Alexander Nehamas begins his essay roughly where David Halliburton leaves off, which is to say with Hobbes's Leviathan, and specifically with its proposed relationship between authors and ownership. Seen from the angle of Halliburton's essay, the Nehamas piece might be viewed as an investigation into the function of "entitlement" as determined by the relationship between authors and texts. According to Hobbes, authors may be said to own their words and actions, so that, as Nehamas points out, the writings of literary authors may be said to be their property. So seen, the authorial relation sets in motion fields of related concern in ethics, morals, and social and legal history. As soon as one begins to regard writers as author-owners of their words and implies that the words are their property, then one introduces questions of responsibility in a way that casts new light upon the central assumptions of modern literary theory and criticism. As Nehamas demonstrates in this essay, these are in need of serious reconsideration.

By framing the problem of authorship in relation to property, it is possible to open up the social and historical dimensions of the problem which have been closed off both by the New Criticism and by the speech-act theory dispute between Searle and Derrida. To this extent, Nehamas is willing to accept the historicist assumptions of Michel Foucault. Yet to the extent that Foucault’s historicism is also found lacking, Nehamas proposes a theory of authorship along hermeneutic lines: the notion of authorship (and, implicitly, the concepts of writer, text, and work) is determined only as a function of interpretation and criticism.

In this essay, Nehamas first takes his bearings from Roland Barthes, who in "The Death of the Author" said that the author function is a peculiarly modern one, "emerging from the Middle Ages with English Empiricism, French Rationalism and the personal faith of the Refor-
From Barthes he turns quickly to Foucault, who has studied
the emergence of the author in connection with one specific aspect of
the problem of ownership, that is, the development of a certain type of
penal system. According to Foucault, authorial-type ownership "has
always been subsequent to what one might call penal appropriation.
Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors . . . to the
extent that authors became subject to punishment." Authorship is, in
other words, historically linked to repression.

Granting that the author function is a determinable historical phe-
nomenon (even if, as Nehamas suggests, it is not a function of exactly
the history that Foucault tells), it is possible to ask whether the author
function might be "overcome." This would mean assimilating the his-
toricist notion of authorship to a theoretical critique of authorship as a
logical concept, as Nehamas seeks to do. If we agree that the author is a
function or role, while the writer is a person—a difference that might
also be stated in terms of Hobbes's contrast of the "person artificial"
and the writer as a historical person; it might be easy to move from the
"artificiality" of the author to the view that the author is one more
fictional character. This is especially so if one is willing to accept
J. Hillis Miller's proposition that the author is an effect of the text.
Nehamas argues that this is a reductive view, and accordingly he draws
out some of the more complex relations that obtain between authors
and their texts.

If the author is indeed some function of the text, then that function
is bound to be determined by the ways we regard texts. It is possible to
do various things with texts—read them, draw instruction from them,
disagree with them, like or dislike them, understand them, and so on.
But not all kinds of texts admit the same set of possible treatments. In
particular, it is not necessary to deal with texts by interpreting them;
this is the case only with authored texts. Accordingly, an understand-
ing of what it means to be an author entails an understanding of what
it means to "interpret" a text. Nehamas resists any view of interpreta-
tion as an effort to uncover meaning or to produce a paraphrasable
content, but instead regards interpretation according to the more gen-
eral model by which we attempt to locate or place actions in a contextu-
tial web. This substantiates the suggestion, made earlier, that a theory
of authorship requires a corresponding theory of human action. As
Nehamas explains, the author is the agent postulated in order to ac-
count for the construal of a text as the product of an action.

If the author (and, as Nehamas says, the work as well) is a construct
"situated toward the notional end of interpretation and not at its ac-
tual beginning," then one faces the risk that the author may be seri-
ously arbitrary. In his concluding section, Nehamas proposes that we
might regard the author as a "plausible historical variant" of the writ-
er or, if one believes that all identities are in some fashion shaped like
texts, then as "a character the writer could have been." Regarding the
writer as a historical person and the author as an artificial person does
not remove the author from history, if one has an appropriate concep-
tion of history. History might be seen as those conditions or possibili-
ties within which writer and author achieve their various identities; or
the concepts of writer and author might somehow be regarded as dif-
ferent realizations, and history as the set of possible functions within
which these are determined.

By beginning the sustained portion of his argument from Foucault,
Nehamas suggests a way in which we may reconcile the notion of the
literary text as significant human action with a vision of human action
as inextricable from its historical context. The work of interpretation
as suggested by such a program might be thought of as one of adequa-
tion rather than recovery. Its success or failure would be measured ac-
cording to standards of breadth and richness, which go considerably
beyond mere correspondence to the (historical) facts.

Writer, Text, Work, Author  Alexander Nehamas

Of persons artificial, some have their words and actions owned by those whom
they represent. And then the person is the actor; and he that owneth his
words and actions, is the Author: in which case the actor acteth by authority.
For that which in speaking of goods and possessions, is called an owner, and in
Latin dominus, in Greek ἀνευρός; speaking of actions, is called author. And as
the right of possession, is called dominion; so the right of doing any action, is
called authority.

This passage from the Leviathan (bk. 1, chap. 16) concerns social
roles, "persons artificial," in general. But though it does not specifically
mention literature, it is easy to see that it can apply to the case of the
literary author as well. It expresses, with the disarming straightforwardness so characteristic of Hobbes, his view of the relationship be-
tween all authors and what he takes to be their products. Authors,
according to Hobbes, own their words and actions. The writings of literary authors, therefore, are also their own, their possession and property.\footnote{1}

This conception of the author as owner and of authority as possession constitutes the specific background against which we must read Roland Barthes's view that the author is "a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English Empiricism, French Rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person.'"\footnote{2} Hobbes's possessive conception supplies at least part of the motivation for Barthes's negative attitude toward the author.

Ownership involves the right to dispose of one's property as one wishes. In addition to the institutions surrounding the ideas of intellectual property and copyright, and from which we must try to keep it distinct, disposition in the literary case emerges as interpretation, to which the author is often assumed to bear a special relationship. But any such right or privilege can be exercised only within the law, and it therefore entails responsibility for one's actions and for what is subsequently made of them. Hobbes makes it clear that from his view "It followeth that when an actor makes a covenant by authority, he bindeth the author, no less than if he had made it himself; and no less subjecteth him to all the consequences of the same" (Leviathan, bk. 1, chap. 16).

This connection between ownership and responsibility, in turn, constitutes the background against which we must read another attack against the author closely related to that of Barthes. This is the view of Michel Foucault, who begins from the thesis that "this type of ownership has always been subsequent to what one might call penal appropriation. Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors . . . to the extent that authors became subject to punishment."\footnote{3}

Such an approach seems almost calculated to shock and to startle. Since, as we shall see, it faces some deep difficulties, it should be defended against some obvious misunderstandings. First, we must notice that the conception of the author as a historical phenomenon is not by itself intended to, and cannot, undermine the author's reality. To argue that this figure emerged at a particular time for particular reasons is only to argue that our notion of the author is part of our history. And being a part of history is not an alternative to reality: it is one of its modes. Yet, though historicity does not undermine reality, it does undermine necessity. If something has a history, if, that is, it has a beginning, then it may also have an end. If the world did not contain authors at some time, then perhaps someday it can be without them again.

Second, the historicist conception of the author is not the view that one day we made the empirical discovery (as we had not known this before) that certain texts were composed by individuals. Rather, this conception asks why these texts began to be treated in certain specific ways at some time, what purposes such treatment served, what values such purposes promoted. In proclaiming the author "dead," writers like Barthes and Foucault do not claim, as William Cain has correctly pointed out, "that authors don't exist at all or that texts (as if by magic) write themselves."\footnote{4} Their argument, particularly Foucault's, which will mainly occupy me in what follows, is more subtle and more complicated.

Schematically and in abstract terms, this argument consists of two stages. Beginning with the idea that the notion of the author is a historical phenomenon and that the way of reading texts associated with it has a definite temporal beginning, the first stage concludes that this notion can come to an end. The second stage then produces what it considers as good reasons for actually bringing this possible end about. The argument finally concludes that both the notion of the author and the treatment of texts it underwrites, that is to say, literary interpretation, must come to an end.

The second part of this argument, in my opinion, is more important than the first. Nevertheless, Foucault's historical claims raise some serious questions. He writes, for example, that the author emerged, that literature ceased being "authorless," only during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (149).\footnote{5} Yet, though perhaps Foucault is right in claiming that literature was accepted simply on the grounds of its "ancientness" during the Middle Ages, this clearly represented a radical departure from the practices of late antiquity. A complicated author figure, though of course one quite different from present-day notions, is implicit in Diogenes Laertius's Lives of the Philosophers, in the scholia to the tragic poets, or in the complex discussions of Homer's allegorical interpreters. Foucault also believes that the figure of the literary author that was established during the Enlightenment represents a direct transposition of the scientific author of earlier times. Now it may be true that scientific texts "were accepted in the Middle Ages, and accepted as 'true,' only when marked with the name of their author" (149). But this transposition, if such it was, was anything but direct. The role of the scientific author, who was supposed to guaran-
the truth of a treatise, is very different from that of the literary author, the truth of whose texts has not been the central concern of modern criticism. In addition, the literary texts of antiquity did actually make claims to truth, though such claims were more often based on divine inspiration than on the author's identity. Plato's attacks on poetry in the Republic (bk. 10) and on the Ion show that the relationships between literature, science, and philosophy are immensely more complicated than Foucault's admittedly schematic discussion suggests. Finally, Foucault's view that in St. Jerome's De viris illustribus we can find, in naive and primitive form, all the criteria by means of which we attribute and evaluate texts today, is questionable (192-51). Jerome seems to me to rely exclusively on only two of Foucault's four criteria of authorship, that is, on only linguistic and stylistic features of texts.

In short, though the figure of the modern literary author may well be, not surprisingly, a modern phenomenon, the figure of the author in general has a much longer and more complex history than Foucault allows.

Nevertheless, simply to dispute such historical claims and to rest content with pointing out that their truth is far from certain is to avoid facing the serious challenge Foucault's discussion presents to current literary practice. This challenge consists, first, in showing that whenever and however the author emerged in modern times, it is not so much a person as a figure or a function or a role—to use Hobbes's term again, though not only in its legal sense, a "person artificial." This absolutely crucial distinction, which I will argue below, Foucault himself sometimes overlooks, will occupy much of the discussion that follows. Though all texts have writers, not all texts have authors: "A private letter," Foucault writes in a passage to which we shall have to return, "may have a signer—it does not have an author; a contract may well have a guarantor—it does not have an author. An anonymous text posted on a wall probably has a writer—but not an author" (40). To consider that a text has an author, therefore, is not to make a discovery about its history. It is to take a particular attitude toward that text, to being willing to ask certain questions of it, and to expect certain types of answers from it. Texts that have authors are for Foucault texts that since the Enlightenment have been construed in a particular manner.

This particular manner of construing texts is reflected, according to Foucault, in the "aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author" and which "are only a projection, in more or less psychological terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice" (190). And since the author, "at least in appearance, is outside ... and precedes" the text (141), we come to think of literary texts as the products of an independent conscious agent, important for what they show us about that agent, and study them "only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations" (198).

The second constituent of Foucault's challenge, and the real target of his attack, is just this particular manner in which, since the Enlightenment, authored (as opposed to merely written) texts have been construed: the expectations we have had and the questions we have asked of texts to which, as in the case of literature, we assign authors. The historical part of Foucault's argument aims to show that this manner of construing texts is not inevitable and that it can be abandoned. The second part argues that current critical practice must in fact be abandoned.

According to Foucault, our critical practice is centrally characterized by an effort to show that the texts of an author are continuous and not inconsistent, internally or with one another. This practice, he believes, is motivated by the hope that in this manner we may capture what the author really meant and that thus we may recapture the unique mental state, meaning, or message, which we assume all authored texts to express and communicate. But this vain hope directs us to the wrong enterprise. In thinking of the author as the preexisting seat of the single and coherent meaning which every text is assumed to possess, we tend to impose such a meaning on every text and we therefore actually use the author as a repressive "principle of drift in the proliferation of meaning" (195).

According to this view, the figure of the author is the concrete expression of the idea that the purpose of criticism is to provide definitive interpretations of texts, revelations of their meaning. As such, the essential function of criticism is to exclude possible but "implausible" uses of literature, suggestive but "inaccurate" interpretations. The author is at the center of construing criticism as an activity that aims to describe literature and that is thus located on a different level from the object it describes, much as natural science is thought to be radically distinct from the reality it represents. The author, for Foucault, prevents us from thinking of criticism as an extension and elaboration of literature, as an activity essentially continuous with its object, aiming to produce new meanings and not to describe old ones. It prevents us from thinking of criticism as literature whose subject, unlike the case of
other genres, is explicitly literature. Foucault's attack on the author is nothing less than an attack on this descriptive and interpretive conception of criticism as a whole.

This is the heart of Foucault's view. In order to come to terms with it, we must immediately press the distinction between writer and author. A writer is a historical person, firmly situated within a specific context, the efficient cause of a text's production. Writers often misunderstand their own texts, and they commonly utter little more than vague platitudes about them. They are no more knowledgeable about them than most of us are about the sense and significance, and sometimes the very nature, of our most complex and opaque actions. Writers (but not, as we shall see, authors) exist outside their texts and precede them in truth, not in appearance only. And precisely for this reason, writers are not in a position of interpretive authority over their writings, even if these are, by law, their property. We must keep the legal version of ownership, with which we began, clearly apart from what we might well call its "hermeneutical" aspect.

Writers are extrinsically related to their texts. This is reflected in the possibility that Henri Beyle, for example, never wrote the works that are commonly attributed to him. Perhaps throughout his life he was an ardent admirer of the ancien régime who, through some curious mixup, came to be thought of as Stendhal. It is, so to speak, not necessary for Henri Beyle to have written Stendhal's works, to have been Stendhal. But notice how we must construe the expression "to have been Stendhal" in this context: it simply specifies the feature of having been the author of Stendhal's works, and nothing more; it is not, despite appearances, a reference to an actual person. This, in turn, reflects the essential connection between Stendhal and the texts of which, necessarily, he is the author. Stendhal is whoever can be understood as the author of these texts; it is these texts that point us to him, and it is in this sense that he precedes them only in appearance. Stendhal, and every author so construed, is to a great extent the product and not the producer of the text, its property and not its owner.

This line of thought might seem to suggest that the author is completely constituted by properties of the text. As J. Hillis Miller has written, "There is not any 'Shakespeare himself,' 'Shakespeare' is an effect of the text . . . The same can be said of the texts published under the name of any author." If this is so, it may now appear that the author cannot readily be distinguished from the very characters of fiction, since fictional characters, too, emerge out of texts in such a manner. Charles does just what Proust's text says he does; he is just what the text says he does—there is no more to him than that. One of the purposes of literary interpretation is, precisely, to establish just what it is that Charles is said to do in the text and so, in a literal sense, to determine who he is. And just as everything we understand Charles to have done, itself of course, a matter of continuing debate is essential to his being the character he is, so, we might think, is the case with his author, Proust himself. Proust, and the author in general, seems to be whoever can be understood to have produced the text as we have construed it. According to this reasoning, the author is one more fictional character, totally immanent, like all fictional characters, in the text out of which he emerges.

This is a conclusion I would like to resist. Though we have generally identified the author of each text with its writer too quickly and too easily, it is no less quick and easy to infer from this that the author is therefore nothing over and above the text, a pure and total product of the peculiar language of fiction. The relation between authors and texts is much more complex than the relation between texts and fictional characters. The first cannot be reduced to the second; it is not, in particular, an immanent relation. Though an author, too, is a character, it is a character manifested or exemplified in a text and not depicted or described in it. The distinction is significant. "The author," John Sturrock as written, "can never finally appear in the text as subject. The representation of a subject is, inevitably, an object, requiring a further, invisible subject as its representative." The relation between author and text can be called, not simply because a better word is lacking, "transcendental." Unlike fictional characters, authors are not simply parts of texts; unlike actual writers, they are not straightforwardly outside them.

In order to understand this equivocal relationship, we must distinguish the author figure from the notion that Wayne Booth has introduced by means of the term "implied author." The main differences are three. First, as Booth's very term suggests, the implied author is the product of the text and the creature of the writer. In this respect, at least, the implied author is very close to a fictional character. Second, the implied author is immanent in the text in the further sense that even if several texts have been composed by a single writer, their implied authors are held to be distinct. A writer's different works, Booth writes, "will imply different versions, different ideal combinations of norms . . . the writer sets himself out with a different air depending on the needs of particular works." Third, though Booth emphasizes the distinction between implied and actual author, he sometimes suggests...
that the distinction is a practical matter. In discussing Emma, for example, he refers to the "author himself"—not necessarily the real Jane Austen but an implied author, represented in this book by a reliable narrator" (350, emphasis added). This statement leaves open the possibility that actual and implied author may coincide—if, for example, the views expressed by the narrator and Jane Austen's actual views turn out to be the same. "A great work," according to Booth, "establishes the sincerity of its implied author regardless of how grossly the man who created that author may belie in his other forms of conduct the values embodied in his work. For all we know, the only sincere moments of his life may have been lived as he wrote his novel." (24). This shows that if a writer did actually accept whatever propositions are expressed in a text, then no logical reason compels us to distinguish a real from an implied author.

Booth originally introduced the implied author in order to account for the relationship between the general views, propositions, and norms expressed in a literary text and the views, propositions, and norms accepted by the writer of that text, since these need not be the same. The author figure, with which we are now concerned, is broader in two interconnected respects. First, in contrast to the implied author, this figure is not correlated with individual works. On the contrary, the author is a figure that emerges from a whole œuvre. It in fact constitutes the very principle that allows us to group certain individual works together and to consider them as parts of such an internally related collection. Since the author, as we have seen, is never depicted, but only exemplified, in a text, this figure is transcendental in relation to its whole œuvre as well as to the individual texts of which that œuvre consists. This, in turn, leads naturally to the second main difference between these notions. The author figure is relevant not only to the attribution of general views to particular texts but also, as we shall see, to every question of interpretation. Both the implied author and the author figure are interpretive constructs. But the latter plays a broader, more directive, and more regulative role in interpretation.

I now want to articulate and defend this transcendental conception of the author and to argue that it is very important for our understanding of literary interpretation. The distinction between writer and author, on which this conception depends, owes a great deal to Foucault's discussion, though, as I shall claim, Foucault, ironically, seems to collapse the two into each other after he has opened a gap between them. And it is, I shall also claim, just this collapse that prompts him to take so negative an attitude toward interpretation that he ends his essay with a call for its abolition. My own view is that just as the author must be consistently distinguished from the writer, so interpretation must be separated from the search for meanings concealed within the text and located in the writer's intention or experience.

We have already seen that to say that a text has an author is to say that it is subject to literary interpretation. If this is true, then it is plausible to claim that though all texts are written, since not all are given literary readings, not all texts are authored. Could we perhaps give a general account of the texts that belong to this class? Interestingly, this is just what is implied in Foucault's statement that private letters, contracts, and anonymously posted texts lack authors (28). This is not, of course, a general theory, but it suggests that some texts are essentially incapable of having authors, and therefore of being interpreted.

Yet private letters do sometimes offer themselves to interpretation. Often, of course, these are the letters of established authors. But the extraordinarily personal and private letters of Madame de Sévigné show that this is not necessarily the case, since it is just these letters that constitute her as an author: apart from them she makes no claim to our attention. And though it does seem unlikely that many anonymously posted texts will have authors, I still cannot think of any general argument that shows that none ever can.

Whether a particular text has an author depends, then, not only on its genre but also on some additional factors, which seem extremely difficult to characterize both generally and informatively. Fictional texts are likely to generate author figures, but not all of them need to. Broadly speaking, texts that, either by imitating or by explicitly flouting literary convention, invite their readers to consider them as literary works make such claims. But, again, the connection does not appear necessary unless we trivialize it by simply defining literary works as authored texts. Much of the literature sold under the heading of "Popular Fiction" in bookstores, for example, may well be authorless.

The reason for this is not that such writings are subliterary or of poor quality but that there is a distinction to be made between understanding in general and interpretation in particular. The view I am developing implies that we can read texts, learn from them, disagree with them, perhaps even like or dislike them, without necessarily interpreting them. The difference, actually, is one of degree. Understanding does involve interpretation, but it appeals only to obvious, generally shared, and uncontroversial conventions or background assumptions.

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All such conventions, of course, must be learned, and not all of them are shared by everyone. Each person belongs to a number of different interpretive communities12 and each community accepts some of its own basic conventions. Such conventions are always in the background, and they constitute the various contexts with which, necessarily, we engage in the effort to interpret and to understand. Since all understanding presupposes some such conventions, it is always to that extent interpretive. But in many such cases only the most basic conventions of a particular context are involved, and interpretation can be so automatic that it constitutes a limiting, null case. Depending on who one is, this can apply to a sign warning hikers that a cliff is dangerous, to an article on genetic programming, or even to a fictional account of an Elizabethan Englishman shipwrecked on the shores of Japan. Cases like these can often require no special assumptions, no idiosyncratic hypotheses on our part; and this is why we speak of understanding without interpretation. The difficulties begin when we try to specify which cases require understanding that is genuinely interpretive.

It is often said (and more often believed) that interpretation is required when a particular text conceals an implicit and, ideally, profound meaning differing from the meaning that text appears to have. Literary texts in particular demand to be interpreted because these surface meanings differ from their real significance, because, as Susan Horton has written, "a text means beyond itself...a railroad is more than a railroad."13 Such views hold that interpretation is needed when the meaning of a text is somehow "beyond" or "behind" it. But this distinction, which is subject to all the difficulties that face any distinction between what merely appears and what really is the case, has been the reason why so much recent criticism has attacked the very notion of interpretation. If interpretation does in fact presuppose this distinction, of which there is good reason to be suspicious, then perhaps there also is good reason to be suspicious of interpretation itself.

I believe, however, that interpretation does not depend on such metaphors of depth and concealment and that it does not involve a radical distinction between the apparent and the real meaning of a text. I would like to articulate an alternative account of interpretation which is connected to the transcendental conception of the author I have been discussing. If such a view is acceptable, interpretation need not be seen as the revelation of a text's hidden meaning. And if this is so, perhaps we can see that much of the suspiciousness with which interpretation has recently been regarded is not really justified.

On the account I propose, interpretation is the activity by means of which we try to construe movements and objects in the world around us as actions and their products. The movement of an arm may, though it need not, be a greeting; the accidental forgetting of a name may, though it need not, be an unconscious aggressive gesture; a long written text may, though it need not, be a novel. But to construe something as an action is not to discover a meaning distinct from its apparent one, a meaning that underlies its seeming sense. Rather, it is to take that movement, or object, or text to be susceptible to a certain sort of question and to a certain sort of account and explanation. It is to want to ask "Why?" of it and to expect an answer that refers to an agent, to intention and to rationality. In most cases, this activity is automatic: we appeal only to general assumptions and classify our object as an action of an obvious, general, and not idiosyncratic sort. When my friend waves her arm at the station as my train is beginning to move, the waving is a farewell. My understanding is not interpretive in the strict sense. But in interpretation strictly conceived we account for the features of an object by appealing to the features of an unusual, original agent whose action we take it to be and who is manifested in it. We take the action, by means of an explicit and often complex process, as an unusual, original event—an event characteristic of its agent, to be sure, but not of many (or any) others. And even in those cases where we say that an action or a text means something other than what it appears to mean, we do not have two meanings, one real and one apparent. All we have, even in the case of psychoanalytic or Marxist Interpretation, is a series of progressively more complicated, detailed, and sophisticated hypotheses aimed at construing a text as an action, at trying to find the meaning it does have in its relationship to its agent and to that agent's other actions, or texts. To identify the results of an automatic, early, rough, and general guess at the significance of something with its "surface," as opposed to its "real," meaning is like arguing that when we think that a square tower, seen at a distance, seems round, there is such a thing in the world as a round appearance in addition to the tower's square reality. Both reifications are equally unjustified.

Interpretation can and must be separated from the metaphors of depth and uncovering, which create this metaphysical difficulty. If we think of it instead in terms of breadth and expansion, we may be able to resist attacks that, like Foucault's, are motivated by the rejection of the distinction between appearance and reality. And by connecting this view of interpretation to the figure of the author, we may also be
able to resist Foucault's attack against a naively psychological conception of this latter notion.

Of this proposal, to take a text or one of its parts as the product of an action is to undertake to relate it to other actions and their products, to account for its features by appealing to theirs and for their features by appealing to its own. We become interested in whatever it is who can be said to have produced that text and to be manifested in its characteristics. We assume that the text's characteristics, unusual as they may be, are as they are because the agent who emerges through them is as he is. Interpretation so construed is not an effort to take a stretch of language which means one thing and to show that it means something else instead. There are no surface meanings, just as there are no appearances—except in the trivial sense that we can be wrong about what texts mean, just as we can be wrong about what things are.

Interpretation, therefore, must be pictured not as an effort to place a text with a continually deepening context but as an attempt to place it within a perpetually broadening one. Nietzsche's comment is perfectly appropriate: "The most recent history of an action is related to this action; but further back lies a pre-history that covers a wider field: the individual action is at the same time a part of much more extensive, later fact. The briefer and the more extensive processes are not separated." The more extensive process of which an action can be seen as a part can in turn generate a different interpretation of at least part of the original action. This, again, can indicate that a new, more extensive process, perhaps containing at least part of the original one as its own part, must now be invoked. Such a process of continual adjustment has no end. Interpretation ends when interest wanes, not when certainty is reached. Nietzsche's comment, "one acquires degrees of Being, one loses that which has Being," is at least as apt when applied to meaning instead.

One of the most striking examples of this understanding of interpretation is provided by the practice of the narrator of Proust's Remembrance of Things Past. As a child and later as an adolescent, the narrator is obsessed with the idea that not only books but all objects, natural as well as artificial, conceal messages of various sorts. He is convinced that happiness no less than literary success depends on the ability to decipher these messages. But the messages always remain elusively inaccessible. His fascination and frustration with the hawthorns along Swann's way is a famous case in point:

But it was in vain that I lingered beside the hawthorns—inhaling, trying to fix in my mind (which did not know what to do with it), losing and recapturing their invisible and unchanging colour, absorbing myself in the rhythm which disposed their flowers here and there with the light-heartedness of youth and at intervals as unexpected as certain intervals in music—they went on offering me the same charm in inexhaustible profusion, but without letting me delve any more deeply, like those melodies which one can play a hundred times in succession without coming any nearer to their secrets... In vain did I make a screen with my hands, the better to concentrate upon the flowers, the feeling they aroused in me remained obscure and vague, struggling and failing to free itself, to float across and become one with them. They themselves offered me no enlightenment.16

As long as the narrator searches for such hidden messages, he fails to find them and, of course, to write about them. Only when (much later in life) he succeeds in writing about the flowers' very silence and in seeing his experience of that silence as part of the process that finally enables him to become an author, that is, only when he takes this experience of "incomplete" understanding itself and gives it a place with the complete account of his life and his effort to become able to write, does his writing begin.

We should not, I suggest, accept the child narrator's point of view and try to decipher the underlying meaning of the perceptions of the young author-to-be. This is nowhere more obvious than in the well-known episode of the steeples of Martinville and Vieuxvicq.17 Once again the narrator recalls the intimation of a message:

In noticing and registering the shape of their spires, their shifting lines, the sunny warmth of their surfaces, I felt that I was not penetrating to the core of my impression, that something more lay behind that mobility, that luminosity, something which they seemed at once to contain and to conceal. (196)

But all of a sudden the message seems to become clear; without warning,

their outlines and their sunlit surfaces, as though they had been a sort of rind, peeled away; something of what they had concealed from me became apparent; a thought came into my mind which had not existed for me a moment earlier, forming itself in words in my head... I could no longer think of anything else. (197)

Here, if anywhere in this book, we should expect to find at least an intimation of what such messages are like. This is especially true because the narrator tells us that he decided to write that thought down then and there and, once in this whole work, he reproduces his early prose for his readers to read. The passage that follows is therefore the earliest part of the book that he composed (198). But the fragment that

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meaning are generated through the proliferation of surfaces, not through the discovery of a single principle that underlies them. The steeple is important, significant, or meaningful because they are being written about, not because writing reveals something about or behind them.

How is this different picture of interpretation connected to the author figure with which my discussion began? The author now emerges as the agent postulated in order to account for construing a text as the product of an action. In Nietzsche's terms, the author is the ultimate "more extensive process," which contains the original text as its part—which is not to say, of course, that this process can ever be finally captured and displayed. In construing a text as an action, we necessarily see it as the partial expression or manifestation of a character: the author is that character. Different parts of a text may generate different or even inconsistent agents or characters. Different texts by the same writer may also do the same. But interpretation proceeds upon the principle that a more consistent narrative of these (perhaps inconsistent) actions can always be devised. Consistency is achieved, not by finding a single meaning underlying all the differences and changes in a work, but by constructing a consistent account of such changes.

We are thus confronted with the following sequence. Writers produce texts. Some texts are subject to interpretation: understanding them involves seeing them as the products of idiosyncratic agents. Interpretation construes texts as works. Works generate the figure of the author, a character manifested, though not represented in them. We cannot know in advance whether a particular text is or is not suited for interpretation. And, as is always the case with character and action, the relationship between author and work involves them in a process of mutual adjustment which cannot, in the nature of the case, ever end.

Both work and author, therefore, are constructs. Both are situated toward the notional end of interpretation and not at its actual beginning. The most we can assume in interpreting a text is that it constitutes a work, not that we know what that work is: to establish that is the very goal of interpretation. And it is a defeasible goal; in actual fact, we often fail to generate a work out of a particular text.

Foucault, we must notice, doubts seriously that the notion of a work can be given a general and useful articulation (143–44). He sees very clearly that the concepts of work and author are deeply interrelated. He sees that once the author was banished, the work emerged
instead as a means of justifying the practice of traditional criticism. That is, given the close connection between the two, the unity the author had been intended to represent now came to be attributed to the work itself. But, Foucault argues, such an appeal is bound to fail. Though "intended to replace the privileged position of the author," the work, he claims, cannot possibly fulfill that role (143). Foucault gives two reasons for being suspicious of this notion. First, he wonders whether we are at all entitled to speak of an individual's work if that individual is not an author. Second, he writes that even when an author is in fact involved, we have no general principle for deciding whether something that author wrote does or does not form part of his work: "How can one define a work among the millions of traces left by someone after his death? A theory of the work does not exist." Therefore, "it is not enough to declare that we should do without the writer and study the work itself. The word 'work' and the unity that it designates are probably as problematic as the status of the author's individuality" (144).

It seems to me undeniable that a general "theory of the work" does not exist. Such a theory would have to be a universal account of everything that is (and isn't) relevant to interpretation. It would have to specify in general terms exactly which features are responsible for a text being construed as a work. Is the fact that we lack such a theory, unfortunate? More specifically, does this lack prevent us from being able to engage in interpretation and to construe particular texts as works of authorship?

It is ironic that Foucault's view exhibits the form of argument a whole generation of scholars put in Socrates' mouth in his fruitless search for the nature of virtue in Plato's early dialogues. The argument is that we can never recognize, say, a particular instance of courage if we don't already know what courage is, if we lack its definition. But since what we are looking for is the center, the key definition of courage, the search is bound to fail: it cannot even begin. This argument has been named "the Socratic Fallacy." And though it is a fallacy, Socrates never committed it. But the argument that constitutes it is not very different from the claim that we cannot decide whether a particular text is or is not a work unless we already possess a general theory, a definition of what a work is.

Interpretation does not seem to me to require any such theory or definition. It is not, as its proponents often grant its opponents, a two-step process. It does not begin with a clear idea of what the work is that is to be interpreted and conclude when it has established its meaning. On the contrary, a text's status as a work and its meaning are essentially interconnected. To take a text as a work in the first place is already to have construed it, at least partly, as the product of a particular action: this is just to have formulated at least a partial interpretation of it. Just as we lack a general theory explaining which of the indefinitely many movements in which we engage constitute the actions we perform, so we lack a general account articulating which of the many texts with which we are confronted constitute the literary works we produce. And just as we construe as actions those movements of the significance of which we have at least a rudimentary intentional account, so we construe as works those texts of which we have at least minimal interpretations.

This is also why there is no theoretical account that distinguishes authored texts from texts that are merely written. Some texts explicitly place themselves within the literary tradition; one way of doing this, as we have seen, is to display obvious obedience or disobedience to acknowledged convention. Such texts demand to be interpreted, but there is no guarantee that their demand will be met, that their writers will turn out to be authors. Criticism can be defined, if one is interested in such definitions, only in uninformative terms: texts that are subject to criticism are texts that can be interpreted, that is, texts that have authors. The circle is small. It is a fruitless task, which some might call "metaphysical" in a pejorative sense, to try to determine the nature of a discipline independently of its actual practice and in the hope that this nature will itself determine the practice. We can tell that a particular text is a work only when we can actually criticize it: which texts are works will depend on what counts as criticism, and what counts as criticism will depend on which texts have been considered as works. Is 'the notation of a meeting, or of an address, or a laundry list' found among Nietzsche's papers, Foucault asks, part of his work? But how could we answer this question just on such information? There is, and there can be, no a priori answer. Such texts may turn out to be parts of Nietzsche's work if, for example, they can be suitably connected to other texts of his, if they can be used to support or contradict them, to illuminate them or make them more obscure than before: if, that is, in conjunction with those other texts they can generate a different "extensive process," a slightly different author. Should notions of meetings, addresses, or laundry lists, Foucault asks, be included in editions of Nietzsche's works? The question is urgent, but it
can be given no general answer. The editors of Nietzsche, like all editors, will have to answer each specific question as it arises for each particular text.

Texts, then, are works if they generate an author; the author is therefore the product of interpretation, not an object that exists independently in the world. But if this is true, it may now appear that the figure of the author is seriously arbitrary. If this figure refers to whatever character is manifested in a text when it is construed as a work, and if each text can be interpreted, as it is often claimed, in different and even incompatible ways, then the author appears to collapse into fragments. Each interpretation generates its own author, and each text can give rise to many different and even inconsistent authors.

No part of the argument of this essay prevents a critic from following out the implications of this objection. I can think of no logical reason that shows that the innovation with which Borges ironically credits Pierre Menard cannot be adopted as a conscious policy. This, of course, is the "technique . . . of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution. This technique . . . prompts us to go through the Odyssey as if it were posterior to the Aeneid and the Book Le Jardin du Centaure of Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier . . . to attribute the Imitatio Christi to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce."20 If the author is our product, why not produce anyone we like out of any particular text?

We could, indeed, try to read the Imitatio Christi as if it were by James Joyce and not by Thomas à Kempis. But James Joyce is, among many other things, the Irish Catholic author of Ulysses. In reading the Imitatio Christi as Joyce's work we would have to read it as the work of the Irish Catholic author of Ulysses. We would have no choice about it; this is just what it is to read this as the work of Joyce. In doing so, we would have to bring the Imitatio into some sort of relationship with Ulysses and therefore change in many ways our interpretation of both works. We would thus begin to fit them into a new, more extensive process. This would now involve not only their reinterpretation but also a new reading of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, which would in turn reflect on our interpretation of the first two works. We would also have to read anew Joyce's other works and letters, and probably some of Pound's poems and some of Beckett's early work as well, and much else (that is, everything) besides. Whether, of course, we actually did this or not does not affect the logical point: we would remain committed to this extreme revisionist approach. No argument can show that we would be wrong to try to revise the history of literature. But in order to show that the author is an arbitrary figure, we would actually have to produce such a revision, as well as a number of others, involving different but equally plausible rearrangements of the canon and even new canons. To say that this can always be done is very different from doing it. And only this latter, if it is successful and convincing, can show that the author is arbitrary.21

In general, the author is to be construed as a plausible historical variant of the writer, as a character the writer could have been.22 The author actually means what the writer could have meant, even if the writer never did. In producing texts, writers are immersed in a system with an independent life of its own. Many of its institutional or linguistic features, many of its values or connections to other systems, are beyond the most unconscious grasp of any writer. For all we know, many texts would have been radically different had their writers been aware of some of those features. But the author, who is the joint product of writer and text, of critic and interpretation, who is not a person but a character, is everything the work shows it to be and what it is can in turn determine what the text shows. The author has no depth.

The objection may now be raised that the very principle that the author be a writer's plausible historical variant is itself arbitrary. And so it is, if we take everything that is supported by less than demonstrative argument as arbitrary. But this is not a useful conception of the arbitrary. To show that a well-established practice is arbitrary entails showing that at least one alternative practice, truly distinct from it, actually exists and makes a claim to being followed. Yet the critics who do not commit themselves to the author as construed here, whether they pursue their new technique in jest (as Borges does) or not, seem to me to confine themselves to partial interpretations of parts of texts. Such readings often are interesting and important. But, once again, saying that such anachronistic readings can be produced is very different from actually producing them. Only a consistent effort to read an entire text in a thoroughly anachronistic manner, an effort that would involve nothing less than reading the entire history of the literary tradition in this manner, would show that the figure of the author is arbitrary in an important or harmful sense. The mere possibility of alternatives never shows that actuality is dispensable.

The figure of the author, in contrast to that of the writer, allows us, however, to avoid the view that to understand a text is to re-create or replicate a state of mind which someone else has already undergone, and which, if I understand him correctly, is Foucault's ultimate target. Such states of mind, whatever their relation to the meaning of a text,
belong to writers but not to authors. Though instrumentally important, perhaps, they have of themselves no critical significance. Authors, not being persons, do not have psychological states that might determine in advance what a text means. We can thus even accept E. D. Hirsch’s view that a “determinate verbal meaning requires a determining will . . . since unless one particular complex of meaning is willed (no matter how ‘rich’ and ‘various’ it might be) there would be no distinction between what an author does mean by a word sequence and what he could mean by it,” and turn it around.21 It is only the latter and not, as Hirsch’s argument is intended to show, the former that is the object of critical attention. We can therefore also refuse to accept the view, expressed by Erwin Panofsky but influential far beyond the disciplinary limits of art history, that “the humanist has . . . mentally to re-enact the actions and to re-create the creations of the past . . . meaning can only be apprehended by re-producing, and thereby, quite literally, ‘realizing,’ the thoughts that one finds expressed in . . . books and in the artistic conceptions that manifest themselves” in artworks.22 There is nothing there, if my view is correct, for us to re-create.

Being a construct, the author is not a historical person whose states of mind we can ever hope, or even want, to recapture. In interpreting a text, we form a hypothesis about the character manifested in it. We thus come—always tentatively, of course—to understand that character better. But this is not to re-create and make our own someone else’s experiences and thoughts. We do not need to become a character (we don’t, that is, need to assume it) in order to understand it. After all, having a certain character is sometimes the most crucial obstacle to understanding it.

In a passage of The Archaeology of Knowledge Foucault writes:

If a proposition, a group of signs, can be called “statement” [sic], it is not . . . because, one day someone happened to speak them or to put them in some concrete form of writing; it is because the position of the subject can be assigned. To describe a formulation qua statement does not consist in analyzing the relations between the author [i.e., in our terms, the writer] and what he says (or wanted to say, or said without wanting to) but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it.23

In interpreting a text, in construing it as an action, we want to know what any individual who can be its subject must be like. We want to know, that is, what sort of person, what character, is manifested in it.

And to know this is simply to know what other actions that character can engage in, what relations it bears to other texts and to the characters manifested in them. To interpret a text, on this model, is not to go underneath it, into a meaning covert within it, but to connect it to other texts and to their authors, to see what texts have made is possible and what texts it, in turn, has made possible itself. This is the literal analogue of the metaphors of breadth and spreading to which I appealed earlier. Interpretation is an activity that relates texts, or their parts, to one another. But to do this, we must construe those texts as works, and to construe them as works we must see them as actions exemplifying a certain character. Again, to understand a character is not to become identical with it, though nothing prevents us as readers from trying, in addition, to make that character at least part of our own. Nevertheless, to understand the character manifested in Remembrance of Things Past, to the extent that this is something (as it is not) that can be fully accomplished, is not to become identified with Marcel Proust, even for a moment. Rather, it is to formulate a series of hypotheses about the actions which we must attribute to the author Proust in order to account for the features of this work. It is, to return to the origin of our circle, to offer an interpretation of the text.

If this is so, then the figure of the author does not constitute the repressive principle with which both Barches and Foucault identify it. The unity the author represents, in the view I have offered, is not a unity that must be assumed to be there at first but a unity that may be possibly captured at last. The charge of repressiveness is much more appropriate against the use of the historical writer as an independent principle by means of which any interpretation of a text is to be judged. Yet Foucault, though he himself makes this distinction, does not attack the writer. On the contrary, he writes that it is the author who provides the means by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite function. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. (“What Is an Author?,” 159)

It could be that Foucault believes that we wrongly confuse writer with author, and that we therefore fail to realize the greater freedom the author figure allows us. Yet he does not attack this identification; instead, he attacks the figure of the author itself. He considers as “pure
romanticism" the hope that doing away with the author, as he urges us
to do, will enable us to treat fiction without any constraints whatever
(ido). He cannot, of course, predict what those constraints will be, but
he thinks that they will have to be preferable to those provided by
the author, whom he sees as the sign under which a psychological con-
strual of reading and interpretation has been victorious.16

Foucault’s essay ends with an echo of Beckett: “What difference
does it make who is speaking?” I have been arguing that the question
asked about the author is not, Who is speaking? but, Who can be
speaking? Even the free circulation, manipulation, composition, de-
composition, and recomposition of fiction is committed to asking this
second question. Even partial, anachronistic, or consciously perverse
readings of texts generate an author for them. Such readings generate
a character to whom these texts, construed (partially, anachronisti-
cally, or perversely) as works, can be assigned. A text, though it usually
has one writer, need never have (that is, generate) a single author. But
not every author is as acceptable as any other, and the mere possibility
of having many authors does not show that the author is dispensable.

My own view is that Foucault himself has fallen prey to the illegit-
mate identification of author with writer against which he so elegantly
warns. We have seen that he believes that the author emerged only
during the Enlightenment, and that there are reasons to doubt this
claim. I have suggested that the history of the author is longer and
more complex than Foucault believes. What may have occurred dur-
ing the Enlightenment is the identification of the role of the author,
which has appeared through history in many guises, with the actual
historical agent who is causally and legally responsible for the text. But
this has been only a moment—though important and long—in this his-
tory. Foucault identifies this moment with the history of which it is
only a part.

What leads us to believe that a complex conscious or unconscious
mental state, an intention or experience, lies at the origin of every text,
constituting the text’s meaning, and that to understand a text is to
recapture that mental state, is the view that to understand a text is to
understand its writer. But the ownership with which my discussion
began changes radically as we move from writer to author. Foucault’s
joint attack on these two notions depends, I think, on overlooking
that difference. Writers own their texts as one owns one’s property.
Though legally their own (eigen), texts can be taken away from their
writers and still leave them who they are. Authors, by contrast, own
their works as one owns one’s actions. Their works are authentically

their own (eigen). They cannot be taken away (that is, reinter-

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precisely) without changing their authors, without making the charac-
ters manifest in them different or even unrecognizable. Authors can-
not be taken apart from their works.

Precisely because of this, because both author and work emerge
through the interpretation of a text, neither stands at the text’s origin,
imparting a preexisting significance to it. The author is therefore not
an independent constraint, forbidding in an a priori manner desired
but unlawful interpretations or extensions. Construing the author as I
have done here puts the very distinction between interpretation and
extension, understanding and use, into question. In “Prison Talk,”
Foucault accepts this distinction when he claims that he wants to “uti-

lize” the writers he likes. “The only valid tribute to thought such as
Nietzsche’s,” he writes, “is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it

groan and protest.”17 But can we use Nietzsche’s thought without un-
derstanding it? Can one remain engaged with an author, make that
author’s thought groan and protest without, at the very same time,
being in the process of interpreting it? Isn’t this just what I have been
doing with Foucault himself, trying to take some of his own views but
using them against him, connecting them with other views, his own,
and those of Barthes and Booth, and mine? Haven’t I been interpret-
ing and at the same time using him? There is, in my opinion, no clear
line between these two. But to insist that criticism must engage only
in interpretation and to claim that it must abandon interpretation alto-
gether in favor of extension is to believe that such a line can be drawn.
And this belief, in turn, presupposes that the author is identical with
the writer and therefore also with the writer’s own self-understanding.
This identification, which ultimately also identifies the fles and the
defenders of pure interpretation, has been the subject of my attack.

In writing to Malcolm Cowley, Faulkner once remarked:

It is my ambition to be as an individual abolished and voided from history,
leaving it markless, no refuse except the printed books . . . It is my aim and
every effort bent, that the sum and history of my life, which in the same sen-
tence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be then both: He wrote the books and
he died.18

There is irony in the fact that this passage was quoted in a review of
one of Faulkner’s numerous biographies. But there may be even more
irony in the fact that whatever we know about Faulkner’s books is also
something we know about their author. And though we may not ever
know what Faulkner, the writer, really was, we may come close to
knowing who he could have been. Having no private property, authors also have no privacy to protect.²⁹

Notes
3. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author," in Josue V. Harari, ed., Textual Strategies (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 149. Parenthetical page references to Foucault in the main text will all be to this essay.
5. This view can also be found in Foucault's "Discourse on Language," in The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A. M. Sheridan (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 222-23.
6. Foucault also makes this point in "The Discourse on Language," 223. St. Jerome discusses authorship in these sections, among others: 1. 7. 9-11, v. 12. 1-3, xxi. 26. 15-17, xxiv. 86. 24-25, xlii. 90. 13-17, lxvi. 98. 24-27. The first of these passages actually suggests that attributions of authorship were already common by Jerome's time: "scripsit Simon Petrus duas epistulas, quae catholicae nominantur; quantum secunda plerisque eius negotior proprior stil cum priore discorsam" (emphasis added).
8. An important though sketchy discussion of social roles can be found in Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). MacIntyre believes that every age conceives of itself in terms of certain privileged social roles, which he calls "characters."
12. Though this expression is intended to allude to the views Stanley Fish expresses in "Is There a Text in This Class?" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), I also want to emphasize the multiplicity of the communities to which each person belongs. It is precisely this fact that makes it possible to criticize the conventions accepted by each community and to provide rational alternatives to them.