

Agency and the Death of the Author: A Partial Defense of Modernism

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There is a story circulating in rhetoric and composition that some time in the late 1970s the author died—or maybe just dissolved into the semiosis of intertextuality. The story has its weak and strong versions. The strong version asserts that no author was there in the first place—only an ideology of authorship, an inscription of the cultural practices and social institutions that organize and regulate the production of writing. This author-effect is written, as it were, into the public record by, for example, the attribution of forms of writing to their composers, copyright law, the emergence of a literary marketplace, careers in writing, and the rise of criticism. In contrast, the weak version asserts that indeed there was at one time an author or, stated more precisely, a historical project of locating the source of written works in the producer. This version upholds a labor theory of value based on the productive work of the author. It runs from, say, the Romantics (with their emphasis on originality and creativity) through the high modernists (with their emphasis on the composition of the difficult text). In both versions, the idea is that the author—along with all the other characteristic figures of modernity (the Freudian ego, the transcendental subject, the possessive individual, the revolutionary proletariat)—has now passed away, having been made obsolete and irrelevant, fragmented and decentered by changing relations of writing and reading in the era of postmodernism.

In composition studies, the death of the author was greeted as a theoretical breakthrough, hitting the street with the force of an ideological rectification. The critique of authorship was energizing because it seemed to create a conceptual space in which new work could take place, a space where composition theory could replace the outmoded modernist notion of the author with an updated version of agency more adequate to the postmodern condition. In short, although the author was apparently dead, people nonetheless felt that there was still something left to talk about. A number of initiatives therefore were forthcoming:

In the study and teaching of writing, theorists started to assign as much (or more) agency to readers and critics as to writers in the production of texts.

People started to grow suspicious of notions of personal voice and expressivist rhetorics as hopelessly implicated in the author-effect.

People started to say things like “the writer is written by as much as writes the text.”

Cognitivist notions of writing as purposeful action began to seem, at best, inadequate to the sheer surplus writing enacted through the writer and, at worst, a hopeless bid for control over the conditions of textuality controlling the writer.

The act of writing itself was refigured: it was no longer viewed as the productive art of making meaning and expressing a self but was viewed as an unending play of signifiers, as an unstable negotiation by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to other subjects, discourses, social institutions, and cultural practices.

People gave up on a unitary representation of the composer as the person doing the work of writing and started to think of the writer instead as “always already”—not an originating author-source but a relay point in the circulation of discourses of race, class, gender, nationhood, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, religion, region, and so on.

Now, the point of this sketch of the shifting fortunes of the author is not to distance myself from the initiatives I’ve listed—which, after all, I’ve participated in with many other people whose work I admire and to whom I am indebted. The point is that in composition studies the death of the author (and the intellectual practices that followed) mobilized allegiances in a way similar to the earlier slogan “process not product.” For example, the Elbow-Bartholomae debate about whether voice is authentic or constructed offers a familiar instance of how assumptions about authorship align teachers to student writers—to facilitate a disclosure of subjectivity (Elbow) or to locate the cultural logics of subjectivity (Bartholomae).

This debate—and all the others like it—is conventionally located in composition theory at an epochal divide, where postmodernists draw a line in the sand, putting on one side the old bad Cartesian self, the phallogocentric author, the Enlightenment notion of a Universal Subject (all of the things that are retrograde about modernism) while putting on the other side the new good decentered nomadic textual self (as a figure of all that’s vital and interesting about postmodernism). In other words, the

story of the death of the author that I've recounted briefly (and, no doubt, simplistically) carried with it an edifying mission—namely, once we get rid of the mystifying figure of the author, then we can rehabilitate the notion of agency. We can fill in the space left vacant by the death of the author with a theory of agency that transcends the illusions of the past and clarifies our tasks in the present.

There is, however, an odd twist to the story. The exhilaration that accompanied the burial of the author turned almost immediately into a sense of anxiety, a feeling that postmodern theorists had reached a certain impasse. As Lester Faigley observes in *Fragments of Rationality*, there was a growing suspicion that despite its critique “of discourses that pretend to contain truth and serve to justify practices of domination,” postmodern theory “does not supply a theory of agency” (20). This was a sobering moment, for the intellectual tools we had used to dismantle the figure of the author seemed to leave us unequipped to find an adequate replacement.

From my vantage point, the story of the death of the author has simply brought us back to the problem of agency as Marx posed it when he said that people make their history but not in conditions of their own making. What Marx is getting at here (at least the Marx I want to separate from the mechanical determinism of the Second International and the state orthodoxies of the Third International) is that *agency* refers to the practical logic by which people negotiate their ways of life, the ways in which they cohere their activity and experience in the world. From this perspective, I argue that the story of the death of the author, for all its charms (and they are considerable), has been misleading; it is not so much wrong as misleading because it's been told in a way that turns agency into the missing link, the subject of forthcoming theories that fills the conceptual void left when the author died. Theorizing agency, in other words, has turned into a progressive calling for compositionists, warranted by the felt need to rectify modernism's past errors.

For postmodernists, the exigence of updating the faded understandings of modernism seems self-evident, grounded in epochal shifts from Fordist to post-Fordist production, national to globalized societies, manufacturing to knowledge economies, the Cold War to the New World Order. My purpose here, however, is to suspend for a moment the millennial sense of urgency that seems to drive postmodern theorizing. I want to ask whether we really need—or even can have—a new theory of agency to explain literate acts and literate practices. My skepticism in this matter is based on the suspicion that the death of the author is not so much

the starting point of a new understanding of agency as it is a particular type of rumor that calls for investigation. In other words, as this essay's subtitle indicates, I want to make a partial defense of modernism and the author—partial in the sense of limited, unfinished, and partisan.

The Problem of Theorizing Agency

One of the difficulties of theorizing agency has to do with the multiple and conflicting senses embedded in the term. *Agency* signifies, on one reading, a domain of freedom, autonomy, absence of constraint—an arena of choice and decision. At the same time, another reading suggests that the term means a functioning part of something larger, such as a government agency, an insurance agent, a secret agent, or a double agent. In the first instance, social structures and the workings of ideology appear as forces that qualify an individual's or a group's ability to act authentically by channeling their energies into preexisting grooves. From this perspective, the notion of an author (not to mention the project of keeping one alive) is necessary and useful because it describes a way to resist the forces of conformity that threaten agency. In the second instance, the possibilities of self or group formation—the grounds of agency—seem to be enabled by participation in organizational or institutional goals and practices. By this account, authorship is part of the means of communication and exchange of identities that make up the common social life.

These representations of agency are not difficult to find in composition theory. Agency as lack of constraint plays a key role in expressivist rhetorics and the process movement's figure of the composer, while agency as enabling participation in institutional work is axiomatic in social constructivist and social-epistemic rhetorics. My sense is that this is not a theoretical debate that can be readily resolved. In one sense, the debate is theological, concerning powerful beliefs about free will and predestination (that "always already" effect again). The Elbow-Bartholomae debate, for example, could be transposed to the Reformation and the question of whether acts of faith (Elbow's "believing game") or good works (Bartholomae's "ventriloquy" and "strong readings") will lead to salvation. In secular terms, when in composition theory the Elbow-Bartholomae debate becomes a sign of epochal divide—with authentic selves on one side and textual selves on the other—it reproduces deeply ingrained habits of mind that polarize the individual and society, and then veers back and forth to understand the determinants of writing. Despite recent attempts at synthesis and blurred genres (for example, socio-cognition and social-expressivist rhetorics), the taxonomies that guide

composition studies simply codify this stalemate.

Agency, as I see it, is the way people live the history of the contemporary, the way they articulate (in the double sense of the term) their desires, needs, and projects, *giving voice* to their lived experience as they *join* their productive labors to the institutions and social structures they live within. As Michel de Certeau argues, agency is not so much a theory as a matter of strategy and tactics; agency is not about explaining but about maneuvering, not the theory but the *practice* of practice. From this perspective, the question of agency is not why people act as they do; instead, it is a question of what is to be done.

To want to *have* a theory of agency in the first place—to feel that one is missing—is a desire that grows out of the empty feeling left by the death of the author and the deconstruction of the transcendental subject. This desire for an adequate theory, I argue, seeks to get a grip on a sense of agency that is simply unavailable. In the story of the death of the author, representations of agency are not so much a matter of theory as of assent. We assent to representations of agency not because of their explanatory powers but because of their resonance with our lived experience. Thus, I think it's more useful to think of representations of agency not as theories but as persuasive structures of feeling.

The notion of “structure of feeling” comes, of course, from the work of Raymond Williams, who developed the term in a series of works, including *Preface to Film*, *The Long Revolution*, *Marxism and Literature* (where he treats it in the greatest detail), and *Politics and Letters* (where he develops some important qualifications and refinements). For Williams, structure of feeling refers to a form of practical consciousness that stands in uneasy relation to dominant systems of belief and education. Practical consciousness, as Williams says, is almost always different from official consciousness, not because it signifies a split between the individual and society but because it signifies how the effective presence of personal experience is itself social and resides in the common forms of what is currently being lived. The meanings and values that characterize a structure of feeling supply the motives that bump up against formally held, systematic beliefs. They can be sensed, Williams says, in the elements of “impulse, restraint, and tone” in a speaker's voice or in a writer's work, in the inflection that links a particular use of language to a particular ordering of social affiliation (*Marxism* 132).

Interestingly, Williams links structures of feelings to generations rather than to class. As Williams says, “No generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors” (*Marxism* 131). Identifying the

concept of structure of feeling with generations underscores, in Williams' view, the sense in which structures of feeling signify social experience in solution, before it is defined, classified, or codified and yet when it still exerts powerful pressures and sets effective limits on experience and action. A structure of feeling is a kind of social experience still in process and is often taken to be private and idiosyncratic; yet, it is socially structured at the edge of semantic availability where it has not yet precipitated semantic figures.

Following Williams, we may think of agency as a structure of feeling and in so doing insist that agency is not epiphenomenal in the older Marxian sense, but is instead the remainder of lived experience for which there is no necessary external counterpart that compels the shape or allegiances of our experience and action. Agency, then, is a kind of excess that is neither determinately given nor freely enacted; it bubbles over, as it were, from people's struggle to make a life in the world. In this sense, the attempt to theorize agency is not a "question about causes"; it is a question that—following Wittgenstein's discussion of the question "How am I able to obey a rule in the way I do?"—is "about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do" (85e). In other words, the representations of agency that we make available to ourselves are not the result of determining how to formulate and apply a rule (or a theory) but of our feelings about the possibilities of consequential action and how we recognize and justify what we do.

Death of the Author: 1968 and 1989

I want to use this sense of agency to revisit the death of the author. I find myself largely in agreement with Terry Eagleton's remarks on what I'd call the severe textualism of poststructuralist currents that emerged after the failure of the French student-worker alliance to overthrow Gaullism in 1968. From Eagleton's perspective, the death of the author and the primacy of the textual that runs through so much contemporary critical theory can be seen not so much as a moment of theoretical insight as the result of a mood of euphoria and disillusion—euphoria produced by the revolutionary energies and carnival of 1968 and disillusion produced by the betrayals of Stalinized Marxism and the decisive political defeat that reinstated the Gaullist regime. What happened, as Eagleton describes it, amounts to a kind of compensatory fantasy. He writes, "Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible instead to subvert the structures of language" and to relocate agency not in the streets but in critical work within the prison house of language (142).

The death of the author is a key episode in the self-fashioning of the post-discourses, a decisive move away from the characteristic author figures of modernism—the artistic avant garde and the revolutionary political vanguard—to a distinctly postmodern *topos*. Once the author is dead, Ezra Pound's classic modernist injunction "make it new" no longer makes much sense. Once the author is dead, no one is *left* to make it new. (And anyone who claims they can must be an essentialist and therefore must be dismissed.) In a sense, the author has *had* to die in order for the post-discourses to evacuate agency, to represent the world as already written to the saturation point—a world in which pastiche, recombination, recycling, cutting, and splicing are the means of production. The structure of feeling operating here is a deeply felt sense of contingency—of following afterward, belatedly—that marks these discourses as "post," strategically and rhetorically. They can't help but depend on what's just happened; they are reactions, after the fact, to modernism.

In the post-discourses, the bolsheviks seem just as depleted as the bohemians. The fall into the anarcho-capitalism of the Stalinized worker states in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe has pretty much put aside the historic commitments of the Marxist left, retired along with the author as a cautionary tale about what happens if you try to make it new. There is a complicated history to the sensibility that continues to read and use Marx; but since the social upsurges of 1968, it has increasingly distanced itself from Marxist politics. The kind of post-Cold War postmarxism that thrives on the intellectual left today has been tempered by the fall of the worker states in 1989, but it is not exactly anticommunist. Its post-ness is not a matter of refuting Marxism so much as it is a matter of expressing incredulity before Marxism's modernist metanarrative. The story of the proletariat and its political vanguard seem like old history now—at best a nostalgic account of the Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War when everyone was young and red, at worst an account of the crimes of Stalin (the purges, liquidations, removal of populations, forced labor camps, and psychiatric prisons).

It would be wrong to say that the post-discourses have abandoned the great modernist projects to overcome scarcity and emancipate humanity. Rather, they have placed these projects on display, an archive of dated beliefs to fix and sustain the contemporary state of disbelief. Socialism, as Jean Baudrillard has said, is a "summer home" to which the critical spirit can now safely retire. You can hear the embarrassed irony that has become such a widely persuasive structure of feeling when postmarxists refer to "what we used to call the class struggle." The turn of speech

reveals a strategic positioning: it displaces the terms of agency from the political to the textual, where we're left with the shard of an old lexicon instead of a motive for action.

Enlightenment and Revolution

The question of what you can no longer believe is a complicated one, complicated decisively by the way you represent your former beliefs and where you locate the point things went wrong.

For postmodern compositionists, the critique of the author invariably points back to the Enlightenment and the emergence of a Universal Subject. James Berlin makes the connection between the "unified, coherent, autonomous, self-present subject of the Enlightenment" and authorship: "the subject is a transcendent consciousness . . . acting as a free and rational agent that adjudicates competing claims for action . . . the author of all his or her behavior" (62). In Berlin's rhetoric—and, of course, more widely in composition theory—much rides on the Enlightenment in the formation of the modern subject. You can see how high the stakes have become when Bruce McComiskey, for example, says that the problem with the "Enlightenment conception of the Subject" is that it "leads inevitably to physical and metaphysical violence" (352).

The idea that the Enlightenment is a source of actual and intellectual terror has become a persistent theme in the post-discourses. As McComiskey points out, for Derrida the problem is an "identity/difference opposition" characteristic of the "Enlightenment Nation/Subject" that results in xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, and national fanaticism (352). Along similar lines, Lyotard argues against Habermas' defense of the Enlightenment as an "unfinished project." According to Lyotard, the "possible unanimity between rational minds" that Habermas still believes can lead to the enrichment of everyday social life does "violence to the heterogeneity of language games" through a terrorist program of silence or consent (xxiii, xxv).

Linking the Enlightenment to terror accounts for a good deal of the appeal of postmodern theorizing about the subject. Who, after all, wants to defend terror, the suppression of difference, and the implicitly totalitarian claims of the Universal Subject? Given postmodern assumptions, it's hard not to think we need a replacement. What may not be so self-evident, however, is how this connection between the Enlightenment and terror amounts to a rewriting of history. In the wake of failed revolution in 1968, revisionist currents on the Left Bank turned not only on the Enlightenment but also on its progeny, the French Revolution. Breaking

with Old Left traditions that hold up the French Revolution as the first stirrings in modernity of popular sovereignty and the people's justice, the "new philosophers" of the post-1968 period as well as renegade former leftists (such as historian François Furet) have, in effect, recapitulated the Thermidorean reaction that overthrew the Jacobins, arguing that collective action to realize the Enlightenment dream of human freedom and a commonwealth based on the general will must inevitably turn into a nightmare—not the Republic of Virtue but the Reign of Terror. The history of struggle that once formed the central revolutionary tradition of the French left—the red thread linking the fall of the Bastille to Toussaint L'Ouverture and the first successful slave uprising in the New World, to the street battles of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871, and to proletarian revolution in 1917—became a dystopic tale that leads to the gulag.

In my view, Foucault's argument that one doesn't have to be "for" or "against" the Enlightenment offers a useful starting point to reconsider the relationship between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Foucault calls for ending the "blackmail" that "you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism (this is considered a positive term by some and used by others, on the contrary, as a reproach); or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality (which may be seen once again as good or bad)" (43). In Foucault's view, the task instead is to "proceed with the analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment."

The "certain extent" of this determination—Foucault's qualifier—depends, I think, on the version of the Enlightenment you want to advance. The question, as Foucault contends, is our orientation toward the "contemporary limits of the necessary"—what, that is, we believe to be indispensable in the Enlightenment for the "constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects" (43). The figure Foucault wants to emphasize is the Kant of "What Is Enlightenment?": the polemicist who makes "maturity" the task of the modern age. Enlightenment, Kant says, is "man's leaving his self-caused immaturity," growing up and throwing off the yoke of the dependent minor, freeing himself from dependence on his former guardians through the public use of reason (132).

Foucault's Kant cuts a different silhouette than the figure you find, say, in Richard Rorty's work, where Kant is the founding father of professional philosophy who heroically faces the loss of metaphysical reality only to reground it in epistemology. In Foucault's account, Kant is aligned not so much with this departmentalization of knowledge but

with Baudelaire and the modernist urge to test the limits of the present—“a philosophical ethos,” Foucault says, “that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era” (42). From this perspective, there is still something left to be done vis-à-vis the legacy of the Enlightenment, if only we would recognize the thread that connects us and modernity to the Enlightenment. What connects us to the Enlightenment is not “faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude”: a persistent struggle to see the history that we are living as the passage to adult status (42).

You may have noticed by now that theorists of the modern/postmodern divide like to stage their fight over the Enlightenment on what the historian Robert Darnton refers to as the “summit view of eighteenth-century intellectual history” where people call out the names and recite the ideas of the Age of Reason (1). I want to extend Foucault’s qualified appreciation of the Enlightenment but sidestep for a moment such a “great books” approach in the interest of identifying more worldly threads that might connect us to the Enlightenment. To be fair, Foucault warns that we must see the Enlightenment not only in terms of ideas but as “an event, or a set of events and complex historical processes, that is located at a certain point in the development of European societies” (43). Nonetheless, Foucault limits himself to a particular “form of philosophical reflection”—namely, the “mode of reflective relation to the present” (44). This is the ethos of the High Enlightenment, the standpoint of the *philosophes* that, Darnton notes, has been “passed on piously from textbook to textbook” (2).

Darnton, in contrast, proposes to bring the Enlightenment down to earth, with another view of its persistently perplexing connection to the French Revolution. What Darnton has in mind is the “low-life of literature” that flourished under the Old Regime. In the twenty-five years before the Revolution, a literary underground evaded French censors, police, and monopolistic booksellers’ guilds to produce and distribute pirated and prohibited books of all sorts. An order from a bookseller in Poitiers to his supplier in Switzerland (a “short list of philosophical books that I want”) offers an idea of the kinds of “philosophical” works actually circulating among the French reading public: *Venus in the Cloister or the Nun in a Nightgown*, *Christianity Unveiled*, *Memoirs of Mme la Marquise de Pompadour*, *Inquiry on the Origin of Oriental Despotism*, *The System of Nature*, *Theresa the Philosopher*, *Margot the Campfollower* (qtd. in Darnton 1-2). It’s hard to miss how unfamiliar the titles are, suggesting, as Darnton says, “a lot of trash somehow got mixed up in the eighteenth-

century idea of philosophy" (2).

Hack writers of the Old Regime produced a constant stream of *libelles*—slandorous, pornographic, and sensationalistic attacks on every aspect of respectable society, from the court, the church, and the aristocracy to the academies, the salons, and the republic of letters. This "gutter Rousseauism" (*Rousseau du ruisseau*), as Darnton says, pilloried aristocratic decadence "with a scurrility that is difficult to imagine today," greeting the final crisis of the Old Regime with "their greatest barrage of antisocial smut" (35, 29). Although they lacked a coherent ideology and program for the future, the *libellistes*, according to Darnton, "communicated a revolutionary point of view: they showed that social rot was consuming French society, eating its way downward from the top. And their pornographic details got the point across to a public that could not assimilate the *Social Contract*" (35).

In the final years before the Revolution, the "shock of the new" was at least partially assimilated into the Old Regime and institutionalized as the High Enlightenment—just as Voltaire and the Encyclopedists, who had appeared so seditious a few years earlier, had been assimilated. In effect, the *philosophes* had professionalized themselves, developing what amounted to a career path and network of contacts, pensions, sinecures, and appointments that enabled them to secure livelihoods that did not depend on the market. Not so for the *libellistes*, who had to make their living through writing. Scorned by Voltaire as *la canaille de la littérature*, the *libellistes* formed a subintelligentsia that seethed with resentment and class hatred for the *grands* and *gens de lettres* who made up *le monde* of French society. As Darnton observes, this literary proletariat "was not merely unintegrated but beyond the pale and . . . wanted not to reform society in some polite, liberal, Voltairean way, but to overturn it" (36).

The establishment of the High Enlightenment no doubt contributed in important ways to the legitimation crisis of the Old Regime, undermining the elite's faith in tradition and social hierarchy with reason and natural law. Nonetheless, as Darnton argues, the ranks of the *libellistes* were much more likely to spawn revolutionary leadership. The pamphleteers, journalists, and bureaucrats of the Revolution such as Jean Paul Marat, Camille Desmoulins, Jacques-Pierre Brissot, Pierre Louis Manuel, and Jacques Hébert emerged from Grub Street to turn the cultural and political life of France upside down. They disbanded the academies and salons, canceled the pensions, and in general abolished the privileges and vested interests of the literary mandarins. The result was a startling revolution in the theater and journalism. After the *Comedie francaise's* monopoly was

revoked, forty-five new theaters opened, and fifteen hundred new plays were staged between 1789 and 1799. Even more striking was the increase in newspapers—from the few dozen that circulated in Paris in the 1780s to the founding of two hundred and fifty newspapers in the last six months of 1789 alone. A year later, at least three hundred and fifty newspapers circulated.

Habermas argues that the “unfinished” business of the Enlightenment is to release science, morality, and art from their esoteric forms and thereby to realign the culture of experts with that of the public. In a sense, this is exactly what the *libellistes* of the Old Regime did as they turned into revolutionaries, though I don’t think they are quite the “experts” that Habermas had in mind. Rather, they are the kind of organic intellectuals who speak for the people, *enragees* joining what Darnton calls their “crude, Jacobinical version of Rousseauism” to the revolutionary energies of the *sans-culotterie* (39). From this perspective, the influence of the Enlightenment on the Revolution runs from the bottom up. We are no longer in the realm of ideas and the Universal Subject; we are in the streets with the partisans.

In my view, this account of popular Enlightenment and the revolutionary forms it assumed provides a much needed corrective to recent theorizing about the politics of modernism. My sense is that what remains valuable about modernist politics is precisely what takes place in the French Revolution—namely, the emergence of the masses as subjects of their own history. Clearly, the revolutionary upsurges of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have an affinity to Kant’s call for “maturity”—to overthrow custodial care and take things into your own hands. At the same time, to the extent we identify with the struggles of the masses, we can loosen the terms *Enlightenment* and *Revolution* from their ritualized use as straw figures in an anti-modernist polemic and invest them with pertinence again as we engage in what Foucault calls the “undefined work of freedom,” which is the modernist legacy (46).

In this account of Enlightenment and revolution, moreover, we can see that the fear of the Universal Subject—the grounds of postmodernism’s ultimate blackmail—has not only been wildly exaggerated but has also been put, whether or not inadvertently, to questionable political ends. For postmodern theorists, the desire to replace the Universal Subject (due to its potential connections to terror and totalitarianism) with a decentered, fragmented, and nomadic subject amounts to a politics of difference and unassimilated otherness. Now, on the one hand, I see nothing objectionable or especially controversial about this representation of the subject, as

long as it is offered as a description of social experience in the era of late capitalism. On the other hand, when this representation becomes normative—when it is offered as a *necessary* defense against the modernist subject—then I think we enter treacherous political terrain, for such notions of the postmodern subject depend on a structure of feeling that wants to shift the work from the old modernist project of negotiating differences out in the streets to the project of preserving difference as an always uncertain theoretical foundation.

A Defense of the Author as Producer

The problem as I see it is the extent to which the supposedly new and improved postmodern subject contributes to the psychic Thermidor of the post-1968 and post-1989 period. More specifically, the problem as I see it consists in the way this representation of the subject challenges, as unfashionably modernist, the felt sense of presence and agency that individuals and groups experience at those moments of historical crisis when they *know* what they are doing and join together, with their differences, at the center of their own history, without debilitating irony or doubt. My sense is that you don't need either a Universal Subject or an updated theoretical replacement in order to preserve the possibility of what Susan Jarratt, among others, calls "kairoitic discourse"—a discourse through which people cohere their activity in the world and in ways that make them accountable to the moment. Revolutionary sentiment in the modern age, after all, has always been partial, situated, and kairoitic, a matter of "us" against "them," where the oppressed and exploited break from their generalized identification with the ruling classes and society in order to act on their own behalf.

Unless we acknowledge this structure of feeling as a living possibility, we risk condemning working people worldwide to an eternal present of globalization, capitalist triumphalism, and the end of history. In my view, what is needed is not a new theory of agency but the old modernist sense of *solidarity*: the workers against the bosses, the people against the ruling bloc, the oppressed against their oppressors. And just as I want to keep this part of modernism alive, I now want to go back and check the vital signs of the author. Despite rumors of death, I think there are good reasons to keep at least a version of the author alive and kicking. As it's been told in composition studies, the story of the death of the author has served, paradoxically, as an overcorrection while at the same time not going far enough. The overcorrection consists in identifying the nineteenth-century image of the writer-in-the-garret as the telling figure of the

author and in seeking to replace this romantic *isolato* with a social and collaborative view of writing. This move is due, no doubt, in part to composition's troubled relations with literary studies and a desire to free the study and teaching of writing from high culture ideologies of authorship and literary value. The problem, however, is that this move gives away too much and offers too little in return. First, an overcorrection mistakes the notoriously bad case of the belletristic author for the category itself, and then proposes that we need to get rid of the author altogether. The proposed gain—to be able to say the writer is “socially constructed”—appears to say more than it actually does by way of explanation and, then, in effect, creates its own difficulties.

Let me put it this way. Compositionists (including myself) habitually claim that writing is a social and collaborative activity. Fair enough. There is no question in my mind that to understand the production, circulation, and use of written texts you need to elaborate complex discursive networks. The difficulty, however, is that dissolving the figure of the author into the relations of writing—the literary circles, publishers, editors, agents, bookstores, critics, and readers—risks at the same time dissolving the class relations that link the author as a producer to precisely those social networks that you want to understand. The notion of writing as collaboration, that is, can lead to idealized representations of the necessarily social work of writing that “forget” the contradictions between labor and capital. There is often a troubling utopian aura around the term *collaboration*, as though it marks a post-capitalist era in which we've transcended market relations and the labor theory of value. But precisely for this reason, we need a notion of the author all the more—as a vital point to organize around, in writers' guilds, unions, congresses, cooperatives, and other associations for self-management. In late capitalist societies, the author still figures as a key site of self-defense within market relations, a self-formed position of struggle to control the conditions and products of work.

The point, as I see it, is not just to rid ourselves of individualistic ideologies of the author and to take up a “social view” of writing. The task, as Walter Benjamin poses it, is to *socialize* the author as producer. He explains, “What matters is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal” (233). Enlightenment and revolution come together in Benjamin's resolutely modernist account of *technique*—that is, the way writers such as Brecht position their work within the relations of production. In Benjamin's view, Brecht's epic theater

grows out of a struggle over the means of production to turn the capitalist theatrical apparatus—what Brecht calls the “means against the producers”—into its opposite, so that consumers can become producers and spectators can become collaborators (qtd. in Benjamin 233-34). The goal is a “dramatic laboratory” that replaces representation with discovery. In this laboratory, the work is not to reproduce situations (with their climaxes and resolutions) but to dissect the “strictly habitual course” of events. The theater thereby becomes a socialized (and quasi-scientific) space of tests, experiments, examinations, and truths—a collaboration by which the spectators recognize the conditions in which they live, not with the satisfaction of naturalistic dramaturgy but with revolutionary astonishment.

Now, I must admit that I have chosen from Benjamin the most blatantly modernist passages I could find concerning the author, passages in which his language is filled with such seemingly retro terms as *technique*, *apparatus*, *production*, *historical tasks*, and *social engineering*. The reason is that this structure of feeling is finally what I want to preserve as a vital and usable legacy of modernism. The corrosive effects of postmodernism show up most distressingly, I think, in the way theorizing has shaken the old modernist faith in our capacity to socialize the conditions and products of our own labor. Postmodern attacks on planning and productivist ideologies are by now familiar to us—and, certainly, they have their point. My feeling, though, is that Benjamin’s notion of the author as producer remains important precisely because it enables the belief that we can design social futures out of the uneven development and moral ruin of late capitalism, even if we cannot guarantee results with the certainties of an earlier time.

In my view, the persistence of capitalism—not its transformation into a new postmodern epoch but its sheer longevity—presses heavily on us. There is, after all, the longstanding revisionist tendency to explain the defeats of the popular forces and the lulls in class struggle as a matter of objective conditions. At this point in the history of late capitalism, the effort to keep alive the author as a producer figures as part of a larger anti-revisionist struggle against an overwhelming sense of contingency and objectivism—of feeling “cast” into the world, in both an existential and a dramatistic sense, without recourse to collective self-defining action. It’s not that we can escape the world as the ground of our history. The point is that we don’t have to make peace with it.¹

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Notes

1. For L.W. and all other “recovering modernists” out there—one epoch at a time.

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