

The Rebirth of the Author: The Construction and Circulation of Authorship in English Culture

Introduction to a Special Topic Section of *Authorship*

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Ever since the publication of the influential essays “The Death of the Author” (1968) by Roland Barthes and “What is an Author?” (1969) by Michel Foucault, which laid the foundations for the critical and theoretical work on authorship, the topic has been the object of numerous debates. Over the last forty years or so many attempts have been made to respond to Barthes’s theory and answer Foucault’s question, each underlining aspects which would testify to the fact that the idea of authorship, despite the tendency towards impersonality established throughout the twentieth century from modernist poetics to post-structuralism and narratology, has never ceased to be appealing to both critics and readers alike. “Born”, “dead”, “disappeared”, or “returned”, the Author is a particularly crucial presence even *in absentia*. Striving to negate the author’s existence implies the recognition of the idea that authority is still an active concept, sometimes a disturbing blind spot with which critics have to come to terms in order to make sense of the world and its teleological implications. In a way, resistance to the author is the resistance *of* the author.

Conceptions of authorship have originated from different socio-historical and epistemic contexts that in turn have theorized the necessity of reconfiguring our understanding of the literary text and the mechanisms out of which the text itself is generated. If Barthes, as Andrew Bennett sums up, “seeks to move authority away from the author, the author as a source of work, the fount of all knowledge and meaning to the system of language”¹, and Foucault introduces the idea of “the author-function”

¹ Bennett, Andrew. *The Author*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. p. 13.

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concerning the complexities of discursive practices within a society, the bulk of critical response that followed both Barthes' and Foucault's works demonstrates that a theory/ies of authorship is/are necessary to our understanding of the literary text.

This issue of *Authorship* is not intended as a further development of the theory-based discourses on the "death and return" of the author. Instead, it may be viewed as an investigation, conducted with the twenty-first century responsiveness to the many theoretical implications of authorship, of certain literary and non-literary products which flourished around the cult and culture of authors whose work/life axis has become so intrinsically interwoven and mutually dependent that a number of myths, fictions and afterlives are now available. The result is that those "secondary" products always interpret, often modify, sometimes misunderstand, and even radically change the truth belonging to the original author. Also in the case of "fictional" authors, the interest is in the (re)creation of a strong idea of authorship which, in a sense, restores what the postmodern paradigm of the "death of the author" had demolished.

Most of the contributions here collected were presented at the ESSE 10 (the 10th International Conference of the European Society of Studies in English held in Turin, Italy, from 24 to 28 August 2010). The seminar, entitled "The (Re)birth of the Author. The Construction and Circulation of Authorship in English Culture", and convened by Francesca Saggini and myself, was an interesting arena for scholars from different countries to discuss the multiple contemporary declinations of authorship, author, and authority. In particular, the participants dealt with the visual commodification of authorship, the field of fictional biographies, gendered (and posthumous) constructions of the Ideal (Woman) Author, and the contemporary interactive dimension of Authorship created by fan literature and fan websites proliferating on the net. The contributions here presented discuss the life and afterlife of (real or fictional) authors whose "authority" has become so strong that they come to be identified with the historical and epistemic values of their age or nation.

In questioning the reasons why Robert Burns has become the cultural and popular icon for Scotland and Scottishness, Josephine Dougal offers an investigation of the construction of Burns as a "metaphor for cultural memory" (5). In her contribution, Dougal starts by defining memory "as a dynamic cultural process in which the past is re-presented" (2), and proceeds with exploring the cultural shift from "Burns as literary figure" to "Burns as site of memory" as is possible to find in the memorabilia market including traditional merchandise and trendy gizmos, from T-shirts to mobile phone apps. The twenty-first-century reception of the Burns-Scotland association has promoted a wide range of cultural activities that not only confirm that connection as intrinsic to an established cultural icon, but also testify to the importance of Burns for the Scottish economy. Such a commodification of the poet can be envisaged within a frame of a cultural "malleability", to use Dougal's words, that always re-uses, re-

interprets and re-contextualises positive images from the past to convey positive images of the present.

Janet Larson faces the problem of “author-ity” concerning Florence Nightingale’s writings. Despite the fact that the most popular and persisting image of Nightingale is that of the nurse *par excellence*, the “Heroine of the Crimea”, she is the author of an enormous quantity of private writings (“includes journals; lengthy private notes; letters to God on pale blue paper; spiritual fantasies; imaginary dialogues; travel diaries; copious annotations in her Bible and other religious books; abandoned writing on “devotional authors”; and “memoranda” on every birthday, New Year’s Day, and the anniversaries of her four divine “calls” assessing her spiritual progress or lack of it”, as Larson accurately reminds us, 2) and the three-volume opus *Suggestions for Thoughts for Searches After Religious Truth* (1860). After recalling the initiatives by some associations (the Nightingale Initiative for Global Health, the Spiritual School, for example) and publishing houses in honour of Nightingale and her legacy (the year 2010, the centenary of Nightingale’s death, was declared the International Year of the Nurse), Larson accounts for the “mystic experience” that emerges from her work. Larson’s point is that the many editions of Nightingale’s work – sometimes the later ones pretending the previous ones did not exist – have betrayed the real spirit of Nightingale’s writing, because they are not interested in restoring this remarkable Victorian to her full stature; instead, they promote an interpretation of Nightingale that reflects the agenda of the editor.

More than on the “death” of the author, Kirby Joris’s contribution is focussed on the “rebirth” of Oscar Wilde, who is the protagonist of an epistolary novel, *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde* by C. Robert Holloway (1997), an epistolary website, *Dialogus*, and a fictional interview, *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* by Merlin Holland (2007). What is interesting in all the three cultural products is that a fictionalised Oscar Wilde is brought to life again to think and speak as a twentieth-century writer who dispenses advice and converses with contemporary people. Wilde’s fictional afterlives are as fascinating as his real life was: “he is revived as a man and revised as an author” (3).

A different and surprisingly glamorous afterlife is the one experienced by the poet Sylvia Plath, who became famous only after she committed suicide. Nicolas Boileau aptly suggests that Plath’s life as an author began the very moment her life ended. What is more, an idealized image of the woman/poet has been constructed since her death, an image that reproduces “a perfection of a woman, providing all the ingredients necessary to counter the gloomy, tragic character of her life: the impeccable hairdo (with various hues depending on the moment of her life), the perfect smile, the happy couple when she poses with Hughes” (3). Almost as a way of compensating for the absence of a life as a well-established “author”, a number of critical and non-critical works on Plath have been proliferating. However, the most striking aspect of the Plath phenomenon is the peculiar use of images and pictures which have appeared in several publications, such as

biographies and journals, that serve the function “to comment on Plath herself and to try to justify either reading of her texts or the interpretation of her life” (6). In so doing, the poet’s work and life is radically reconstructed in a gender-reassuring template which is, most of the time, totally different from the original work and the actual person.

The final contribution in this collection deals with the challenge to the postmodern theory of the death of the author: indeed, it attempts to revive subjectivity and give importance to authorship as the stance of the creator on his/her creation behind the pure act of creation. In particular, Carmen Lara-Rallo is interested in the character of the author-musician in three novels – Bernard MacLaverty’s *Grace Notes* (1997), Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music* (1999), and Conrad Williams’ *The Concert Pianist* (2006). Through the stories of the protagonists of these novels, writing/narrating and composing/playing are closely intertwined in a sort of inter-artistic dialogue that reflects on the issues of authorship from a multifocal perspective. Significantly, as Lara-Rallo aptly states, “such works give voice to the exercise of aesthetic transmission from the composer’s abstract inspiration to the audience’s auditory reception in all its steps” (8). More significantly still, the conclusion is that not only does the “rebirth” of the author permit the “birth” of the reader but it enhances the possibility that she or he will aesthetically enjoy the artistic products, be they written or performed.

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