Abstract: The most influential trends in 20th-century literary criticism and theory of literature can be described as revolting against a both Romantic and positivist approach which focused on the person of the author rather than his or her literary product. Formalism, New Criticism, structuralism and post-structuralism denied any importance of the biographical author and dealt with texts exclusively. After the Barthesian formulation of the death of the author (applauded by towering figures like Foucault or Derrida) the end of the 20th and even more the beginning of the 21st centuries have brought back the importance of the author. For some new trends (especially in post-colonial and gender studies) the personal or even the bodily experience of the biographical author seems the most important aspect of literature, which is again the expression of a personal experience which is however not of personal but of social interest. The revival of the author as refusal to look at literature as a self-centered play should not deny the importance of close reading or textual analysis since the intellectual capital collected by 20th-century literary criticism is still worth applying.

Key words: the death of author; literary theory; personal experience; biographical author

Author: Péter Hajdu is a senior fellow at the Institute of Literary Studies Research Centre for Humanities Hungarian Academy of Sciences and he does research in classical philology and comparative literature studies focusing on classical Latin poetry 19th century Hungarian prose and dialogic theories of literature. Recent publications include “The Betrayal of the Satirical Text” and “The Memory of National Literature in Budapest City Centre” (both in Neohelicon). Email: hajdu.peter@btk.mta.hu
The Genesis of the Modern Concept of the Author

One tends to suppose that every literary text is composed by an author and therefore the author as such can be regarded as an eternal notion of literary thinking. The English word goes back to the Latin noun auctor which is derived from the verb augeo meaning to make something bigger or nourish. On the one hand the very fact of the word’s Latin origin may suggest that the notion has been with us from the beginning of western literature; on the other its etymology may suggest some basic difference between modern and pre-modern concepts of the author. The latter might have been regarded not as the ultimate source and originator of the text but somebody who gives it the final measure makes it grow. Michel Foucault the author of one of the two seminal papers declaring the death of the author seems to have suggested that the concept of the author as we know it is a modern development and “not universal and constant in all discourse” since he highlighted two features of modern written culture which must have contributed to its genesis these being the legal responsibility for the published content and copyright (Foucault 20). Roger Chartier probably the most important historian of the sociology of literature has demonstrated in great detail how the business of publishing books led to the concept of the author as owner of his or her literary product. Eighteenth-century London publishers and booksellers were very much interested in this concept fighting against state restrictions of copyright timespan and against countryside booksellers re-publishing works of expired copyright. The legal debate followed the shift in the definitions of what makes literary works valuable a shift from ideas expressed in them which are the common property of all humankind to the unique form of verbal expression which should be regarded as the achievement of a single person carried out through hard work (Chartier 52–55).

And it is only in this new legal situation that writers can make their living as independent figures in a free market for the first time in western cultural history. The author does not write for a special limited and well-known circle any more on which (s) he personally and financially depends and this new situation also increases his or her responsibility for the content. It is the author’s text (s) he creates it and it belongs to him or her. Something similar happened according to Norbert Elias to music and composers but not before the beginning of the 19th century (Elias 1993).

Even after the death of the author the legal issue has still haunted some post-modernist writers with provocative working methods. Péter Esterházy suffered sharp criticism for the unmarked quotation practices of his otherwise excellent book Celestial Harmonies (Esterházy 2000 and 2004) including an attack in a journal (Forgócs 2007) a huge on-line debate and also fierce forums among literates. When looking back at the discussions a year later he coped with the problem of literature and law in a passage formulated in a rather fragmentary style which is quite unusual for him. He tried to make a contrast between matters of literature (including intertextuality and “those fine East-European text-vibrations”) and legal issues. He admitted that the legal viewpoint is “legitimate” and that he applied different methods in the Hungarian and the American editions due to different legal environment namely that his provocative quotation or intertextual technique developed in a non-constitutional state and therefore legal thinking is simply non-existent for it. He said “it would be bad if the problem was solved in the court” (probably the worst for him) but he concluded that those who started the discussion of the problem “are basically not interested in literature” (Esterházy 2008).

Esterházy did not need such careful formulation when he repeatedly narrated how he appropriated a short story by the post-modernist Serb writer Danilo Kiš which he read in unpublished manuscript translation (cf. Bojtar 2008). Before publishing the translation as his own literary product three times (in a literary journal as a short story and as chapters in two of his major prose volumes) and before presenting it as his own
writing at a literary soirée in Germany Esterházy wrote a letter to Kiš: “not to ask for permission but as a relatively polite person to inform you that I have appropriated the text because it obviously belongs to me.” (Esterházy 1998:173). Esterházy is descendant of a magnate family which for three or four centuries was proverbially rich and influential not only in Hungary but also in the Habsburg Empire. His direct ancestors were counts but the other branch included princes too. Kiš’s (1983) historical short story narrated the execution of an Esterházy. Péter Esterházy who in many books elaborated family or autobiographical novels (which does not exclude his incorporation in them of dozens or even hundreds of quotations from others’ literary texts) “obviously” regarded a story from his family history as his own especially because it was a good text. Even if this case seems correctly done from the viewpoint of copyright (since Kiš gave written permission to the appropriation and the translator does not seem to have raised any objection) the legal vocabulary repeatedly entered Esterházy’s narratives of the appropriation story (Bojtár 2008) always suggesting some unresolved business about it. He tells the first encounter with the short story as follows “When I first read it I knew that the text was mine my writing. Kiš should take the royalty I don’t care: the text is mine” (Esterházy 1998:172). He decided not to explain the situation to the audience of a literary soirée in Eisenstadt because he thought they could not understand why he had read them a text written by somebody else. “I should not be involved in such a discussion. But I will take the money for sure” (Esterházy-Birnbaum 1991:18). Money matters. And even if a very post-modern artist creates his great compositions with a montage technique collecting good texts from dozens or hundreds of previous and contemporary authors he has to face the legal-financial issue at least by denying it has something to do with literature which he regards as an autonomous system. Bourdieu would protest: the system is not so autonomous. And even if the author is dead he has to make his living.

A Link to the Genesis of Modern Literary Criticism

I have already mentioned Foucault’s paper “What is the author?” but the other basic text Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” also regards the concept of the author as a modern invention. It does not refer to the changes in the marketing and legal context but to various developments in cultural history. “The author is a modern figure a product of our society insofar as emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism French rationalism and the personal faith of the reformation it discovered the prestige of the individual” (Barthes 1977:142 – 43). For Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes it was enough to hint at the cultural developments that made the birth of the author possible; they did not need to analyze how it happened because they were only killing the author as a historically limited phenomenon not an eternal concept. It may be however important to emphasize that literary criticism like other academic disciplines was established or invented in the first half of the 19th century the period that gave form to general education especially in secondary schools. Many school subjects were established around 1800 and the idea that literary history along with national history should be taught in school emerged shortly after. It was the same cultural spirit namely Romanticism that formed both the concept of the author and the modern academic disciplines among which literary history naturally focused on the author as the origin of artistic creation. The cult of the genius that creates worlds of nothingness and the cult of originality that cannot regard textual links and models as anything but proofs of failure and lack of imagination logically resulted in an almost exclusive interest in the author. If the main goal of reading is to admire the creative mind of a genius the text is but a way towards that goal. And not the only way: biographical data and handwriting are no less important. When the true positivist Hippolyte Taine developed his science-like theory of race milieu and moment that is how
nation, social situation, and historical moment determine the literary output of an author. He tried to give a positive description of the workings of the genius and when he wrote about poetry in his six volume *History of English Literature* he was trying to reach the mind or rather soul of the genius through the literature it has produced. Modern literary criticism as a true child of Romanticism focused on the author because the creation of the text was the process in which genius was manifested. The text was regarded as nothing more than a fossil of a process that had been full of life. Looking at the fossil one might imagine the previous living creature. And it is that previous life that is interesting not the present dead stone in accordance with the Romantic ideal that travelling or making one’s way is more important than arrival which is too final to be inspiring.

We may sense two kinds of contradiction here. Firstly, Romanticism worshipped not only the genius but also the nation the community. The developing discipline of literary history apart from its focus on the author contributed massively to the development of nationalism. Was literary criticism at the moment of its birth tied rather to individualistic or collective ideologies? And secondly, if great literature is the product of the genius (which creates in a state of enthusiasm in contrast with the craft of neoclassical poets) how could the positivist collection of biographical and other data contribute to the understanding of that creation? Let us start with the first problem: even if geniuses create out of nothingness in a state of ecstatic enthusiasm they do not perform this act in a cultural vacuum. And the cultural context influences the actual form of both the genius and their creation. Thus the national community can be proud of its genius as its own product. All the nations that performed successful nation building projects in the 19th century selected national poets as symbols of national genius and the worship of authors is especially fashionable in those areas even today.

With the importance of the cultural (which almost means national) context we are approaching an answer to the second problem. Even if the creation of the genius seems more or less inexplicable (since that is exactly what makes an author a genius) collecting data on the genius makes us know more about them and knowing more brings us closer to an understanding of how they work. This is how natural sciences proceed. However, there are cases where the huge amount of biographical data collected by generations of scholars made the inexplicable nature of poetic creation increasingly obvious. About a dozen people have been named as authors of the works transmitted under the name of William Shakespeare. The more we know of the person the less we understand how was it possible for an ordinary man to write such great texts. And several generations had doubts about Shakespeare’s authorship indeed there are groups that are trying to deny it even today. They think it impossible that the son of a simple glover from a provincial town could create what many people regard as the best poetry ever. Somebody else must have written those plays someone like Francis Bacon the great philosopher of the period or Queen Elisabeth and so on and so forth (see Mekis 2010). Biographical knowledge does not explain literary creation especially regarding authors who lived before modern literary criticism and modern press made the interest in the author’s personal life widespread.

Some authors of the 19th century realized the marketing value of the public display of the personal life and started to transform it into art to advertise the literature they produced. If someone lives the life of an eccentric genius we are supposed to understand why and how they create great poetry. But we certainly know of authors who transform their lifestyle exactly because of this hypothesis of the audience: if someone lives the life of an eccentric genius people tend to expect them to create great literature and will buy their books.
The Death of the Author

What I have written about the birth of the author in connection with Romanticism and the genesis of modern literary criticism may already imply why and when the author died: with the end of (late or latest) Romanticism and with a paradigm shift in literary criticism which may be called the birth of literary theory as an independent subdiscipline. When we speak about the history of the theory of literature we usually begin earlier maybe with antiquity Plato or Aristotle and continue our development through the Middle Ages and the 19th century to the present. But in such presentations we mostly discuss theoretical presupposition implied in types of discourse which are not theoretical per se: rhetoric philology or literary history. Theoretical reflection on literature for its own sake is a relatively new phenomenon which simply cannot focus on the author of the text as the supposed origin of meaning. The new approach to literature that can be seen in Russian formalism American New Criticism and in the work of some theoreticians like Eliot or Richards who are usually discussed as attached to New Criticism although they were not all focused on the text or rather the encounter of text and reader as the locus where meaning can be created or where it happens. This change in the concept of the task of literary criticism is not independent from (or rather is a part of) the linguistic turn in philosophy or in the humanities in general and is also a logical consequence of the transition from Romanticism to Modernism. The early avant-garde’s experimentation with automatic writing multi-author text-creating practices and so on highlighted the signifying potential of the text which may or in some cases should be uncontrolled by the author. Modernist insights into the multi-layered non-unified character of the personality (which came both from psychology and communication theory) also contributed to the devaluation of the author as an academic concept. Collecting all the life facts of the person could not be regarded as contributing to the understanding of the author or the genius since being an author is only one of the person’s social functions which he may perform very differently from other functions and modernism experienced serious doubts about the possibility that all those performances can be regarded as building up a unified whole. No person can be believed to know even themselves.

It is hardly a coincidence that the novel represented the peak of the genre hierarchy in that period. Although the novel gradually gained importance in the nineteenth-century literary system it is regarded as a prestigious genre only retrospectively. Romanticism still appreciated lyric poetry as the greatest possible literary achievement where the soul of a genius could be regarded as directly emanating. It is Modernism that put novelists at the center of the canon. A link between the text of a novel and its author’s person soul or personality is much less obvious than (or cannot be regarded as obvious as) in the case of lyric poetry. The latter claims to display personal experience by which one does not need to mean the personal experience of the biographical author but the kind of experience lyric poetry is about is personal while the experience of the novel is rather social. Or to put it another way if the experience of literature is first of all a linguistic experience poetry offers a unique — Bakhtin would say monologic — version of language while a novel makes readers face the competitive dialogical symphony or cacophony of languages in a given society (cf. Bakhtin 1981).

The Not-so-Latent Survival of the Author as an Out-dated (?) Concept and in Textual Studies

Although modern and post-modern literary theory has rather convincingly killed the author there were
many scholars mostly literary historians that refused to accept such conclusions still investigating the author’s intention. For some decades this attitude was regarded as the consequence of insufficient theoretical training lack of knowledge or strange and outdated residue of the past living with us. But it may also have been a symptom of a different attitude towards the text. They could refer to the Jakobsonian model of communication if literature is communication it necessarily happens between the sender and the receiver of a message. What is important is the message encoded in the literary text and it comes from the author. Readers want to understand what the author wants to tell them and not what the text actually means.

Everybody knows also from everyday experience that we cannot control language. We do not always say what we want and literary works (that are much more complicated than usual verbal conversation) can hardly fulfill the author’s plan totally. Twentieth-century literary theory suggested that we should not care about the author’s intention since a) we cannot know it and b) even if we did there is no guarantee that it has been realized in the actual work of literature. We should rather focus on what we have access to namely the text we are reading. It is however also a more than 2000-year-long tradition and experience in the western literary culture that we cannot really trust the text. Since a text exists in numerous but usually countable variations (even if their number can go up to hundreds or thousands) we always have to make decisions about the text too. In normal conversation we can easily correct the other’s lapses of tongue and while reading we usually do not even notice typos. When we decide to understand the message instead of declaring that the utterance has no meaning whatsoever and communication should start again from the beginning we actually do not read the text as it is but rather the sender’s intention. And when a true philologist is doing the exhausting work of comparing variations he tries to follow the traces back to the author trying to reconstruct the text that he or she actually created.

Of course somebody with my training must say: No what they are doing is not reconstruction but the creation of their own texts. The immense amount of modifications philologists suggested for classical texts without any proof in the manuscript tradition or the print versions following only their own imagination and modern literary taste clearly shows what they were doing: creating ever new variations suggesting ever new conjectures (90% of which will never re-appear in any further edition) and as a result the ramifications multiply. If they were collectively approaching the one original text the number of possibilities and versions would be reduced in the long run.

This situation however does not really invalidate the aim of understanding the author’s message instead of the text as it is given. Since the text does not exist as a stable entity but varies from manuscript to manuscript from edition to edition from typesetting to typesetting what we are trying to understand is somehow — whatever Jacques Derrida said — beyond the text of Protean nature the ideal of the text the text as it should be or as the author conceived it or wrote it or thought he wrote it (to count even on the possibility of lapses of the pen). It goes without saying that through the maze of variations there is no way to that Ideal Text. But even aiming at it presupposes the use of the author to legitimize our intention.

Another kind of textual scholarship namely genetic criticism focuses on the process of creating a text. We can do this with modern authors whose activity is well documented and who often leave even their most trivial notes to public archives. We may have their autographed manuscripts or typescripts even a series of elaborations but also their notes sketches and drafts. Genetic criticism is not interested in the final form of a text which it regards as only one particular form among many but in the process of development (cf. Ferrer Deppmann Groder 2004). Some of its theoreticians try to be very cautious about the concept of the author suggesting that this kind of criticism does not reconstruct the actual historical process of literary creation but constructs its logic model. That logic model is called avant-texte (cf. Bellemín-Noël Jean 2004).
which is a tool to understand the polysemantic open nature of literary works (Z. Varga 2010:553).
Therefore genetic criticism is very much in tune with the post-structuralist criticism of the concept of closed literary works with fixed meaning but as if approaching the text from the other direction: its polysemantic nature is not shown from the viewpoint of the reader but of the writer. However not every representative of genetic criticism is so careful in their formulations; many simply speak of understanding the author’s intentions or the workings of authorial invention (e.g. Biasi 2005:7). We can say that with this branch of textual criticism the biographically meant author returns although no longer that of Romanticism the creative genius but rather the hard-working craftsman.

The Real Revival

Previously I spoke of the birth of modern literary criticism and theory of literature; it may be legitimate to speak of the death of those disciplines in the context of the cultural turn. If they are dying they do so with a long and very productive agony and not without frequent revivals. Some scholars experience this as frustrating since simply writing on a well canonized poet or novelist became suddenly uninteresting and literary analysis seemed marginalized; for others it has been a liberating experience since they did not have to stick to the literature and elite culture in their academic writing but were allowed to analyze anything they found interesting from postcards through music videos to television ads. And the feeling of social commitment could cause a chilling revolutionary fervor. Of course the author is not a thing if we speak of postcards at least usually. But when we come back to literature everything will change.

The ideas I explained above were rather trying to save the old concept of author although sometimes with some sacrifices. What made the author really return with a vengeance was the cultural turn. With very little exaggeration it is possible to say that the same post-structuralism that declared the death of the author paved the way to its return. Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality (which very soon became a pretext for old-fashioned philological practices from research into literary motifs and themes to comparisons in vocabulary) could do very well without the author: if a text cannot have a meaning in itself but only in the medium of all the texts produced in the given culture or visible on its horizon (Kristeva 1969) authorship is hardly a remarkable factor in the process. There is no logical reason why this kind of discourse should not work if the context or the medium is extended to every product of the culture if the meaning of the text depends not only on other texts but also on visual musical spatial and other issues just as do social practices and phenomena. The author should count even less. But (s) he does not.

If literary scholarship is to undertake to hear and articulate the voice of the oppressed and the deprived it becomes hard to avoid the question “who is speaking?” If one wants to make marginalized voices audible it is crucial to position them. The connection of voice and person however is no more evident — on the basis of the insights of post-structuralist literary theory — than that of the text and the author. Why should we ask about the authors and their personal experience in addition to (or instead of) the experience presented in the texts? Maybe we should not but the author’s person appears in the background as a guarantee for the reliability of the experience. Post-structuralism and modern hermeneutics made it a commonplace that knowledge and experience depend not only on the object but also on the recipient the experiencing subject. That insight should be applied not only to the reader of the literary text but also to the text (or its implied author) as it reads the world or the cultural context. We have learned the lesson that the subject displayed in the text as experiencing the world is not identical with the biographical author but it is hard to imagine that they have nothing to do with each other.
We can take the obvious example of feminist literary criticism. In our quest for female voices (suppressed in history) is it not obvious to look for them in the writings of women? Yet the quest sometimes has negative results: there are women writers who adapt their products to the dominant male discourse. And feminist readings of male writers do not always detect oppressive or understanding compassionate male discourse. Theoretically it is a moral obligation that we should resist the temptation of essentialism but common sense suggests that genuine female voices cannot be easily found in male writing.

And the situation is very similar with all the oppressed and deprived. Of course there is a huge body of literature on them a good part of which expresses pity and sympathy but that is still not their experience or their voice but that of the anthropologist observer. Let us take the example of Sinclair Lewis’s (1885 – 1951) novel *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) which is rightly regarded as a forerunner of the civil rights movement. Nevertheless what it offers is not the experience of African-Americans in a northern state after World War II but how a white male protagonist experiences legal and non-legal racial oppression when his environment starts handling him as African-American due to the one drop blood rule. It represents a humiliating life experience as if to ask: “How would you feel if it happened to you?” Yet both the voice that asks the question and the implied addressee are definitely white even if they feel compassion for those who are not. That is not the kind of voice cultural studies were looking for for example Toni Morrison who happen to be African-American. And it is the same point of view that gives special importance to the author when we try to hear the voice of native American Sino-American Turkish-German and similar communities.

The selection of so-called great literary works worthy of analysis interpretation and teaching i.e. canon formation is not an objective evaluation of the works’ inner merits rather a political process which tends to silence those social groups that are otherwise also oppressed. This insight has resulted in the elaboration of various sets of alternative and counter-canons. When alternatives are looked for the name of an author functions as a signal for eligibility. A feminist counter-canon will contain works by female writers. This obviously reliable strategy has its risks as well since the discussion of such counter-canonical works can easily slip into simplifying biographical discourse. Many scholars felt disappointed with the achievements of cultural studies especially because the fervor for social commitment made some of its representatives forget everything literary theory had taught in the 20th century. But the shift of focus from the text to the social context does not and should not mean a theoretical amnesia.

The interest in the social position of literature and literary works has created new links between literary studies and sociology. Literature as a system of producing disseminating reading conserving and teaching literary texts can be regarded as a subsystem of a given society and not necessarily a privileged one that should be adored for its special sublime values. Schools of literary theory that developed systemic approach to literature like those initiated by Itamar Even-Zohar and Siegfried J. Schmidt have gradually left the realm of literary studies and became part of sociology (cf. Kúlmán 2013: 269 – 71). The application of social theories to the field of literature seems to have much creative energy nowadays and many literary historians are looking for theoretical inspiration in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu or Niklas Luhmann. Authors also tend to be of crucial importance in such approaches since they are regarded as players in a game actors in a system trying to sell a product on a market a product whose possibilities are determined by their social-cultural position. It is more promising to understand the role a person can play in the workings of a social subsystem than a text. But personally I am convinced that the systemic approach to literature will have a great creative impact if we find ways not to get rid of the refined and sophisticated methods of textual analysis that literary studies have developed over a long period.
The experience of cultural globalization has also contributed to the increased importance of the author. This was of course not inevitable. We can do research into the ways texts travel. The emerging new sub-discipline of world literature studies is not really interested in the author since it focuses on the intercultural dialogue of texts. However, the cross-cultural experience is an exciting topic for recent literary and cultural analysis and it is only logical that it can focus on texts produced by people who have an intercultural or cross-cultural experience of globalization. I cannot deny that eating a burger at the MacDonald’s in one’s hometown just around the corner also involves experiencing a kind of globalization and I would not deny that it can be represented in good literature as a global experience. For the interpretation of such texts we will probably not need the author. But in order to understand migrant literature (or literature on the experience of migration) we will probably look for authors that have that kind of experience. A branch of comparative literature studies decided to research the actual literary connections between cultures decades ago and one of the most exciting loci of such connections (apart from translations or reception in general) was persons who had experience of a culture other than their native one who had travelled who had lived somewhere else who had an intercultural personal and/or intellectual network or had even started to write literature in a second language. The condition of globalization encourages comparatists to continue this kind of research on an even wider scale.

What is however I think very important to keep in mind if we want literary studies to contribute to the understanding of both the present global culture and the cultural intellectual history of mankind is that we should interpret literature to understand our culture and not vice versa. The cultural focus means that we analyze literary texts in the widest cultural context rather than trying to explain through the cultural context and the concept of the author why the given piece of literature is so. A deterministic approach describing how the cultural context influences the literary product may block the cultural understanding literature offers.

Notes


Works Cited


Notes


Works Cited


- - -. “Minél idegenebb területekre menni” To go to the possibly strangest places (Interview by András Greff) *Magyar


