

# Chartier, Roger

## *O que é um autor? Revisão de uma genealogia*

(What is an author? *Revision of a genealogy*)

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Returning to the classics is always a risk, even more so when it is intended to critically revise the classic. Throwing oneself into this arduous task is to place oneself in front of a challenge which can often prove to be frustrating. Assuming this risk, the French historian Roger Chartier, professor of *Écrit et cultures dans l'Europe Moderne* in Collège de France since 2007, returns to the classic lecture by the philosopher Michel Foucault, given in February 1969 under the title “What is an author?” In the wake of this Roger Chartier proposes *O que é um autor? Revisão de uma genealogia* to revisit the reflections of the philosopher in his analysis of how what he calls the ‘author function’ operates in the world of western writing.

Fruit of a conference held in the Sorbonne in 2000, and presented to the same Société Française de Philosophie which had held the homonymous Foucault conference, *O que é um autor?* is the result of a prodigious dialogue between the historian and the philosopher played out over a number of years. A specialist in written culture, Chartier, in *A Ordem dos livros* (published in 1994), had already visited the Foucault’s famous lecture to analyze the representations made of the figure of the author and make an initial correction of the reflections of the French philosopher. On that occasion Chartier sought to dialogue with Foucault, fundamentally in relation to the regularity of the appearance of the author in ‘scientific’ and ‘literary’ texts, a theme he returns to in this book.

Here Chartier reiterates the originality of the philosopher by calling attention to the relevance of his questioning of the mechanism by which a text or work

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are identified with a proper name. Reaffirming the central thesis of Foucault's conference, Chartier develops a historical analysis of the distinct manners in which the 'author function' developed over time. For this he starts with a revision of the chronology drafted by the French philosopher in order to correct some mistakes in his assertions, thereby renewing its interpretative strength.

In this venture Chartier frequently evokes another interlocutor in his books, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. In the short story *Borges e eu*, which is part of the volume *O Fazedor*, Borges talks with profound humor about the non-identity between the individual who writes and the author, although he reiterates the inescapable phenomenological between both: "It would be exaggerated to affirm that our relations are hostile. I live and let myself live so that Borges can concoct his literature, and this literature justifies me" (p.32-33).

The citation of the Borgian short story is not gratuitous. It shows, like Foucault, that the functioning of the 'author function' is not inscribed in the moment of practice of writing, but is inserted in specific order of discourse which encompasses it. It is this adhesion to the Foucauldian thesis which is the starting point which Chartier uses for his critical revision, evoking from this the vague chronology with three distinct times drafted by Michel Foucault in his famous speech.

The first is the birth of the bourgeois concept of literary property, which Foucault locates between the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. Although he reaffirms the importance of this moment as fundamental in the construction of an 'author function,' Chartier calls attention to the fact that the literary property of the author was born in England, not so much in the interest of authors, but rather of London bookseller-editors who in the imminence of losing their rights over a determined work – an exclusive right to reproduction acquired under the old statutes and revoked by a new law –, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and not at the end, created or had created the author's property over his text. Chartier affirms that this conquest of the author encompasses the true objective that would give the author the right to pass on his property to a determined bookseller-editor, also transmitting the same rights in perpetuity and the imprescriptibility of the work.

Advancing in his reflections the historian observes that the justification for the creation of copyright in this period is based on natural law – according to

which man is the owner of his body and the products of his work – and an aesthetic justification which looks at the originality of what is produced, creating in its wake the figure of the individual and unique producer. This signifies as Chartier alerts us, not just the economic demand of the author's rights, but also the existence of an old demand based on moral property, according to which control over a work could be requested in the name of the honor of the author.

The other chronology, in which the historian follows Foucault more closely, is related to the distinction of the process of anonymity which characterizes literary and scientific texts between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chartier believes that perhaps the *aporia* existing in Foucault's reflections is the result of three problems: the first, a linguistic inertia, created by the impossibility of prudently defining a division between science and literature in specific periods; the second refers to the need to think about the evocation of authorities (Hippocrates, Pliny, etc.), common procedures before the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries and this relationship with the authors of a determined epoch; and the third, the absence of the 'author function' in literary texts before the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries and even its absence in scientific statements after this data, a hypothesis which Chartier rejects.

Although he agrees in part with Foucault, when the latter highlights the need to reference an author much before the seventeenth century for texts identified as 'scientific,' Roger Chartier does not agree when this distinction states that there was anonymity in literary texts. For Foucault, after the seventeenth or eighteenth century, there is a change between the appearance of the figure of the author in literary texts and, inversely, his disappearance in scientific texts. For the historian, even after the seventeenth century, a scientific discovery or statement was only validated by the use of a name, not necessarily the erudite, specialist or professional. Chartier identifies this procedure as an aristocratic method of validation, in which what matters most for this statement is the one who has the power to say the truth – someone powerful, a prince, or a minister. On the other hand, the disinterest of an author, represented by the lack of relationship of property with his production, is fundamental for the erudite to be acknowledged as the author or authority in this regime. This procedure, to the contrary of what Foucault thought, is present even in literary texts after this moment of rupture, said to be the seventeenth century, in which in prologues, prefaces, or dedications, the disinterest of the author is evoked as a factor of

credibility for texts. Finally, Chartier states, different from what Foucault thought, that some texts with the value of truth had circulated in anonymity since the Middle Ages, without the need for any reference to an authority – books of secrets and technical manuals, for example.

While the eighteenth century reveals the construction of the author-owner, the figure of the author predates this. The ultimate chronology outlined by Foucault deals with the connection of an author to a function linked to the identification of an individual with a determined text for punitive purposes, notably censure. Chartier agrees with this proposition citing inquisitorial sources from the seventeenth century, where the anonymity of the printed text was the motive for its censoring, with linking the titles of the works and a name being an essential formula for better surveillance by authorities.

This investigation has led some historians to conclude that the ‘author function’ was born with the printed book, following the appearance of the name of an individual on the printed work, with the law cases taken by writers whose texts had been published without consent since the beginning of the sixteenth century, and with the appearance of a picture of individual author. However, Chartier sees this precipitation as erroneous. In first place, following the lexical change out of which emerged the terms *auctor* and *actor* when the system for circulating texts was fundamentally manuscript based in the fourteenth century and at the beginning of the fifteenth, with the former designated an authority and the latter a compiler. Chartier points to the progressive winning of the authority of *auctores* by *actores* and at the end of the fourteenth century and at the beginning of the fifteenth, the existence of a designation of *acteur* for both authorities and certain texts published in a vernacular, out of which was born the figure of the writer, not only as the one who copies, but the one who composes and invents.

This strong presence of the representation – a keyword in Chartier – of the author as a creator in contrast with the decipherer, glosser, or compiler, imposes a reflection on the historicity of the identification of the name of the work and the actual materiality of the object. For Chartier, although since the High Middle Ages the best known form of the book was the miscellany, in other words, the different texts gathered in an object-book, what appears to exist is a supposed ‘reader function’ – the one who desired to gather different texts in a single object – and a ‘copying function’ – the one who copied the

text in a single book. However, while the miscellany is the characteristic of this type of book, in the fourteenth century when texts still circulated in manuscripts, it is possible to identify the 'author function' with an individual, linking him to a work or book. Here there lies for Roger Chartier an unavoidable recommendation that the genealogy of the 'author function' immersed in the order of the discourse should be concomitantly added to an order of books. The consequence of this resides in the manner of treatment given to the investigation of printed material, which also needs the investigation of the supports which distributed texts as a way of identifying their meanings.

By correcting some impressions given in Michel Foucault's famous talk, Roger Chartier in *O que é um autor?* emphasizes the interpretative strength of the French philosopher incorporating some questions arising out of recent research about printed material, especially coming from Cultural History. This *démarche* does not lead him to the negation of the question proposed by Foucault. The return aims to reinforce how much his critical reflection is expressed in current questioning of the functioning of a determined mechanism of authority over texts. This reflection does not end in the investigation of the order of the discourse, but incorporates in a fundamental manner the dimension of the materiality of the same discourse. This is why, answering the questions at the end of the book, Chartier states that a reader will never find a text except through a specific form, with the order of the discourse always being an order of materiality.

Finally, it is worth repeating that this vision of Michel Foucault as part of a movement which seeks dialogue with the classics is based on a space of tension in which the interlocutor appropriates the ideas of others, contributing in this way of keeping them alive. Chartier does not appear in *O que é um autor* to want to fall into traps which would lead him in confrontation with the philosopher. He takes the inevitable risk, by appropriating the ideas of Foucault of also becoming an author of these ideas, of deepening them in a critical manner. However, the feelings which readers will give to this respectful appropriation may not be so compatible with the desires of the historian. This final proposition is assumed by Chartier as an unavoidable part of a practice of reading which is also, he knows, the space of unpredictable creations.