



The Dissolution of the Author in Literary Collaboration: Two Case Studies

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Literary collaboration is a mode of textual production in which two or more people are involved in all the stages of the writing of a text, and co-sign the final product. A well-established practice for the writing of opera librettos, and the theatre in general, collaboration in fiction cannot boast an equally rich tradition. However, coauthorship in novel writing knew a period, though relatively short-lived and now largely unknown of, when it constituted a prolific and fashionable literary practice. Collaboration in the writing of fiction had been practised sporadically since the eighteenth century,¹ but only in the late nineteenth century it witnessed an unprecedented expansion, probably as the result of an increasingly composite and competitive literary market which spurred “a proliferation of authors of all abilities and types” (Jamison 2016: 5). A

¹ An early example of coauthorship for the writing of fiction is *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, the malicious satire on intellectual pretensions co-written by Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell and John Arbuthnot, and published in 1741 as a part of Alexander Pope's *Works*.



variety of literary alliances sprang up within the United Kingdom, but the phenomenon interested also the United States – so much that Ashton calls the last thirty years of the nineteenth century in the US “The Collaborative Age” (2003: 1). Starting from Dickens’s collaboration with Wilkie Collins in 1867, the subsequent decades saw the publication of a large number of coauthored novels, with a peak around the year 1890. The products of the joint efforts of writing partners such as the London-based friends Walter Besant and James Rice, the Scottish sisters Emily and Dorothea Gerard, and the Irish cousins Edith C.E. Somerville and Martin Ross, to mention but a few, conquered the popular literary market and circulated widely. An increasing number of established writers started to experiment with coauthorship out of curiosity and economic profit, and around the turn of the century basically all successful authors took part at least once in collaborative enterprises. Although writers such as H. Rider Haggard, R.L. Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Bram Stoker, A. Conan Doyle and Joseph Conrad have entered the canon for their solo work, they can all be counted among the ranks of late Victorian collaborators.²

Novels co-signed by two authors – or three, or more, up to twenty-four – spurred the curiosity of the public, who entered a game of guessing *who wrote what*. Who had the initial inspiration? Whose hand held the pen? Who was the more talented author? That is, who was the *real* artist behind the collaboration? A large number of commentaries on the collaborative practice was published in periodicals of the time, which fuelled the debate on the mystery of *how it was done*. The practice of coauthorship indeed complicated long-cherished, sanctioned notions of authorship, textuality and writing. The problem with the reading of collaborative texts is that they were approached by using paradigms employed for single-authored texts. A collaborative work, instead, has implications for the author-figure quite contrasting with a single-authored work: within collaborative writing, the author turns into something very different from what the Victorians were accustomed to imagining. This essay considers the implications of late Victorian collaborative writing for the figure of the author, and the ways in which the author emerging from the collaborative process subverted hegemonic conceptions of author-ity.

In order to support and illustrate my argument, I rely on the experiences of two prominent late nineteenth-century collaborators: the Columbia professor, critic and writer James Brander Matthews³ (1852-1929), who, in the course of a long independent career, collaborated sporadically with a number of other male authors in the early 1890s, namely H.C. Bunner, Walter H. Pollock, George H. Jessop, and F. Anstey; and Edith C.E. Somerville (1858-1949), who belonged to an Ascendancy Anglo-Irish family and who was engaged in an exclusive, long-term literary partnership with her cousin Martin Ross (pseudonym of Violet Martin) from 1887 to 1915, the year of the latter’s death. Praised by both the public and the press, Somerville and Ross’s

² H. Rider Haggard coauthored *The World’s Desire* (1890) with Andrew Lang; Stevenson and his step-son Lloyd Osbourne wrote *The Wrong Box* (1889), *The Wrecker* (1892) and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894); Kipling composed *The Naulahka* (1892) together with Wolcott Balestier; Bram Stoker and A. Conan Doyle took part in the multiple collaboration of twenty-four authors that produced *The Fate of Fenella* (1892); Conrad was engaged in a collaboration with Ford Madox Ford, and together they published *The Inheritors* (1901), *Romance*, (1903) and *The Nature of A Crime* (1909).

³ He was christened ‘James Brander Matthews’ but dropped his first name early in his career (Matthews 1917: 253). From now on I will refer to him only as Brander Matthews or simply as Matthews.



works were hugely popular in their days, and, although their fame decreased significantly in subsequent years, they have never completely dropped out of the canon of Irish literature. The innovative potential of their model of authorship has been recently acknowledged (especially by Ehnenn 2008 and Jamison 2016), though they still deserve more attention. On the contrary, for the young moderns of the 1920s Brander Matthews embodied all that was conservative: mocked as “an outdated Victorian” (Ashton 2003: 124), he has since then fallen into oblivion. Yet, as I shall discuss below, in his collaborative efforts he promoted – like Somerville – an innovative and in many respects subversive understanding of authorship.

The cases of Brander Matthews and Edith Somerville, though rooted in different backgrounds and performed under diverse conditions, are described by Matthews and Somerville themselves in surprisingly similar terms. Both use a rhetoric which highlights the unity of the coauthored work and the shifted position of the author with respect to the text. Reading their metadiscourses, the same idea of authorship gradually takes shape: that of a diluted, hybrid, elusive author who rejects the predominant role accorded to him/her by the Romantic tradition and proclaims the necessity of remaining concealed behind the text.

THE ROMANTIC MYTH OF THE SOLITARY GENIUS

In 1890, at the opening of his essay “The Art and Mystery of Collaboration,”⁴ Brander Matthews stated:

It may be said that curiosity is the only useful vice [...]; and curiosity it is which lends interest to many a book written in collaboration, the reader being less concerned about the merits of the work than he is with guessing at the respective shares of the associated authors. To many of us a novel by two writers is merely a puzzle, and we seek to solve the enigma of its double authorship, accepting it as a nut to crack even when the kernel is little likely to be more digestible than the shell. (Matthews 1891: 1)

When addressing a coauthored work of fiction, Matthews goes on, readers usually find themselves asking a double question: first, “what was the part of each partner in the writing of the book?” and, second, “how is it possible for two men to be concerned in the making of one work?” (Matthews 1891:1). On the other side of the Atlantic, after the striking success of Somerville and Ross’s first coauthored novel, *An Irish Cousin* (1889), an acquaintance of theirs declared that she “found it impossible to believe in the jointness of the authorship” (Somerville 1917: 133) and further commented:

⁴“The Art and Mystery of Collaboration” is an extensive commentary by Matthews on the subject. It originally appeared in 1890 in *Longman’s Magazine*, was reprinted as a preface to his 1891 collection of collaborative fiction *With My Friends: Tales Told in Partnership*, and was later included in his 1896 essay collection *Aspects of Fiction*. The fact that the essay was reprinted in a number of different forms clearly points to Matthew’s satisfaction with the ideas advanced there, which he neither ever modified nor withdrew.



But though I think the book a success, and cannot pick up the fastenings of the two hands, I yet think the next novel ought to be by one of them. I wonder by which! I say this because I thought the conception and carrying out of Willy [the male protagonist] much the best part of the character drawing of the whole book.[...] If Willy, and the poor people's talk, were by one hand, that hand is the better of the two, say!! (Somerville 1917: 134)

Some years later, the respected critic Andrew Lang (himself a collaborator) tried to make Ross privately confess to him that she was the one who did the writing (Lewis 1989: 209). Not to mention that both Somerville's and Ross's mothers were each "comfortably aware that her own daughter had done all the work" (Somerville 1917: 208).

The comments of their contemporaries reported by Matthews and Somerville disclose a precise understanding of authorship, which identifies the author with an inspired genius who creates works of art in isolation, a 'solitary genius,' to borrow the terminology employed by Stillinger (1991). Such model developed in the course of the eighteenth century and found its consecration in the Romantic period.⁵ It was epitomized, among others, by P.B. Shelley when he identifies "the Poet" with "a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds" (Shelley [1821] 2012: 861). In the final book of the *Prelude*, Wordsworth codifies the authorial process as an ultimately solitary one, incompatible with a collaborative "Helper" or second hand:

Here must though be, O Man!
Power to thyself; no Helper hast thou here;
Here keepest thou in singleness thy state:
No other can divide with thee this work
No secondary hand can intervene
To Fashion this ability, 'tis thine,
The prime and vital principle is thine
In the recesses of thy nature, far
From any reach of outward fellowship
Else is not thine at all. (Wordsworth [1850] 1959: 14. 209-219)

In this passage, Wordsworth explicitly links the idea of 'being an author' with the idea of isolation: the author is and must be alone in the creative act, otherwise the creation would not be his at all. The insistent rhetoric of possession (five occurrences of 'thy' or 'thine' within ten lines) stresses the importance of authorial ownership over the text. Alone at the centre of his creation, the Romantic author "straddles the boundaries between man and God" (Ehnenn 2008: 28). Also, S.T. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* considers a work of art as a reflection of a unitary author: he cannot "describe the legitimacy of the poem without referring it to 'the poetic genius himself' as embodied in 'the poet'" (Hickey 1998: 306):

⁵ As Masten explains in his study of Elizabethan theatre, collaboration was a prevalent mode of production in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, displaced by "post-Enlightenment paradigms of individuality, authorship, and textual property" (1997: 4).



What is poetry? Is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind." (Coleridge [1817] 1983: 2.15-16)

Such theorising of the myth of the artist as a solitary genius led, especially as the nineteenth century advanced, to an underrating of the many collaborative relationships that connected Romantic writers. The discrepancy between idealisation and actual practice is evident. Collaboration was "an indisputable fact of the Romantic period, traceable through authors' published accounts of the genesis of their texts; through personal journals, epistolary exchanges, publication history, and the testimony of contemporaries" (Hickey 1996: 735). Studies such as Stillinger's (1991) give ample evidence of major Romantic writers' solid involvement in each other's literary production. The Romantic era is indeed full of collaborative projects: one year before Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*,⁶ a poetic volume by Coleridge appeared in print with the addition of some sonnets by Charles Lamb and by Charles Lloyd; in 1794 *The Fall of Robespierre* was published, a play to which Coleridge contributed the first act and Robert Southey the second and the third; Coleridge and Southey collaborated also on the satirical ballad "The Devil's Thoughts," published in the *Morning Post* in 1799.⁷ Recent studies have brought to light the crucial roles of Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Lamb in their brothers' literary production. The collaboration between Mary and Charles Lamb results particularly intriguing due to their co-dependent, almost symbiotic, relationship.⁸ These two siblings' mutual influence was embedded in a life-long domestic and authorial partnership (the 'double-singleness' described by Charles in "Mackery End") and they actually set out to collaborate on three works for children, most notably *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), with Charles in charge of adapting the tragedies and Mary the comedies.⁹ The self-proclaimed nightingale Percy Bysshe Shelley was himself part of a net of literary comradeship, and also shared an intense relationship of literary exchange with Byron and with his wife Mary – his 'editing' of *Frankenstein* and his contributing the 1818 Preface to the novel must be accounted for, along with his contribution to Mary's mythological dramas *Proserpine* and *Midas*.

Yet, although the Romantic period was strewn with more or less acknowledged collaborative relationships, as this brief survey has tried to suggest, they either remained at the level of influence or mutual revision (however important), or, in the cases of actually co-signed texts, the division of labour was quite clear, the hands of the authors distinguishable. Such Romantic collaborations differed in aim and degree from the writing practices that characterised the late nineteenth century, and that

⁶ Wordsworth and Coleridge's celebrated collaboration on the *Lyrical Ballads* is re-read by Koestenbaum (1989) as burdened with homoerotic energies.

⁷ For an insightful discussion of the collaborative relationship between Coleridge and Southey, see Hickey (1998).

⁸ Aaron (1991) offers an illuminating analysis of the Lambs' personal and writing relationship, but she focuses more on gender than collaboration. See also Hickey (1996).

⁹ Although she wrote fourteen of the twenty plays of the collection, Mary's name did not appear on the title-page until the seventh edition of 1838 (Warner 2007: 16).



deliberately opposed post-Romantic ideals of unitary author, as I will endeavour to describe in the next section.

DISPERSING AUTHOR/ITY

The Romantic paradigms of authorship, deeply rooted in the Victorian consciousness, codified a literary text as the expression of an author's hypertrophic self. From this perspective, how could a single text possibly "manifest the essential being of more than one person"? (Ede and Lunsford 1990: 85) The collaborative writer, being someone who by definition 'works with' (lat. *cum/laborare* > *collaborat*) someone else, destabilizes this model: he/she shares the creative moment, so that the possessive his/her and the Author-God identity cannot apply. In the act of coauthorship, the direct cause-and-effect scenario staging "individual author + inspiration = original literary masterpiece" becomes somewhat less clear (Karell 2008: xxi). Collaboration "calls attention to a possible weak link in this 'genial' conception of authorship per se: an illegitimacy in the relation between genius and its products" (Hickey 1998: 306); it emphasises "the tenuousness of the idea of a legitimate relation between unitary author and unitary text" (Hickey 1998: 307). The association 'one author for one text' is no longer valid and the Romantic monotheist system collapses.

As a matter of fact, when a reader takes up a book written in collaboration and looks at its cover, he will find two names in the place reserved for the name of the author. The authorial role is not in the hands of a single person, but is shared. Consequently, control over the textual space and narrative responsibility have to be distributed between the collaborators. Masten points out that collaboration is "a dispersal of author/ity, rather than a mere doubling of it" (1997: 19). Such intuition, though just touched upon and referred to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama, proves to be absolutely valid for nineteenth-century collaborative fiction. Coauthorship as I intend it does not consist in the juxtaposition of individually created lots, hence in the 'doubling' of the author. Quite the contrary, the sharing of textual spaces implied in collaboration gives origin to a double dispersion: first, a dispersal of authority, as authorial power, ownership and control over the text have to be divided;¹⁰ second, and consequently, a dispersal of the author-figure. Therefore, we can assert that in the collaborative process a 'dilution' – rather than a strengthening – of the author takes place.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Hickey (1998: 306) argues that "the general anxiety about collaboration arises from the equivocal relation of collaboration to authority." "Collaborators," she explains, "in addition to jointly producing texts, jointly produce authority. But whose authority? Each his own? Each the other's? Both together a collective authority? Collaboration leads to ambiguous relations of mutual construction and deconstruction of authority [...]" (308). In this light, coauthorship acts as "a reminder that authority is not organic and inalienable," but "it is constructed with reference to other people and forces, it is always partial, it is never fully controllable by any one party, and it is vulnerable to deconstruction" (307). Drawing a parallel between coauthorship and political upheavals (specifically the French Revolution), Hickey notes that as "in the political realm, the revolutionary refiguring of the patriarchal familial paradigm as a fraternity threatens the singular nature of political authority, so refiguring authorial paternity as fraternity jeopardizes the singular nature of writerly authority" (306).



Such dilution is generally perceived as unmanageable by a large portion of the reading public, and by many writers themselves. "A collaborative relationship that consciously disperses power and authority," notes Karell (2008: 36), "appears not only unusual but psychologically unnatural," as if the coauthors were "breaking the laws of authorship." However, as composition theorist Anne Gere remarks, in writing couples/groups "trust and a sense of empowerment result from the giving and receiving of authority" (1978: 110). This is exactly what happened to many late Victorian coauthors. In particular, recent studies on collaborations between women (London 1999, Laird 2000, Ehnenn 2008 and Jamison 2016), demonstrate that the writing relationship was very frequently intertwined with a strong personal bond that provided validation, intellectual stimulation and emotional support. This positive reciprocal exchange of authority is illustrated by Somerville in her late-life essay "Two of a Trade" (1946):¹¹

Sometimes the compelling creative urge will come on both, and we would try to reconcile the two impulses, searching for a form into which best to cast them – one releasing it, perhaps as a cloudy suggestion, to be caught up by the other, and given form and colour, then to float away in a flash of certainty, a completed sentence – as two dancers will yield to the same impulse, given by the same strain of music, and know the joy of shared success. (Somerville 1946: 186)

Yet coeval criticism, puzzled by these dynamics, insisted on seeing coauthored texts from the same perspective one would adopt when looking at a single-authored work. Collaboration, indeed, was associated with a clear-cut, almost industrial division of tasks (the same early admirer of *An Irish Cousin* mentioned before above Somerville: "and is it you that do the story and Miss Martin the words?" Somerville 1917: 132) and, at best, with the dominance of one of the partners over the other, a solution to achieve textual cohesion actually adopted by some popular Victorian collaborators such as Walter Besant in his ten-year partnership with James Rice (1872-1882). In an article entitled "On Literary Collaboration" (1892), Besant stated that "in every kind of partnership, and especially in literary partnerships, one of the two must be in authority: one of the two must necessarily have the final word" (204). The presence of a dominant partner, according to Besant, was necessary in order to obtain unity in a coauthored work: "we must hear – or think we hear – one voice. Therefore, one man must finally revise, or even write the whole work" (Besant 1892: 205). From Besant's accounts, it seems that it was him who did much of what is thought of as the actual writing, while Rice, besides helping to plot the story, took care of more practical tasks such as securing publication and negotiating with publishers. In his *Autobiography* (1902: 188), Besant revealed that one of the advantages of his collaboration with Rice had been "that of freeing me, from my part, from the worry of business arrangements". The clearly split division of tasks between Besant and Rice projects the former as the inspired genius and the latter as his helpmate, an assistant who acted as a mediator between the artist – who should remain untainted by concrete matters – and the world. Hence, in Besant and Rice's case the Romantic ideal of the solitary author

¹¹ This essay was commissioned to Somerville for the opening number of an Irish literary magazine, *Irish Writing: the magazine of contemporary Irish literature*, edited by David Marcus and Terence Smith.



remains.¹² Also, when Andrew Lang assumed that behind Somerville and Ross's joint authorship there was one dominant partner, it was from his personal experience that he was speaking:¹³ he confessed to Ross that he really could not understand "how any two people could equally evolve characters etc – that he had tried and it was always he or the other that did it all" (Lewis 1989: 209) and publicly declared that "in most collaborations one man did all the work while the other man looked on" (Matthews 1891: 5).

NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCES

Both these approaches to collaboration – the mechanical division of labour and the dominance of one partner over the other – were rejected by Matthews and Somerville. In their perspectives, collaboration involved a continuous negotiation of power. Within the collaborative dynamic, the writer "inevitably encounters a relational difficulty: acknowledging the other" (Karell 2008: 25), and so the coauthored text may be imagined as a space where authors must negotiate their differences.¹⁴ Meeting the other necessarily involves arguments, as Matthews and Somerville did not try to conceal: "M. Dumas is said to have answered a request to collaborate with the query, 'Why should I wish to quarrel with you?'" Matthews reported ironically (1891: 25). Comparing writing partnership to marriage, he observed that "as there are households where husband and wife fight like cat and dog, and where marriage ends in divorce, so there are literary partnerships which are dissolved in acrimony and anger" (1891: 25). In the Victorian imagination, indeed, literary collaboration was associated with fights. For example, in the 1896 short story "The Collaborators" by Robert S. Hichens (a coauthor himself), two poor but ambitious friends decide to coauthor a novel, but one initially backs out because he is afraid they would "quarrel inevitably and doggedly" and "tear one another into pieces" (Hichens 1896: 139) – which they duly end up doing. Walter Besant stated that every writing team must inevitably end after some time, because of the very nature of the artistic temperament:

There will come a time when both men fret under the condition [of being collaborators]; when each desires, but is not able, to enjoy the reputation of his own good work; and feels, with the jealousy natural to an artist, irritated by the loss of half of himself and ready to accept the responsibility of failure in order to make sure of the meed of success. (Besant 1902: 188)

¹² Even though the partnership with Rice had significantly helped to launch his career, at the end of his life Besant unceremoniously dismissed the practice of collaboration: "If I were asked for my opinion as to collaboration in fiction, it would be decidedly against it. [...] After all, an artist must necessarily stand alone" (Besant 1902: 188).

¹³ Lang engaged in occasional collaborations with many popular writers of the period, producing parodies (e.g. *He*, 1887, with Walter H. Pollock, a parody of *She* by H. Rider Haggard), adventure novels (e.g. *The World's Desire*, 1890, with H. Rider Haggard) and sensation novels (e.g. *Parson Kelly*, 1899, with A.E.W. Mason).

¹⁴ Stone and Thompson maintain that collaboration partakes of the same complex strategies of "negotiation, mediation, compromise, competition, retaliation, coordination, and obligation that operate in larger institutional structures and economies" (2006: 24).



Besant's own collaboration with Rice was interrupted by his partner's premature death, but he confidently asserted that, had his partner lived, "the collaboration would have broken down" anyway and even regretted it did not end sooner (Besant 1902: 189).

Both Matthews and Somerville, though recognizing the practical difficulties of collaboration, treated ironically "the question as how two people can write together, without battle, murder, and sudden death ensuing immediately" (Somerville 1946: 180). The American coauthor declared that

[i]t is a fact that the 'artistic temperament' is jealous and touchy [...] It may be that I am lacking in the 'artistic temperament,' since my varied associations only cemented the friendships which preceded them, (Matthews 1917: 252)

while Somerville reported a letter from Ross from the first years of their partnership:

[n]ever mind what she [the woman who refused to believe in the jointness of their writing] says about people writing together. We have proved that we can do it, and we shall go on. The reason few people can, is because they have separate minds upon most subjects, and fight their hands all the time. (Somerville 1917: 134)

Matthews and Somerville ascribed the good results of their partnerships to the "harmonious equality" (Matthews 1891: 24) that both partners enjoyed within the creative process. Such equality was necessarily the product of a certain degree of suppressed egos. Indeed, in order to write with another, the hypertrophic self of the writer (the 'artistic temperament') must undergo a weakening. The collaborative author needs to take a distance from himself and to open up to the other: "[e]ach must be ready to yield a point when need be. In all associations there must be concessions from one to the other" and "an ability to take as well as to give" (Matthews 1891: 5, 23). In the partnerships of Somerville's and Matthews's, we are in the presence of two consciousnesses that deliberately decided not to try to impose themselves on each other, but to blend harmoniously:¹⁵ "Sometimes I may have thought that I did more than my share, sometimes I knew that I did less than I should, but always there was harmony, and never did either of us seek to assert a mastery" (Matthews 1891: 27). This "possibility of transforming difference into a positive force, which can occur during the recognition and negotiation of difference" (Karell 2008: 25) is one of the most significant and compelling aspects of such collaborations.

The deliberate suppression of one's ego was not experienced by Somerville and Matthews as a loss (as "the loss of half of himself" lamented by Besant). Rather, they both saw the shared creative act as a pleasure: "writing together is [...] one of the greatest pleasures I have. To write with you doubles the triumph and the enjoyment, having first halved the trouble and anxiety" (Somerville 1917: 134); "[i]f I may be

¹⁵ In this respect, I oppose to Koestenbaum (1989), who argues that in every (male) writing couple each partner tries to dominate over the other, thus suggesting a model of coauthorship as divided and engaged in a constant struggle for authorial control. Koestenbaum's theory is deeply influenced by an understanding of collaboration between men as a space where homoerotic energies are active.



allowed to offer myself as a witness, I shall testify to the advantage of a literary partnership, which halves the labor of the task and doubles the pleasure" (Matthews 1891: 26).¹⁶

THE MERGING PROCESS

Under these conditions, the two distinct authorial consciousnesses meet, and, in the course of the collaborative process, mix up, intertwine, and become more and more blended into each other; gradually, a 'merging' of the two authors takes place, so that at the end of the process it is not possible to determine who is responsible for what – not even for the coauthors themselves:

Even the collaborators themselves are at a loss to specify their own contributions. When two men have worked together honestly and heartily in the inventing, the developing, the constructing, the writing and the revising of a book [...] it is often impossible for either partner to pick out his own share; certain things he may recognize as his own, and certain other things he may credit frankly to his ally; but the rest was the result of the collaboration itself, contributed by both parties together and not by either separately. (Matthews 1891:1-2)

Thus, while retaining their bodily borders, the coauthors metaphorically merge, giving origin to a new author figure. Borrowing Glissant's (1995) concept of cultural creolization, Medaglia (2014: 94) theorises that "la scrittura a quattro mani creolizz[a] l'autore." Her analysis proposes a formula to represent this creolization of the author: given a co-author X1 and a co-author X2, the result of the collaborative writing process shall not be X1-2 – a superficial juxtaposition of authorial individualities – but rather X3, that is, something more, new and independent from both X1 and X2 (100-101). X3 is the result of the merging of the coauthors, of their consciousnesses, their social and cultural backgrounds, their styles, etc. and therefore is a hybrid entity. Behind a coauthored text, then, there is no defined authorial self, but a creolized multiplicity of consciousnesses, which defies any untangling of the original contributors. In the collaborative practice, the hybrid triumphs.

In order to clarify the mystery of her and Ross's joint writing, Somerville explained that their styles were as different as blue and yellow on the mixing palette, but that the final product was neither blue nor yellow, but green (Lewis 1985: 74). Exactly as green is a secondary colour deriving from the merging of two primary colours, but still constituting a proper colour on its own, so was the author emerging from Somerville and Ross's collaborative process. The resultant green obscures the individual colours that went into its composition, so that it is impossible to distinguish the original inputs. This new 'author' appearing from the merging of Somerville and Ross has its own recognizable characteristics (an ironic style and a preference for Irish

¹⁶ It is useful to underline that very often those who engage in a literary collaboration are close relatives or friends, so an underlying sympathy supports the writing relationship. Mutual esteem and sympathy are indeed stressed by both Somerville and Matthews as the fundamental basis of any successful collaborative relationship (Somerville 1946: 186; Matthews 1891: 5). Matthews even entitled his 1891 collection of collaborative fiction *With My Friends*.



country life became the 'Somerville & Ross' trademark); what is not recognizable are the individualities behind, the two hands involved. Likewise, in his essay Brander Matthews wrote that, if the collaboration had been "a true marriage," any endeavour "to sift out the contribution of one collaborator from that of his fellow" would be as futile as trying to decide "whether the father or the mother is the real parent of a child" (Matthews 1891: 9). As a baby bears the genes of both parents, but constitutes an independent being with his own features, so does the collaborative X3.

At this point, a question springs naturally to mind: how, in actual terms, is this merging possible? How does it take place? Matthews and Somerville offer the same answer. They both explained that they relied on a conversational method:

the subject was always thoroughly discussed between us; it was turned over and over and upside down and inside out; it was considered from all possible points of view and in every stage of development. (Matthews 1891: 27)

To those who may be interested in an unimportant detail, I may say that our work was done conversationally. One or the other – not infrequently both, simultaneously – would state a proposition. This would be argued, combated perhaps, approved, or modified; it would then be written down by the (wholly fortuitous) holder of the pen, would be scratched out, scribbled in again; before it found itself finally transferred into decorous MS. would probably have suffered many things, but it would, at all events, have had the advantage of having been well aired. (Somerville 1917: 133)

Both coauthors claimed that their collaborations drew heavily on conversation and accorded special significance to the act of talking, saying that the writing came secondary and was not as important as the discussion that preceded it: "[w]hen a final choice was made of what seemed to us best, the mere putting on paper was wholly secondary" (Matthews 1891: 27). In this way, they both subverted the common assumption that automatically associated authorship with writing: according to them, the putting of pen to paper is not the defining act of authorship. In particular, Somerville placed great emphasis on the conversational nature of her and Ross's partnership: "[w]e sat out on the sandy hills, roasting in the great sunshine of Northern France, and talked until we had talked Major Sinclair Yeates, R.M. and Flurry Knox into existence" (Somerville 1917: 258). The two women debunked the image of the solitary author sitting at his desk, in silence, writing: not only did they talk their stories, they often did so in unconventional, casual settings, outside the 'garret' of the Romantic mythology. Against the significance accorded in the Victorian imagination to the writer with his pen in hand ("that autocratic, commanding pen, which has – as is so generally known and believed – so much in it power!" Somerville 1946: 186), the Irish coauthor bluntly proclaimed that the holder of the pen in her and Ross's partnership was "wholly fortuitous." One may try to imagine and contrast the iconic painting of Charles Dickens by Daniel Maclise, in which the author is sitting alone at his desk, pen in hand, his eyes raised in search of inspiration, with the scene described by Somerville. The two creative moments could not be more different.



“IT’S THE BOOKS THAT MATTER, NOT WHO HELD THE WRETCHED PEN”

Thanks to the conversational method, then, the authors become ‘one’ and it becomes impossible to discern the hands of the coauthors behind the collaboration. Furthermore – and crucially – both Matthews and Somerville insisted that there is no point in trying to do so. To the coeval public’s curiosity about *who wrote what*, the coauthors answered: what does it matter? These late Victorian collaborators considered the public’s “supreme, almost invariable question, as to which of us held the pen – the inspired pen!” (Somerville 1946: 181) totally pointless – if not utterly irritating. Matthews spent much of his essay insisting that:

[i]n a genuine collaboration, when the joint work is a true chemical union and not a mere mechanical mixture, it matters little who holds the pen. [...] When a situation has been talked over thoroughly and traced out to its logical conclusion, and when a character has been considered from every angle and developed to its inevitable end, nine-tenths of the task is accomplished. The putting down on paper of the situation and the character is but the clothing of a babe already alive and kicking. (Matthews 1891: 7)

Somerville commented that “[t]he question as to which of us held the pen [...] was a point that never entered our minds to consider” (Somerville 1946: 133). Pestered by the media’s unrelenting questions about the mechanics of her and Ross’ collaboration, she expressed all her exasperation in a letter to her brother: “It’s the books that matter, not who held the wretched pen” (Jamison 2016: 46). Somerville’s and Matthew’s final point seems to be one: the focus of the public’s attention should be the text in its unity, not what is behind it, that is, not the authors. The authors of a collaborative work, being neither discernible nor perceptible, remain concealed behind the text. Only the product in its final coherence and independence, the colour green, the baby alive and kicking, should be visible. Only to it the reader should devote his attention, without trying to look for the authors in its pages.

Therefore, the author-figure promoted by Matthews and Somerville in their commentaries on collaboration is reduced to a scattered, blurred and hybrid entity that simply ‘does not matter.’ The collaborative author fades away into an elusive presence that remains hidden behind the text: he (or should we say ‘it?’) becomes a ghost, which cannot – and should not, the coauthors exhorted – be seen nor even looked for. And yet, as normally happens with ghosts, readers, Victorians and not, have been constantly haunted by this puzzling presence. Our curiosity is spurred by the mystery of this figure, so distant from our traditional conception of author and so difficult to fully ‘catch.’ The ghost of the collaborative author haunted the Victorian reading public, and keeps haunting readers of today.

To conclude, it is necessary to note that the experiences of Edith Somerville and Brander Matthews with their respective collaborators are by no means the only cases in which the dissolution of the Romantic author takes place. Similar assertions of merging and fluidity of authorial identity are present in other collaborators’ metadiscourses. For instance, another late Victorian literary couple, the controversial



aunt-niece Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley, who published coauthored poetry and various fiction under the pseudonym Michael Field, described their joint works as a “perfect mosaic” and warned their readers: “as to our work, let no man think he can put asunder what God has joined” (Sturgeon 1922: 47). Echoing Somerville’s image of the partnered dancing (see *infra* p. 5), Bradley declared that, during the creative moment, she and Cooper “cross[ed] and interlace[d] like a company of dancing summer flies.” Images of unity and boundlessness are also employed by the Australian Marjorie Barnard to describe her collaboration with Flora Eldershaw on a number of novels during the 1930s. In her essay “The Gentle Art of Collaboration” (1977), Barnard wrote: “[w]e worked it up together and our thoughts and ideas became inextricably blended into a whole. There was no mine and thine but ours. This not only excluded proprietary rights on either side but gave the book its unity” (Barnard 1977:126).¹⁷

So, the dismantling of the author within the collaborative practice is not limited to the cases of Somerville and Matthews, but is a larger and fascinating phenomenon, though understudied and not sufficiently theorised. Without trying to go too far, this essay has tried to suggest that the late nineteenth-century collaborative trend might point to an early overcoming of the Romantic concept of authorship, strikingly akin to those twentieth-century movements which would systematically dismiss the importance of the author.

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¹⁷ The recurrence of discourses of ecstatic fluidity in women’s collaborations may point to a gender aspect, as noted by Ehnenn (2008). Ehnenn focuses on the collaborative relationships of Somerville and Ross, Michael Field, Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson, and Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell, and observes that, while men’s collaborations are generally characterised by competition and hierarchy, women, perhaps because already excluded from the category of ‘solitary genius’ because of their gender, tend to shape collaborative relationships based on equality, mutual caring and extreme closeness. However, as I discuss above, Brander Matthews’s approach to collaboration seems to partially refute this binary opposition.



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