

## Introduction: The Concept of Polyphony and the Author's Voice

Lale Behzadi

The idea of investigating concepts of authorship seems fascinating and at the same time outdated, at least for those who are familiar with the theoretical debates of the past decades where every possible idea and opinion with regard to authorial concepts apparently has been uttered and published.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps 'outdated' is not the right word; on the contrary, the author has been re-discovered, especially in medieval studies where contemporary literary theories are applied, albeit reluctantly. At the same time scholars in the field of research on pre-modern texts have expressed some kind of relief that the author has been deconstructed because previously the focus there had been exclusively on the authorial instance.<sup>2</sup> Another re-discovery continues to concern those who work with these texts: the phenomenon that interpretation as such, and especially when it comes to the author, remains an unsolvable problem. It seems that even with the most sophisticated theories and systems we still have to be content with approximation and an ongoing endeavor.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it does remain fascinating for two reasons:

Firstly, the broad range of authorial manifestations in pre-modern Arabic texts remains to be thoroughly investigated. In this volume we focus mostly on prose texts from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E.; it could be extended, though, until the advent of modernity, i.e. the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We are convinced that the author as figure, category, and function is not only interesting for Arabic Literary Studies but for Middle Eastern Studies in

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1 For an overview on the debate, see for example Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, Jannidis, *Rückkehr des Autors*, or Spoerhase, *Autorschaft und Interpretation* (Chapter 1: Der "Tod" des Autors und seine "Rückkehr" als "Autorfunktion").

2 Wenzel, "Autor und Autorschaft," 1.

3 Rather than looking for an all-time solution, research can identify temporary conditions for plausibility. For authorship as a marker of time and space, see Dannenberg, "Zum Autorkonstrukt und zu einem methodologischen Konzept der Autorintention," 99-102.

general, be it religious studies, history, art history, or other disciplines, especially those which rely on historical texts, documents, or other artifacts.<sup>4</sup> The concept of authorship points towards a certain anthropological constant, namely, who is speaking and to whom.<sup>5</sup>

Our second reason for taking a closer look at the author is based on our assumption that by including Arabic prose into the range of investigated sources the field of theory could be enriched. Furthermore, new perspectives to the discussion can emerge which is, to date, dominated by European and North American medieval and literary studies that focus on texts generated in Europe.

When we try to understand literary history as well as literary historiography, we are confronted by authors all the time. They simply cannot be circumvented. The history of Arabic literature – as any literature – is shaped by authors and their oeuvres. While we can assume that authorship is only one textual function among others, it is striking that this feature in particular is quite dominant, not only with regard to the self-expression of by-gone times but also with regard to our perception of those eras.<sup>6</sup> Since every act of interpretation means to cross borders, the fact that we read texts from historically distant times and different cultural and linguistic backgrounds should not constitute an insurmountable obstacle, on the contrary: without neglecting the conditions in which those texts have been written, we could apply hermeneutic strategies and identify semiotic structures that can claim universal validity (which again is something different from alleged objectivity).

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4 See here, for example, the chapters on textual agency in Hirschler, *Muslim Historiography*, 63ff. and 86ff.

5 Referring to Paul de Man, Burke identifies several important aspects, such as intention, authority, biography, accountability, oeuvre, and autobiography. Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, 4. As we can see, the scope of authorial functions and aspects can be widened and shifted.

6 The author is, in some way, our hermeneutic tool of providing order in literary studies; Bein, "Zum 'Autor' im mittelalterlichen Literaturbetrieb," 303.

## 1 The Author as Hermeneutic Category

For the reading of historical texts the term “author” seems indispensable. Even if we decided to dispose of it, its functions and impacts would remain. Therefore it could be helpful to ask which implications the term “author” offers as a hermeneutic category.<sup>7</sup> By trying to understand pre-modern Arabic texts we traditionally start to reconstruct the knowledge of the author. The name of an author is tantamount to a certain textual world and, vice versa, any textual corpus is mostly linked to a name of an author. With it, we associate a historical person as well as a source of certain ideas and concepts. Anonymous texts are usually difficult to deal with in that they challenge this perception and provoke an almost reactionary, hurried search for the ‘real’ author. Of course, as medieval studies have pointed out, this desire for reconstruction is justified in some ways. The author, his (rarely her) intention and his biography, gives some indication of his particular political, social, and cultural circumstances and therefore serves as a historical witness. In the course of examining the historical context other aspects of the authorial potential have been neglected such as the epistemic value and the discursive horizons.<sup>8</sup> The theoretical debates of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been characterized by a deep mistrust of the author. If we take a closer look at the history of literature, we can find that there is mutual suspicion: the reader nurses it towards the author; and the author maintains it towards the reader, and sometimes towards himself. This displayed mistrust is by no means a purely modern and post-modern phenomenon as we can see in Galen’s hermeneutic anecdote on the poet Parthenius, transmitted through Arabic-Latin translations. A short summary goes as follows:

The poems by Parthenius (d. after 73 B.C.) reach a foreign people while he is still alive. He goes there and encounters two philologists who quarrel about the interpretation of a passage. One understands it as Parthenius wants it to be understood, the other differs from this reading. Parthenius, traveling incognito, tries to convince the latter

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7 Since we cannot grasp what an author is, we could focus on the contingency, the variability and the apparitional nature of authorship. Bennett, *The Author*, 118.

8 Foucault, “Was ist ein Autor?,” 17f.

by telling him that he had heard Parthenius explaining the meaning. But the philologist would not accept this line of interpretation. Parthenius, then, is forced to reveal his true identity in order to regain the authority over the interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, it is not clear by the end of the anecdote whether the disclosure of the poet's identity ends the dispute. The problem of misinterpretation or, to be more precise, the fact that a text leaves room for interpretation, appears to have been an issue in Galen's time because he thinks about attaching some guidelines in the interests of avoiding it.<sup>10</sup>

For the author's mistrust towards himself George Campbell in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* presents the following anecdote:

It is reported of Lopez de Vega, a famous Spanish poet, that the Bishop of Beller, being in Spain, asked him to explain one of his sonnets, which he said he had often read, but never understood. Lopez took up the sonnet, and after reading it several times, frankly acknowledged that he did not understand it himself; a discovery which the poet probably never made before.<sup>11</sup>

The author's mistrust is traditionally reflected in his preface where he outlines the way he wants his book to be understood. The reader equally questions this authority and reads between the lines or weighs whether he can trust the author or not; or he decides to believe him. Either way, a decision has to be made, and the author offers some advice, hoping that the decision is made in favour of his suggestions.

The textual archaeology and the reconstruction practised in the disciplines concerned with historical texts are quite useful aids for grasping

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9 Quoted from Spoerhase, *Autorschaft und Interpretation*, 443, Fn 17.

10 Galen, here, enacts the return of the author where the father's authority – over his text-child – remains unsteady among the stepfathers (i.e. further witnesses who give their *testimonium* about the authorship). Spoerhase, *Autorschaft und Interpretation*, 446.

11 Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, in his chapter on "The Nature and Power of Signs," 256. An initial indication was found in Spoerhase, *Autorschaft und Interpretation*, 443, Fn 17. I am grateful to Peter Konerding for his helpful comment.

the contextual conditions of a specific historical setting. Research on authorship, however, can be taken beyond this point. At the beginning of any hermeneutic activity, the author seems to be the key to gaining access to the meaning of his text. One way to overcome this authorial authority would be to see the author not primarily as a biographical figure and a historical personality but rather as an organizational principle, a template which enables us to uncover both the potential and the limitations of a text simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> The authorial undertakings would not so much highlight an individual perspective but rather be seen as a source for hermeneutic options.<sup>13</sup>

## 2 Manifestations of Voices in Medieval Arabic Prose Texts

The multiplicity of voices is probably not an exclusive characteristic of medieval Arabic prose texts but it is a quite prominent feature of them. In our context, those texts that do not fit the modern definition of literature inasmuch as they are not fiction in the traditional sense are especially interesting. The focus is on *adab* texts in the field of entertaining education, encyclopedic texts, collections, *rasā'il*, *akhbār*, and what could be called literary historiography or historicizing literature. It is this special mixture that we trade under the name of *adab* and that still is so difficult to grasp, not least because there is no real equivalent in European medieval literature.<sup>14</sup> The author often appears in prefaces and epilogues, stating his authorship and ownership of the text and explaining the goal of the book, thanking God and addressing his patron and his intended readership, sometimes outlining the conditions of his writings.

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12 Authorship “not as a single essence or non-essence but as a repertoire of practices, techniques and functions – forms of work – whose nature has varied considerably across the centuries and which may well in any given case have been performed by separate individuals.” Love, *Attributing Authorship*, 33.

13 With reference to Foucault, Jannidis identifies four rules of the authorial construction: the author as a constant level of values, the author as a field of a terminological and theoretical context, the author as a stylistic unity, and the author as a specific historical moment. Jannidis, “Der nützliche Autor,” 355.

14 On fictionality and *adab* literature, see for example Kennedy, *On Fiction and Adab*, and Leder, *Story-telling in non-fictional Arabic literature*.

In those paratexts, he appears to be a familiar speaker, and it is these texts in particular which have already been examined in research.<sup>15</sup> The author, there, often speaks as an individual, as one person with certain qualities and abilities, and quite often with a biographical background which is disclosed in part to the reader. When the actual text starts, the author changes his appearance and his tone. Mostly, he does not transform explicitly into a narrator. The established separation between the author and the narrator which is probably most prevalent in modern and post-modern Western literature does not get us very far here. Although most authors generally portray themselves as if the living person and the authorial instance are the same,<sup>16</sup> it often appears as if the author passes on his authority to other voices.

Authors such as al-Tha‘alibī (*Yatīmat al-dahr*), Ibn Khallikān (*Wafayāt al-a‘yān*), Abū l-Faraj al-İṣfahānī (*Kitāb al-Aghānī*) and others collect information about individuals and their respective works. In these biographical compendiums, anthologies, and *ṭabaqāt* works, it is worth noting that the authors are not invisible, but not very dominant either. They compile many, sometimes differing, variations of certain accounts, biographical data, and anecdotal material and thus present themselves as conductors of audible, often identifiable, voices. Treatises and essays, although being presented by one author, are composed in a similar way even if the author’s voice is more prominent in these genres than in the former. The intellectual entertainment produced by authors such as al-Jāhiz (*Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, *Rasā’il*) possesses a higher level of complexity. Here, the author collects a lot of information and narratives, but at the same time gives his personal opinion as well. However, what he passes on as his personal choice from the rich material at his disposal is a carefully arranged panorama of the respective topic and deeply rooted in a choir of distinguished voices.<sup>17</sup> The ef-

15 Among others Freimark, *Das Vorwort als literarische Form in der arabischen Literatur*. Orfali, “The Art of the *Muqaddima*.”

16 It could be helpful here to take into consideration Lejeune’s “pacte autobiographique”, Lejeune, *Der autobiographische Pakt*, 28.

17 It is the author as arraying instance that is at work here. See al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, vol. V, 199.

fect of this composition is a high level of complexity, the author being an agent that works like a medium between the audience and the sheer unmanageable abundance and variety of perspectives from which any given subject can be looked at.<sup>18</sup>

Next to biographical works and essays there are portraits, reports, and memoirs in which allegedly authentic accounts on contemporaries are narrated in elaborated language. An author such as Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī peppers his court stories (*Kitāb al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*, *Kitāb Akhlāq al-wazīrayn*) with statements and accounts of others, thus placing the authorial responsibility on many shoulders – that would be one possible impact – or substantiating his own authority and authenticity. Interestingly, the number of audible voices decreases with the level of fictiveness (anecdotes, poetry etc.). We can observe this effect in entertaining narratives such as *maqāmāt*, didactic literature, and anecdotes of all sorts. Verification via authorial witnesses does not seem necessary; nevertheless the multiplicity of voices is existent here, too. Al-Tanūkhī, for example, in his *Kitāb al-Faraj ba'd al-shidda* gives moral advice via entertaining stories which he has assembled from previous collections. He presents divergent accounts of the same topos, yielding to different narrators and acting as member of a chorus of voices. As compiler and editor, however, he is fully in charge and responsible for the arrangement of the stories and also for changes, abbreviations, and additions. While he often seems to vanish as an author between transmitted stories, it is his style of narration and his mode of interference that underlines his existence throughout the text.<sup>19</sup>

### 3 Polyphony and the Authority of the Author

In nearly all genres of pre-modern Arabic texts, authors are the masters of relativizing the authorial authority, or so it seems. If the author does not appear throughout the text with author's comment or personal

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18 James Montgomery has described these authorial directions in detail, see Montgomery, *Al-Jāhīz: In Praise of Books*, for example 73.

19 Özkan, *Narrativität*, 18, 222, 226.

sound (*skaz*),<sup>20</sup> he steps back in line with other authors. Here, we encounter double or multiple hermeneutic layers, multiply hidden authors, and authors in disguise. This ‘polyphony’ is characterized by a diversity of genres. Different types of prose and verse are mixed and collected from various sources. The references are given by means of empty *is-nāds* and similar statements that are used as a stylistic device instead of a reliable verification. It seems as if the audible voice soon passes the baton on to the next person and in doing so, delegates the act of narration to them. Last, but not least, we can find frame structures in varying degrees, contextualizing information, feigned authenticity, antithetic writing etc.

Polyphony, a term borrowed from music theory, when applied here, describes a texture consisting of two or more seemingly independent voices; the important core of the term is that the voices are perceived as independent and equivalent although they are related.<sup>21</sup> There are several questions to be asked as to the nature, the reason, and the effects of this polyphony or ‘multi-voicedness’ in Arabic literature: Does the author, in his own voice, shy from directness? Is one voice not enough? Does the author need corroboration from others? Is the phenomenon simply a matter of academic name dropping? Could this in turn be interpreted as a sign of underdeveloped individuality? Is this whole act of collecting voices an impact of the *ḥadīth* transmission? Is this ‘multi-voicedness’ or ‘polyphony’ (to stay with the musical metaphor) rather a crowd of equal voices, or is there a hierarchy? And if the latter is the case, how is it made evident? Should the author then better be called a conductor of an orchestra rather than just one voice among others within a polyphonic texture? The multi-voicedness phenomenon could also imply that authorial function itself is weak and self-conscious. Perhaps it sheds light on the circumstances of writing, as authors had to make sure, i.e. to assure

20 For the “illusion of improvisation” see Boris Eichenbaum, “Die Illusion des Skaz,” 272; although he mostly refers to explicit oral insertions, it could be asked in our texts, too, how this “personal sound” evolves, “Wie Gogols Mantel gemacht ist,” 275f.

21 When used in literary theory, the term mostly refers to either multilingualism or to a required unity of the original text and its translation. See Strutz/Zima, *Literarische Polyphonie*.



themselves, that they would not cross a line, being dependent of their patrons, their employers, or their social and academic peer group.

With regard to the emergence of the encyclopedic genre in late medieval and early modern Europe it has been argued that the popularity of the genre has been the result of the plurality of the environment (i.e. the realms of experience).<sup>22</sup> The multiplication of options, living conditions, beliefs etc. has led to the need to organize. We could also call it a prototype of modernity with the result that the loose and rich material had to be sorted and categorized so as to establish order in times of rising complexity.<sup>23</sup> When we look at Arabic *adab* texts, a need to reduce obscurity but without simplifying diversity is evident at first glance. On further examination, however, the order gives way to a new level of complexity where the determinism of a single position is clearly rejected in favour of a polyphony of voices and perspectives. The fact that so many voices are audible circumvents the problem of the unavailability of the author.<sup>24</sup> Again, if we limit our inquiry to asking what the author's motivation might have been to put himself into this array of voices we behave like tutors or guardians of the text. The father of the text is absent; he cannot control inappropriate contextualization.<sup>25</sup> We as philologists therefore treat the text as the Prodigal Son<sup>26</sup> and take the place of the absent father/mother, fulfilling the traditional task of philology: To re-contextualize those texts which have been subject to the process of de-contextualization as a result of the passage of time and an ever-broadening gap between author and reader in terms of culture, religion, language etc. Per-

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22 Friedrich, "Weltmetaphorik und Wissensordnung der Frühen Neuzeit," 195.

23 For this tendency to totality, see Biesterfeldt, "Arabisch-islamische Enzyklopädien: Formen und Funktionen," 47; and Meier, "Enzyklopädischer Ordo und sozialer Gebrauchsraum," 519f.

24 "Genuine problems of interpretation typically arise when and only when the speaker or writer is unavailable for comment." Glock, *Quine and Davidson on Language, Thought and Reality*, 206, quoted from Spoerhase, *Autorschaft und Interpretation*, 439, Fn. 3.

25 With regard to the "placelessness" of the philological object, Spoerhase refers to the discussion on the value of written transmission as given in Plato's *Phaidros*. Spoerhase, *Autorschaft und Interpretation*, 439.

26 Spoerhase, *Autorschaft und Interpretation*, 441.

haps instead of (or in addition to) asking why any author might have shaped his text the way he did, we could also ask what this mode of presentation does, what effects can be identified and, what it causes.

Pre-modern Arabic texts show an astonishing awareness of the fact that the author's authority is a fragile one. However, paradoxically, this lends the author a ubiquitous quality even in passages where he is not to the fore. The act of embedding the author's voice in a polyphonic concert can be understood as an act of self-defense against any possible reproach which could emerge with the claim that the author lacks authority, as additional voices, if carefully chosen, increase the level of authority of both the work and the author. In addition, information, or any act of communication, is valued only when confirmed by a multitude of voices. This reading would strengthen the arguments of those who claim that in medieval times there was no real sense of the individual, that a group or a number of voices always carried more weight than an individual voice. It is, however, rather unlikely that this is the case here, not least because the paratexts show quite a tangible sense of individuality and authority.<sup>27</sup>

One could assume that this system of multiplying the author's voice applies to collections and compilations only and therefore represents a rather specific problem of anthologies and editions. We should, of course, bear in mind the power and the state of development of the respective genre an author has chosen,<sup>28</sup> and the literary and social circles throughout which he roamed, with their interplay of expectations towards a genre (recipients) and expectations towards these expectations (authors). Genres apparently work as syntheses of anticipated expectations in a cultural space that is defined and structured by previous works, conventions, and values.<sup>29</sup> However, a look at other Arabic genres proves that this 'multi-voicedness', combined with a strong performative

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27 Referring to Edward Said's statement on textuality, Harold Love sums up as follows: "To identify authorship as a form of human work is to validate individual agency." Love, *Attributing Authorship*, 32.

28 With reference to Friedrich Schleiermacher, see Klausnitzer, "Autorschaft und Gattungswissen," 227-230.

29 Klausnitzer, "Autorschaft und Gattungswissen," 231.

impetus, is a common *modus operandi*. What the texts seem to convey is an awareness of the unreliability of a single voice. Authors appear as one voice among others, taking part in a polyphonic concert, the outcome of which is uncertain. The text – allegedly – abstains from fixed definitions and final statements.

Nevertheless, perhaps we can deepen our understanding when we turn the argumentation over and look at it from yet another angle: Perhaps these texts challenge the whole concept of originality that is usually inextricably linked to our concept of authorship. Every text, to modify the notion of a father trying to save his prodigal text-child, has different mentors, or at least more than one father.<sup>30</sup> This concept of authorship seems to represent the general concept of a text; as woven fabric of very different threads with no beginning and no end. The texts themselves, however, do not conceal that every text in principle is a hierarchical entity, because it preselects, organizes, and arranges the material at hand.

Authors present themselves as the interface between text and context, embedded as they are in an unlimited number of voices. Perhaps we can go so far as to state that these texts represent the prototype of post-modern concepts of authorship, displaying a high degree of referentiality and self-reflexivity, thus transferring the responsibility to the reader as well as perceiving any text as a hybrid and rhizome-like entity.<sup>31</sup> But, of course, it is also conceivable that we are fooled by a very sophisticated simulation of ambiguity. Regardless of whether or not this is the case, what remains is the insight that the focus on authorship encourages us to approach these texts with fresh perspectives inviting us to follow the enriching path which they afford us.

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30 Furthermore, authors themselves deal with their “poetic fatherhood” and “poetic sonship” respectively as has been discussed in English literature. This poetic ancestry is especially revealing in Arabic literature. For this form of “authorial self-fashioning,” see Erne’s Introduction in Bolens and Erne (eds.), *Medieval and Early Modern Authorship*, 15, and Cooper, “Choosing Poetic Fathers”, in the same volume.

31 With reference to Eco’s labyrinth metaphor, see Nicol, *Postmodern Fiction*, 48; with reference to Linda Hutcheon, see Nicol, *Postmodern Fiction*, 32.

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