

A Brief History of Authorship

Explicitly addressing an unspoken subtext of many debates in literary scholarship, this course of lectures will trace the historical development of notions of authorship from Plato to the present. It will tell the story of the birth of the modern author, his (?!) death in the late 1960s (reports of which seem to have been greatly exaggerated), and the resurgence of interest in the concept in recent years. Historically, the account will revolve around the competition between inspiration- and imitation-models of authorship, and it will end with an attempt at identifying a suitable paradigm of authorship for the 21st century.

Lecture 1: What is an Author? An Introduction

- 1) Some Definitions
- 2) Staging Authorship: Recent Examples
- 3) Course Overview

1) Some Definitions

author

one who is the source of some form of intellectual or creative work; especially, one who composes a book, article, poem, play, or other literary work intended for publication. Usually a distinction is made between an author and others (such as a compiler, an editor, or a translator) who assemble, organize, or manipulate literary materials. Sometimes, however, the title of author is given to one who compiles material (as for publication) in such a way that the finished compilation can be regarded as a relatively original work. The word is ultimately from the Latin *auctor*, "authorizer, responsible agent, originator, or maker."

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OED (2nd ed. 1989)

author, *n.*

1. *gen.* The person who originates or gives existence to anything:
 - a. An inventor, constructor, or founder. Now *obs.* of things material; exc. as in b. [1384...]
 - b. (*of all, of nature, of the universe, etc.*) The Creator [1374...]
 - c. He who gives rise to or causes an action, event, circumstance, state, or condition of things. [1413...]
[... *obs.*]
- 3.a. *esp.* and *absol.* One who sets forth written statements; the composer or writer of a treatise or a book. (Now often used to include *authoress.*) [1380...(1880...)]
- b. *elliptically* put for: An author's writings. [1601...]
4. The person on whose authority a statement is made; an authority, an informant (Usually with *poss. pron.*) *arch.* or *Obs.*
[... *obs.*]
6. *attrib.* and in *Comb.* See also AUTHOR-CRAFT.

authorship

1. Occupation or career as a writer of books [1710...]
 2. The dignity and personality of an author [1782...]
 3. Literary origin or origination (of a writing) [1825...]
 4. *gen.* Origination or instigation of an action, state of affairs, etc.
- Cf. AUTHOR *n.* 1 [1884...]

authority

- I. Power to enforce obedience.
 - 1.a. Power or right to enforce obedience; moral or legal supremacy; the right to command, or give an ultimate decision. [1393...]
 - b. *in authority*: in a position of power; in possession of power over others [1460...]
 - 2.a. Derived or delegated power; conferred right or title; authorization. [1375...]
 - b. with *inf.* Conferred right *to do* something. [1535...]
 3. Those in authority; the body of persons exercising power of command. [1611....]
- II. Power to influence action, opinion, belief.
4. Power to influence the conduct and actions of others; personal or practical influence. [1410...]
 5. Power over, or title to influence, the opinions of others; authoritative opinion; weight of judgement or opinion, intellectual influence. [1386...]
 6. Power to inspire belief, title to be believed; authoritative statement; weight of testimony. Sometimes weakened to: Authorship, testimony. [1303...]

7. The quotation of book acknowledged, or alleged, to settle a question of opinion or give conclusive testimony. [1230...]
- 8.a. The person whose opinion or testimony is accepted; the author of an accepted statement. b. One whose opinion *on* or *upon* a subject is entitled to be accepted; an expert in any question. [1665...]
9. *Comb. as authority-maker*. [1678...]

The concept of authorship has been a relatively unproblematized one until comparatively recently. But subsequent to the publication of two essays in particular – Roland Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’ [1967/68] und Michel Foucault’s ‘What is an Author?’ [1969] – the term *author* has, from being one of the least problematic of terms, become the SITE of much complex discussion. Clearly on a simple level an author is a person who writes a work [...] But [...] one cannot be an author by writing anything [...] In other words, the term *author* does more than attach a piece of writing to its individual human origin [...] To talk of an author is to appeal to a shared knowledge of [...] DISCOURSES and of the CONVENTIONS governing their transmission and circulation.[...] [There is a] gap between the author seen as sole creator of a work, and the real process of literary composition involving negotiation between historically located individual authors and a range of other individuals and institutions – publishers, censors, collaborating friends, critics, and so on.

(Hawthorn 1992, 9-11)

Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” [1969]:

Beckett supplies a direction: “What matter who’s speaking, someone said, what matter who’s speaking.” In an indifference such as this we must recognize one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing. [...] [T]he writing of our day has freed itself from the necessity of ‘expression’; it only refers to itself, yet it is not restricted to the confines of interiority. On the contrary we recognize it in its exterior deployment. [...] [W]e find the link between writing an death manifested in the total effacement of the individual characteristics of the writer; the quibblings and confrontations that a writer generates between himself and his text cancel out the signs of his particular individuality. If we wish to know the writer in our day, it will be through the singularity of his absence and in his link to death, which has transformed him into a victim of his own writing. While all this is familiar in philosophy, as in literary criticism, I am not certain that the consequences derived from the disappearance of death of the author have been fully explored or that the importance of this event has been appreciated.

(115-117)

[Portraits of Beckett and Foucault]

2) Staging Authorship: Recent Examples

a) Photographs

Die amerikanische Schriftstellerin Siri Hustvedt ist eine schöne Frau. Dies zu bemerken ist unzulässig, weil es von der Tatsache ablenkt, dass Siri Hustvedt unter anderem zwei Romane geschrieben hat. Sie erzählen die Geschichte von Frauen, die mir Siri Hustvedt literaturmäßig nicht identisch sind. Wer zum Beispiel *Die Verzauberung der Lily Dahl* liest, ist besser dran, wenn er das Bild der Siri Hustvedt nicht kennt, auf dass er sich kein falsches Bild der Lily Dahl mache. Heutzutage, da die Welt der Bilder die Welt ist, kann es keinem, der Erfolg haben will, egal sein, wie der Dichter aussieht und folglich ankommt. Vor einiger Zeit machte ein Verlag für einen Debütanten Werbung mit dem Satz, der habe das Zeug zum 'literarischen Sexsymbol'. Der Mann sah in der Tat gut aus, aber bis vor kurzem gab es neben dem Totengräber oder der Souffleuse keinen Beruf, bei dem das Aussehen eine derart geringe Rolle gespielt hätte wie beim Schriftsteller. Sartre schielte, Kafka hatte Fledermausohren, Rilke Glubschaugen. Macht das was? In Kanada ist jetzt ein Bild aus dem Jahre 1603 entdeckt worden, das den jungen Shakespeare zeigt. Große Aufregung. Ist er es wirklich? Man weiß es nicht genau, wird es wohl nie genau wissen, denn Shakespeare ist tot, aber er lebt. Verstünden wir den *Lear* oder den *Hamlet* besser, wenn wir wüssten, wie der Autor aussah? Wir wissen es ohnehin: Er sieht aus wie Joseph Fiennes in dem Film *Shakespeare in Love*.

Einer ehrwürdigen Literaturtheorie zufolge gilt nichts außer dem Text. [...] Die werkimmanente Methode ist später zur Rezeptions- und zur Wirkungsästhetik weiterentwickelt worden: Der Text gewinnt seinen Reichtum erst durch uns, die Leser. [...] Indem wir lesen, erwecken wir den Text zum Leben, und dieses Wir ist jeweils ein historisch anderes, sodass erst die Kette der Lesarten jenes Etwas herstellt, das man Werk nennt. Wenn dies auch nur ein bisschen stimmt, dann ist es kontraproduktiv, das Leben der Dichter bis ins Konterfei kennen zu wollen. Müssen wir tatsächlich wissen, ob hinter Thomas Manns traumatischem Verhältnis zur eigenen Homosexualität womöglich ein grauenvolles Erlebnis steckt?

Wir müssen nicht, aber wir wollen. Zwischen Text und Leser entwickelt sich nicht selten eine irrealer Beziehung, die der realen Liebe gleicht. Wie ein Liebender will der Leser dem geliebten Autor so nahe kommen wie möglich. Ist er weise, wird er dem Wunsch widersagen. Aber ein Leser muss nicht weise sein. Er soll sein illegitimes Bedürfnis nach intimer Auskunft äußern dürfen. Dann wird er sehen, dass die Antworten, die er kriegt, zu seinen Fragen nicht passen. Die bloß neugierigen, literaturfremden Ignoranten aber mögen das Leben der Dichter ausforschen noch und noch – sie haben der Liebe nicht. (Greiner 2001)

[“Wie sehen die denn aus? Dichter und ihre Portraits.” *Die ZEIT*, 18th Jan 2007]

Historical Background:

Matthias Bickenbach, *Das Autorenfoto in der Medienevolution: Anachronie einer Norm*. München: Fink, 2010.

b) Authorial Narration

Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (1983), p. 28/29, 69/70

- historiographic metafiction about Pakistani history
- new narrative technique: 'postmodern' authorial narration

Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! [...] Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?

I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories? Can only the dead speak? I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe myself when I say this. It is part of the world to which, whether I like it or not, I am still joined, if only by elastic bands. [...] The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. [...] My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centring to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. [...] I [...] am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion [...] that something can also be gained.

[...]

But suppose this were a realistic novel! [...] By now, if I had been writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally [...] The book would have been banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned. All that effort for nothing! Realism can break a writer's heart. Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale [...] [N]obody need get upset, or say anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either. What a relief!

c) Metalepsis

B. S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (1964), p. 163/167

[...] Albert lazed at his drawing board before the great window. Nearly seven weeks' summer holidays lay ahead of him in which to work; and he could not work today, always tomorrow was the day he was going to work. Part of the trouble, he thought, was that he lived and loved to live in an area of absolute architectural rightness, which inhibited his own originality, and resulted in him being — OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!

— fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero though what a useless appellation my first character then im trying to say something about me through him albert an architect when whats the point in covering up

covering over pretending pretending i can say anything through him that is anything that I would be interested in saying [...]

— Im trying to say something not tell a story telling stories is telling lies and I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality about sitting here writing [...]

Broader Cultural Background:

Karin Kukkonen et al., eds., *Metalepsis in Popular Culture*. Berlin/New York: DeGruyter, 2011.

[*Animal Man* (D.C. Comics 1990): No. 25 (ending), No. 26 (complete)]

3) Course Overview

Introduction

25 th Oct	Lecture 1	What is an Author? An Introduction
8 th Nov	Lecture 2	Notorious Cases: Ossian, de Man, Rushdie, Wilkomirski

1) A Brief History

15 th Nov	Lecture 3	The Birth of the Author
22 nd Nov	Lecture 4	Medieval Concepts of Authorship (Guest Lecture by Fritz Kemmler)
29 th Nov	Lecture 5	Into Modernity
6 th Dec	Lecture 6	Neoclassicism and Romanticism
13 th Dec	Lecture 7	Romanticism and Modernism

2) The 20th Century

20 th Dec	Lecture 8	Modernism into Literary Studies
10 th Jan	Lecture 9	The Death of the Author
17 th Jan	Lecture 10	The Persistence of the Author
24 th Jan	Lecture 11	The Return of the Author
31 st Jan	Lecture 12	The Digital Author

7 th Feb	Written Exam
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[N.B.: English versions of most of the essays collected in this volume can be found in a copy folder in the special reserve section of the library!]
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