Lecture 11: The Return of the Author

1) Looking Back

2) Looking Forward

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1) Looking Back

Antiquity:	**Inspiration**	**vs.**	**Imitation**
	(God)		(Nature/Authorities)
Middle Ages:	-		+
	(Subjectivity)		(Objectivity)
Early Modern:	+		-
Neoclassicism:	-		+
Romanticism:	+		-
		(Historicity)	
Modernism:	-		+
		(Reflexivity)	
Postmodernism:	+		+

"What is an author?" Foucault asks. The distinguishing characteristic of the modern author, I would answer, is that he is a proprietor, that he is conceived as the originator and therefore the owner of a special kind of commodity, the "work". And a crucial institutional embodiment of the author-work relation is copyright, which not only makes possible the profitable publishing of books but also, by endowing it with legal reality, produces and affirms the very identity of the author as author. […]

Before the structuralist and poststructuralist transformation of the intellectual scene, literary scholarship with its concern for the integrity of the individual work as an aesthetic artefact and its respect for the author's proprietary rights in his meaning was committed to the same mode of thinking as the legal system. Thus traditional textual study was concerned with establishing authoritative texts, with determining what an author *really* wrote (as if there were always a single theoretically determinable literary object), and traditional source study was controlled by a judicial and economic metaphor in which the critic was seen as determining the extent of one author's "indebtedness" to another.

Now, however, a gap has appeared between the dominant mode of legal thinking and that of literary thinking. "Originality", the necessary and enabling concept that underlies the notion of the proprietary author, is at best a problematic term in current thought, which stresses rather the various ways in which, as it is often put, language speaks through man. Where does one text end and another begin? What current literary thought emphasizes is that texts permeate and enable each other, and from this point of view the notion of distinct boundaries between texts, a notion crucial to the operation of the modern system of literary property, becomes difficult to sustain.

The gap between poststructuralist thought and the institution of copyright brings into view the historicity of the seemingly "solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work."

(Rose 1988, 54/78)

2) Looking Forward

Will the author in the modern sense prove to have been only a brief episode in the history of writing? By "author" we mean an individual who is the sole creator of unique "works" the originality of which warrants their protection under laws of intellectual property known as "copyright" or "authors' rights". […] Our laws of intellectual property are rooted in the century-long reconceptualization of the creative process which culminated in high Romantic pronouncements like Wordsworth's to the effect that this process *ought* to be solitary, or individual, and introduce "a new element into the intellectual universe".

Both Anglo-American "copyright" and Continental "authors' rights" achieved their modern form in this critical ferment, and today a piece of writing or other creative product may claim legal protection only insofar as it is determined to be a unique original product of the intellection of a unique individual (or identifiable individuals). In short, the law has yet to be affected by the "critique of authorship" initiated by Foucault and carried forward in the rich variety of post-structuralist research that has characterized literary studies during the last two decades. Indeed, from recent decisions […] that as creative production becomes more corporate, collective, and collaborative, the law invokes the Romantic author all the more insistently. There would thus seem to exist both considerable potential and a pressing need to reestablish communication between the two disciplines [of law and literary studies].

(Woodmansee 1994, 15/28)

The Reassertion of Collective Writing Practices Today:

- collaborative writing practices in business, government, industry, the sciences and social sciences
  ⇨ "the collaborative nature of contemporary research and problem solving"
- "electronic technology is hastening the demise of the illusion that writing is solitary and originary" (acceleration of response and participation, hypertext, interactivity)

vs. last bastions of solitary origination in

- the arts
- the humanities
- teaching institutions

(cf. Woodmansee 1994, 24-27)

"Das ist ein Autor!" (Werber/Stöckmann 1997)

[Zahlreiche aktuelle Positionen zur Autorschaft] gründen auf einer Fehleinschätzung der Lage, die sich einer Beschränkung der Kategorie des Autors auf seine Funktion in der Textinterpretation der Geisteswissenschaften – und keinesfalls innerhalb der Literatur selbst – verdankt. Man darf aber wohl getrost davon ausgehen, dass allein schon der Buchmarkt und das Rechtssystem dafür sorgen werden, daß unserer Gesellschaft der Autor nicht verloren geht. Damit darf sich die Literaturwissenschaft aber nicht zufrieden geben; sie wird nach einem überzeugenderen Konzept suchen.

Gefordert ist eine Theorie, die zwischen den hermeneutischen Figuren einer vorgängigen Schöpfer-Autorität und der Genügsamkeit poststrukturalistischer und diskurstheoretischer Analysen einen Weg findet, der – einerseits – spezifischere Ergebnisse zuläßt als die leitenden Präsuppositionen von Hermeneutik und Poststrukturalismus und der – andererseits – einen Kontakt zur 'Wirklichkeit' literarischer Kommunikation herstellt, für die der Autor – nach wie vor – einen irreduziblen Selektionshorizont darstellt: eine Ressource gleichsam wie viele andere, *ohne die es* – trivial, aber wahr – *keinen Text geben würde.* […]

Innerhalb literarischer Kommunikation kann vom Autor nur als 'Werk'-Funktion die Rede sein, deren konkrete Operationalisierungen von spezifischen, selektionssteuernden Programmen betreut und reguliert werden. Der Autor ist insofern eine *systemrelative Funktion literarischer Kommunikation*. Diese Sachlage entkoppelt das traditionelle Zuschreibungsverhältnis von Autor und Werk. Als symbolisch generalisierten Kommunikationsmedium ist das 'Werk' kein materielles Substrat, dem sich eine intentionale Autor-Subjektivität als dessen Urheber zurechnen ließe, sondern die hochaggregierte Formierung eines Mediums, die literarische Kommunikation transponierbar und für weitere Kommunikationen anschlußfähig macht. Es ist also allein das Werk – genauer: seine Programmierung –, das die verschiedenen Autor-Projekte und -Funktionen *im* Literatursystem bestimmt. […]

Um und nach 1800 hat das Literatursystem Autor-Projekte entfaltet, die […] nur *im Literatursystem* – und nirgends sonst – Anschlussfähigkeit finden konnten. […] Faktisch freilich – und das ist für die 'Wirklichkeit' funktionaler Differenzierung entscheidend – bilden die […] beobachtbaren reflexiven Konstruktionen des Literatursystems keine Barrieren für das reibungslose Prozessieren von Recht, Wirtschaft und (philosophischer) Hermeneutik. Für das Rechtssystem etwa bleibt der Autor Sinn-Schöpfer einer expressiven Werk-Totalität – allen Strategien des Literatursystems zum trotz, die Inschriften des Autors in den selbstreferentiellen Bewegungen des Textes zu invisibilisieren. […]

Eine literaturwissenschaftliche Theorie muß dieser, in der strukturellen 'Logik' funktionaler Differenzierung verankerten Sachlage Rechnung tragen: durch eine analytische Taktik, deren Auflösungsvermögen bis auf das Niveau einzelner systemspezifischer Kommunikationen herabreicht, und dessen Abstraktionslage auch die Gesamtheit sozialer Kommunikationen über Literatur miterfassen kann. Dies geschieht in Form strikt *polykontexturaler* Analysen (vgl. Plumpe/Werber 1995), die den Autor im Literatur*system* und zugleich in den Beobachtungen seiner *Umwelt* trennscharf rekonstruieren: juristisch etwa als Eigentümer am Werk, politisch als Träger 'korrekter Meinungen' oder ökonomisch als Investitionskalkül oder Honorarempfänger. […]

Was die systemtheoretische Literaturwissenschaft künftig zu leisten hätte, ist – neben den angedeuteten polykontexturalen Analysen – eine Rückwendung auf die Theorieprogramme der Literaturwissenschaft selbst, die unterschiedlichste Autor-Funktionen hervorgebracht und stabilisiert haben. In den Blick käme der Autor dann als literaturwissenschaftliches Ereignis hermeneutischer, psychoanalytischer, struktureler, diskurstheoretischer oder dekonstruktionistischer Lektüren. Nur so ließe sich das Konzept 'Autor' in das Projekt einer dezidiert polykontexturalen Literaturwissenschaft einfügen: als Beobachtungsposition innerhalb einer multireferentiell verspiegelten sozialen Kommunikation, die nirgends mehr als Einheit repräsentierbar ist.

⇨ **a similar approach would be fruitful for academic authorship (cf. Steiner 2009)**

John Updike, "The End of Authorship"

[…] Last month, The New York Times Magazine published a lengthy article that gleefully envisioned the end of the bookseller, and indeed of the writer. Written by Kevin Kelly, identified as the "senior maverick" at Wired magazine, the article describes a glorious digitalizing of all written knowledge. Google's plan, announced in December 2004, to scan the contents of five major research libraries and make them searchable, according to Kelly, has resurrected the dream of the universal library. "The explosive rise of the Web, going from nothing to everything in one decade," he writes, "has encouraged us to believe in the impossible again. Might the long-heralded great library of all knowledge really be within our grasp?"

Unlike the libraries of old, Kelly continues, "this library would be truly democratic, offering every book to every person." The anarchic nature of the true democracy emerges bit by bit. "Once digitized, books can be unravelled into single pages or be reduced further, into snippets of a page," Kelly writes. "These snippets will be remixed into reordered books and virtual bookshelves. Just as the music audience now juggles and reorders songs into new albums (or 'playlists,' as they are called in iTunes), the universal library will encourage the creation of virtual 'bookshelves' — a collection of texts, some as short as a paragraph, others as long as entire books, that form a library shelf's worth of specialized information. And as with music playlists, once created, these 'bookshelves' will be published and swapped in the public commons. Indeed, some authors will begin to write books to be read as snippets or to be remixed as pages."

The economic repercussions of this paradise of freely flowing snippets are touched on with a beguiling offhandedness, as a matter of course, a matter of an inexorable Marxist unfolding. As the current economic model disappears, Kelly writes, the "basis of wealth" shifts to "relationships, links, connection and sharing." Instead of selling copies of their work, writers and artists can make a living selling "performances, access to the creator, personalization, add-on information, the scarcity of attention (via ads), sponsorship, periodic subscriptions — in short, all the many values that cannot be copied. The cheap copy becomes the 'discovery tool' that markets these other intangible valuables."

This is, as I read it, a pretty grisly scenario. "Performances, access to the creator, personalization," whatever that is — does this not throw us back to the pre-literate societies, where only the present, live person can make an impression and offer, as it were, value? Have not writers, since the onset of the Gutenberg revolution, imagined that they already were, in their written and printed texts, giving an "access to the creator" more pointed, more shapely, more loaded with aesthetic and informational value than an unmediated, unpolished personal conversation? Has the electronic revolution pushed us so far down the path of celebrity as a summum bonum that an author's works, be they one volume or 50, serve primarily as his or her ticket to the lecture platform, or, since even that is somewhat hierarchical and aloof, a series of one-on-one orgies of personal access?

In my first 15 or 20 years of authorship, I was almost never asked to give a speech or an interview. The written work was supposed to speak for itself, and to sell itself, sometimes even without the author's photograph on the back flap. As the author is gradually retired from his old responsibilities of vicarious confrontation and provocation, he has grown in importance as a kind of walking, talking advertisement for the book — a much more pleasant and flattering duty, it may be, than composing the book in solitude. Authors, if I understand present trends, will soon be like surrogate birth mothers, rented wombs in which a seed implanted by high-powered consultants is allowed to ripen and, after nine months, be dropped squalling into the marketplace.

In imagining a huge, virtually infinite wordstream accessed by search engines and populated by teeming, promiscuous word snippets stripped of credited authorship, are we not depriving the written word of its old-fashioned function of, through such inventions as the written alphabet and the printing press, communication from one person to another — of, in short, accountability and intimacy? Yes, there is a ton of information on the Web, but much of it is egregiously inaccurate, unedited, unattributed and juvenile. The electronic marvels that abound around us serve, surprisingly, to inflame what is most informally and noncritically human about us — our computer screens stare back at us with a kind of giant, instant "Aw, shucks," disarming in its modesty, disquieting in its diffidence.

The printed, bound and paid-for book was — still is, for the moment — more exacting, more demanding, of its producer and consumer both. It is the site of an encounter, in silence, of two minds, one following in the other's steps but invited to imagine, to argue, to concur on a levelof reflection beyond that of personal encounter, with all its merely social conventions, its merciful padding of blather and mutual forgiveness. Book readers and writers are approaching the condition of holdouts, surly hermits who refuse to come out and play in the electronic sunshine of the post-Gutenberg village. "When books are digitized," Kelly ominously promises, "reading becomes a community activity. . . . The universal library becomes one very, very, very large single text: the world's only book."

Books traditionally have edges: some are rough-cut, some are smooth-cut, and a few, at least at my extravagant publishing house, are even top-stained. In the electronic anthill, where are the edges? The book revolution, which, from the Renaissance on, taught men and women to cherish and cultivate their individuality, threatens to end in a sparkling cloud of snippets. […]

Bibliography Lecture 11:

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