Rumors About the Death of the Author Have Been Exaggerated: 
Between Collectivism and Individuality in the Middle Ages

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Among scholars and critics of literature, it is widely believed that the earliest period of writing, the ancient period, is characterized by collective literature and the anonymity it produces, and that little importance was attached to the author, who, if acknowledged at all, was considered inconsequential. However, starting from the 17th and 18th centuries, this began to change and authors were given the position of greatest prominence in the study of literature and its significance, while collective writing disappeared altogether, that is, until the advent of The Death of the Author and the Internet, which re-established collectivism and anonymity (the Wikipedia as a case in point). The question that we need to ask is: Does this approach conform with reality or is it merely a convenient generalization?

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Literature Before the Common Era

Stories are transmitted by oral tradition, while the storyteller is of secondary importance. The fundamental difference stems from the way in which the narrative is communicated. When stories or traditions are passed down orally, the storyteller is insignificant; he becomes lost in the mists of time and the word of mouth transmission. When they are put into writing, however, they are transformed into a written text, which may sometimes become canonized as well. These texts are perceived as worlds unto themselves, as literary artifacts, and we are not entitled to examine how they relate to various extra-textual realities or to doubt them, especially if they have allegedly been handed down in the name of those who transmitted, or more precisely, recorded them (Ginzburg, 1999, p. 71). The most ancient and most important collective, ostensibly anonymous, work in our people’s culture is the Bible. But it is not one unified composition (Shinan & Zakpvitch, 2004, p. 16). The Bible was cast in this image when we received it because its traditions had been handed down orally from generation to generation. When it was written down, for purposes of conservation—possibly starting with the beginning of the Second Temple Period—the aim was to preserve the stories and instructions it contained. The memory of those who transmitted them, the storytellers, and the writers, had long since evaporated into the mists of history.

Yet, along with the Bible, we know of other ancient compositions, albeit from other cultures that neighbored the land of Israel and influenced its inhabitants, as can only be expected. One example is the Greek Homer of the 8th century B.C. Did he actually write his epic poetry or did he collect and edit fragments of popular poems? In the end, however, the important thing is the fact that the works were credited to one person.

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and that their very publication was by then dependent on being attributed to that person, the author. The Bible is the book of the Jewish people just as Homer’s work is the book of the Greek people. This notion—prevalent in the 19th century—refers to the idea that the Bible and the Homeric epic, which differ so much from one another, are two basic books in the canon of (Western) culture. They are often quoted while citing the names of their authors. Indeed, it can be said that it is often enough to mention the name, without the philosophy, for their words to be accepted as a source of higher authority, which cannot be called into question. This produced individuals, known by name, who were active at the same time that our collection, the Book of Books was taking shape. For the cultural life of the society, and in the public consciousness, the importance of the individual writers was, naturally, equal to that of the “collective” work.

**Literary Compositions in the First Centuries of the Common Era**

Are the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Talmuds really anonymous collective works? Could they have had such a fundamental impact, to the point where they became a binding canon, if they had not been filled with so very many names? Masechet Avot (Pirkei Avot), for example, tells us about the chain of transmission from Moses, to the men of the Knesset HaGdolah (the Great Assembly), and from them to the zugot (pairs) up to Hillel and Shamai. Thereafter, the explicit order of transmission is interrupted, although it is carried on by the utterings of sages from the dynasty of the nesi’im generation after generation. Why was this precise order broken? The Jerusalem Talmud explains that, after the completion of the autonomous chain of transmission: “from here on in their wisdom is not clean” (Jerusalem Talmud, Hagiga 29a). In this way, the Talmud is telling us that only a handful of sages possessed “clean” wisdom, that is, the intellectual ability that enabled them to be autonomous, to think independently. Thereafter, there were no leaders talented enough to face the challenge of independence of thought and values. Another highly significant factor is: who was included in the chain of transmission and who was not. The makeup of this list represents a decision based on the values and politics of Talmudic Jewry (Shner, 2004). In other words, the editors were responsible for including or excluding names based on considerations of principle and perhaps other factors as well. The redacting, carried out later on, had a decisive role in determining the sources of our collective authority.

Alongside these authors, we see the flourishing of writers that the later editing did not, apparently, deal with such as Justus of Tiberias and Josephus Flavius, both of them authors and chroniclers of the first century CE. This is apparently one of the reasons for the blossoming of the pseudepigraphical literature in the same century, and can mainly be seen with regard to books such as the midrashim and the Apocrypha attributed to figures such as Enoch (a character from the Book of Genesis), Abraham, Moses, and others, though they were written during the Second Temple Period, or the Heikhalot and Merkavah (Palaces and Chariot) literature that developed at the end of the Byzantine period. The writers, who sought to give credibility to their visions, were certainly aware that well-known names could to help establish their work as a source of authority. This is not a mere counterfeit, but a well-developed and widespread literary genre that testifies to a real need, which seeks to have the source of authority designated by name, and refuses to accept an unknown or collective name.

**Talmudic Literature**

In the Talmudic period, the commonly accepted viewpoint is that Jewish literature was collective and anonymous, and that generation after generation of sages created layers of writings until they reached the more or less final stage of redacting. The Mishnah was complied in this manner, as were the midrashei halakhah,
RUMORS ABOUT THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR HAVE BEEN EXAGGERATED


The Babylonian Talmud had been transmitted orally for hundreds of years, whereas the earliest explicit information about its written form is from the eighth century CE. Even after it began to be recorded, it seems that in the yeshivot, the oral transmission of the Talmud continued concurrently throughout the geonic period, while its status as an oral document remained no less, if not more, prominent than the written text (Brenner, 2009, p. 5). We have already postulated that orally communicated literature naturally emphasizes the content and the message, while tending to ignore the messenger and the source of authority. This was the method used by the Talmudic sages in the area of belief and opinion; they did not create a systematic and comprehensive system, preferring to deal with problems that arose from their study of halakhah rather than the philosophic-scholarly methods themselves, which had no bearing on day-to-day life (Yasif, 2004, p. 72). When they put their thoughts down in writing, it became necessary to quote the words of leaders who could be a source of authority; naturally, this was, in most cases, the work of the editors. The fact that they took the trouble to do this shows us that the author, creator, transmitter, or storyteller existed, and significantly influenced the canonization of these texts. According to the OED (Oxford English Dictionary): Until the 18th century, (1) one could identify the word “author” with “authority”: a person whose statements have the force of authority; (2) a person who provides us with information, an informant; (3) a person who has authority over others, a director, ruler, commander; (4) to father, bring something into being; a forefather. Starting with the 18th century, however, we can see a change in the definition: the function of, or the person who composes, writes books; to write books.

In other words, up to the 18th century, the author is a source of authority. What we learn from the dictionary is that the definition of the word “author” reflects the notion of an individual, who is responsible for writing, composing, creating a literary text and should, therefore, be looked upon as a founder or inventor. This can be associated with the idea of the Creator of the Universe, since the author has the rights over the text and the authority to interpret it. The writer is capable of influencing others and is often considered an authority when it comes to expressing opinions, a trustworthy person, who can be consulted and relied upon, or even obeyed (Bennett, 2005, pp. 6-7). The author is the only individual responsible for producing a work that is one of a kind, and the only person entitled to receive credit for a particular composition (Woodmansee, 1994, p. 35); or as the philosopher Derrida defines it: sovereign solitude (Derrida, 1978, p. 226).

But as Foucault claims, “writer” and “composition” are not universal, a-historical concepts (Foucault, 2005, pp. 35-37). He argues that the writer’s function in relation to the text changes from one era to another and from one culture to another. Moreover, not every text possesses the function of a writer. From this it emerges that a text that lacks such a function must be analyzed in a different manner from one that includes this function; furthermore, no attempt should be made to establish or invent a writer for such a text since the absence of this role is one of its characteristics. The anonymity that typifies large portions of the Babylonian Talmud underscores the fact that the role of the author operates differently in this text than in modern discourse. The evidence shows that even texts designated with the name of a tanna or amora also changed to a great extent, due to the long chain of oral transmission, which stresses the different functions of the author. It appears that in the Babylonian Talmud, the author is perceived more as the “father/initiator/creator” of the statement or text, the source of its existence. Yet, at the same time, the text and the statement are also independent; in addition, their existence is associated with the manner in which they were transmitted, understood, interpreted, and
handed down by means of the chain of transmission, within the world and discourse of the links on that chain (Brenner, 2009, pp. 9-10). All the same, the name of the communicator on this chain is the guarantee for the trustworthiness and authority of the text; therefore, as far as circumstances allow, it is impossible to dispense with it.

The Geonic Period—the Early Middle Ages—the Line of Demarcation?

An Overview

On the basis of Genizah correspondence and works written in the 9th-12th centuries by Jewish authors such as Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, it may be asserted that the years between the 10th and 12th centuries were a transition period between two concepts, which, mainly, but not exclusively, served the world of the intellectuals—the readers and producers of literature—at one and the same time: the concept of the open text, in which the author plays an important role, but not one of copyright and exclusivity, and where the text may also be collective, fluid, flexible, and sometimes anonymous; and the concept that the text is the sole intellectual property of the author, and that a text is meant to be closed, unchanging, and individual. In Jewish history, the early days of the Middle Ages are characterized by two cultural phenomena associated with the rise of Arab culture—starting with the 7th century. The first is professional divisions. From a certain point of view, the Talmud, as well as the midrashim, is comprehensive, holistic creations that contain all the components of contemporary Jewish culture. Yet, already during the geonic period in the East, there was a trend to create special compositions for various professions. This cultural development, whose importance cannot be exaggerated, stemmed from the influence of the dominant Arab culture, on the one hand, and internal needs and changes within Jewish culture, on the other hand (Yasif, 2004, p. 9). During the Talmudic era, we do not know of the existence of independent compositions in a particular branch of Jewish culture. Such works only began to be composed from the beginning of the medieval period, in response to the process of “professional division” (Yasif, 2004, pp. 10, 32-33).

The second factor is the disappearance of the storyteller’s anonymity, which may be due to the fact that medieval compositions were written down to begin with, and not transmitted orally—as was the case in ancient times. Written works do not tend to anonymity. The storyteller-writer is recognized and well-known as the creator of his composition. We have already seen that even in ancient times, in early civilizations—whether Israelite or others—authors held a place of importance, although information about them and their lives tended to dissipate because of the manner in which the material was conveyed and the passage of time. This important process—the disappearance of the author’s anonymity—took place gradually. Stampfer claims that the authority to interpret and make halakhic decisions with regard to queries sent to the yeshivot of the geonim was considered the collective authority of the yeshiva, by means of its head, who was the only one authorized to provide official responses (Stampfer, 2010, p. 203). There is a built-in contradiction here, since, even according to Stampfer, the signature of the gaon, his personal name, was the only legal seal of approval for the response, without which it would not be accepted by the community that had sent the query. In Brody’s opinion, this convention—that the response is a collective process—is expressed in several ways, principally, perhaps, in its style: The responses of the geonim are always worded in first person plural, even when a personal point relating solely to the gaon is mentioned. This is not a matter of etiquette or style alone, but rather a reflection of the manner in which the responses were composed (Brody, 1998, pp. 44-46). However, I believe that the use of first-person plural cannot be construed as reflecting the process of composing these responses, since it was also
the conventional formula, which the geonim used in their personal letters. Moreover, it was the standard phraseology used in cultures all over the world, the manner in which kings, popes, and other autocratic rulers expressed themselves. Apparently the gaon did not compose the responses on his own; yet the very the fact that his signature was the only one affixed to them indicated that it was understood that he, not the anonymous, collective group, was the source of authority. In my opinion, the tendency to describe the process of answering queries as a collective endeavor is based solely on Nathan the Babylonian’s composition, *Ahbar Baghdad*. Written in the 10th century, it cannot be relied upon conclusively, from my point of view; rather his words must be read with caution and careful scrutiny.

The practice of distinguishing authors by name was widespread and unmistakable in the Arab-Islamic world. Starting in the 9th century, it could lay claim to chroniclers, geographers, travelers, and all types of intellectuals. They gained recognition through their own individual writing and were always quoted by name. It is conceivable that, already towards the end of the 8th century, Jews would have adopted the criteria and concepts of the Muslim literary world, placing greater emphasis on individual writing, or more precisely, the dissemination of written compositions bearing the name of their authors. If writers’ names were lost in previous eras, mainly due to the oral transmission of the material, we are now confronted with an age in which authors began to write their words down directly on paper, to which they affixed their names.

Rav Saadia Gaon ben Yoseph al-Fayumi (882-942) (RASAG), a gaon of Babylonia, the head of the yeshiva at Sura, was one of the first to be clearly influenced by the writings of Arab literary figures. Even before his appointment to the gaonate, Saadia ben Yoseph al-Fayumi wrote several innovative monographs, while other geonim and sages followed in his footsteps. These individual compositions, foremost among them the writings of Saadia Gaon, are distinguished from the collective literature of previous centuries in several other ways: The language was Judaeo-Arabic and not Hebrew; the author chose the title for his composition whereas in the past, works of rabbinic literature were apparently named by those who read them; the compositions began with an introduction, according to Arab literary practice, a departure from the norm of earlier rabbinic literature; the written material was organized in a systematic fashion, in keeping with Arabic writing, and not according to the associative style found in the works of rabbis from previous generations (Brody, 1998, pp. 146-150).

The Karaites—whose halakhic and theological positions were consolidated mainly in the 9th and 10th centuries (and Saadia Gaon was one of their major opponents)—did not tend to quote Talmudic sages by name (usually referencing their words with “rabbi so-and-so said”). On the other hand, the commentaries of Anan and Benjamin, who they considered the founding fathers of Karaism, were always referred to personally, by their given names, indicating their unique and lofty status, which the Karaites viewed as canonical (Erder-Polliack, 2009, p. 177).

In the medieval Christian world, anonymity and designation appear to be inconsistent. The scroll of Achimaatz was an individual, signed composition, in contrast to Sefer Hasidim, which was traditionally attributed to Rabbi Yehuda HeHasid. Although early scholarship was convinced that this book was a collective production formulated over several generations by the sages of Ashkenaz, the latest studies indicate that the book portrays the world of Rabbi Yehuda HeHasid and that he was its sole author. Apparently, he maintained his anonymity purposefully, for ideological reasons, those of humility and fear of the sin of arrogance.
Textual Manifestations

Saadia Gaon’s writings seem to show quite clearly that in his generation, the 10th century, the boundary between literature in the public domain and individual writing—ostensibly with copyright privileges—was blurred and in point of fact, nonexistent. On the one hand he stresses, in his introduction to the Book of Beliefs and Opinions, that the content is his and his alone, in other words, he is aware of his copyright privileges; yet on the other hand, he is well aware that once his text reaches the public, although signed by him, it will be exposed and open to all those who wish to add, change, correct, or annotate it. Nathan the Babylonian (Nathan Habavli), Saadia’s contemporary, describes in a very colorful manner—which may also be somewhat exaggerated—the tension between collective creations and individual, signed writing; his composition agrees with the assumption that Saadia symbolizes the border line between them, which is in reality not a line but an unclear and hesitant transition between the public domain and that of the individual author.

Afterwards, Rav Sharira Gaon (d. 1006), the head of the yeshiva at Pumbedita, composed his famous epistle. His contemporary, the Gaon of Sura, Shmuel (Samuel) ben Hofni (d. 1013), wrote many signed compositions. The poetry and piyyutim produced in the East between the 10th and 12th centuries are examples which prove that this was the era of the written word, and that of the author as well. Most poets would frequently sign their names at the beginning of each line of a poem, as a method of asserting their copyright. One of them was Eli ben Amram, an untiring poet who headed the large Fustat community in the second half of the 11th century. At that time, hazanim (cantors), who had to demonstrate their superior abilities in front of their congregations, would “steal” piyyutim composed by others to glorify themselves. Signatures of this sort were a way to guarantee that the poet’s copyright was upheld (Bareket, 1995, pp. 67-68).

But is this apparent transition the result of a changing world outlook, or could it have been due to the birth of a “culture of the book” of unprecedentedly vast dimensions? We have already seen that names were always important. They were the source of authority and the force that generated intellectual challenges. Perhaps the wide-spread dissemination of books and the tremendous importance that Muslim society attached to them and their authors is what led to the change. Up to the beginning of the Muslim era (the 7th and 8th centuries), the only books that existed in writing were the books of the Bible and the Apocrypha. Other materials were handed down through traditions of oral transmission. Between the 8th and 12th centuries, the culture of the book spread in the lands of the East among Muslims and Jews alike (Drori, 1988). This was a mass revolution, which might even be compared to the one brought about by the invention of the printing press, as regards both the scope of production and dissemination, not to mention the quality and variety of books. Information about books that were written, copied, lent, or sold is a major topic in the correspondence between members of the Jewish intellectual and financial elite, as Genizah documents indicate. Among those documents are lists of books kept in private homes, which also demonstrate the prominence given to books in the homes of educated Jews (Frenkel, 2010, pp. 93-94).

In his 1968 article, The Death of the Author, Roland Barthes argued forcefully against the centrality of the author in literary research. According to his approach, it is legitimate for modern readers to interpret any written text according to their beliefs and understanding, even if they contradict the writer’s intention. The fundamental attitude of The Death of the Author is anti-hegemonic, and this defines the disappearance of the author from literary criticism and his replacement by the reader himself. In other words, the reader should ignore the existence of the author within a specific cultural and historic context so that an infinite number of
interpretive options can be made available to him. Barthes’ ideas relate to the modern world, and are valid, he believes, in the world as it exists after European rationalism (Barthes, 2005). Foucault, whose point of view is philosophical-economic-capitalistic, also thinks along these lines. He stresses the economic-social aspects, which have instituted a regime of ownership over written texts, a regime in which they have become property, in which they are produced as part of the economic competition that characterized the 19th and 20th centuries. This includes institutions such as copyright, distribution rights, royalties, and other features related to the market economy (Foucault, 2005, p. 46).

These important scholars drew a clear line between the era of collective literature, or at least literature that does not place the emphasis on authors and their rights, and the new era, where the stress is on the author, his conceptual world, his lifestyle, and his copyright privileges. In order to understand a literary work, the new literary scholars had to be familiar with every detail of the author’s life and personality. They had to invest a great deal of energy and resources in this investigation, until Barthes came along and declared “the death of the author”. But as we have already seen, the author was already a very important factor in periods that preceded modernity, albeit not with respect to copyright, since for a text to acquire authority and validity, it had to bear an important, well-known name. The author had already been born hundreds of years before the modern era that Barthes and Foucault were dealing with. This birth took place at the beginning of writing and literary creation, but it acquired its greatest significance at the time of the great revolution of the Islamic world, the revolution of the culture of the book that began at end of the 9th century, and expanded mainly in the 10th to 13th centuries, as Genizah documents clearly reflect (Frenkel, 2010, pp. 93-94).

Anyone who persists in seeking a precise boundary between the idea that every work of literature is public property, and strenuous objection to this outlook, should consider Maimonides. In the introduction to his book Mishneh Torah (written in 1167-1177), not only does he designate himself by name as its sole author, he also launches a public relations campaign by declaring that it is the only book that a member of the Jewish people needs, aside from the Torah. At the end of his commentary on the Mishnah, he also wrote: I am Moses the son of Maimon the judge (dayan)… I began to write the commentary on this book when I was 23 years old and I completed it in Egypt when I was 30 years old, which was in the year 1168.

To Sum Up

In the introduction to his philosophical treatise Guide to the Perplexed (written in 1187-1191), Maimonides went even further; he warned his readers not to attempt to disturb or explain what he had written, because it “will injure me, while I endeavored to benefit him”. “He will requite [repay] me evil for good”. The idea that the book belongs exclusively to its author is celebrating a clear victory here, and if we are so inclined, we can consider this the “birth of the author”.

Yet, you may also see in this survey the birth of the written book, disseminated on a scope never before observed in the civilized world, which had previously communicated all literary creations by oral means. What was not preserved by this oral tradition, due to the objective difficulties of remembering texts by heart and transmitting them from one generation to another, and because concentrating on the content was more important than the name of the author, could easily be communicated in an era in which the texts were written down to begin with and distributed in written form. “The book revolution” spawned by Islamic culture, which subsequently reached Christian civilization, too, albeit after a delay of several centuries, also brought with it the highlighted role of the author and his significance for the reader, who could no longer ignore this additional
factor, which had penetrated the consciousness of the act and experience of reading, and mainly the consciousness of the authority: The author is the authoritative power, therefore, it is important for us to know who he is and what else he has written.

The author was not born and he did not die. He has always existed, from the moment that people began to create literature. He was born together with the composition and cannot be separated from it. Collective literature is a term used by modern literary criticism, which seeks to create an artificial distinction between different eras. It could be said that a work of literature may only be seen as a collective endeavor in retrospect, and that it always starts out as the labor of an individual. It is very likely that the first and most authentic anonymous collective text is the Wikipedia on the Internet.

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