327). Upon this point, it is important to notice that Foucault never suggests these traits exist inherently in an author's work, but rather claims that we readers "make," "assign," and "practice" them. In other words, we as readers construct a literary and individual identity for the person we perceive as author. Lastly, in line with this third point, Foucault argues that the author is not, even in our minds, a unified person. The author is a "plurality of egos," and it "would be false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator" (329). For Foucault, our projection of characteristics onto an author make him just as fictional as the characters he creates The "author-function," therefore, is something that is constructed through literary criticism, our society's idea of authorship itself. The author may be progressively disappearing, but he or she seems to still exist because we have failed to completely deconstruct the concept of authority.

Foucault's intention in displaying the misconceptions of the "author-function" to us is not to solve them. As he himself observes, "there is a decided absence of positive propositions in this essay" (333). His goal is to point out the way that the author still exists in our society and in our forms of discourse and criticism, and to show us what we must overcome in order for the author to truly disappear. Despite refusing to offer specific "positive propositions," Foucault does attempt to point us in a particular direction:

> Clearly, in undertaking an internal and architectonic analysis of a work…and in delimiting psychological and biographical references, suspicions arise concerning the absolute nature of the creative role of the subject. But the subject should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies. (333)

Therefore, we should not completely eliminate the role of the creative subject, but we must study it in order to understand its unnecessary and imagined importance.

If we break down the subject of both Barthes and Foucault's essays into much simpler terms, what we have is a dilemma revolving around the relationship between one who produces a work and one

who receives it. To Barthes, the producer of a literary work is merely a scriptor, and what should be valued in the work is the symbolic system of language that he or she presents, not the author's personal attempt at expressing meaning. To Foucault, similarly, the "author-function" produces the illusion of a magisterial creative presence, but in actuality the producer of a literary work merely collates the public discourses of which the work is comprised.   In both cases, the reader would be wrong to attribute vast creative powers or a magnetic personal presence to the author, who is simply a "scriptor" rather than an originating genius. What I aim to show in this essay is that both Edgar Allan Poe and Alfred Hitchcock are arguably just as interested in the concept of authorship, which they play with in creative and innovative ways. In what follows, I will argue that by placing themselves within their own works, often as fictional characters, Edgar Allan Poe and Alfred Hitchcock create a plurality of egos. Their dramatic enactments of the effect of the "author-function" on their own works ironically forces us to confront the creative role of the artist, resulting in an unavoidable consideration of the "originating subject."

Despite his works and talents being impressively broad and covering a vast range of genres and styles, Poe is typically remembered as an innovative writer and poet in the field of suspense and horror. But Poe is not merely an author, but also a pop culture icon whose life is commonly associated with horror, grief, death, and mystery. He is essentially a fictional character himself, commonly depicted in movies, and visual art. Because of our culture's interest in Poe's biography, he is arguably the perfect example of an author who is defined by the "author-function." However, in the case of Poe, we can see that he intentionally creates a number of egos all relating back to himself within his works, as if he already had Foucault's theory in mind.

In his essay "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe meticulously explains the genius of his intention in the process of constructing "The Raven." He presents himself as a hyperconscious aesthetic mastermind, a puppeteer pulling on the passive strings of his readers. We first see this as Poe depicts himself as a path-breaking theorist of composition:

> I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might
> be written by any author who would – that is to say, who could

– detail, step by step, the process by which any one of his
compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why
such a paper has never been given to the world, I am at a loss
to say – but, perhaps, the authorial vanity has had more to do
with the omission than any one other cause. (676)

Upon reading this passage, one cannot help but think of how blatantly
"vain," and ironic it is. Poe presents the paper he has written as
"interesting" and innovative, noting, significantly, that no other writer
has done such a thing before. The irony here is that he claims that
authors might have preferred to keep themselves and their techniques
out of the public eye for "authorial vanity," but that sentence itself is
overflowing with it. The ironic contradictions only continue, as Poe
claims that the "extent to which [originality] has been neglected, in
versification, is one of the most unaccountable things in the world,"
for the "possible varieties of metre and stanza are absolutely infinite"
(681). "Of course," he proceeds, "I pretend no originality in either
rhythm or metre" (681). For the first time in The Philosophy of
Composition, Poe appears to be humble, but falsely so. He continues,
after explaining the technique he employed in his "metre and stanza"
that "what originality" the poem has lies in the unique combination
of those elements (681). "[N]othing even remotely approaching this
combination has ever been attempted," he boasts (681). First Poe
humbly admits that his poem lacks originality in "metre and stanze,"
yet then reveals that his technique in "combination" is so original that
no poet has ever come "remotely" close. Poe presents this essay to his
readers as if he is intently serious; yet, it is at points like these that one
cannot help but ask, "What is he doing?" We cannot help but wonder,
"Does he not know that he is contradicting himself, or is he playing
with us?"

To reiterate, Barthes claims that an author is "never anything more
than the man who writes, just as I is no more than the man who says
I." But is that really the case here? It seems not. Critic N. Bryllion
Fagan tends to lean towards the idea that Poe is carefully and creatively
playing with the relationship between the author and the reader. Upon
this subject Fagan argues that "the intellectually sharp and defiantly
honest hero of 'The Philosophy of Composition'- its author, "I"-
stays behind the scenes, at least part of the time, but makes himself

none the less visible" (138-39). Fagan continues, "It is safe to say that there were always two Poes, one playing his part as a poet, as a story-teller, or as a critic, the other watching him play it" (141). What Fagan seems to be referring to is an *intentional* plurality of egos. To say that "Poe" is "no more than the man who says I" is to unjustly simplify his work. The "I" of the essay is Poe, or part of him, but another part stays "behind the scenes," watching himself play a part. Poe creates a fictional version of himself as author, playing with the author-reader relationship in an innovative way. He insists that the reader question the "author function" of his work as he discusses and plays with his authorial presence. The mere fact that we must ask whether Poe is playing with us or being serious makes it impossible to "seize" his function or abandon "the theme of an originating subject."

In his essay, Foucault refers to a "scission" between the author and his narrator, and says that "It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter, its signs of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather, they stand for a second self" (133). That is, when an author writes a novel in the first person, the narrator does not refer to the author himself, but rather to a "second self." Critics nonetheless often have the author in mind when speaking about the narrator. However, it seems that Poe, like Foucault, is interested in our tendency to associate an author with his narrator, and in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, he seeks to complicate the affiliation of narrator and author. In the preface to his novel, Pym remarks that "several gentleman of Richmond, VA…felt deep interest in all matters relating to the regions I had visited," and that "Among those gentlemen in Virginia…was Mr. Poe" who "proposed that I should allow him to draw up, in his own words, a narrative of the earlier portion of my adventures, from facts afforded by myself, publishing in the Southern Messenger *under the garb of fiction*" (original italics, 432). Pym continues, "Two numbers of the pretended fiction appeared…and, in order that it might certainly be regarded as fiction, the name of Mr. Poe was affixed to the articles in the table of contents of the magazine" (432-33). Therefore, Poe, writing in the voice of Pym, tells us that Poe, a fictional representation of himself, will write the beginning of the story while Pym will finish

it and, although it will be a realistic account, it will be published as fiction. Like in "The Philosophy of Composition," where Poe plays the part of a storyteller and poet while simultaneously sitting back and watching himself do it, we have in this story a plurality of egos, yet in a much more complex way, as we see Poe the author, Poe (or Pym) the narrator, and Poe the fictional character / editor all sharing space in this supposedly realistic account.

The implications of these complications are somewhat difficult to comprehend; yet they demand attention. In reading *Pym*, that is, one must address Poe. In the layers of authority that he produces, as critic Ki Yoon Jang claims, "Poe debunks Pym's pretension to natural authority by revealing that the author is none other than a fictive character which is only made an author by means of readers' belief in its existence and rights as an author" (357). In other words, by inserting himself into his work as an editor and character, he demands that his reader ponder the implications of the relationship between literature and authorship. It is as though Poe had read Barthes and Foucault before he wrote *Pym*. What his novel reveals is that he is fully aware of the distinction between the author as writer and the author as actual person, and that the author's authority is only granted by the "readers' belief in" the "existence and rights" of an author. However, by demanding that we ask, at the very least, "What is he up to?" Poe makes it impossible to entirely subvert his authorial power and presence. By forcing us to question his motives and intentions, Poe brilliantly immortalizes himself within his work.

Similar to Poe, Hitchcock covered a broad range of genre, yet he is commonly associated with horror and suspense.[1] Though his catalogue covers "romantic comedies and costume dramas, Hitchcock was most at home in the suspense film" (Corliss 13-14). As Foucault argues, "author-function" is not simply formed through the mistaken "attribution of a discourse to an individual," but through traits that we project onto the individual himself, such as "the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice." In light of these projections, Hitchcock becomes the perfect candidate to be defined by the author function. Despite his versatile abilities, Corliss observes, "Hitchcock is the only director in film whose name has become a genre. His collective

achievements seem so familiar that the phrase 'a Hitchcock film' instantly evokes a comprehensive, tantalizing cinematic universe, not just of story but of style. It conjures up both the matter of his work (an intriguing narrative) and the manner" (13). Hitchcock's authorial power and presence is so strong that merely his name conjures up a genre of film supposedly specific to himself, and is defined by certain techniques that we as viewers project onto his character. Hitchcock's authorial power is no coincidence, and to prove this I will use his 1960 film *Psycho*.

Like Poe, Hitchcock intervenes in his works, creating fictional versions of himself. In the trailer for *Psycho*, for example, he takes viewers on a tour of the Bates Motel where much of the suspense of the narrative takes place, narrating and revealing the background of the story after the fact. In the trailer, Hitchcock tells us:

> Here we have a quiet little motel, tucked away off the highway, and as you see perfectly harmless looking, when in fact it has now become known as the scene of a crime. This motel also has as an adjunct, an old house, which is, if I may say so, a little more sinister looking; less innocent than the hotel itself, and in this house the most dire events took place…In that window on the second floor…that's where the woman was first seen. Lets go inside.

Considering the viewer's awareness that Hitchcock is the director of the film, this quotation shows him playing with his viewers by inserting himself into the story as if it really happened, as if his own film captured reality rather than narrated a fictional tale, stating that the motel has "in fact…now become the scene of a crime." As we will see, Hitchcock's complication of authorship only becomes heightened in *Psycho*.

A signature of every Hitchcock film is a cameo appearance by the director himself, although not typically as a character directly involved in the narrative, but as an accidental bystander. In *Psycho*, we see his celebrated profile through a shop window. As noted, this shot, placed several minutes into the film just after Marion Crane, played by Janet Leigh, returns to her office, does not reveal him to be a character that is aware of any plot or fabricated story occurring, but as an unknowing bystander casually standing on the sidewalk. Critic Robert Stam claims

Figure 1: *Psycho* Cameo

that "Hitchcock's cameo appearances…tend to be shrewdly apt and over-determined with meaning," and, although within the narrative of *Psycho* the cameo provides very little meaning, Stam is right in his claim that it is "over-determined," or at least not a passive self-reference or an attempt to save money by not paying an extra. Although it may seem trivial, the intention of the cameo is to complicate the director-viewer relationship. In other words, Hitchcock's brief presence in his film is a playful nod to his audience that simultaneously creates a fictional ego of the director. As Poe does in the "Philosophy of Composition" and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Hitchcock presents us with a number of egos: Hitchcock the director, Hitchcock the storyteller, Hitchcock the unknowing man on the street in his own film, and Hitchcock the genius who sits back and watches himself put on these different personas.

Writing about the construction of biographical legend, Robert E. Kapsis claims that it is "invented by the author himself" (18) According to him, Hitchcock "methodically cultivated and exploited" his own "firmly entrenched persona" which in turn "shaped how critics responded to his…films" (18). Therefore, Hitchcock purposely created his biographical legend by "methodically" inserting himself into his films and presenting himself simultaneously as an unknowing bystander, a narrator who introduces the audience to the story that has,

supposedly, taken place, and a director who has crafted the cinematic masterpiece that commands the respect of critics. Like Poe, Hitchcock seemed to have been aware of the fictional personas projected onto an artist. To comment on that process, and complicate it as well, he creates his own multiple personas, facilitating the production of his own "author-function."

Hitchcock's insertion of himself into his own work insists that his viewers question the reality of the film and the origins of his own authority. If Hitchcock is supposed to be the man behind the camera, why is he in the film? And if this is a fictional story, why is he telling us that it is real when we consciously know that it isn't? In other words, how can we as viewers watch *Psycho* without attempting to account for the multiple egos of Hitchcock and asking, "who is this man, and what is he doing?" As in "The Philosophy of Composition" and *Pym*, the author's presence complicates our ability to attribute meaning to him, demanding that we address the idea of authorship and the persona(s) of the author. And if we must address the author, how can he disappear?

In certain artistic circumstances the author is inevitably, if elusively, present in the work. In the case of Poe and Hitchcock, if we try to approach a work by "killing" the authors, are we not missing out on the creative and playful ways in which they complicate our relationship to them and their creations? And, furthermore, what would be the point in doing so? Foucault may be right in saying that the author should not be "entirely abandoned," but "reconsidered." However, in certain circumstances it is not only impossible, but also unnecessary to "seize" the author's functions, because to do so is to ignore or, at least, to diminish the extent to which artists such as Poe and Hitchcock themselves comment on the relationships between the "originating subject" and the audience and the fiction that brings them together.

Notes

¹ Barthes and Foucault limit their essays to the discussion of literature. Considering Hitchcock is a filmmaker, couldn't it be possible that the author has disappeared in literature, but not film? However, Foucault admits that "I am aware that until now I have kept my subject

within unjustifiable limits; I should have also spoken of the 'author-function' in painting, music, technical fields, and so forth" (329). Therefore, the "author-function" is not merely limited to literature, and I have taken the liberty of expanding it into the genre of film.

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