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Metamorphoses of Authorship in the Age of the Mechanical Reproduction of Texts*

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Abstract

While recent research has partially downplayed the impact of the printing revolution by inserting it in a communication system which also included the manuscript, orality and their amalgams, it remains one of the most significant scenarios in contextualizing developments in authorship during the Renaissance. These developments interacted with a series of other cultural phenomena: the rise of individuality in a period of enduring collective identities; the influence of *imitatio* on cultural production practices and the limits to the appreciation of originality; the relationships between authors and readers; self-fashioning and the paths of biographical writing; the dynamics of power and censorship; the revaluation of technical-practical skills and the redefinition of intellectual profiles in a period characterized by a 'decompartmentalization of knowledge' and the 'reduction into art' of new disciplinary fields. By briefly revisiting such phenomena, this essay aims to show that the notion of the 'author function' formulated fifty years ago by Michel Foucault remains a heuristically fruitful category for interpreting the cultural developments of the period.

Keywords: Authorship, Michel Foucault, Printing Press, Renaissance

Two essays dating to the late 1960s, 'La mort de l'auteur' by Roland Barthes and 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?' by Michel Foucault, formed the initial reference points for the occasion that originally prompted the following text. Just under a quarter of a century after these two essays were written, Roger Chartier, in a chapter on the 'Figures of the Author' in *The Order of Books*, returned to the challenges posed by Foucault's text. It would be too simple an exercise here to summarize Chartier's

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observations in the form of a paraphrasis with glosses, but the wealth of his suggestions is such that repeated reference to them is essential. His point of departure is significant because he places his investigation within a historiographic *continuum*. Chartier revisits the terms in which generations of scholars addressed the issue of authorship after the Second World War. Following a phase in which the role of the author was either ignored or confined to literary studies (a period encompassing the bibliographic tradition in the English-speaking world and social history of the printed text as it developed in France), it subsequently resurfaced, albeit in a somewhat dependent and constrained form. I quote:

He is dependent in that he is not the unique master of the meaning of his text, and his intentions, which provided the impulse to produce the text, are not necessarily imposed either on those who turn his text into a book (bookseller-publishers or print workers) or on those who appropriate it by reading it. He is constrained in that he undergoes the multiple determinations that organize the social space of literary production and that, in a more general sense, determine the categories and the experiences that are the very matrices of writing. (Chartier 1994, 28-29)

What are the principal early modern historical contexts that have allowed such historiographical reconsideration of the role of the author, and in what way?

1. *Texts and Authors in Print*

The paradigm inspired by the work of Marshall McLuhan, which postulates a clear break in the forms of communication of the early modern age, attributing it to the advent of the ‘Gutenberg galaxy’, is no longer unreservedly accepted. More recent research has at least in part reduced the estimated impact of that turning point by positioning the printing press within a diversified system of forms of communication in which the manuscript and orality continued to thrive, and indeed carved out specific roles in areas where movable type was a seemingly inadequate tool. One of the most obvious and oft-cited examples are texts intended to elude the censors, which clearly benefitted from avoiding the printing press. Also consider the hybrids, such as amalgams of woodcut, print and manuscript, which in fact largely outnumbered pure print at first (Johns 2015).¹ Yet, as Elizabeth Eisenstein put it, in a milder form than in McLuhan’s formulation, the ‘unacknowledged revolution’ remains one of the most significant scenarios shaping the background, and helping to contextualize, Renaissance developments in authorship. Indeed, it seems hard to completely deny Eisenstein’s observations looking beyond the specific role played by the press in such discursive contexts as the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Scientific Revolution.² In particular, she pointed to the emergence of the title page during the period of initial maturity of the sixteenth-century book after its early beginnings rooted in the incunabulum. The title page, she argued, was a place where, among other things, a text would normally be attributed to an author, unlike in medieval circulation, when the title had been its widely prevalent element of identification. The same point had already been made by scholars from previous generations, such as Ernst Philip Goldschmidt and Sigfrid Henry Steinberg. Among the first more complete examples is the title page of the astrological and astronomical calendar of Regiomontanus, which proposed the calendar reform that would only be carried

¹ Pettegree singles out the peculiar hybridity of drama as a medium ‘deeply evocative of the fluid, transitional nature of communication in the sixteenth century’, another area of research to which Chartier has significantly contributed (2010, 346).

² For a reconsideration of Eisenstein’s position, see the ‘AHR Forum’: Grafton, Eisenstein, Johns 2002.

out a century later by Gregory XIII. Reprinted in Venice in 1476, the year of the author's death, by the Augsburg printers Erhard Ratdolt, Bernhard Pictor and Peter Löslein, this edition is also famous for being the first to be adorned with a woodcut border (Goldschmidt 1943; Eisenstein 1983; Steinberg 1996). The connection between authorship and the printing press had become commonplace by the end of the seventeenth century. At this time, as Chartier notes, Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* recorded that the term *auteur* was also used, though this was by no means its primary literary significance, to refer to someone who had had one or more books printed. Previous texts had already made it clear that 's'ériger en auteur' required a step over and above mere writing, as it was the result of choosing a method of putting texts into circulation. However, the connection stemmed from a process: Chartier finds that, a century earlier, towards the end of the sixteenth century, two *Bibliothèques*, catalogues collected by La Croix du Maine and Du Verdier and which list French authors alphabetically, both consider manuscript and printed books indifferently. They are also indicative sources for the role that one of them attributes to biography as an element identifying the figure of the author; while the other excludes imaginary authors, thus positing real existence as a requirement for inclusion in the group in question (1994, 39-43). The view expressed by Chartier thirty years ago regarding the impact or otherwise of the printing press as a decisive factor in the emergence of the author function was therefore complex and balanced. On the one hand, in relation to both censorship and literary property, he noted that the author function

appears to derive from fundamental transformations brought by printing: it was printing that extended, hence that made more dangerous, the circulation of texts that defied authority, and printing created a market that presupposed the establishment of rules and conventions among all who profited from it, economically or symbolically, the writer, the bookseller-publisher, and the printer. (51)

Yet he also found that 'the essential traits in the book that manifest the assignation of the text to a particular individual designated as its author do not make their first appearance with printed works but were already typical of the manuscript book at the end of its unchallenged reign' (*ibid.*).

When reproducing and commenting on other examples of frontispieces, Chartier takes a cautious approach: he points out that four names appear on the frontispiece of the first edition of *Don Quixote*, designating the writer, dedicatee, printer and bookseller. As a result, little emphasis is placed on the writer's literary authorship. However, this proliferation of paternities was perhaps a short-term effect of the introduction of printing; over time authorship went on to become more pronounced in relative terms – as if the Gutenberg galaxy operated as a ticking clockwork mechanism, with a delayed or diluted effect.

Inevitably, and fruitfully, then, both Foucault and Chartier positioned the notion of author in relation to that of work – Chartier remarking, among other things, that when the first printed editions presented the reader with volumes by a single author rather than miscellaneous authors (which did not always happen, but a little more frequently than before), those volumes were not necessarily a 'book' as we commonly understand it, but rather a collection of his³ texts in which it was not automatically clear which portion actually corresponded to which title. Anyone familiar with the editions of the first centuries of printing will be well aware of how frequently works were placed next to one another, as well as how subtle the distinction may have been, in terms of bibliographic description, between the different quires that went to the printer under a single impression. Foucault believed the notion of work to be inseparable from that of author,

³ Such a gender connotation was almost inevitable at the time.

supporting his argument with an example: ‘When Sade was not considered an author, what was the status of his papers? Were they simply rolls of paper onto which he ceaselessly uncoiled his fantasies during his imprisonment?’ (1984, 103). Foucault also reinforces the author-work connection by suggesting that the ways in which modern criticism makes the author function work were already defined in the four authenticity criteria proposed by Jerome to verify whether a series of texts attributed to an author can actually be considered the work of a single hand: the author is defined as a certain constant level of value, a certain field of conceptual or theoretical coherence, as a stylistic unit and finally as a defined historical moment and focal point of a certain number of events (110-111). The unexpected can of course arise in this process of authentication, perhaps the clearest demonstration being those works of art attributed to an artist on the basis of a unitary stylistic code recognized by virtue of a canon, but the authenticity of which is called into question at a later date (the case of Giorgione is paradigmatic in this respect).

2. *Authors and the Making of Books*

A key point of comparison in Eisenstein’s argument is a passage from Bonaventure’s commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, in which the thirteenth-century Franciscan theologian, while conceptualizing a writer as a man who makes books with a pen, just as a shoemaker makes shoes on a last, identified four ways of making books. These characteristics belonged, respectively, to the *scriptor*, the *compiler*, the *commentator* and the *auctor*, an asymmetric series given that the typological range did not even consider entirely original writing. Even the *auctor*, in fact (the role that Bonaventure attributed in his *conclusio* to Peter Lombard in the composition of the *Sentences*), was characterized as someone who ‘writes both his own work and others’ but with his own work in principal place adding others’ for purposes of confirmation’ (Eisenstein 2005, 95; cf. Bonaventura 1882, 14-15).⁴ In this context, one should consequently not overlook the legacy of *auctoritas* as a principle of verification and argumentation, as well as the influence of the humanistic, ethical and aesthetic principle of *imitatio* on the practices of cultural production (including translation) and the consequent boundaries that delimited the enhancement of novelty and originality. The type of authorship that emerges from this initial context is evidently limited by the dependence and constraints pointed out by Chartier. To the extent that the symbolic value attributed to invention grew at the time, and novelty ceased to be looked upon mainly with suspicion, Renaissance authorship gradually took on certain nuances which, to us, appear more modern. But it must never be forgotten that these developments were not necessarily deliberately pursued to change and enhance the new: after all, was the revolutionary phenomenon of the Protestant Reformation – in all its facets up to the German Peasants’ War – not, in the intention of its protagonists, a movement for the restoration of an unduly troubled order?

I have specifically mentioned, in passing, the case of translation, because here there are different combinations, or proportions, in the degree of responsibility that a publication can attribute to the original author and the translator, up to and including the borderline case of undeclared plagiarism.⁵ But such a range of possibilities is not only limited to the different ways of highlighting one contribution or another in the presentation to the reader; translation is also

⁴ On Bonaventure’s and other thirteenth-century theologians’ take on authorship, see Rosemann 2015; for the wider context of the medieval theory of authorship, see Minnis 1988.

⁵ A question relatively independent from the fact that a comparison is being made of texts written in different languages. For more on Renaissance plagiarism, see, among others, Cherchi 1998; Bjørnstad 2008.

a form of practice, with infinite degrees of freedom in rendering meaning, which by definition will always to some extent involve betraying the original sense, resorting at times to a variety of solutions – paraphrasing, cuts, additions, adaptations and so on – which, all together, contribute to singling out the differences between the texts under examination.⁶

3. *The Author as Individual*

This phase in the material history of the production, circulation and use of texts interacts with a series of other cultural dynamics of the time. Prominent among these was the ‘development of the individual’, or *Entwicklung des Individuums*, as Jacob Burckhardt labelled it, giving it a central role in his portrait of the Renaissance epoch, a period in which the strength of collective affiliations certainly did not fade, and the philosophical and religious restrictions on the valorization of individuals did not disappear. Just as this is the main thesis of the Swiss historian – the second centenary of his birth was celebrated in 2018 (Bauer and Ditchfield 2022) – so too has it been the most fervently discussed. The various criticisms normally tend to offer an objection and its opposite. For some, the development should be post-dated, given that collective memberships continued to carry weight for centuries, and the modern bourgeois individual has a more recent genealogy. Others believe it should be predated, regarding it as unwarranted to deny individuality to the Middle Ages. After all, Burckhardt’s discourse must be read in the light of the place and time in which he wrote, though this does not in itself remove its heuristic value⁷. What has perhaps emerged most usefully from the historiographic debate is not so much the push and pull on the chronology of the phenomenon, but rather a questioning of its nature and means of attainment. Whether or not one wants to brand it a *question mal posée*, the Burckhardtian development must be requalified whilst taking into account the forms of proto-modern subjectivity. This would commence with an appraisal of the imitation of models,⁸ and the connected, relatively uninhibited adoption of the arts of simulation and dissimulation, in order to perform any social role correctly.

4. *Roots and Facets of Authorship*

Developments in the relationship between authors and readers must of course also be given due consideration. After all, Barthes’ essay ends with the joint affirmation of the author’s death and the reader’s birth; and the chapter in Chartier’s book that precedes the one on the author is dedicated to ‘Communities of Readers’, a highly valued theme in recent research into the history of the book and in his own in particular.⁹ Forms of cultural mediation thus also deserve consideration, taking into account the phenomenon of collective authorship (Johns 1998, 186).

The chronological starting point in Barthes’ essay, however mythical, are primitive societies in which the narrator is not a person but a mediator, shaman or speaker. His performative ability can be admired, but genius is reserved for the figure of the author, an individual stemming from the joint effect of English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith brought by the Reformation (1977, 142-143). These historiographic coordinates sound somewhat traditional, though at least they have the merit of suggesting the vastness of the roots and implications of the phenomenon

⁶ On translation, see Burke and Hsia 2007.

⁷ For a recent assessment (also relevant to the theme of *self-fashioning*, below), see Farr 2020.

⁸ As well as the broader issue of writing within literary traditions (see Mack 2019).

⁹ On the experience of reading, see also Johns 1998, 380-443.

under consideration. The chronology of the two philosophical presuppositions that are mentioned (empiricism and rationalism) tends to shift the gaze towards the seventeenth century. The geography of Barthes' list is curious: he seems to have deliberately chosen to flag up England, France and Germany, while leaving out Italy, which Burckhardt had instead seen as the cradle of everything.

Barthes' mythical reference to a shaman or orator reminds us of the role of performance. It would, however, be schematic to confine it solely to the prehistory of authorship. When a text is the subject of staging, agency and authorship are enriched and complicated by the responsibility – which also involves strongly orientating the forms of reception – held not only by the author (of a complete text or sketch), but also by the voice and the body of those who transform it into a show, with all the nuances of role that interpretation and improvisation can play within it.¹⁰ This is true not only of theatre in the strictest sense, but also, for example, of a sermon. Having mentioned reception, one might add that, if the relationship between author and reader is culturally and historically variable, so too is the one between performance and audience in the theatre. It would be simplistic to view this as unilateral, and it was quite interactive in the early modern period (Biet 2019).

A series of secondary authorships contributed to providing additional facets to the forms that a complex, and ultimately collaborative, authorship assumed – typically in the sixteenth-century printing house. Even without considering anonymous contributions like those of proof-readers, a series of other figures tended to appear in the paratexts, configuring the printed book as a work of multiple paternity.¹¹ One area where they were active was the translation, as previously mentioned. Other included the preface and editorship; and as seen for *Don Quixote*, there were dedicators, printers and booksellers too.

Predictably, as in the previous era, the practice of producing anthologies of various types was maintained (Pettegree 2010, 172). In the case of notebooks (Italian *zibaldoni*) and collections of commonplaces, in Chartier's opinion they represent genres of writing in which the compiler himself is the recipient and the author function is absent (1994, 55-56).

More recently, Chartier described what reached its apex at the end of the eighteenth century as a fetishization of the autograph manuscript and an obsession with the author's handwriting as a guarantee of the authenticity and the unity of a work dispersed in a number of publications. That new economy of the written word broke with an older order based on quite different practices: frequent collaboration between authors, reuse of content that had been used previously, familiar commonplaces, and traditional formulas, along with continual revision and continuation of works that remained open. (2014, viii)

Such was the 'paradigm of the writing of fiction' (*ibid.*) at the time of Cervantes and Shakespeare, despite their early canonization.

5. *Authorship and Anonymity in an Age of Censorship*

Authorship is also constituted in relation to powers and censorship (a proper microphysics should not fail to take into account self-censorship). Foucault's essay also emphasizes the centrality of this mechanism; though referring primarily to the procedures that, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rigidly defined the rights of reproduction by sanctioning copyrights on discourses, it suggests 'what one might call penal appropriation. Texts, books, and discourses

¹⁰ See Braida 2019 for the cultural and legal implications of this multiple responsibility in the eighteenth century, especially in the case of the battles fought by Carlo Goldoni.

¹¹ Among the studies of the role of such printing house figures, see Richardson 1994.

really began to have authors ... to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive' (1984, 108). This observation can be fruitfully applied to the whole experience of ecclesiastical censorship.

As mentioned at the beginning, the manuscript circulation of a text was sometimes deliberately used as a ploy to hide it from the control of the censors. But it was not the only one adopted in the historical period we are considering. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious conflicts offer the most obvious – though not exclusive – field in which a series of other communication strategies can be found: from anonymity and pseudonymity to the inclusion of a false date or of other indications of the content of a work designed to conceal its true nature and orientation. A few annotated examples may help to elucidate these dynamics and to recognize their logic and potential implications, in an age when practices in this field were undergoing significant change, and everyone involved was highly aware of the consequences of such editorial choices. In his study of Giorgio Siculo and his sect, Adriano Prosperi returns to the methods of composition, circulation and reception of the *Beneficio di Cristo*, and mentions the tract's long journey to the press. He points to evidence of the presence of a 'collective author', in other words, that several people actively participated in its drafting. 'By being published anonymously', Prosperi notes, 'it exploited its borderline position between the age of edifying and anonymous religious printed works, the heritage of every Christian, and the age of a divided and individualized Christianity, where every thought had to be carefully measured and shaped by one person'. And he continues: 'It became important to know who had actually written it as soon as the fragile defence of anonymity of devotion was overwhelmed by the victorious march of the Dominican inquisitorial culture'. Making a link between intellectual history and its social context, he also explains: 'The age of anonymous voices placed at the service of collective truth was over now, just as the collective and undivided properties of the world of common ownership of the past were in the process of disappearing'. In addressing 'Christian readers', the publisher Bernardino Bindoni felt bound to give an account of his choice: 'Ci è paruto a consolazione e utilità vostra darla in istampa, e senza il nome dello scrittore, acciocché più la cosa vi muova che l'autorità dell'autore'. Or, as Prosperi paraphrases it, 'it was the truth of what was said and not the authority of the name that had to strike and convince readers' (2000, 47-48).¹² Bindoni's choice would be denounced by the Dominicans as deceptive. In broadly similar terms, in 1542, the year before the publication of the *Beneficio*, a bestseller of the Italian Reformation, the author of an anonymous tract on justification argued: 'I did not put my name to it ... to leave readers freer to judge' (84) – thus suggesting that the attribution of a work to an author may guide ways of pre-understanding the text which, particularly in an era of heated controversy, risked compromising it by seriously affecting its reception.

6. *Shaping the Renaissance Author*

A further element is represented by *self-fashioning*, by the paths of biographic writing and the art of the portrait. Burckhardt talks about it in the fourth part of his *Versuch*, devoted to the 'Discovery of the World and of Man', even if the connections with the theme of the second, namely the 'Development of the Individual', are evident. Chartier points to portraits of late medieval French and Italian authors as a sign that visual representation was already contributing to the emergence of

¹² (We thought it comforting and useful for you to send it to print, and without the name of the writer, so that the matter itself moves you more than the author's authority). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

authorship in manuscript culture, therefore suggesting the need to moderate the emphasis that tends to be placed on the printing revolution. Stephen Greenblatt's lesson on the shaping of the 'I' in the Renaissance, evoked by recalling his key word, *self-fashioning*, must be understood – according to its inventor, rather than later followers – by treating the *self* as the object, and the historical context as the factor that ended up shaping it, or at the very least delimiting the arena of its thinkability and presentability (1980). The result is a Renaissance author who thought and presented himself on the basis of social norms and conventions that he could certainly challenge but not simply ignore. In other words, it is not exactly synonymous with 'self-made', let alone with 'do of yourself whatever you want' (following the inspiration of Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio de hominis dignitate*).

This did not prevent some figures from managing to build their own public persona as a writer with considerable effectiveness. Lisa Jardine studied Erasmus from this perspective. When he had himself depicted in a way that linked him with Saint Jerome, he intended to present himself in a secular role that functioned as a counterpart to the spiritual role of the Father of the Church, disseminating human knowledge rather than Scripture. Personal fame was not, Jardine suggests, the primary purpose; the intention was to promote virtuous behaviour through culture. To achieve this, Erasmus acted as an unrivalled manipulator of the media at his disposal:

He invented the charisma of the absent professor – the figure who creates awe by his name on the title page, not by his presence in the classroom. The teacher, indeed, who was *never* present (after his earliest, impoverished years, Erasmus never actually taught) but whose presence was evoked in portrait, woodcut, or published collection of personal letters, set alongside the wildly successful, constantly reissued, revised, and re-edited textbooks, translations, and editions. (1993, 5)

7. *Techniques and Disciplines*

One should also bear in mind the re-evaluation of technical-practical skills and the redefinition of intellectual profiles that occurred in a period characterized by a 'decompartmentalization of knowledge' and by the 'reduction into art' of new disciplinary fields.

'Réduire en art' (from the Latin *ad artem redigere*) is an expression put into circulation by collective research coordinated by Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and H el ene V erin (2008). Their work examined the ways in which a series of techniques emerged in the period from the Renaissance to the Age of Enlightenment. These were formalized and put into circulation for the first time through writing and an iconographic apparatus, starting from knowledge that had previously been fragmented or transmitted exclusively through observation, practice and orality, and in any case reserved for people in the given trade. The fields examined in the contributions to their volume range from visual arts, mathematics and exotic languages to the art of war, fencing, dance, mining and masonry. In our case, the role of the craftsman-writer was evidently exercised within an attempt, whatever its historical outcome, to ennoble a mechanical art. As for the shoemaker evoked by Eisenstein in presenting the passage by Bonaventure, the hard core of the trade consisted of a set of skills. Authorship could be claimed as the function of initiators of a field of knowledge but starting from a tradition one claimed to belong to and whose status one strove to increase by adopting the discursive rules of the *paragone* between the arts (all the way back to Horatian *ut pictura poesis*). However, no ennobling on paper can succeed if the social consideration of the practice to which it refers does not advance at the same time. Beyond those specific disciplinary areas, can the author be considered *tout court*, starting from the core business of what we now call literature, one of the subjects participating in this ennobling contest? Somehow its status would already seem clearly discernible and respectable; nevertheless, when

considering such factors as the patronage system and the constraints that it imposed on the writer's activity, it seems impossible to deny that a long march towards emancipation was underway. A fundamental stage in this path has been highlighted with regard to Erasmus.

The other expression mentioned above ('decompartmentalization of knowledge') was first advanced in an essay by Erwin Panofsky at a symposium held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1952, which he subsequently reworked and published elsewhere under the title 'Artist, Scientist, Genius: Notes on the *Renaissance-Dämmerung*'.¹³ He started by noting that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy, and the sixteenth century elsewhere in Europe, are usually considered to be a period when the arts flourished, while at the same time the sciences appeared to have stalled, experiencing some kind of a rupture between late medieval innovations and the Scientific Revolution. His essential hypothesis, on the contrary, is that these two spheres cannot be understood without each other, that they were much more interconnected than previously believed, and indeed that the genealogy of the sciences and the arts in the following ages cannot be fully understood if we do not take proper account of the Renaissance interaction and overlap between artist, scientist and genius. Here too the status of liberal and mechanical arts is at stake as well as the recognition of authorship (1953).

8. *Constructing the Authorial Self*

In observing the interrelations between the dynamics that have been outlined, the writing of Girolamo Cardano deserves to be examined as a valuable case study to test their implications. The vastness and variety of his work by itself would make him a promising case study; this is also more specifically imposed by *De Vita propria*, reviewed by Burckhardt when dealing with autobiographical writing as part of the theme of the 'Discovery of Man' (1860, Part IV).

In a 2004 article examining the autobiographies of Cardano and Benvenuto Cellini (Burckhardt also briefly considered the latter in the paragraph preceding the one in which he discusses Cardano), the German Italianist Franziska Meyer considers the Renaissance examples of self-writing as preceding the 'autobiographical pact'. In contrast to autobiography as conceived by Rousseau and later theorized by Philippe Lejeune, the variety of forms which narration took in this epoch does not distinguish between biography and autobiography, and proposes a representation of the self that, instead of talking about its contingent feeling, conceives it through re-experiencing pre-existent models (Lejeune 1996; Meyer 2004).¹⁴ A few years earlier, Guido Giglioni had analysed Cardano's autobiographical writing as a tool for therapeutic self-control. The page dedicated to Cardano in Cesare Lombroso's *Genio e follia*, within a series of 'esempi di geni alienati',¹⁵ between August Comte and Torquato Tasso, already contained quotations from the autobiography, although it insisted above all on Cardano's dream experience, in essence by questioning his ability to distinguish between reality and imagination (Giglioni 2001).

In the eyes of today's reader, *De Vita propria* represents a window on a distant cosmos and on a writer whose statements are inevitably striking and perplexing. One chapter features a

¹³ *Renaissance-Dämmerung* is an expression used by Panofsky to refer to the dispute about the concept of Renaissance during the first half of the twentieth century; it is therefore in the framework of those historiographic developments that Panofsky's intentions and formulations must be considered.

¹⁴ A discursive strategy for which Meyer refers also to Ernst Cassirer's observations on the relationship between subject and object in Renaissance thought.

¹⁵ (examples of alienated geniuses).

detailed list of his ‘remarkable discoveries in the different disciplines’. Elsewhere he enumerates his natural qualities, the successful outcome of his cures, his books, honours he had received and opinions expressed about him by various famous people.

In truth, neither Alfonso Ingegno, the distinguished Cardano scholar from Florence University who edited the Italian translation, nor August Buck, the author of an essay on *De Vita propria* published a few years after that translation, stress the idiosyncrasy or eccentricity of the author and text (Cardano 1982; Buck 1986). Not even self-adulation should be superficially adopted as the code with which to read that text fruitfully. In our interpretative endeavour, we should adopt keys like the one proposed by Jardine regarding the production machine of the person of the writer, as well as those of Panofsky on the structural disciplinary transversality of the Renaissance ‘genius’ – to the point of redesigning the map of knowledge itself. One of the main ways of reading his own experience that Cardano proposes is its pervasion by supernatural events; he speaks persistently of a ‘spirit’ that watches over him, somewhat like that of Socrates; and if he must acknowledge himself to be endowed with a gift, he chooses (though not to boast about it) the ability to foresee the future, which would accompany him throughout his life.

As Meyer suggests, the writing is elaborate and builds, admittedly, on models (Burckhardt also noted that Cardano expressly depends on Marcus Aurelius, among others).¹⁶ This exceptional case would appear, therefore, to significantly exemplify the entanglement of the individual, multiple communities of belonging and, in the vision current at the time, supernatural forces, and how they contributed to determining the forms of production, circulation and reception of texts. They did so in an ever-changing amalgam that remains highly recognizable due to the pattern it acquired in mid-sixteenth century European culture.

9. Foucault’s Legacy

A recent critical edition of Foucault’s essay, with an introduction and commentary by Dinah Ribard (2019), sheds new light on this scholarly story by providing an updated summary of fifty years of reception and debate. Basing her reflections on the text and on the contextualization provided by Daniel Defert, Ribard recalls that Foucault distanced himself from the theme and thesis of the death of the author as expressed by Barthes and Jacques Derrida – with whom he is often assimilated by critics (see Burke 1998). The lively and diverse debates that developed over the following decades testify to the thought-provoking effectiveness of Foucault’s text, including specific developments within literary studies.¹⁷ Ribard notes that Foucault’s aim was not to reconstruct a precise chronology of the rise of the modern author. In that sense, attempts to ‘improve’ his narrative are misplaced, something which is also subtly remarked upon by Chartier. The most significant lines of research and discussion have included, among others, a new focus on the history of anonymity, the power of authority and the notion of the author, culturally constructed through a variety of textual strategies as well as the projection of a specific image (Maingueneau 2013; Francis 2019). Anonymity, which by no means disappeared in print culture, is a particularly rich thread of inquiry since it involves a variety of cultures of discretion and encompasses paradoxes such as the use of initials and the peculiarity of the female voice (North 2003; and, for eighteenth-century Italy, Braidà 2019).

¹⁶ On Cardano’s declared precedents, see also Gardini 2010, 209-216; on Italian Renaissance biography and autobiography, see McLaughlin 2002.

¹⁷ See Viala 1985, among others.

10. *Searching for Initiators*

In his essay, Foucault identifies Freud and Marx as two non-exclusive figures who are nonetheless more evidently representative than others of authors who not only held the authorship of their own writings, but also ushered in a mode of discourse in which others would later come into play. They did not stop to hallmark their discourse with an initial gesture that created the very possibility of the genre but instead continued to provide coordinates in a more profound way than even the founders of modern science, such as Galileo or Newton, managed. Foucault suggests that this particular type of author appeared ‘in the course of the nineteenth century’ (1984, 113). Although he was not greatly interested in chronology, it would perhaps be interesting to ask ourselves if there have been figures and contexts in which something similar to such discursive inaugurations occurred in previous historical periods. Erasmus’s role in the republic of letters might be a reasonable candidate for being regarded as a new intellectual figure in the early modern age. This would underline both the intellectual authorship of his contributions and his prominence in public discourse – not to mention the revolutionary effects of his application of philology to the biblical text. It would be a question of assessing the characteristics and the ways in which that experience may have established a new discursiveness in terms comparable to psychoanalysis or Marxism. Michel de Montaigne is another obvious candidate. It is not just that he invented a new literary genre with the *Essais*. He can be seen (and significantly this was already acknowledged at the time) as inaugurating new modes of writing and an original relationship between reading and writing, which had a major impact on literary representations – and philosophical understandings – of the self (Boutcher 2017, with the labelling of a ‘school of Montaigne’ and recognition of ‘enfranchising the reader-writer’). An earlier example may be Petrarch, again, not just as an initiator of the European tradition of love poetry (with everything this implies), nor as the Ur-humanist, but also in the light of his early preoccupation with autograph writing and the control of one’s literary output (Petrucci 1982, 516-517; Chartier 2014, 76-77).

It was subsequently suggested that Foucault’s and Barthes’ essays both start from the eighteenth-century emergence of copyright and that they do not adequately account for its prehistory (Halasz 1997, 38-39). As a matter of fact, Foucault does identify areas in which, in his view, the author function might already have been operative in the Middle Ages (although his thesis that this was reserved at the time for scientific discourse and excluded the literary one is perhaps less convincing). His analysis certainly does not lack references to ancient and Renaissance authors. Thus, when it comes to discussing the specificity of authors’ names as opposed to personal names in general, the example he cites – to highlight the potential implications of some modifications to the information regarding authors – is the authorship of the works of Francis Bacon and Shakespeare: if they were shown to be the work of the same hand, the functioning of the author’s name would totally change (Foucault 1984, 106).

On closer inspection Chartier too, partly on the basis of pre-existing studies – including *La naissance de l'écrivain* by Alain Viala (1985) – identifies a turning point in the second half of the eighteenth century. This was characterized by a paradox: in order to shed the dependence that had marked the patronage system until then (the only alternative previously offered to those who did not enjoy economic independence, either by birth or profession), the writer had to seek to enhance his own originality and lack of self-interest as a prerequisite for a claim to remuneration on the market. This obviously does not prevent the French historian from reflecting acutely on the metamorphoses of authorship over the previous three centuries; all the same, the later eighteenth century would appear confirmed as their point of arrival.

Setting aside discussions on chronology, it seems hasty to give up the heuristic potential that some of the final considerations of Foucault's work promised. His conference-debate ended with the provocative phrase 'What difference does it make who is speaking?' (Foucault 1984, 117). It was preceded not only by the findings of the historically determined nature of the author function, of which he said that 'n'est sans doute qu'une des spécifications possibles de la fonction-sujet' (Ribard 2019, 58),¹⁸ but also by an enhancement of the significance of the research around these dynamics, in comparison with traditions of study too often centred on the content, as well as on form:

Perhaps it is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations, but according to their modes of existence. The modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each. The manner in which they are articulated according to social relationships can be more readily understood, I believe, in the activity of the author function and in its modifications than in the themes or concepts that discourses set in motion. (Foucault 1984, 117)

Fifty years on, I believe that recommendation has lost none of its relevance.

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¹⁸ The exact phrase does not appear in the English version; see Ribard 2019, 58-59 for variants.

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