

The Ascension of the Author and Ecologies of Knowledge

A New Theoretical Framework

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IN THE last couple of decades of the 20th century, “the death of the author”¹ has been tirelessly haunting the field of literary studies. More often than not, however, this concept and its underlying arguments seem to have been structured around metaphors and lines of reasoning already firmly established in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s by seminal thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault,² and Jacques Derrida.³ In more recent times, though, portrayals of “the return of the author”⁴ have been also thriving, presenting the restorative postulation as an ideational trope able to—at least purportedly—facilitate an entirely new meditation on the topic and to finally move beyond the doom and gloom of poststructuralist deconstruction, in a pragmatic yet ideological proclamation of sorts.

It would be facile yet unmistakably true to say that, in the wake of Foucault’s work, the field has been framed by genealogical approaches that openly acknowledged and criticized the power relations between individual writers and cultural institutions.⁵ Similarly, though, the scientific context has been also dominated, as previously mentioned, by narratives inspired by Roland Barthes’ poststructuralist theories as well as Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist approach. Ever since, academics have been endorsing research stratagems that were myopically focused on the play of authorial disappearance and reappearance.⁶ Even though this critical framework has been hugely lucrative, recent phenomena such as globalization and digitization, as well as world and systemic approaches to literary studies have decisively altered the structure of our sphere of study.⁷ Before describing a new authorial regime and how we can use informational ecologies, I would like to prudently move forward by submitting a few conditional remarks to gauge the issue at hand.

The first of these is related to the notion of authorship in what could be called an axiological perspective and it claims that the idea of authorship is invariably the item of some form of contestation.⁸ Between Plato’s banishment, Wimsatt & Beardsley’s anti-intentional stance and Barthes’ aforesaid insurrection, comments on authoriality typically entail discursive attitudes somewhat similar to those involved in statements made about

the inner workings of power and authority. These are habitually shaped around notions such as position, value, influence, rights, reputation, prestige, status, rank, supremacy, credibility, responsibility, and expertise (the list could go on). In effect, it would seem that the conferred association inadvertently betrays the etymological stakes of the matter: authorial power means scriptorial control, i.e., whoever defines the term—whether in apophatic or cataphatic terms—dominates the literary field. Contested authorship, then, is nothing else than a form of cultural sovereignty doctrinally obscured as subversion.

My second consideration relates to the conditions of contemporaneity and its multiple shapes and sizes: the planetary,⁹ the risk society,¹⁰ the cosmodern,¹¹ the metamodern society,¹² the age of cognitive capitalism,¹³ or the post-Anthropocene.¹⁴ In the last two or three decades, these and other theoretical endeavors have been successfully mapping these ongoing changes, while, in its own way, recent comparative scholarship has been continuously amplifying our understanding of literature's wordly situatedness.¹⁵ In spite of everything, though, academics have continued to speculate that authorship has already vanished from the face of the literary earth¹⁶ or that it has or will soon stage a definite return.¹⁷ To be sure, the two allegories—the death and return of the author—have thoroughly permeated academia: scientific books and articles have been recycling these two figures of thought across analytical trends across various genres and media to boot.¹⁸ These two grand narratives have been, perhaps, the most widespread, but also probably the most deceitful plots of the past few decades. Under the influence of French Theory, scholars like Seán Burke and Andrew Bennett observed, in a review of their ideological collusions, a definite concurrence between these categorical postulations and the stronghold of certain figures and conversations.¹⁹

My third and final tentative reflection, which will eventually lead us into the matter, considers a brief conceptual and historical framework for understanding the genealogy of authorship instantiations. In 1985, Alain Viala has convincingly shown that “the birth of the modern author” was located in the 17th century.²⁰ The second stage in the history of modern authorship is best known as “the sacralization of the author” (see Paul Bénichou's demonstration pertaining to the Romantic-period transfiguration of genius-writers²¹). The next important step, of course, is “the death of the author,” as announced by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and many others.²² Finally, one has to recall that, even though it was immediately picked up by the likes of Eugen Simion or Seán Burke, the idea lingering behind “the return of the author” was initially suggested by Roland Barthes himself in 1971.²³ “The birth of the author,” moreover, has consecrated the use of Bourdieu's field theory and literary sociology in the realm of auctorial studies, but it did so, as we have seen, in the second half of the 20th century, even if the birth itself is chronologically located in the early 17th century, when France's modern literary institutions were first formed.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL sequence outlined above is, as we have seen, divorced from the paradigmatic or methodological one. The distinction between the history of auctorial ideas and practices, on the one hand, and authorship studies, on the

other, should not go unnoticed. For example, when scholars invoke “the death of the author,” they typically seem to consider that the famous shibboleth signifies a phenomenological description of the writer or a linguistic characterization of textual meanings and styles. Nevertheless, the notorious disappearance of the author symbolized the rather trite imposition of poststructuralist reading strategies. “The death of the author” can now be described as an overt attack on the *ancien régime*, where the authority of literary institutions was built around the figure of the writer, and “the return of the author” as representing the stronghold of identity-politics (gender studies or postcolonial studies, for instance).

I would therefore remark that “the ascension of the author” maintains an even more inconsistent relation between the current state of authorship, on the one hand, and its professed methodological ensemble, on the other. The dynamic characterizing ‘the ascension of the author’ is paradoxical for the simple fact that—even if the ecology of knowledge can, indeed, be applied to the study of any historical period—it has proven itself indispensable when trying to make sense of the present conditions of the discipline and its adjacent phenomenon.²⁴ “The ascension of the author” would—suffice it to say at the moment—constitute an unfolding site of controversy and dissent, in which both militant and textual concerns melt away in a larger—distributive, expanded, and networked—ecological heterarchy.

Returning, now, to the uncanny configurations of contemporary authorial phenomena, one should immediately stress the importance of historical variation, institutions, and contexts. “The ascension of authorship” is particularly interested in how authorship looks like, through the lens of cognitive ecologies, (a) in our neo-liberal economy, (b) in the social and cultural circumstances of digital globalization and, finally, (c) under the framework of international literary institutions.²⁵ The human element in World Literature today, for instance, and the ways in which real writers travel across the international landscape have both recently come to the fore in the context of literary studies, especially with the rise of new research collectives, like the “Authors and the World” hub in Lancaster, UK.²⁶ Moreover, the weakening of postmodern, postcolonial, and poststructuralist paradigms,²⁷ the expansion of planetary studies and relational aesthetics,²⁸ and the birth of post-internet communication technologies in our late global society all seem to coincide with the establishment of a new regime of authoriality. Finally, various other cultural and material phenomena, such as quantitative and statistical analysis²⁹ also participate in building this 21st-century authorial symptomatology typical of our networked society. However, the question of how exactly authorship itself should be redefined in the age of digital globalization has been a deeply contested one of late.

For instance, German and other literary theorists have argued that authorship is primarily a performative cultural concept.³⁰ Yet, French scholars have noted that authoriality should be understood as the totality of social conditions surrounding the process of creative singularity.³¹ Furthermore, media experts have contended that authorship is a construct of some sorts,³² while cross-cultural philosophers, discourse analysts, and others have depicted it as a set of textual images.³³ These contributions, including those discussing the mechanisms of world authorship, appear to be unable to connect the vari-

ous planes of authorial co-existence.³⁴ Despite much excellent work having, thus, been done, we might still seem to be inhabiting—or so would some recent researchers want us to believe—the same old realm of authorial absence and presence.³⁵

Even though ecology and literature have been associated in many ways in the past couple of decades,³⁶ no work has yet tackled the issue of authorship in these precise terms. Addressing these gaps and exploring the rich diversity of today's authorial theories and practices will help in expanding Michel Foucault's notion of authorial function. The need to implement a fresh investigation of authorship—particularly in a postcritical and/or post-theoretical age—is a crucially important point to make given that French Theory itself was coeval with the birth of a similar regime—that which we now call “the death of the author.”

Therefore, when considering the morphology of contemporary authorship theories, researchers should be reflecting on the synecdochal relationships that occur between (A) the two types of temporality—the eventual and II—the methodological. In other words, we must pay close attention to when a particular auctorial event took place and, by contrast, when the method that facilitated its discovery was imposed or first used. Next, one obviously needs to account for (B) the use of certain epistemological tools: whether biographical criticism, sociology, statistics, poststructuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalytic criticism, digital tools, cognitive ecologies, etc. Finally, scholars must clarify (C) the nature, status, features, and definitions of auctorial practices and theories themselves, while also pinpointing (D) the historical, social, institutional, material, economic, ideological, philosophical, and ethical contexts of the matter.

While points (A), (B), and (D) can easily be reconstructed, let us focus on what seems to be the heart of the matter: (C). Seán Burke has convincingly argued that each and every auctorial theory—from Plato to postmodernism—is based on the three following elements: 1) the concept of imitation, 2) the idea of subjectivity, and 3) the notion of otherness.³⁷ His model interrogates both the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of biography as a correspondence theory where one must distinguish or even choose between the historical writer (the empirical author) and the authorial ethos (the essential author). Here is Burke in his own words: “literary theory elected, in the twentieth century, to replicate the Kantian gesture whereby the subject is reduced to a purely formal function.”³⁸ The human subject, then, is typically translated as or into an abstract being, a process by which an objective understanding of the author is somehow amalgamated within a concrete authorial practice.

Mimetic representation, Burke continues, defines the author as a point of passage between nature (or objective truth) and communal representation. Didactic representation (or imitation), on the other hand, represents the author as a politically engaged writer who does realistically account for his or her social conditions but does so according to a higher collective truth. The representation of tradition, however, is based either on technical imitation, where the author is defined as a craftsperson, or on the notion of interpersonal originality, thus eschewing the very idea of technical tradition. Otherness, then, is divided into inspiration which comes, he suggests, in two forms: sacred or idealist, which circumscribe the author as a vehicle of divine truth (the absence of intention is important here, as well as the fact that the writer is not understood as the origin of

the text but as a mere recipient), and secular or psychic, where the author loses control in favor of alterity, thus becoming some sort of a platform for various political, cultural, and linguistic discourses. Finally, then, the concept of abstract subjectivity could define the author either in transcendental and omniscient terms or in impersonal parameters whence the author is absent from the world of the autonomous text. On the flip side, though, situated subjectivity defines the author as a historical and political human agent with a bodily being.

While acknowledging the sacrifice of nuances, deviations and the like, Burke nonetheless concludes by reassuring us that imitation, otherness, and subjectivity yet remain the three most important categories having determined authorship theories for as long as intellectuals and thinkers had been speculating about the origins of cultural production. What is, however, even more important is to acknowledge that, as he puts it, “even the most sophisticated literary theories or eras seem incapable of synthesizing, or giving adequate account of all three models of textual production.”³⁹ I would like to use his diagram, then, as a starting point towards the articulation of a more complex reflection.

It seems, therefore, that Burke’s model fails to account for the relations that might be articulated between (A) and (D): the two types of temporality and the importance of various contexts. What Burke’s conceptualization seems to ignore is the material nature of authorship. His taxonomy should, thus, be complemented. The concept of “otherness” and its subcomponents (idealist and differential) cannot begin to explain, for instance, the function of collaborative authorship to the same extent it fails in unraveling the role of cultural mediators in the dynamics of international literary forms. Finally, then, my argument is that, to be truly effective, this model should be ecologically supplemented with the help of new categories: contexts, technologies, and images. Contexts ought to relate to both said temporalities. Technologies should, then, be subdivided into materials, on the one hand, and instruments of *auctorialité*, on the other, to the same extent that authorial images might be said to belong inside the text (interior) or outside it (exterior).

“The ascension of the author” is, then, part methodology, a conjunction of Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory⁴⁰ with Atsushi Akera’s ecology of knowledge,⁴¹ and part conceptual yearning to metaphorically advance towards a new regime of authoriality. Materialistic and post-anthropocentric, collective and relational, this regimen recognizes that, in the age of digital globalization, writing practices are, first and foremost, institutionally and materially distributive or networked. It also concedes that authorship is—and has, in fact, always been—a collective, collaborative, interactive, or even anonymous process at times. Lastly, it acknowledges that authorship is a planetary phenomenon.

IT WOULD serve us well, then, to register the fact that all ecosystems can be articulated, as Douglas Eyman rightly suggested a couple of years ago,⁴² in terms of scale. Thus, by adapting the scholar’s terminological proposal, I would first argue that auctorial ecologies—and their circulation—might also come in various shapes and sizes: 1) micro-ecologies: the work of a single author, for instance, 2) mezzo-ecologies or mid-level ecologies (collaborative authorship), and 3) macro-ecologies: institutions, domains, disciplines, nations, literary history, canons, and so on.

Secondly, it could also be claimed, following Alexandre Gefen's suggestions, that auctorial ecologies may be divided in at least three different subcategories: 1) the real: the actual biographical person writing a text, cultural mediators, etc., 2) the textual: the implied author, for instance, or the discursive ethos, and 3) the imaginary: the author-function, iconography, literary postures, to name just a few examples.⁴³ Reproducing a taxonomy previously proposed by Dominique Maingueneau,⁴⁴ these categories prove themselves useful not only when trying to form a clearer view of the disciplines involved in authorship studies,⁴⁵ but also when trying to outline particular case studies.

Like a palm-leaf fan, authorship is an open-ended, deeply contested, complex notion that remains contingent on the countless environments in which it operates. If 'the death of the author' has meant the imposition of structuralist and poststructuralist reading tactics on the map of modern literary studies, and if "the author's resurrection" has largely presupposed the reoccurrence of biographical readings, one could conclude by articulating that "the ascension of author" could urge into being a new critical methodology. □

Notes

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 37. Seán Burke, *The Web of Circumstance: Challenges Posed by the Biographical Question to Contemporary Theory* (n.p.: Institut for Litteratur, Kultur & Medier Syddansk Universitet, 2001), 25–31.
 38. Burke, *The Web of Circumstance*, 17.
 39. Burke, *The Web of Circumstance*, 30.
 40. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
 41. Atsushi Akera, "Constructing a Representation for an Ecology of Knowledge: Methodological Advances in the Integration of Knowledge and its Various Contexts," *Social Studies of Science* 37, 3 (2007): 413–441.
 42. Douglas Eyman, *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).
 43. Alexandre Gefen, "L'auteur, une bibliographie," *Fabula*, http://www.fabula.org/atelier.php?L%27auteur%2C_une_bibliographie.
 44. Maingueneau distinguishes between three instances of authorship: a) the person (the historical citizen) b) the scrivener (the voice in the text), c) the writer (a principle of classification of works and public figure). One has been obsessively dealt with by narratology (Wayne C. Booth's *implied author*). The other, of course, refers to the famous function of the author, whereas the third has been the main object of study of biographi-

cal criticism, but also of traditional literary historiography or psychoanalytic criticism: Dominique Maingueneau, "Le recours à l'ethos dans l'analyse du discours littéraire," *Fabula/Les colloques, Posture d'auteurs: du Moyen Âge à la modernité*, <http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document2424.php>; id., "L'ethos: un articulateur," *CONTEXTES* 13 (2013), <http://journals.openedition.org/contextes/5772>.

45. Andrew Bennett's taxonomy is also quite interesting: Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London–New York: Routledge, 2005), 128–130. The same could be said about Paisley Livingston's intervention: Paisley Livingston, "Authorship," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, edited by Noël Carroll and John Gibson (New York–Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 173–183.

Abstract

The Ascension of the Author and Ecologies of Knowledge: A New Theoretical Framework

In the last couple of decades of the 20th century, "the death and return of the author" routine tirelessly haunted the field of literary studies. More often than not, however, these two narratives seem to have been structured around metaphors and lines of reasoning already firmly established in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s by seminal thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Consequently, this paper will analyze the relations between contemporary authorship theories and practices, on the one hand, and globalization and digitization, on the other, trying to show how a new authorial regime could be studied through the lens of informational ecologies.

Keywords

the death and return of the author, the ascension of authorship, globalization, digitization, the ecology of knowledge