DESPITE EFFORTS AMONG RECENT CRITICAL THEORISTS TO REMOVE, BANISH, OR EVEN KILL THE AUTHOR, THE AUTHOR REMAINS AT the center of general critical attention. It is commonplace now to under-
stand that all texts produced by authors are not the products of individ-
ual creators. Rather, they are the result of any number of discourses that take place among the writer, the political and social environments in which the writing occurs, the aesthetic and economic pressures that en-
courage the process, the psychological and emotional state of the writer, and the reader who is expected to receive or consume the end product when it reaches print. Even if not intended for an audience or the pub-
lishing marketplace, a piece of writing cannot escape the numerous in-
fluences that produce it. All discourse is socially constructed.

Yet we continue to maintain the traditional image of the author as an individualist up against a materialistic world, trying to create some-
thing pure and unsullied by the rank commercialism of society despite the interference of the system of publication, which requires mediation and compromise—an image that Jack Stillinger has called “the romantic myth of the author as solitary genius” (202). In American literature, Herman Melville best fulfills this myth. According to some early biogra-
phers and critics, he was unable to shape his creative forces to suit the readers of his time and thus was sentenced to neglect and disrespect in his later years. Refusing to sacrifice his integrity by writing for a mass audience, the story goes, he was forced to earn his living as a mundane clerk in the New York Customs House. We know now, however, that such seemingly innovative works as Moby-Dick and Pierre drew on ex-
isting popular narrative forms of the day and that they were largely in-
tended to suit the literary marketplace (Post-Lauria). Earlier in his life, Melville had been a part of antebellum popular culture as the man who lived among cannibals, so he knew how to strike the popular chord, and we need to look elsewhere for his literary fate in his lifetime rather than blame his readers’ lack of taste and good judgment.

There have been a few important writers who seemed to write only for themselves; who refused to barter with the literary marketplace; who

M. THOMAS INGE is the Robert Emory
Blackwell Professor of English and Hu-
manities at Randolph-Macon College. His recent publications include William Faulkner: The Contemporary Reviews (Cambridge UP, 1994), Conversations with William Faulkner (UP of Missis-
sippi, 1999), and Charles M. Schulz: Con-
versons (UP of Mississippi, 2000). His projects under way include books on American humor, Faulkner, Walt Disney, and the comic arts.
understood that their work was too far advanced for, or out of accord with, the expectations of their contemporary readers; and who therefore fitted the model of the solitary genius—Emily Dickinson and Franz Kafka may be the two best known examples. Interestingly enough, however, the posthumous collaborative efforts of Mabel Loomis Todd and later Thomas H. Johnson, as editors of Dickinson, and of Max Brod, who saved and supervised the publication of Kafka’s fiction, brought these two authors to the attention and endless admiration of twentieth-century readers. Henry David Thoreau, who once wrote that he “never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude” (386) and who removed himself from society with the intention of finding out how much he could do without, might have qualified as a solitary genius had he not sought commercial publication of his work and a career as a writer (albeit an unsuccessful one). But Dickinson and Kafka are the exceptions that prove the rule. Most writers want to be a part of the collaborative network that brings their books to readers and occasionally earns them a decent living.

Exactly when the myth of solitary genius began is not clear, but it has been connected with the concept of the poet as prophet and possessor of transcendent knowledge. As James S. Leonard and Christine E. Wharton describe this concept, “[W]riting is the tool with which the poet tries to capture (or recapture) the elusive glimpse into the good and beautiful truth of things lying at the heart of silence. The silent locus/nature of truth calls for solitude, mirroring the truth itself as transcendentally unitary” (25). This description gives the writer and the artistic intention an especially exalted status. Whatever the origin of the myth, English and American Romanticism helped firmly establish it.

The idea of establishing ownership of a text through signing it, however, is fairly recent, as indicated by the fact that we are not sure who wrote the Iliad and the Odyssey. Those who attended plays in seventeenth-century England may often have had no idea who wrote them, if we take the word of John Dryden in a letter dated 4 March 1699: “This Day was played a reviv’d Comedy of Mr Congreve’s calld the Double Dealer [. . .]; in the play bill was printed,—Written by Mr Congreve [. . .] the printing an Authors name, in a Play bill, is a new manner of proceeding, at least in England” (112–13). This was a century after Shakespeare was writing his plays, and of course we are still not certain who wrote all the plays attributed to that name. That no one cared is suggested by the frequency with which the texts were revived, adapted, and entirely rewritten, and even today a source of their vitality lies in the various ways they can be adapted to new historic circumstances and modern contexts. While this adapting often upsets purists, the plays were not meant to be historical archives, and dressing the actors in Troilus and Cressida in Elizabethan costume makes no more sense than dressing them in United States Civil War uniforms.

There has seldom been a time when someone did not stand between author and audience in the role of a mediator, reviser, or collaborator. When monks copied manuscripts in medieval monasteries, they had the opportunity to correct or amend the texts by their best lights, and the illuminations they added appear intended as glosses and interpretations. They could claim co-ownership of the texts resulting from their handiwork. Once movable type was invented, another intermediary entered the process, the printer, who in the beginning fulfilled the triple role of editor, typesetter, and publisher or promoter of a book. As typefaces became standardized and consistent rules for grammar and spelling were developed, necessary for expediency in the printing operation as well as for comprehension by the reader, the collaborative process became more complicated.

The development of new technologies and methods of reproduction, as well as the expansion of retail and promotion strategies, would serve to complicate things further, and the originator of the manuscript grew even more distant from the reader. As James West has made clear in his thor-
thoughly detailed study *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace since 1900*, required reading for any student of modern American literary culture, any number of influential people stand between author and reader, each making a distinct impression on the resulting book. These people include the author’s agent, who places the manuscript with a publisher; the acquisitions editor at the publisher, who looks for promising writers; the primary reader, who evaluates and recommends the project for publication; the copyeditor, who prepares the text for the printer; the typesetter at the printing firm; proofreaders sometimes at both the printing and the publishing offices; the promotion and advertising director; the marketing manager and sales staff members; book reviewers for journals and newspapers; wholesalers; and finally the bookstore owner, who puts the book in the hands of the reader.

This elaborate process requires many negotiations and compromises, and at its best it produces a book that is both a best-seller and a critical success, thus increasing the reputations and earnings of everyone involved in the project. It doesn’t always work this way, but it works often enough to have made some publishing firms financially solid and some authors wealthy. While the introduction of the word processor and computer has simplified some of these steps in publication and would seemingly restore to the writer more direct influence, the structure pretty much remains the same today (although many publishers have dispensed with proofreaders, relying on the authors to proofread, much to the detriment of the texts). The publishing process is not the same as a collaboration between two or more authors in the writing of a book, but it is a collaboration that involves many people with various degrees of influence on the finished text. And it must be taken into account in any full appreciation and understanding of a book-length piece of literature.

Both British and American literatures provide any number of examples of the kind of collaboration that occurs among individuals, whether beyond or including the collaborative process outlined above. In his groundbreaking and still unchallenged study *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*, Stillinger brought to bear his considerable experience in studying the manuscripts of several Romantic and Victorian-era writers to conclude that “multiple authorship—the collaborative authorship of writings that we routinely consider the work of a single author—is quite common, and that instances [...] can be found virtually anywhere we care to look in English and American literature of the last two centuries” (22). He provides a series of highly detailed and thoroughly researched case studies of classic works of poetry and prose—John Keats’s *Isabella*, John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography*, William Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* are among them—to demonstrate that each of these works came about through direct collaboration, peer advice, editorial assistance, or creative borrowing from other sources. Stillinger’s careful survey of the assistance offered by Ezra Pound in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* demonstrates that this influential work of modern poetry would not and could not have existed in its present form without Pound’s expert reshaping of the original manuscript. In the recent millennial craze for assembling lists of the most important works of the twentieth century, *The Waste Land* came out at the top of nearly everyone’s list of poems. While critics still tend to dismiss Pound’s influence as slight and of little consequence—Stillinger quotes from a dozen Eliot experts to this effect, in spite of the extensive documentary evidence preserved by Eliot himself—it is clear that both poets’ names should properly be attached to the poem. But this acceptance of joint authorship will not happen as long as “critical appreciation of a masterwork requires it to be the product of a single organizing mind” (138).

Twentieth-century American literature is largely a history of collaboration. The works of Thomas Wolfe would not exist had not his patient
friend and editor, Maxwell Perkins, extracted from the mountain of manuscript produced by Wolfe such works as *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*. After Wolfe’s untimely death, another editor, Edward C. Aswell, shaped several more posthumous books from the remaining manuscripts—*The Web and the Rock, You Can’t Go Home Again*, and *The Hills Beyond*. Aswell even produced new prose when needed to effect transitions and fill in gaps. Wolfe’s agent, Elizabeth Nowell, was responsible for crafting the short stories and other pieces from the seemingly inexhaustible supply of manuscript. Wolfe was incapable of doing this, and without such collaboration his work might have been lost to literary history. All these people who attended to his work deserved acknowledgment or even billing on the title pages of his books.

Perkins deserved credit for far more than Wolfe, of course. He was of central importance to the lives and works of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example. He inspired them with ideas and plot lines when their imaginations ran dry, helped them shape inchoate manuscripts into effective wholes, found titles for their books, gave them psychological and financial advice, listened to their confessions and petty arguments, and even loaned them money. Other writers he nurtured into print were Ring Lardner, Erskine Caldwell, Edmund Wilson, J. P. Marquand, Sherwood Anderson, Allen Tate, Stark Young, and Alan Paton. One of the finest features of *The Great Gatsby* is its delicately balanced structure, which mediates between the past and the present, revealing just enough to maintain reader interest but holding back the real surprises. After the book was published and praised for this technical virtuosity, Fitzgerald wrote to Perkins, “Max, it amuses me when praise comes in on the ‘structure’ of the book—because it was you who fixed up the structure, not me” (qtd. in Bruccoli xviii).

Yet this prodigiously talented man, without whom the landscape of twentieth-century American literature would not be the same, was himself infected by the myth of the solitary genius. He once spoke to a group of students about his editorial philosophy and noted, “An editor does not add to a book. At best he serves as a handmaid to an author. Don’t ever get to feeling important about yourself, because an editor at most releases energy. Hecreates nothing” (qtd. in Berg 6). But the evidence of his career proves him wrong on this matter, and the comment can be attributed only to his personal humility. However we credit his accomplishment, Perkins deserves more than to be called merely an editor. In fact, it would be appropriate to include a selection from his writings in any anthology of American literature along with those from Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and others of that period.

Perkins’s credo that “[t]he book belongs to the writer” (qtd. in Berg 4) and the myth of the solitary genius have also influenced a good deal of recent textual criticism and the production of scholarly editions of twentieth-century literature. Theodore Dreiser offers a case in point. Dreiser is important in the history of American literature for many reasons: the powerful social conscience he brought to bear on his depictions of the American class system, his attention to realistic social details and human psychology under the pressures of unbalanced economic forces, and the voice he gave to a nation becoming a world power. He knew how to create characters, develop plots, and use dramatic tension in telling memorable stories, which inspired writers to follow. But style was not his forte. His sentences often rambled and fell into patterns of awkward syntax. He had an imperfect grasp of grammar and the rules of spelling and punctuation. In other words, he needed help, and when he wrote *Sister Carrie*, he sought it out by turning to his wife, a schoolteacher, and to his writer friend Arthur Henry.

In the notes to the Pennsylvania edition of *Sister Carrie*, the process of composition is described as follows:

> Throughout the composition of the manuscript, in fact, Dreiser offered his drafts to Jug [his
wife] and Henry for revision and editing. This practice was by now habitual: during his apprentice years as a newspaper reporter, Dreiser had become accustomed to working with copyeditors and rewrite men, and he had never developed much sensitivity about his prose. He had always been a poor speller and an indifferent grammarians; Jug, who knew the mechanics of the language from her teaching days, could correct demonstrable errors in his drafts. Henry’s function was different; he was a published author with some feeling for the style and rhythm of English prose, and Dreiser allowed him to identify and revise awkward spots in the drafts. The manuscript of Sister Carrie therefore exhibits, in nearly every chapter, markings by both Jug and Henry. (506-07)

In addition, the several typists involved often misread Dreiser’s handwriting, skipped over sentences, and corrected punctuation and spelling errors. All the revisions, alterations, inadvertent changes, and corrections were allowed to stand with Dreiser’s approval. At the last moment, the publisher asked that over thirty thousand words be deleted from the lengthy manuscript, which Dreiser entrusted Henry to do. The effect of Henry’s work, according to the Pennsylvania editors, was “almost without exception” to “quicken narrative pace and tone down sexual passages” (520). The book greatly benefited from what is clearly a collaboration, becoming more engaging and better suited to the contemporary reading public.

The four textual critics who worked on the Pennsylvania edition saw the assistance Dreiser sought in a different light: “The Sister Carrie that was published in November 1900 was marred by this editorial interference and censorship and has been the basis of American editions and foreign translations until the present” (Westlake ix). The collaboration then was “interference” and “censorship” that “marred” the novel. Anyone who undertakes to read the critics’ massive restoration of the book to its manuscript and first typescript stage is likely soon to long for Dreiser’s authorized first edition. More Dreiser is not better, and he was a writer who needed and depended on collaboration. The publishing system of the day worked to his benefit. As Stillinger has wittily observed, this is “Dreiser in his underwear” (199)—not a pretty sight.

Another writer who had little grasp of spelling and punctuation, despite his time at Princeton, was Fitzgerald. Commas especially bedeviled him, but between Perkins and the house editors at Scribner’s, these problems were usually corrected. Thus, returning to his original manuscripts for copy texts is problematic, but it was done for the Cambridge edition of Fitzgerald’s works. For example, the first sentence of chapter 4 of the restored version of The Great Gatsby reads, “On Sunday morning while church bells rang in the village along shore the world and its mistress returned to Gatsby’s house and twinkled hilariously on his lawn” (49). On first reading, it is not clear where the introductory clause ends and the main clause begins. And what is the subject of the verb “returned”? “[T]he village along shore the world and its mistress” first suggests itself, although that makes no sense. The house-edited version of the 1925 text clears up the problem with a single properly placed comma: “On Sunday morning while church bells rang in the village along shore, the world and its mistress returned to Gatsby’s house and twinkled hilariously on his lawn” (61). Would Fitzgerald have preferred to be read with his shirttail out, or did he rely on the collaborative process to tuck it in before appearing in public? I suspect he counted on Perkins to make him more presentable. At least the Cambridge edition resists following Fitzgerald’s impulse just before publication to call the novel Under the Red, White, and Blue. That would have been a disastrous title for what many consider the great American novel.

The editors of these and similar editions under way on American and British authors are all highly capable and talented scholars who have developed a vision of what constitutes a pure text and have followed it faithfully into print at great cost in time and exhaustive attention. It is
demanding, meticulous work. The volumes they have produced are extremely valuable for scholars interested in the process of composition and the working habits of influential writers. But these editions are not the books that were originally published, reviewed, read, and discussed by generations of teachers and critics. They stand outside literary history and form a part of the chronology of critical response to that history. They should not be assigned in classrooms to students unfamiliar with the original editions and the works' cultural contexts. Finally, they perpetuate veneration for the myth of the solitary writer and for the effort to rescue that writer from the suspected corruptions of commerce and collaboration. It is ironic that the editors of the Pennsylvania edition of Dreiser note that their edition of Sister Carrie “has been, since its inception, a collaborative effort” (ix). What is essential for them was bad for Dreiser.

As the traditional study of literature and composition in English departments expanded in the last half of the twentieth century to include such topics as film, popular literature, the media, and other forms of popular culture, it embraced forms of narrative even more clearly the product of collaboration. The first courses in film as a form of culture were offered in English departments—a natural development, considering that film, like literature, can be analyzed and appreciated through such components as plot, characterization, dialogue, and theme. But of all the forms of creative expression, film may be the most collaborative, given the extent to which it draws on the talents in unison of writers, producers, directors, actors, cinematographers, costume designers, set makers, makeup artists, electricians, and the hundreds of others usually listed in the credits at the end of a screening.

It is the English department background, no doubt, that explains the attraction found in the classroom of the auteur theory, the film studies version of the myth of the solitary genius. Originated by the French in the 1950s, the auteur theory takes one identifiable person as the major creative force behind a film—usually the director or producer but sometimes the actor or studio head. Powerful and influential talents like John Ford, Orson Welles, or Alfred Hitchcock are usually studied with attention to themes, symbols, and techniques that are consistent from film to film. Yet it is not the collective effect of these continuities that makes the individual films great; each film falls or rises on the virtues of its separate qualities. Nothing else Welles ever did had the artistic integrity and innovative force of Citizen Kane (although Touch of Evil comes close). When such matters as production costs, budgets, marketing, and the fickle tastes of moviegoers are thrown into the mix, it is amazing that great films emerge at all. But emerge they do, and all because of the intangible and subtle ways dozens of talented people find it possible to work together in cinematic collaboration of a most demanding kind.

Another form of popular art to enter the classroom of late is the comics. Courses in satire, humor, and twentieth-century culture frequently use comic strips as mirrors of concepts and trends found in language and literature, especially as the daily newspaper feature has developed from the simple gag humor of The Katzenjammer Kids and Blondie to the more complicated and psychologically engaging humor of Peanuts and Calvin and Hobbes. Comic books are taught now in courses about narrative, cultural history, and relations between verbal and visual art, especially through the descendant of the early comic books, the graphic novel, such as Art Spiegelman’s Maus and Will Eisner’s A Contract with God.

From the beginning, comic art has been a collaborative product, combining the forces of a writer and an artist at a minimum but sometimes of a team of creative people. Dozens of artists have drawn and written The Katzenjammer Kids for its run of more than one hundred years, and sometimes a strip is passed down in the creator’s family, as Blondie was. Often, once a strip becomes popular enough, the artists can afford to turn it over to teams of assistants while they
follow other creative and professional interests, as did Al Capp with *Li’l Abner* and Jim Davis with *Garfield*.

There are few solitary artists who insist on writing, penciling, inking, and lettering their own work with no assistance. Charles M. Schulz did this for almost fifty years in *Peanuts*, a singular record in comic art history, and Spiegelman produced on his own every page of *Maus*, his postmodern narrative about the impact of the Holocaust on his family and himself. Both artists demonstrated how such a seemingly simple form of communication as the comics can be used to produce works that will last as commentaries on the human condition and our resilience for survival.

But, once again, they are exceptions. Both Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster gave us Superman, one of America’s contributions to modern mythology (probably exceeded in instant recognition only by Mickey Mouse throughout the world). It was Joe Simon and Jack Kirby who created our quintessential comic-book hero Captain America during World War II, as well as such home-front fighting teams as the Young Allies, the Boy Commandos, and the Newsboy Legion. The antiheroic comic-book character Spider-Man, whose personality problems made him the icon of the alienated young readers of the sixties, was produced by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko. In more recent comic-book series, the collaborative nature of this medium is borne out by the title pages, where a minimum of seven names appear—the general editor, project editor, scriptwriter, penciler, inker, letterer, and colorist. In addition, the names of the original creators, idea people, and various producers may appear. When comic-book publishers began some years ago to return the original pages to the creators, because of the pages’ value on the art market, there was great uncertainty over to whom the material belonged.

Wherever one looks in twentieth-century culture, collaboration seems the order of the day, from the Nashville Fugitives and the southern Agrarians to the Bloomsbury group and the beat generation. The Fugitive poets subjected their poetry to intense group criticism before publication, and in the first issue of the *Fugitive* they all used pseudonyms to conceal their identities. Out of those meetings came the American version of the New Criticism, as passed on to generations of students in the textbook collaborations of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*. Film and television comedy has been dominated by team efforts, from Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, the Marx Brothers, and the Three Stooges to Monty Python, *Saturday Night Live*, and *Mad TV*. In music, one can mention William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, or Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels gave us dialectical materialism, Will Durant and Ariel Durant popular history and philosophy, William Masters and Virginia Johnson the sexual revolution, and James Watson and Francis Crick DNA’s double helix. By uniting their skills, the individuals involved in these group projects transcended their capabilities and limitations for something greater than solitary accomplishment. Perhaps the nature of culture is collaboration.

I have used the word *collaboration* intentionally to cover a wide variety of kinds of group effort. Most people would agree that any attempt by two or more individuals to create or compose something together—line by line, page by page, or chapter by chapter—qualifies as collaboration, but I would argue for a broader understanding. Anytime another hand enters into an effort, a kind of collaboration occurs. My recent submission of an entry for an encyclopedia was edited down to the bare-bones level of direct communication of information. While I have a fondness for the more expansive style of the original, the published version should not be considered the product of my sole authorship, although only my name will appear beneath it.
On a practical level, recognizing that the concept of the solitary genius, or of the divinely inspired author, is a myth calls for no drastic change in the ways we teach and write. Probably we should put Pound’s name beneath Eliot’s on The Waste Land because under any definition of collaboration his name belongs there. Likewise, Perkins’s name should be placed on the title pages, at least as editor, of Wolfe’s first novels. But there should be a change in attitude about how we discuss our literature and culture so that we do not constantly downgrade authors according to the extent to which they compromise with the pragmatic and economic forces of time and place. We might reconsider the priority we give to what authors think is best for their works, since like parents they are too often blind to the imperfections of their children. If we allow more for a social and contextual concept of authorship, perhaps we can provide a more realistic and less romantic view of literary production. Then we could join Eliot’s “working man” who went into a music hall and enthusiastically joined in the performer’s singing: “he was engaged in the collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art” (407).

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