



Paradox: The Diminishing Increase of an Author

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A curious thing to consider is an *author*.

This is commonly the writer of a book, & c.; or the originator of an event, policy or state of affairs. The term derives from the Latin *augeo*, to increase or promote. There is thus a natural inflation built into an *author*.

From this extends *authority*, a power, or right, to enforce obedience. The root is *auto--* from the Greek *autos*: self, own, of or by oneself. Related, then, in Greek is *authentēs*: one who does something by himself. Thus our *authentic*: trustworthy, entitled to acceptance (of a statement); genuine, not forged (of documents, pictures, etc.).

Johnson, in his *Dictionary*, calls an *author* "the first beginner of a thing; the writer of a book, opposed to a compiler." And he gives the related terms:

authentick: genuine, original, provable.

authenticate: to establish.

authenticity: *authority*, genuineness.

authoritative: having *authority*.

authority: legal power, influence, role.

authorize: to give *authority*, to justify.

Your *author*, then, is someone who produces himself as an *authority*, by puffing himself up,

or *bigging up*, as is sometimes now said.

What he produces would thus naturally be trustworthy, as it is he who has produced it.

There is perhaps something a bit circular in all this, one murmurs. And the *author* replies firmly: *just trust me*.

But a very few of the better *authors* (most of them are dead, of course) say it with a conspiratorial wink that for a moment takes you into the joke.

Johnson was an *author* and an *authority*. He was to be trusted. Yet one wonders. Alone, Johnson suffered terribly from strange guilts that seem to have caused him to do physical harm to himself. It may be thought the burden of his own *authority* was terrible for this great *author*. He is to be trusted, perhaps, because his example teaches us that the most solid exterior often conceals something that should not be completely trusted.

The poet Horace--a noted *author*--put the problem thus:

Nil fuit unquam

Sic impar sibi

or: Surely such a various creature--as an *author*, Horace means--never was known. That is: There never was known a creature less worth trusting.

The *author* lies to tell the truth and tells the truth to lie, flatters to deceive and deceives to flatter, yet is widely received as wise and thought good.

There is the letter Milton wrote to the learned stranger. The visitor had come from afar to meet Milton, the formidable *author*. In his letter Milton remarks on the fact that, though the visitor's expectations had been high, they had not in any way exceeded the reality that had been found: Milton in his actual person was at least as great as the learned stranger had imagined, perhaps indeed even greater, as Milton helpfully reminded the learned stranger in this letter.

Nevertheless those brilliant and intriguing features the public habitually attributes to an *author* often evaporate upon contact with the atmosphere of planet Earth. Loving an

author, one has pressed a ghost to one's bosom, it is too often found.

To write better than one lives is patently easy. Consider virtually any *author* up close and the truth of this will be observed.

Still *authors* run deep. The seas are smooth, the wind fair for the *author*, like one who, upon land, teaches the art of navigation.

Authors have secluded themselves in well-appointed towers and luxuriant caves, on remote islands and atop cloudy peaks, as well as in private offices, studios, and writing-dens. An authoritative *pied-a-terre* from which to launch one's *author* appearances, reading tours and book-signings is considered by some a virtual necessity for one of the *authorial* tribe. Any locus in which one remains essentially disengaged from the common cares of mankind, however, may prove sufficient for an *author*.

Were an *author*, in his works, to be suddenly thrust into the cold seas of actuality, where the first harsh wave that washes over him may be expected to bring panic and a swirling descent toward unconsciousness, the profession might attract fewer eager candidates than at present.