

DE AUCTORE (1)

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Abstract. Informed by Michel Foucault’s genealogical approach (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, 1984), this paper is primarily concerned with how history inscribes the idea of the author. Suspicious of absolute truths, we have engaged ourselves in critically reading a number of theoretical formulations of the idea from antiquity to the dawn of Romanticism (Plato, Bonaventure, Ronsard, Montaigne, La Motte, Sydney, Pope, or Young, etc.) in order to appropriate its system of rules, identify the hard core of elements that define the author, reveal how certain meanings force their way and impose a certain direction to subsequent evolution, and put present assumptions about the author into their true perspective. We discriminate between the different historical roles the author played as a hermeneutical category, a reference for the interpretation, or a norm in the literary sense.

“Authorship does not exist to innocent eyes; they see only writing and texts”
(Peter Iaszi and Martha Wodmansee. *The Construction of Authorship*)

The very existence of texts ostensibly testifies for the existence of the author. As soon as an individual’s name appears on the cover of a book, his traditional and institutional identity seems ascertained, through a sort of implicit “contract” or “pact” (Wayne C. Booth 1961; Philippe Lejeune 1975) with the reader.

Attached to a text, the name of the author designates, first of all, a particular and discrete historical individual, in other words, a biography. However, the author’s figure somehow transcends history, as it performs more than a simple indicative function. The author also identifies a body of works, which it marks as distinct from others, in terms of authenticity, genre, hermeneutics, style, cultural value, literary merit, and suggests that they should be approached in a certain manner. Whenever the proper name comes into question (as in the case of Shakespeare/Bacon controversy, for example), the possibility of such a change inevitably alters the mode in which the text operates.

Authorship also has a legal dimension that seems to have arisen from the need to punish those responsible for transgressive statements. By designating the place from which the illicit gesture originated, claiming authorship was, from the beginning, as Foucault cogently notices, a “gesture fraught with risks” (1988: 179).

From this idea of locating authorship in someone held accountable for writing or speech came the idea of ownership of works, and the idea of copyright rules.

The author's name does not always play itself out as a simple reference point for intertextual signs that refer to the outside of the text. The author function contains in it a more disseminated and dispersed concept of subject as a mediation between text and authorial name by levels of narration, grammatical changes and shifters, perspective changes, and interpolated or implied readers. The construction of the author relies on signs of presence in the text, i.e., pronouns, verbal forms, etc., which actually indicate multiplicity.

In addition, the author function operates in ways specific to historically situated disciplinary practices, it is neither universal, nor uniform. It does not affect all texts in the same way, and it performs differently in different places and at different times.

The notion of the author was influenced, for a long time, by the Christian tradition critical exegesis, of attribution and authentication of texts in the biblical canon. All amount to the idea that the author is the place where the contradictions of the work resolve, it is a principle of unity common to all his productions; the author is a particular source of expression manifested equally well in texts. However, the author is not the producer or the guarantor of meaning as traditionally assumed, but a hermeneutical category since it limits the appropriation of the text by the reader. As Foucault states,

the author allows the limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferations of significations within a world where one is thrifty not only with one's resources and riches, but also with one's discourses and significations. The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.[...]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 fashion. (1998: 186)

Nor is it formed spontaneously. Rather, it is the result of complex cultural operations which construct a figure, a certain *raison d'être* of a text, identified, through various operations, to some creative power, to a project, as the original place of writing.

Although not fashioned in the same way, the names of authors reveal certain transhistorical invariants. The idea of the author, with its implications of creativity, originality, freedom, intentionality, appropriation or responsibility, is inseparable

from the concept of the individual: “The coming into being of the notion of 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences” (Foucault 1998: 174). It emerged slowly, before being fixed, as we know it today, between the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

The Author as Inspired.

In *The Artist as Creator* (1956), Milton Nahm makes the astute remark that the classical philosophical and aesthetic understanding of human creativity in art and literature bore the mark of a primarily theological and cosmological conception, what he calls the “great analogy” between artist and God, which generated two lines of thought (63).

First was the inspired genius, the analogue to God the Creator, capable of producing works of art that could not be vindicated solely in terms of artifacts. The prototype is Homeric *aiodos*, who in act of poetic creation appears as possessed by a sort of sacred frenzy or *furor poeticus*: inspired by Muses, his voice is prophetic and he is often seen as their messenger. Yet, the classical bard is never seen of as the author of his own song, for he does not speak in his own voice. In *Ion*, Plato calls attention to the incapacity of the author as producer of the text to rationally account for his production, or to locate its exact origin in himself. The platonic theory reveals the fundamental alterity of literary creation: the work is beyond the initial design and the intentions of the author as a historical subject, and in a certain way escapes him:

So is it also with the good lyric poets; as the worshiping Corybantes are not in their senses when they dance, so the lyric poets are not in their senses when they make these lovely lyric poems. No, when once they launch into harmony and rhythm, they are seized with the Bacchic transport, and are possessed as the bacchantes, when possessed, draw milk and honey from the rivers; but not when in their senses. So the spirit of the lyric poet works, according to their own report. For the poets tell us, don't they, that the melodies they bring us are gathered from rills that run with honey, out of glens and gardens of the Muses, and they bring them as the bees do honey, flying like the bees? And what they say is true, for a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him. So long as he has this in his possession, no man is able to make poetry or to chant in prophecy. Therefore, since their making is not by art, when they utter many things and fine about the deeds of men, just as you do about Homer, but is by lot divine therefore each is able to do

well only that to which the Muse has impelled him--one to make dithyrambs, another panegyric odes, another choral songs, another epic poems, another iambs. (*The Collected Dialogues*, 220)

Then, there was the artist as artisan, the *poietes*, the analogue to God the Maker, one who proceeds by “right reason,” the ground for *technē* (τεχνη), which Greek philosophers (Aristotle in his *Poetics*, for instance) usually examine in terms of mimesis or imitation. He can only discover what is already there, select and construct. These contrasting views informed all subsequent speculation on the author.

The Author as Efficient Cause.

The medieval text is often the product of anonymous work, rather collective than individual, and frequently consists in continuously glossing on the same excerpts from the same, though not always, sacred texts. The medieval notion of ‘author’ is often confuse, as the name, when attached to a text, does not clearly distinguish between the creator, the minstrel, or the scribe. Following the doctrine of the inerrancy of the *Holy Scripture*, whose orthodox formulation was given by Saint Augustine in the *On the Christian Teaching* (Preface, par. 6-7), medieval approaches to the sacred texts usually deny any contribution of the human writer to meaning, the texts permitting only an allegorical interpretation. Human *auctores*, the ‘Doctor of Grace’ comments, use words that signify; the Divine Author uses things that signify allegorically (Book I, ch. 2). The literal meaning, linked to the signification of the words, is identified with the expression of the intention of the human author. On account of evidence provided by the texts themselves, Augustine reluctantly admits that some figurative language belongs not only to the allegorical sense but also to the literal sense of the sacred texts; human authors can also speak figuratively, in a sort of duplex *sensus literalis*, although not all the figures in the texts are mystical (*idem*).

In the medieval conception, the *auctor*, from *augere* (bring forth what is not in existence, originate), designates the one who has the power to create, an attribute granted to God only. The term also indicated authority, imposed respect, and invited belief. By an extension of meaning, *auctoritas*, which derives from it, came to name someone who was respected and trusted. The writings of an *auctor* had *auctoritas* in the abstract sense of the term, with its strong connotations of veracity and sagacity

and, in the specific sense, an *auctoritas* was a quotation, or an extract from the work of an *auctor* worth imitating. Conformity with the Christian truth, by opposition to the fables of the poets, and authenticity, the fact that the texts were not apocryphal, were the main guarantees of authority.

The Augustinian idea, so long ignored, resurfaced in the twelfth century, when medieval commentators began to seek for the veiled (spiritual) meaning under the *integumentum*, and this allowed for the notion of the author to slowly emerge. Hugh of Saint-Victor (1096-1141) in *Didascalicon* (Liber sextus, caput iv) notices that the Holy Bible is not entirely allegorical, and claims that sometimes only the literal signification of the words exists. Patristic exegetes should therefore refrain from entertaining their own ideas about such texts. To avoid this, they should choose those meanings that best correspond to the intention of the divine author, or *sensus auctoris*. Examining a number of 158 differences and contradictions between the writings of the Holy Fathers, in his *Sic et non* (1140?), Abelard concedes that the prophets and the apostles may have been mistaken occasionally and unintentionally: "... it is established that the prophets themselves at one time or another have lacked the gift of prophecy and offered from their habit of prophecy some false statements, derived from their own spirit,...: (195-208), that the things they say are based on their own opinion rather than truth. Yet, he adds that they certainly did not lie like poets: "...poetic and philosophic writings also say many things based on opinion, as if they were steadfast in truth, things which however, are clearly quite inconsistent with the truth" (Prologue 149-175). To offer a satisfactory explanation, Abelard is constrained to explore the circumstances and the historical context of each author. In his opinion, not all texts share the same degree of authority: the authority of the Fathers is less than the Bible's.

The full-scale recovery and revaluation of Aristotle's *Physics*, in the thirteenth century, was crucial for the emergence of the notion of author. The Aristotelian theory of causality led to a new type of commentary on the author, divided into four sections, corresponding to the four principal causes of any activity identified by the Greek philosopher, which considers the text under the headings of efficient cause (author), material cause (subject matter), formal cause (literary form, *forma tractandi*), and final cause (intention, purpose, or utility). For the scholastics, the meaning is no longer hidden by God in the depths of the biblical text, but expressed in the literal sense by the human authors, each in his own way. The

obsession of allegorists with *auctoritas*, gradually made room to human, inspired authors, each with his own purposes and styles.

Bonaventure's *proemium* (prologue) to his *Commentary to Pierre Lombard's Libri sententiarum* (1155-58), one of the great *auctoritates* of the early Middle Ages, is typical: "Which is the efficient cause or the author of this book?", he asks. Pierre Lombard cannot not be called *auctor*, because he is not the originator (the *auctor*) of the doctrine that the book contains. Only Christ, as Saint Augustine says, is the author of this book of *Sententia*. In addition, Aristotle says in the *Ethics*: 'Not everyone who makes grammaticals or musicals, ought to be called a grammarian and/or musician, as (is the case) if it happens on occasion, by fortune, and/or by another substituting or speaking'. However, "Master (Peter) composed this work from another's doctrine, as he himself says in (his) text, that 'in this work you will find the examples and doctrine of (our) elders', and therefore "he ought not to be called (its) author." For all this, "this is not only the doctrine of the Saints, but also his own, by which reckoning he ought to be called the author", for although "his own voice sounded out a little while", he "did not depart from the limits of (our) fathers". However, Bonaventure continues, "[i]t is established that God did not write this book with His finger, therefore it had another, created author; but no other is given except Master (Peter). Likewise, if the authority of Master (Peter) is received in this case, he himself says in (his) text . . . therefore it seems, that he himself was the author of the present book" (Forward to the First Book, Question IV).

In order to illustrate this reasoning, Bonaventure distinguishes the fourfold manner to make a book. The *scriptor*, writes the words of others without adding or changing anything. The compiler writes the words of others "by adding, but not from his own". The commentator writes the words of others and also his, but the former make up the main part, while his words are "added for evidence". Finally, the *auctor* writes the words of others and also his, but his words make the principal part of the work, and those of others are simply added to serve as confirmation. Such is Pierre Lombard, because he put forth his own opinions (*sententiae*) to confirm the opinions of the Holy Fathers: "Whence he truly ought to be called the author of this book" (*idem*).

The most significant result of this approach was a stronger emphasis on the literal meaning of the text, which set limits to the allegorical interpretation. For Thomas Aquinas (*Super epistolam ad Romanos lectura*), an obscure passage of the

Bible must be interpreted with reference to other passages where the meaning of the things is explained clearly, rather than appeal to allegory. Meanings are no longer hidden by God in the depths of the biblical text, but expressed in the literal sense by inspired human authors of the Bible, each in his own manner and style. The literal meaning, related to the significance of words, began to be identified with the expression of the *intentio auctoris*, of the human author. The exegete could thus concentrate on the individual behind the text and on the material forms of textuality--rhetoric, affect, form, structure--that are the products of human agency.

The new interpretive system (the Aristotelian prologue) opened a door to appreciation of human authorship on its own terms, and thus to more flexible critical reception of secular and pagan authors. It did not take long until this notion of the author was applied to profane texts, notably to a modern allegorical poem like Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Boccaccio, in his *Trattatello in laude di Dante* (1362), makes a clear distinction between the man, with his defects, and the writer, with his literary qualities. His genius as a writer is praised, while his faults as a man are blamed, especially his lust for power and his "loving licences". Because of these changes, the medieval auctores become human, and the barrier between sacred and profane authors, between the ancients and the moderns was eventually removed.

The Author as Divine.

The recovery of the Greco-Roman traditions by the fifteenth century Italian Humanists heightened a sense of the greatness of man and of the power of human reason. In the eloquent testimony of Pico della Mirandola, man is described as the "great miracle" of Creation, "an interpreter of nature", and a free agent endowed also with the power of growth and development (*On the Dignity of Man*, [1486] 1948: 223 ff; 1-7).

Stimulated by the host of classical texts now available, by the invention of printing, or again, by such an event as the discovery of America, a new critical instrument is seen emerging, which submitted to the test of Reason or Nature various problems of literature, and produced a break, although not complete, with the medieval dogma. With the epoch-making re-discovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* came a series of illuminating commentaries and discussions on poetry in general.

With increasing self-confidence, humanists declare that poetry is no idle, but deep truth, hidden under the veil of fables. The direct contact with Plato makes the

furor poeticus a popular idea again, first developed by Marcilio Ficino in *Theologia platonica* (Caput 2 'De poetis'), and later accepted by many poets and critics. To Juan Luis Vives (*De disciplinis*, 1531), the poet is like a prophet, because the source of poetry is divine, and resides in poetical frenzy: "The poet is a man who possesses great passion, . . . which raises him above the usual and ordinary state of his nature, and who in this elation conceives lofty, almost heavenly, inspirations. Then the sharpness of his mind contemplates and concentrates itself on great ideas; it also arranges them and thus causes within his body a harmony derived from the exaltation of his mind." (qtd. in Atkins 1951: 49).

The Renaissance consecrated the concept of *divino artista*, "the divine artist", suggesting that the artist was divorced from the rank and file people. The poet is regarded as a second Creator, inferior to God, but akin to him. The supreme example remains Michelangelo, to whose name Ariosto gave a fashionable meaning in the punning verse: "Michael più che mortal / Angel divino" (qtd. in Wittckower 2: 310). Divinely inspired, ". . . les vers viennent de Dieu, / Non de l'humaine puissance", poets are granted a spiritual authority similar to priests or prophets only: "Ceulx là que je feindray Poëtes / Par la grace de ma bonté, / Seront nommez les Interpretes /Des Dieux, & de leur volonté" (Pierre de Ronsard, "Ode à Michel de l'Hospital", 188). Through his gift, the poet is able to transcend Nature. 'Lifted up', Philip Sidney states in his *Apology for Poetry* (1595), "by the vigour of his own invention, he doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as were never in Nature" (1890: 143).

The literary criticism of the sixteenth century knew of no breach between originality and imitation. On the contrary, Marco Girolamo Vida's dictum that the highest originality was the most ingenious imitation of the ancients (*De arte poetica* 1534), reverberated for a long time in literary theory: "Je suis de cette opinion que nulle poësie se doit louer pour accomplie si elle ne ressemble la nature, laquelle ne fut estimée belle des anciens que pour estre inconstante et variable en ses perfections" (Ronsard, Preface to his Odes [1550] 1970: 147). The Renaissance however changed the medieval *auctores*, and the role, which the "imitation" of their works played. It was in relation to a principle relating to literary standards laid down by Laurentius Valla, *De Elegantiiis Latinae Linguae*, i.e., *Ego pro lege accipio quidquid magnis auctoribus placuit*, which made the actual practice of the great classics the only

infallible authority (soon turned into a pedantic cult), that the notion of an individual style gradually emerged (qtd. in Atkins 1951: 20).

Michel de Montaigne forcibly presents this idea in his illuminating essay “On Education”. There, he acknowledges the debt due to the ancients, and states that he respects certain authors such as Plato or Socrates, who is his model, but that finds mistakes even with them, and does not hesitate to criticize them (see the chapter ‘Of Experience’). The essayist contests the tradition of writing that is a continuous and infinite commentary on ‘authorities’ and, in the chapter called “Books”, he extends the body of his readings beyond the ‘canonical texts’: “Amongst moderne bookes merely pleasant, I esteeme Bocace his Decameron, Rabelais, and the kisses of John the second (if they may be placed under this title), worth the paines-taking to reade them. As for Amadis and such like trash of writings, they had never the credit so much as to allure my youth to delight in them.”(II, 10)

For the French writer, an author is a unique individual, whom he tries to discover through the work: “For (as I have said elsewhere) I am wonderfull curious to discover and know the minde, the soul the genuine disposition and naturall judgement of my authors. A man ought to judge their sufficiencie and not their customes, nor them by the show of their writings, which they set forth on this world's theatre” (II, 10). Thus, the *Essays* substitute of the alterity and the authority of auctores for the existential plenitude of the self in the text. The ancient idea, originating in Plato’s *Gorgias*, of the ethical union of the poet and of his work, which the Renaissance assimilated through Marcilio Ficino, is further elaborated by Montaigne in his famous declaration in the chapter “Of Giving the Lie”: “I have no more made my booke then my booke hath made me. A booke consubstantiall to his author: a peculiar and fit occupation. A member of my life. Not of an occupation and end strange and forraine, as all other bookes.” (II, 18). By means of a radical innovation, Montaigne establishes a strict equation between the book and the author and asserts their identity and their consubstantiality. Montaigne uses words such as truthful, sincerity, to underline the singularity of his design, as well as the fidelity of his representation.

Having denied the supremacy of *auctores* and asserted his own identity, Montaigne is however faced with a paradox: be leaving the universe of allegory and authority, of commentary and gloss, in order to represent more vividly the author

with whom the book makes one body, i.e., himself, he falls immediately into the world of books, and intertextuality:

And then undertaking to speake indifferently of all that presents it selfe unto my fantasie, and having nothing put mine owne naturall meanes to imploy therein, if it be my hap (as commonly it is) among good Authors, to light upon those verie places which I have undertaken to treat off, as even now I did in Plutarke, reading his discourse of the power of imagination, wherein in regard of those wise men, I acknowledge my selfe so weake and so poore, so dull and grose-headed, as I am forced both to pittie and disdaine my selfe, yet am I pleased with this; that my opinions have often the grace to jump with theirs, and that I follow them a loofe-off, and thereby possesse at least, that which all other men have not; which is, that I know the utmost difference between them and my selfe: all which notwithstanding, I suffer my inventions to run abroad, as weake and faint as I have produced them, without bungling and botching the faults which this comparison hath discovered to me in them.(I, 25)

Montaigne finds it impossible to talk of himself without referring the others: “That sufficeth: I have my will: All the world may know me by my booke, and my booke by me: but I am of an Apish and imitating condition. (III, 5) His relations to authors are ambivalent: on the one hand he loves them, but they frighten him: “When I write I can well omit the company, and spare the remembrance of books; for feare they interrupt my forme. And in truth good Authors deject me too-too much, and quaille my courage.” (III, 5) He goes as far to admit in the essay called “Of Institution and Education of Children” that “I never speake of others, but that I may the more speake of my selfe” (I, 25). He discovers the others, after distancing from himself; yhen, he returns to them in order to know himself better.

Montaigne advances an equally original and radical theory of reading, when he says: “I have read in Titus Livius a number of things, which peradventure others never read, in whom Plutarke haply read a hundred more than ever I could read, which perhaps the author himselfe did never intend to set downe” (I, 25). The *altior sensus*, which allegorical interpretation disregarded as an accidental component of creation, is thus re-valued in the image of ‘heedy reader’. These meanings not intended by the author however belong to the work and enrich it:

Poeticall furies, which ravish and transport their Author beyond himselfe, why shall we not ascribe them to his good fortune, since himselfe confesseth that they exceed his strength and sufficiencie, and acknowledgeth to proceed from elsewhere than

from himselfe, and that they are not in his power, no more than Orators say to have those strange motions and extraordinary agitations, that in their art transport them beyond their purpose? The like wee see to bee in painting, for sometimes the Painters hand shall draw certaine lines or draughts, so farre exceeding his conception or skill, that himselfe is forced to enter into admiration and amazement. But fortune yet doth much more evidently shew the share shee hath in all their workes, by the graces and beauties that often are found in them, not onely beyond the intent, but besides the very knowledge of the workman. A heedy Reader shall often discover in other mens compositions, perfections farre differing from the Authors meaning, and such as haply he never dreamed of, and illustrateth them with richer senses and more excellent constructions. (Chapter xxiii: "Divers Events from One Selfsame Counsell. (I: 23)

In spite of the significant theoretical breakthroughs and the central and privileged position that some authors, playwrights in particular (Shakespeare is the best illustration), seem to have enjoyed in the latter half of the sixteenth, the identity of the author was generally unknown to their audience and often to his readership, and they had little or no control over, and only a limited reward from, the performance or publication of their works. The notion of an "individual" author is significantly absent from the early quartos.

The Classical Author.

In the eighteenth century, a break happened in the way literature and works of art in general came to be valued, whom most saw as victory of the Moderns over the Ancients. Paralleled by a similar challenge of authority in religion and politics, the famous *Querelle des Anciens et des Moderns* in France, or "The Battle of the Books" as it is known in England (for details see Joseph M. Levine 1991) had been preceded by the attack on authority in science, growing out of the efforts of Descartes and Bacon to promote new methods of judging truth. Both rejected the authority of the ancients in scientific questions—Bacon as part of his inductive method and Descartes as part of his system of "methodical doubt". Descartes asserted in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649): "what the ancients have taught regarding them is so slight and for the most part so far from credible, that I cannot hope to get within sight of the truth save by departing from the paths they have followed. In other words, I feel myself obliged to write as if I were treating of a matter to which no one before me had ever paid due attention." (Part 1, article 1)

In the quarrel, traditionalists (Boileau, Racine, La Fontaine, Bossuet, La Bruyère, in France, William Temple, Jonathan Swift, in England), defended the Ancients; they identify value in the permanence of models. A work is recognized as literary and has an aesthetic value from the moment it mobilizes the models inherited of a tradition or of the poetical genres authorized by the Ancients; the only authority an author may claim derives from tradition. His task is to renew the traditional repertory of subjects and polish it. The author is not an absolute, creative, and original instance; instead, he is characterized by the singularity of his expression (style). In this dialectic of tradition and innovation, the genius of a writer consists in discovering and promoting an alternative, still unheard of a subject otherwise known. For the traditionalists, literature remained polite *paideia*; it was a name given to all reading that could be of value or seemed as essential for an individual's cultural literacy. Bacon had this sense in mind when, in his dedication before *The Proficiency and Advancement of Learning* (1605), praised his king for being "so learned in all literature and erudition, divine and humane". (Book 1, par. 2). *The Dictionary of the French Academy (Dictionnaire de L'Académie française)*, 1st Edition (1694) confirms the usage, and equates *litterature* and (*belles*) *lettres* with science, erudition, or doctrine (640). The association of literature with theology, science, or philosophy may have been deliberate and intended, to a certain extent, to enhance the intellectual status of an activity, occasionally reduced to mere entertainment.

The modernists (Charles Perrault, Fontenelle, the abbé Terrasson, La Motte, William Wotton, Richard Blackmore) pleaded in favor of the superiority of their contemporaries, in the name of the progress of knowledge in the arts and science. In *Digression sur les anciens et les modernes* of 1688, Fontenelle asserts for his contemporaries a further claim to superiority—that they had developed new literary forms like the novel, and the *lettres galantes*, which had not existed in antiquity. Rejecting the voice of authority and prejudice, La Motte demands subjection of the ancients to the judgment of reason, based on criteria of novelty and originality (*Discours sur Homère*, (1714):

En quoi consiste la perfection d' un esprit poétique ? C' est dans une imagination sublime et féconde, propre à inventer de grandes choses différentes entr' elles ; c' est dans un jugement solide, propre à les arranger dans le meilleur ordre ; et enfin, dans une sensibilité, et une délicatesse de goût, propre à entrer avec choix dans les

passions et dans les divers sentimens que le sujet présente. Or le degré de disposition dans l' esprit du poëte, n' emporte pas toujours le même degré d' execution.

La disposition la plus grande ne peut parvenir qu' à une execution médiocre, si l' ignorance et la grossiereté des tems y met de trop grands obstacles ; au lieu qu' une disposition médiocre parviendra à une execution plus heureuse, dans des tems plus éclairés et plus polis. Il faut donc juger d' Homere, par les progress qu' il a faits, eu égard à la grossiereté de son siècle ; et il faut juger de son ouvrage, par les beautés et les défauts qui s' y trouvent, eu égard aux lumieres du nôtre. ([1714] 1997: 96-97)

Abbé Jean Terrasson (*Dissertation critique sur "l'Iliade"*, two volumes (1715) not only supported la Motte's views, but also insisted on the adoption of the same philosophical spirit, i.e., René Descartes', that was responsible for progress in science, in dealing with ancient texts. When measured against the exigencies of Reason and the rules of eloquence, he found Homer inconsistent, his morality fallible, while admitting that "the Ignorance of the Age in which *Homer* liv'd, and the Darkness of Paganism, with which he was surrounded, render him, in some Measure excusable." (qtd. by Foerster 1947: 22-23)

As Hugh Blair puts it in the polemical introduction to his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles lettres* (1783), the *belles lettres*, a transitory term, restrained to the works of poets, orators and historians, designates the order of reception, the science and knowledge of works that could engage the readers' powers of taste and imagination:

Belles Lettres and criticism chiefly consider him [the reader] as a being endowed with those powers of taste and imagination, which were intended to embellish his mind, and to supply him with rational and useful entertainment. They open a field of investigation peculiar to themselves. All that relates to beauty, harmony, grandeur, and elegance; all that can sooth the mind, gratify the fancy, or move the affections, belongs to their province. They present human nature under a different aspect from that which it assumes when viewed by other sciences. They bring to light various springs of action, which, without their aid, might have passed unobserved; and which, though of a delicate nature, frequently exert a powerful influence on several departments of human life. (33-34)

The period from mid-sixteenth century through the eighteenth century laid the foundations of the autonomy of literature, in particular by the setting up of institutions such as academies of creation: *Accademia del Disegno*, Florence, (1563),

L'Académie Française (1636), The Royal Society (1662), The Royal Academy of Arts (1768). Artistic and literary life gravitated around them; with the benefit of such professional organizations, a new type of artist emerged--the artist-gentlemen--,"the conforming, well-behaved, rational philosopher-artist, who is richly endowed by nature with all graces and virtues: in other words, "a man of the world" (cf. Wittckower 2: 304).

The process accompanies the gradual emergence of the modern notions of the writer, the author, and literature. In fact, the overt conflicts of the classical age over their meaning and value are the best sign of the autonomization of the literary field. These terms are not yet fixed; they rival with the more traditional designations.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the writer (Fr. *écrivain*) was widely used to designate those who wrote (cf. Nicot, *Trésor de la langue française*, 1606):

ÉCRIVAIN. s.m. Qui montre à écrire. *Maître Écrivain. Écrivain Juré.* Il se dit aussi de ceux qui écrivent bien ou mal. *C'est un bon, un méchant Écrivain.* Il se dit encore d'Un Auteur qui compose quelque Livre. C'est un fameux Écrivain. Tous les Écrivain du dernier siècle. Méchant Écrivain. Sur les Vaisseaux & sur les Galères, il y a un Officier qu'on appelle l'*Écrivain*, qui tient registre de ce qui est dans le Vaisseau, & de tout ce qui s'y consomme, & qui a le titre d'*Écrivain du Roi.* (588)

As for the author (Fr. *Auteur, aucteur, auteur*), the term, in accordance with its etymology, primarily referred to anyone who claimed authority (Nicot, 61) or, as the 16 entries in *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française*, 4th Edition (1762) shows, produces something: a text, or even a criminal offence, the primary cause, and, only secondarily, the writer of books, Fr. *écrivain* (136-137).

This semantic development, which later lexicographic works, such as Jean-François Féraud's *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* (Marseille, Mossy 1787-1788) faithfully records, is however significant: to be an author/writer, one must have his books printed, in prose or verse, one must risk his name on the increasing literary market. The same dictionary makes a subtler and more important distinction:

Écrivain, Auteur (synon.) Le 1er ne se dit que par rapport au style, le 2d a plus de rapport au fond de l'ouvrage qu'à la forme. De plus, il peut se joindre par la particule de, aux noms des ouvrages. "Racine est un Ecrivain pur, élégant, correct. Corneille

est un excellent Auteur. "Descartes et Newton sont deux Auteurs célèbres . . ."
(A227a)

As the lexical entry seems to suggest, the writer enjoys considerably more prestige than the author, as the label applies only to writers who have published works of acknowledged aesthetic value, mainly stylistic. On the other hand, the author's name notably associates with originality, and may be a qualification for the writer. The prominence of the writer over the author in the classical age highlights the hegemonic position literature had gained within the cultural field.

Not only was the concept of "aesthetics" introduced during this period (in 1735) by Alexander Baumgarten in his *Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus / Philosophical meditations on some requirements of the poem* (Hammermeister 2002: 3-13), but the word 'literature', finally surpassed the terms 'poetry' and 'poesy', (whose claim) which had long been used as the prevalent term to designate the category of verbal and fictive art. It grew increasingly specialized in its meaning and became, by the end of the century, the most prevalent term given to imaginative writings. This evolution means that literature gradually separated from erudition; its privileged attributes were increasingly *invention* and *originality*. No longer synonymous with learning, and removed from the values of productivity and instrumentality, literature came to designate a canon of works of manifest "literary merit" that could not be judged according to the terms of religion, politics, or science. It was turned into an object of study, and proclaimed as a path to self-formation and self-sufficiency.

The emergence of these conceptual categories was accompanied by major adjustments in critical practice that led to the development of literary history as a discipline, culminating with the publication of Thomas Warton's monumental *History of English Poetry*, (I-III, 1774-81). Under the circumstances, in order to maintain their social legitimacy, writers appealed for decorum, regularity, uniformity and rules, usually justified on the grounds that they corresponded to the dictates of Nature. Pope's rendition of the argument in the *Essay on Criticism* (1711) remains the most frequently cited:

Those RULES of old discover'd, not devis'd,
Are Nature still, but Nature Methodiz'd;
Nature, like Liberty, is but restrain'd
By the same Laws which first herself ordain'd. (l. 88-91)

To follow nature and to imitate the ancients is the same thing:
Learn for ancient rules a just esteem;
To copy nature is to copy them. (1. 139-140)

The search for evidence, whether in the rules, or in experience, resulted in a heightened impetus among critics to analyze individual works or to provide historical or biographical information that could enable such analysis. Dryden's investigation of *The Silent Woman in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, "you see in it many persons of various characters and humours, and all delightful" (1950: 84), clearly locates literary value in the text. Literature is a repository of fundamental knowledge: the work of art mediates between the intellect, affect and cognition.

The ultimate source of that value, however, remained mysterious. The poet could produce a highly rational work, according to Shaftesbury, (*Soliloquy: or Advice to an Author*), but the cause of its affective power was beyond rational comprehension. That quality in a work of art which defies analysis and can be described only in terms of the effect it produces, Shaftesbury calls the *je ne sais quoi*:

Tho his [the poet's] Intention be to please the World, he must nevertheless be, in a manner, *above it*; and fix his Eye upon that consummate *Grace*, that Beauty of *Nature*, and that *Perfection* of Numbers, which the rest of Mankind, feeling only by the Effect, whilst ignorant of the Cause, term the *Je-ne-sçay-quoy*, the unintelligible, or the I know not what; and suppose to be a kind of *Charm, or Enchantment*, of which the Artist himself can give no account. ([1710] 1999: 171)

The influence of aristocratic patronage was waning toward the end of the seventeenth century, the book trade and readership was growing at a rapid pace, consequently the fickle notion of authorship came to be increasingly defined in popular criticism, as the *Monthly*, founded in 1749, and the *Critical*, founded in 1756, projected themselves as arbiters of literary production. The professionalization of writing, the identification of author and character in life and work, to such an extent that his public figure was virtually indistinguishable from the image of his protagonist in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-67), is convincingly illustrated by the career of Lawrence Sterne (Donoghue 1996: 62-75)

“Invention,” a notion inherited from the classical tradition faded into oblivion in the course of the eighteenth century and was increasingly replaced by “creation” and “imagination”, as the following evaluation of Shakespeare’s *Tempest* in Addison’s *Spectator* No. 279 (January 19, 1711-12) says: “It shews a greater Genius in Shakespear to have drawn his Caliban, than his Hotspur or Julius Caesar: the one was to be supplied out of his own Imagination, whereas the other might have been formed upon Tradition, History, and Observation . . .” (qtd. in Robinson 1932: 32). A new kind of originality, independent of imitation, allied instead with the notion of genius was being envisaged by Edward Young in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759): “An Original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made.” The vital function of spontaneity and inspiration was constantly reiterated. Edward Young (1759) laid down that genius creates “spontaneously from the vital root” of our individual natures (12). Young deliberately used the organic metaphor to distinguish imaginative from merely mechanic operations.

Thereafter, the concept “creative imagination” was assimilated by the *Sturm und Drang* movement in Germany, where Young’s treatise proved very influential, and became a motto during the Romanticism. In *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant propounds authoritatively: “So the mental powers whose combination (in a certain relation) constitutes genius are imagination and understanding” ([1790] 1987: 185). These mutations paved the way for the major developments that the notion of the author would undergo in Romanticism.

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