

## Introduction: Institutions of Authorship

Philipp Löffler and Tim Sommer

### Contributor biographies:

Philipp Löffler teaches American literary and cultural history at the University of Heidelberg. His work focuses on the history and sociology of reading, literary patronage, the professionalization of authorship, and the history of US higher education. He has (co-)edited a number of books, most recently *The Handbook of American Romanticism* (2021) and *How to Read the Literary Market* (2021). His first monograph is *Pluralist Desires: Contemporary Historical Fiction and the End of the Cold War* (Camden House). His next book will be a cultural history of US literary professionalism in the nineteenth century, tentatively titled *Publishing Scoundrels: American Literature and the Professionalization of Authorship, 1790–1915*.

Tim Sommer is a Lecturer in English Literature and Culture at the University of Passau. He has been a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University, an Academic Visitor at the University of Cambridge, and, most recently, a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. His research has appeared in *Romanticism*, *Book History*, the *Harvard Library Bulletin*, and *The Wordsworth Circle*, among other venues. His monograph *Carlyle, Emerson and the Transatlantic Uses of Authority: Literature, Print, Performance* was published by Edinburgh University Press in 2021. He is currently at work on a project that explores the relationship between modern fiction and the literary archive.

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What does it mean to think about literary authorship as a cultural institution? An episode from a recent chapter in American literary history may serve to suggest a tentative answer. When Jonathan Franzen published his third novel *The Corrections* in the fall of 2001, critics used the occasion to proclaim a near total literary revolution. The novel's strength, David Gates argued, consisted in its ability to use the narrative framework of a "conventional" "family saga" to reveal itself "as a trickier and trendier sort of work, which flawlessly mimics old-school plottiness, readability and character development in order to seduce you into realms of bottomless geopolitical-spiritual disquiet" (2001, n. pag.). Franzen fused "wordplay worthy of Nabokov" with "ambivalences" reminiscent of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* while entertaining "an on-and-off relationship with realism" (Gates 2001, n. pag.) to "create a mosaiclike picture of America in the waning years of the 20th century" (Kakutani 2001, n. pag.). Franzen, in other words, was multilingual in the sense that his literary craft attracted a variety of readerships whose appropriations of him and his novel depended on different assumptions about the nature of the literary.

As it quickly turned out, the versatility of *The Corrections* was its greatest asset and arguably its biggest problem. For while there seemed little controversy over the novel's centrality within the broader cultural establishment (which had been hoping for a long-anticipated exploration of contemporary America) and the more confined spaces of contemporary academic criticism (which was exploring the various ends of postmodernism), the novel's selection for

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Oprah Winfrey's Book Club exposed deeper faultlines underneath this apparent consensus. In a frequently quoted interview, Franzen revealed his conflicted stance on the choice of his novel and its concomitant branding as popular reading: he thought of himself as "solidly in the high-art literary tradition" but he also liked "to read entertaining books and this maybe helps bridge that gap, but it also heightens these feelings of being misunderstood" (Franzen, qtd. in Kirkpatrick 2001, n. pag.). He just could not shake off his fear of being read alongside a range of other picks by Winfrey, which he thought of as "one-dimensional" and "schmaltzy" (qtd. *ibid.*). Oprah's Book Club seemed to represent to Franzen a reading environment governed by rules and standards of taste that he thought could threaten his assumed literary credibility (although an appearance on Winfrey's show would not necessarily have diminished his high literary esteem).

Such authorial ambivalence about different forms of recognition (academic, peer, and popular) reveals the extent to which the modern literary landscape is divided by competing currencies of value and corresponding assumptions about the nature of literary authorship. It shows, perhaps more importantly, that authorial self-fashioning becomes meaningful within distinct spaces of literary production and criticism, many of them relying on sense-making categories that are not naturally applicable within other fields of practice. The reasons why writers like Franzen (we may also think of other, late-twentieth-century examples such as Umberto Eco or A. S. Byatt) speak to graduate students and professors in literature departments at the same time that they appeal to a wider reading audience reflect the internal segmentation of the modern literary field and the important role that literary institutions – from newspapers and publishing agencies to TV shows and private sponsors – have played in the history of professional authorship.

This special issue on "Institutions of Authorship: Publishing, Gatekeeping, and Patronage in the Modern Literary Field" explores these multiple intersections between practices of professional authorship and literary institutions by surveying developments across the long twentieth century. In so doing, it seeks to shed light on the historical trajectories of what Jeremy Rosen (2019) has recently identified as an "institutional turn" in contemporary literature and criticism. Rather than dismissing institutional authority and power as expressions of hegemonic coercion, the special issue suggests, with Rosen, "a more balanced view of institutions as enabling as well as constraining" (2019, n. pag.). Informed by such a descriptive rather than normative approach, the issue contextualizes the complexities of modern literary authorship by historically situating the agents and institutions that have restricted (or allowed) access to, and participation in, the literary field since the late nineteenth century.

This focus on literature's socio-institutional frameworks may seem particularly pertinent to scholarship on contemporary literature, given that prevalent notions of what counts as "literary" or "professional" have changed substantially over the past two decades. Digital forms of publishing, reading, and reviewing have extended access to the field of literary production in ways that appear to suggest an increasing democratization of culture. At a time in which the boundaries of traditional authorship appear to have become more permeable, the "Age of Amazon" (McGurl 2016) has lent authority to cultural practitioners such as amateur writers and lay critics (see Barekat/Barry/Winters 2017 and Majumdar/Vadde 2019). Exerting their power through online forums such as *Goodreads* and publishing platforms such as *Kindle Direct* or *Smashwords*, they circumvent more conventional taste-making institutions associated with newspaper criticism, academic journals, or prestigious prizes and fellowships.

The special issue implicitly asks about the nature and scope of such contemporary phenomena but also, more immediately, inquires into their prehistory, aiming to reconstruct the salience of earlier forms of publishing, marketing, reviewing, and collecting that accompanied and

shaped literary authorship in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century. What such a comprehensive historical perspective reveals is that – despite recent transformations – traditional hierarchies of cultural value have hardly lost their relevance. Some of the locations and institutional settings in and through which assumptions about literary greatness (and mediocrity) are established and sustained have undoubtedly shifted over time (from Paris in the 1920s to New York City in the 1970s, for example, or from the modernist little magazine to academic venues [see, for example, Casanova (1999) 2004 and Harbach 2014]). Yet the notion that there are higher and lower forms of literary practice has remained relatively untouched (see Graff 1987, Guillory 1993, and Kindley 2017). Literary culture today continues to be informed by hierarchies of aesthetic production that have dominated the field since the nineteenth century, at the same time that new agents have emerged and different vocabularies of valuation openly vie with one another.

Retracing such continuities and tensions, the special issue closes in on questions that include the following: What are the currencies by which literary quality – in both material and immaterial terms – gets measured? Who is responsible for establishing and upholding such standards? What is the relationship between traditional tastemakers such as academics or prize committees and less frequently discussed arbiters such as literary scouts or censors? How do authors navigate different institutional environments, from libraries and archives to the world of publishing? Which forms of literary patronage have enabled writers to access the field in the past? How has the landscape of cultural sponsorship and literary networking changed – and what has been the impact of such changes on modern authorship and its professional and cultural performance?

These broad questions and concerns can be assessed critically only within concrete fields of inquiry and their respective empirics. The individual contributions to this issue feature a selection of historically specific case studies that all highlight key moments in the co-evolution of literary authorship, on the one hand, and literary institutions, on the other. United by their focus on micro-historical contexts of literary and critical practice, the five articles gathered in this special issue show how these contexts relate to broader, macro-historical constellations of (mostly Anglo-American) cultural production. In that sense, the essays help us to understand that questions about the institutionality of literature and corresponding models of authorship attain value within fields of practice that may at times seem almost irrelevant, removed from the grand narratives of literary-critical revolution. And yet, while the essays' insistence on the field-specificity of their individual case studies evades the frameworks of traditional literary historiography – based on periods, schools, and movements – all contributions prompt their readers to consider alternative ways in which the particularities of literary practice might be incorporated into larger stories of literary-historical evolution. These include the history of the book trade and marketing, the function of censorship in the literary field, the authority of archival procedures, and – not least – the role of contemporary literary criticism itself.

The issue opens with two articles that focus on transatlantic institutions of authorship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her contribution “Owning the Apparatus: Edith Wharton, Racine, and the Fetishization of Pre-Revolutionary France,” Sheila Liming looks at genteel book collecting in the *fin-de-siècle* United States. Her particular focus is the American writer Wharton's bibliophile interest in the French dramatist Jean Racine. To Wharton and her affluent neighbors and friends, Liming demonstrates, collecting rare seventeenth-century French editions provided a way of relating to the (European) cultural past, but it simultaneously went beyond mere antiquarianism or the acquisition of cultural capital. Collecting books and building a personal library to an author like Wharton was also an expression of one's own location within

a late-nineteenth-century social structure (a positioning that, in the case of collecting Racine, was inspired by a particular vision of a France before the political upheavals of the Revolution).

Tim Sommer's "Writers, Manuscripts, Collectors: Modern Authorship and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Origins of the Literary Archive" is concerned with institutional spaces, as well, but focuses on the archive rather than the library, on manuscripts rather than books. Wharton here, too, serves as a case study. Wharton's interest in the material traces of the literary past, Sommer argues, coincided with the rise of a more general late-nineteenth-century cultural disposition toward cherishing the relics of literary production and with the gradual emergence of public institutions devoted to the systematic collection of such materials. The article illustrates how this historical context is mirrored in selected examples of Wharton's early fiction, which sees her working through the wider implications of the autograph-collecting boom for the place authors occupy in the modern literary marketplace.

The two articles that follow explore aspects of the literary culture of the mid-twentieth century. Like the two previous contributions featuring a transatlantic perspective on authorship and institutions, Magda Majewska and Corinna Norrick-Rühl and Miaïna Razakamanantsoa draw our attention to the publication process, to the biography of the book before and after the point of publication. In "The Literary Prestige of Censorship: The Case of *Naked Lunch*," Majewska explores censorship as a specific kind of gatekeeping mechanism that not only works to suppress radical texts but can in fact also serve to produce prestige and recognition. The essay's central claim is that the obscenity trial surrounding the publication of William S. Burroughs's book was paradoxically crucial to turning *Naked Lunch* into a text recognizable as a novel and a work of major literary quality. Revisiting the production and the transatlantic publication history of the text, Majewska draws our attention to the "enabling aspects of censorship," and thus to the intricate relationship between the literary avant-garde and mid-century legal institutions.

Norrick-Rühl and Razakamanantsoa's "Your eyes and ears on this side of the ocean': Complicating S. J. Greenburger's Role as Literary Scout and US Representative for Rowohlt Verlag in the 1960s" offers a rich account of German-American literary relations and the role of broker figures usually neglected in traditional historical accounts. Drawing on documents in German literary and publisher archives, the contribution looks at Greenburger's literary activities on behalf of the German publishing house Rowohlt. Norrick-Rühl and Razakamanantsoa highlight the key role played by literary scouts and agents as gatekeepers, institutions that contribute to determining which authors and texts become visible in the cultural marketplace. The article provides a series of intriguing insights into the postwar transatlantic publishing scene, but it also more generally emphasizes the centrality of publishing archives for twenty-first-century book historical research.

The final article in the issue, Harriet S. Hughes's "The Pronominal Grammar of Ontological Anti-Blackness: Institutionality and Authority in *Afropessimism* and *The Undercommons*," focuses on figurations of authorship in the institution of twenty-first-century cultural criticism. Hughes focuses on the significance of genre in recent "Afro-pessimist" writing. Reading two key texts – Frank Wilderson's memoir *Afropessimism* and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons* – Hughes looks at how dimensions of voice and positionality operate in this discourse. The article shows how closely related grammatical, philosophical, narratological, and sociological tropes and phenomena are in this kind of writing, with Hughes exploring the use of the first-person singular (in Wilderson) and plural (in Harney and Moten) and reflecting on how the genres of the memoir and the manifesto (and the respective generic notions of authorship bound up with them) are situated in relation to questions of subjectivity and institutionalization.

The idea for this special issue on authorship and modern literary institutions itself took shape within a particular institutional setting, a panel at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the German Association for American Studies. We are grateful to everyone who contributed to the lively conversation that followed the papers given on that occasion, several of which have found their way into the present issue. Other contributors joined the project at a later stage, as our endeavor was moving from the institutional framework of the academic conference to that of scholarly publishing. If institutions have long been looked upon as controlling and constraining individual forms of artistic and intellectual expression, our hope is that readers of this special issue will find that they may just as well prove the opposite.

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