

The Authority of the Author: A Cult of the Past or of the Future?

Boris A. Novak

University of Ljubljana
Boris-a.novak@guest.arnes.si

*This paper analyses the history of the category originality, which is a *conditio sine qua non* of any authorship. It takes as a starting point Lotman's models of "aesthetics of identity", characteristic for the Middle Ages, and "aesthetics of difference", which prevailed in the last centuries. It owes a lot also to Mortier's thesis that originality became an artistic criterium already in the period of the Enlightenment, and not only later, in those of Romanticism and Modernism, as we usually think. The changing of the concept of the authorship over the centuries had its consequences also for the changing of the status of translation: in the Middle Ages a translation was always an adaptation as well; the rise of the Author to the throne of the absolute Creator of the artistic world caused the fall of the status of translators, since their activity was seen as secondary. This hierarchic relation lasted until recently, when Postmodernism in literature (Borges) and phenomenology and reception theory (Rezeptionsästhetik) rehabilitated translators in the field of literary criticism. The thesis about the death of the Author could be traced implicitly already in Mallarmé's poetics; explicitly it was developed by Valéry. The writer of this article, a poet himself, is convinced that the Postmodern limitation of the arrogance of the Author was necessary, but that repeating Barthes' slogan about the death of the Author is no longer productive: we live in a period when the global economy is based on copyrights, which Capital is trying to steal from their original creators and owners – authors who are alive and kicking.*

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This paper is dedicated to the analysis of a category which is closely connected with the notion of the author and serves as the *conditio sine qua non* of any authorship: it is the category of *originality*, of aesthetic innovation. The etymological source of that category is, of course, the Latin word *origo* – *originis*. The French structuralist Paul Zumthor has in his brilliant book *Essai de poétique médiévale* lucidly defined the relation between the author and the language during the Middle Ages: "*Le poète est situé dans*

son langage plutôt que son langage en lui.” (“The poet is anchored in his language more than his language in him.”) (68) Contrary to our contemporary image that the text emerges from the author, the medieval author came from the text. Everything in the Middle Ages was a text, so there was no place or need for any originality.

The cultural typology founded by Jurij M. Lotman can serve as a starting point for our analysis. Lotman has delineated a clear difference between “the aesthetics of identity” that was characteristic of antiquity and the Middle Ages, on the one hand, and “the aesthetics of difference” characteristic for the modern era, on the other. “The aesthetics of identity” is based on the identification with the models – *clichés* which are already known to the audience and which have entered into the system of “rules” (Lotman 1970 245). Individual innovation was rejected as a sin, an expression of vanity, because this aesthetics demanded loyalty to the ancient, “God-given” patterns (Lotman 1970 120).

“The aesthetics of difference” is a system in which the nature of the codes is not known to the audience before the beginning of artistic perception. Against the models of reality the reader is used to, the artist imposes his own, original solution, which he considers to be more real (Lotman 1970 248).

According to today’s copyright laws Shakespeare would be accused of plagiarism because he frequently borrowed themes and motifs, stories and dialogues from elder playwrights or Italian Renaissance writers of novellas. Fortunately, Shakespeare was better than the authors from who he was so shamelessly “stealing”. A pamphlet written in 1592 by the playwright Robert Greene (one of the so-called “University Wits”), in which he defined the young Shakespeare as a “shake-scene” accusing him of stealing from others, proves that “the aesthetics of identity” was overruled by “the aesthetics of difference” approximately at that time, in the late Renaissance. Such a criticism would not have had any validity in the Middle Ages when everybody “was stealing”. Taking from other sources was a normal part of the creative process.

Such an understanding of culture and art had far reaching consequences for the relations between the author and the translator. In the Middle Ages the translator was always an adapter as well. The borders between the original text, an adaptation and a translation were blurred. That is the reason why translations were frequently treated as original works: *Romaunt of the Rose* is simultaneously considered to be Chaucer’s translation of the French verse novel *Roman de la Rose*, which was originally written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, and Chaucer’s own work. This interweaving of the creative and translation activities was possible in the

manoeuvring space between them – usually called the *adaptation*. The basic relations between the original, the translation and the adaptation have been well defined by the Slovene translation theorist Majda Stanovnik: “As far as the language is concerned, the translation is entirely different from the original, but it maintains its individual and genre form; the adaptation changes the purpose of the original, frequently its genre character as well, but it clearly remains attached to it with paraphrases and quotations.” (Stanovnik 1998 35) Here we are trying to put these relations into a historical perspective.

“The aesthetics of difference” has crowned the author as a sovereign Prince of Imagination, as a Creator of the artistic world who enjoyed divine attributes. Consequently, the artistic creation was understood as *creatio ex nihilo*. This process of the sacralization of the Author happened primarily on the basis of the category of originality. There is no originality without the Author. An author, who is not original, is a *contradictio in adiecto*.

The rise of the Author had negative consequences for the status of the translator: the translating activity which had enjoyed such a lofty reputation in the Middle Ages for its religious, intellectual and cultural importance, turned out to play just a secondary role, as the translator was a servant of the creative power of the Author, the Master of the artistic world. Joachim du Bellay, a poet and a member of the French Renaissance *Pléiade*, wrote venomous arguments against translators in his manifesto *Défense et Illustration de la langue française* (1549):

Mais que dirai-je d'aucuns, vraiment mieux dignes d'être appelés traditeurs que traducteurs? Vu qu'ils trahissent ceux qu'ils entreprennent exposer, les frustrant de leur gloire, et par même moyen séduisent les lecteurs ignorants, leur montrant le blanc pour le noir (...) O Apollon! O Muses! Profaner ainsi les sacrées reliques de l'Antiquité! (Du Bellay 1988: 58-59).

But what should I say about some people who would rather deserve to be called traitors instead of translators? If they betray those whom they should present, robbing them of their glory, and in this way seduce ignorant readers, selling them white for black (...) O Appollo! O Muses! To profane like this the sacred relicts of the Antiquity!

This humiliating status of translators lasted until very recently: it was Postmodernism which rehabilitated the activity of translating. As in many other dimensions the initial role in this development was played by Jorge Luis Borges: if we re-consider his oeuvre from the point of view of the relation between authors and translators we come to the surprising conclusion that the heroes of Borges' novels and stories are frequently translators, not authors. As Tonko Maroević, a Croatian art and literary historian, pointed out in his book *The Reader of Borges*, Borges

has rehabilitated the dignity of readers and reading (Maroević 2005 340). Reading is no longer a passive process – it has become an utterly creative activity, a real spiritual adventure. And what are translators – if not the most passionate, systematic and precise readers? In the field of theory this change in mentality was prepared by philosophers of hermeneutics and phenomenology, among others by Roman Ingarden, who pointed out that the text of the literary work is just a basis which must be actively completed by the reader and his/her mental horizon (Ingarden 1973: 50). This tendency has been further developed during the past decades by reception theory (*Rezeptionsästhetik*), which has reversed the traditional relation between the origin and the target language: if in old times literary history was almost exclusively focused on the author and therefore treated relations between different national literatures through the imperialistic prisma of “influence”, the primary field of research of reception theory is the target language, namely varied strategies of the adaptation of the original texts into the – aesthetic, historical, social, etc. – contexts of the target culture. The author here plays no role; personally, I find this position too radical.

By the way: precisely Shakespeare’s creative “reception” of other authors’ “material” raises a crucial question: on which level is a literary and, generally, artistic work original? We all agree that the originality of *Antigone* does not depend on the story itself which belongs to *mythos*, but on various authors interpretations of this tragic story: Sophocles’ *Antigone* is different from Jean Anouilh’s or Dominik Smole’s (the Slovene playwright has written a poetic version of the fratricide at the end of the Second World War in which the main heroine, Antigone, never appears). The story itself, therefore, belongs to everybody, to the tradition of the Western civilization and to the treasury of the world culture ... although we are clearly aware that Sophocles’ originality is deeper and primordial in comparison with the later adaptations of this mythological story. Sophocles is the first, he is a source, but Anouilh and Smole are equally original. It is more difficult to understand Shakespeare’s phenomenon: he is one of the *first* authors, the Author in the emphatic sense of the word, although, as we have already pointed out, certain segments of his dramaturgy, plots and dialogues would according to the today’s copyright laws be treated as: plagiarism.

Contrary to the widely spread conviction that the coronation of the Author as an absolute dictator of the creative originality stemmed from the Romantic and Modernist cult of so-called artistic freedom, the analysis by the Belgian literary historian Roland Mortier in his book *Originality (L’originalité)* shows that the category of originality had its *origin* in the pe-

riod of the Enlightenment. The subtitle of this systematic and lucid analysis is significant: “*Une nouvelle catégorie esthétique au siècle des Lumières*” (A new aesthetic category in the century of the Enlightenment).

The notion of *originality* has, of course, its own pre-history which is – it cannot be otherwise – closely connected with the history of *mimesis*, the basic category of both Western art and theory of art. In the Middle Ages and beyond *mimesis* was not understood merely as an imitation of the *reality*, as it had been originally in Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophy (with all the differences in their understanding of *reality*), but as an imitation of other, previously existing artistic works and authors as well. In this sense *originality* is the opposite of *mimesis* or *imitatio* (a Latin translation which reduced the original semantic wealth of the ancient Greek term *mimesis* to mere craft).

According to dictionaries the word *original* has several meanings, such as: original literary or scientific work in the language in which the author has written it; a sculpture or a painting as created by a visual artist, contrary to its reproduction; the first example of a legal document, etc. Besides these positive meanings there is, however, a negative meaning as well: *original* can be a name for a *weirdo*. Abbé Féraud drew the following distinction in his *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* (3rd book, 1787, quoted by: Mortier 1982 33).

– Un auteur original est un homme de génie – An original author is a genius
 mais but
 – un original est un homme bizarre et singulier. – an original is a bizarre and weird person.

The opposition between imitation and originality was at the core of *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* in the 16th and 17th centuries: the dilemma was whether to imitate classical aesthetic ideals and authors or to create original works.

Surprisingly modern is the definition of the notion *Imitation* in the famous French *Encyclopédie* (1765); it was most likely written by Diderot himself. It is an unusually long description, which starts with the definition: “*On peut la définir, l’emprunt des images, des pensées, des sentiments, qu’on puise dans les écrits de quelque auteur, et dont on fait un usage soit différent, soit approchant, soit en enchérissant sur l’original.*” (Mortier 1982 27) Imitation, according to Diderot, is lending of images, thoughts and sentiments from other authors in three possible ways – copying them, or making from them something different or richer. The most shocking sentence in Diderot’s analysis is: “*La bonne imitation est une continuelle invention.*” (“A good imitation is a constant innovation”.) Diderot’s conclusion is, therefore, very positive: “*Ainsi l’imitation née de la lecture continuelle des bons originaux, ouvre*

l'imagination, inspire le goût, étend le génie, et perfectionne les talents." Roughly translated: imitation of good original sources opens imagination, inspires the taste, widens the genius, and raises the talents (Mortier 1982 27–29). Very modern, indeed!

Alexander Pope criticized imitators, accusing them of producing just opportunistic and slavish copies of pre-existing greater works. Nevertheless, he insisted on the principle of the imitation, but the imitation of – Nature itself (quoted by Mortier 1982 44):

First follow Nature, and your judgement frame
By her just standard, which is still the same ...

In his introduction to an edition of Shakespeare Pope wrote (quoted by Mortier 1982 46): "The poetry of Shakespeare was inspiration indeed; he is not so much an imitator, as an instrument of Nature." Pope anticipated the meaning which Nature was about to play in the value system of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophers understood originality as an important criterium and a positive evaluation in aesthetic judgements, but they still insisted on the basic principle of *mimesis*. And if an author does not imitate his predecessors' works, classical ideals and idols, what does he imitate? He imitates Nature. In the most radical variations of this understanding the author is Nature itself. Here we have entered the realm of philosophy. What is Nature? Is it the ancient Greek *physis*? Or the Renaissance *natura*? Is it Spinoza's "*natura naturata*" (created nature) or his "*natura naturans*" meaning "creative nature", which is Spinoza's name for the Creator, for God? Indeed: is it Spinoza's pantheist "*Deus sive Natura*" (God or Nature)? Or is it the Nature of scientific laws which can be empirically established and verified? What is the relation between the aesthetic laws of Art and Nature? Does Nature belong to the realm of the so called *sublime* as Kant understood it? And what is the ethical nature of Nature? Is Nature Good or Evil? For Rousseau, Good, for Marquis de Sade, Evil.

The turning point in the rise of the author to the role of the king of the artistic world occurred in the period of Pre-romantics, and it was marked by the essay of the English poet Edward Young "*Conjectures on original Composition*" (1759). As Roland Mortier justly remarks: "*Young's importance was less in ideas than in the efficiency of their expression.*" (Mortier 1982 76). This essay spread all over Europe and charmed many young spirits with its freshness and passion. A true announcement of the Romanticism.

Why did this decisive initiative come from England, and not from France (as was usual at the time) or Germany? In the 18th century the

normative Classicism was still so strong in France that it did not allow for such outburst of innovations. French literature gathered revolutionary force only a century later, when Symbolists carefully examined poetic language, reaching the peak in Rimbaud's abolition of the mimetic principle in *Illuminations* and with Mallarmé's thesis that poetry was not written by I, but by the Language itself. Contrary to the prevailing opinion, the Enlightenment imposed itself in German speaking countries relatively late: Kant's definition of the Enlightenment, which introduced the term *Aufklärung* in the German language and culture, was published only in 1784, in the note *Was ist Aufklärung* in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (Mortier 1982 14).

Young's enthusiasm for originality was taken over by Lessing, Klopstock, Hamann, Herder and poets of the movement *Sturm und Drang*; it is characteristic of the German spirit that they radicalized the notion of originality into the idea of a *genius* in different variations (*Originalgeist*, *Originalgenie*, *Kraftgenie*, etc.).

It is worth mentioning that in addition to the principles of *mimesis* and *originality* there was always the third principle – *authenticity*. Mortier claims that it is based on the criterium of *intensity* and that it involves *expression* as the basic strategy of the artistic process (Mortier 1982 129). This principle functions as an imitation of Nature *within* the author himself. The mimetic principle is, thus, maintained, but interiorized.

In the last decades literary criticism dismantled the throne on which the Author was crowned by Romanticism and its last descendant, the radical Modernism with its glorification of the principle of innovation. Avant-guard movements in the 20th century frequently used the criterium of innovation as the only remaining aesthetic principle. The cult of the Author as a divine Creator was in desperate need of critical distance and soberness. But there is still a basic question whether art is possible without the author. To put it more precisely: the signature of the author on the cover of the book is definitely not necessary – we would understand a novel or a volume of poems equally well even in the case of anonymous authorship. The simple level of the authorship is not essential – essential is the other level which Lotman has in *The Structure of the Artistic Text* called “the author's model of the world” (Lotman 1976 369). This model, this *prisma* through which the world is shown in a literary work – that is the “author”.

The question of the relation between the artistic work and the author's personal experience is even more complicated. Mallarmé has erased the principle of the first person singular in poetry, but was no less personal, nor did his author's authority suffer in any way from it. Quite the contrary:

he is one of the greatest and most revolutionary authors of the modern era. But although he apparently erased the personal experience, it is inscribed into his poetic language. Mallarmé frequently wrote sonnets describing empty rooms (for example *Sonnet en -yx*). Translating Mallarmé into Slovene I have found an explanation for this obsessive theme in the cycle *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole* (For Anatol's Grave), where Mallarmé expressed his pain after the death of his son at the age of eight. There were other dead souls haunting him: his mother, who died when he was a child, leaving him and his younger sister Marie orphans and intensifying their relation; the death of the little sister a few years later... The seemingly formal, impersonal and cold emptiness of Mallarmé rooms turned out to be the mortal absence of the human beings he loved, and the poetic word was the only way to call them back. (Novak 2006 318–323) The personal experience is the fire through which “*les mots de la tribu*” (“the words of the tribe”) must go in order to obtain “*un sens plus pur*” (“a purified sense”) – to quote in full Mallarmé’s lines from his sonnet *Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe* (The Grave of Edgar Poe):

Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu. (Mallarmé 1975 94)

Literally: To give a purified sense to the words of the tribe.

Mallarmé transcended the monopoly of the Author by means of his prophetic words in the essay “*La Crise du Vers*” (“*The Crisis of Verse*”), namely that “*le poète cède l’initiative aux mots*” (“the poet yields the initiative to words”) (Mallarmé 1945 325). That is also the message of the following anecdote: when his friend, the painter Edgar Degas, lamented that he had so many brilliant ideas, but that he could not write good poems, Mallarmé gently responded: “My dear Degas, poems are not written with ideas, but with words.”

Mallarmé’s follower Paul Valéry radicalized this tendency of the abolition of the traditional understanding of the Author. He was one of the young “*mardistes*” (the term coming from the French for *Tuesday*) who every Tuesday evening from 1880 to the mid nineties gathered in the “poetic salon” – more precisely: the kitchen – of Mallarmé’s modest apartment at the Rue de Rome in Paris to worship Poetry and its personification, Mallarmé. They called him *Maître*, encompassing the word’s entire range of meaning, from “craftsman” to “teacher” to “boss.” Contrary to the great majority of poetic “apprentices” who – according to Harold Bloom – feel “the anxiety of influence”, Valéry found unbearable any comparison between him and his Maître Mallarmé, and that is why he protested

against the comparative analysis of Henri Ghéon who had placed Valéry above Mallarmé. Here we encounter the problem of influence, an utterly sensitive topic for authors. Departing from his own poetic experience and with his exceptional power of self-reflection Valéry has seen this problem not as a trauma, but as a possibility for a poetic growth, quite differently from the traditional literary history. He has articulated this with breathtaking cynicism in his volume of essayistic fragments and poetic aphorisms *Tel Quel*: “There is nothing more original, more *mine*, than to feed with the others. But you have to digest them. A lion is made of a well digested sheep.” (Valéry 1960 478)

Paul Valéry has great merits for the dethronement of the Author as the only and exclusive Proprietor of the sense of his work, as the supreme Interpreter with an absolute monopoly over the meaning of his text. At the end of the essay “*Au sujet du Cimetière marin*” (“Speaking about The Graveyard by the Sea”) (1933) where Valéry explained the genesis of his most famous poem, *Le Cimetière marin*, he has come to the far-reaching conclusion: “*There is no real sense of the text.* There is no authority of the author. Whatever he *wanted* to say, he has written what he has written. Once published the text is similar to the tool that everybody can use according to his wishes and abilities; and it is not quite sure whether its constructor uses it better than anybody else.” (Valéry 1957 1507) In the preface to the edition of the poetry collection *Charmes*, commented on by the philosopher Alain (1929), Valéry wrote: “My verses have the meaning that is given to them. The meaning that I give to them is suitable for me only, and it is not in discordance with any other. It is the error which is contrary to the nature of poetry and can be even fatal for it if we demand that each poem should have a real and unique sense which would correspond or be identical with the author’s thoughts.” (Valéry 1957 1509)

Roland Barthes with his slogan about “*la Mort de l’Auteur*” (launched in the revolutionary year 1968) basically repeated Paul Valéry. But it is only fair to point out that forty years ago limiting the Author’s arrogance was still necessary. I am convinced that today the situation is quite different, the opposite, and that authors need protection as an endangered species.

Paul Valéry has broken the validity of Young’s concept of originality as a *conditio sine qua non* of the artistic work. But authors follow their ways and they do not believe theories even when they sound good and when they praise an author’s work. As a matter of fact, true authors do not believe their own theories. That was the case with Paul Valéry – a talented poet and a brilliant mind who (fortunately) in his poetic *praxis* did not follow his own ideas about *poésie pure* (“pure poetry”).

An unusual anecdote has connected the tragic personal destiny of Edward Young with the bright poetic “fortune” of Paul Valéry. As a student of the University in Montpellier (which now bears his name) at the beginning of the 1890s Valéry liked to walk and meditate in the beautiful Botanical garden. In a quiet corner there was (and still is, I have seen it myself) a mysterious grave without any data, with the Latin inscription: “*Narcissae placandis minibus*” (“To placate the shades of Narcissa”). According to the local legend the English poet Edward Young had buried there his little daughter named Narcissa. (The rationalistic spirit of the modern era took this story to be just a fabrication of the people’s imagination. However, excavating this site archeologists have found a child’s skeleton.) Paul Valéry was so touched by this grave and its story that he wrote the longer poem *Narcisse parle* (Narcissus speaks), published later, in 1920, in his volume *Album des vers ancien* (Album of Ancient Verses) in which – persuaded by his friend André Gide – he gathered his youth poems. The name Narcissa had reminded him of the ancient Greek myth about the beautiful young man Narcissus falling in love with his own image. That was the beginning of Valéry’s obsessive writing about Narcissus. The poet of the “poetry of graves and nights”, who launched the idea of originality as a sign of true art, had given the eternal theme to the poet of the Light and of the Sea, who used it to express his basic personal problem and later denied the role of personal experience in poetry and even dismantled the category of Authorship. That this poem stemmed from the consciousness of mortality as human destiny cannot be a coincidence. Let us remember that narcissi were in various mythologies flowers of death. Valéry has used as a motto the epitaph on the grave: “*Narcissae placandis manibus.*”

I would like to conclude with a sociological comment: principles of originality and authenticity are basic laws of Postmodernist global economy. Registered trademarks are an economic translation of artistic and intellectual copyrights. The basic law of the political economy of the European Union is the rule that each product must be labelled with an indication of “the land of origin” or “cradle of the race”, if animals and their products are concerned. That is the reason why only the French wine producers have the right to the name “champagne”, because France is “the land of origin” of champagne; if the same product is offered at the market by wine producers coming from other countries, then it is not “champagne” but ordinary “sparkling wine”, because copy-rights must be respected!

The biggest economic field of the future will be copyrights. The revived thesis about the death of the Author, unfortunately, enters into the

context of the aggressive pressure of global capitalism to steal copyrights from their rightful owners, the authors themselves. The ethical duty of literary criticism is to lend a hand of solidarity to authors in their legitimate struggle for copyrights. After all, the future of all intellectual work depends on the outcome of this conflict. We are all in the same boat, and we are going to sail forward or to drown together.

Having said that, let me answer the challenge of the title of our colloquium about the death of the Author. How is the Author doing today? He is alive and kicking.

Translated by the author

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