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Models of Historical Literary Collaboration

Introduction

I would love to use this paper to concisely summarize the history of of literary collaboration and draw broad conclusions on its importance and effectiveness: an impossibly ambitious goal. Upon even superficial investigation it becomes clear that authorship, although often articulated otherwise in dominant contemporary academic and literary discourses, is, nearly without exception, a collaborative process to some degree. No author creates in a vacuum.

For his book, Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius, Jack Stillinger initially sought to assemble an appendix of all major collaborative works from the earliest times and from all possible literatures. It quickly became apparent to Stillinger had poorly evaluated the breadth of topic. Several medievalists asked him if he, "intended to include every work originating before the invention of printing." Specialists in Renaissance drama echoed similar concerns about the work in their field. These issues were raised again by those who worked with works published anonymously and pseudo-anonymously. The list continued (203).

Even when he limited him study to the cream of the contemporary English and American literary canons, Stillinger had difficulty defining multiple authorship for the purposes of his appendix. What type of collaboration would he include? Would it include both acknowledged and unacknowledged collaboration? Was borrowing, adapting, developing, or discussing an idea, plot, concept or character an act of multiple authorship? Would his appendix include work by collaborators working as editors; where would he draw *this* line? It became clear that even under the most conservative definitions of collaboration and multiple authorship, his list would be impossibly large; under the broadest definitions it might include nearly every major text ever written.

As the medievalists pointed out, the invention of printing ushered in the eras of copyright and mass production when "authors" were conceptually transformed from craftsman building works from bits of pieces in an existing literary continuum into Romantic geniuses whose brilliance and creations sprung from within--but this reconfiguration hardly marked end of widespread literary collaboration. Influential in the popularization of this concept, even Wordsworth and his fellow Romantic poets actively collaborated on several of their greatest projects (Stillinger 69-120). In spite of their, their concept of singular authorship, economically driven by copyright and the literary industries it created, has dominated the popular psyche so effectively that few even consider that a great book might be written by a committee.

Still, existing collaborative works have retained their positions at the top of major literary cannons and the role of collaborators in the creation of new literary works has persisted--although increasing unacknowledged or understated in nature. Works including the King James Bible and the short stories of Raymond Carver act as testaments to the persistence--and the persistent success--of the collaborative literary process.

Literature by Committee: King James Bible

The Bible is, humanly speaking, a text of multiple and composite authorship on an unprecedented scale. The books of the Old and New testament is explicitly attributed to over forty men from a diverse range of backgrounds--from kings to laborers--writing from between 1500 B.C.E. through 97 C.E.[1] Scholars acting as "editors" including the Septuagint (itself made up of 70 collaborators), Origen, Jerome, Eusebius and Augustine, gave the text form by comparing and consolidating divergent copies in attempts to assemble a "true" version (Gaebelein 18). It should come as little surprise that believers refer to the product and process of this unparallelled collaborative effort as miraculous.

Given this rich collaborative history, it should come as little surprise that the collaborative

1. Ongoing scholarship suggests that many of these men, including Moses, may themselves be composites; it implies the hands of uncountable unattributed authors and unattributable traditional sources, lore, and legend.

efforts that have gone into the production of the "original" texts have been adopted in the production of the most revered translations. This is certainly true in the case of the King James Version (KJV) of the English Bible: the most popular Bible translation and, by many estimates, the single most influential text in the English literary canon.

The collaborative process responsible for the KJV was already centuries underway when the translation was commanded by King James at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604. KJV is derived from the Geneva Bible (1560) and the Bishops Bible (1568) which in turn had The Great Bible (1539) and Matthews Bible (1537) as antecedents. Work antecedent to these includes translations by John Wycliffe and William Tyndale.[2] Each translator interacted with their predecessors by basing their work off the work of those before them. The collaborative process, while not unusual during the time, is noteworthy in its extent and explicitness; pieces of KJV can be positively traced to the very first manuscript translations of the Bible into English. Gaebelein states, "some of the most beautiful portions of the King James Version can be traced directly to John Wycliffe's Bible."

At the end of a century that gave birth to six separate English translations of the same book, King James, prompted by Dr. John Rainolds (Reynolds), President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, set the wheels in motion for the creation of yet another translation (Daiches 65). Several months later, King James informed English bishops that he had appointed, "four and fifty men," (of which we know the names of only forty-seven) and had called for suggestions, clarifications, or specific insight from "learned men" anywhere in England.

The committee assembled was, "catholic and intelligent on the whole, including most of the ablest men available, whether High Church or Puritan" (Daiches 67). This ideologically diverse group was again divided into six sub-groups which met at Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge. Each location housed a group translating the Old and New Testaments. Each scholar translated the same piece of text as his colleagues before the small groups compared versions and created a

2. To trace the collaborations to *yet another* level, the translations by both Wycliffe and Tyndale were themselves collaborative processes. Wycliffe's work was finished by collaborators after he was martyred and Tyndale's work assisted and eventually completed by John Rogus, Miles Coverdale and others.

rendering that was then forwarded to a final committee of revisers. This final committee referred to works in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, Spanish, Italian and other languages making use, "of ancient and modern translations...and consulting the old manuscripts that were available" to arrive the most informed decision possible (Gaebelein 67-69).

The results of this process of, "creation by committee," while not an instant success, where nothing short of astounding. Frank Gaebelein describes KJV as, "the crown of our literature," and argues that the translation offers, "one of those rare cases where superlatives are not only justified but demanded" (22, 72). He goes on to describe it as, "immortal poetry, enduring in beauty because it reflects so truly the inspired original" (75). The translation is, and continues to be each year, the highest selling Bible translation. It has persisted in popularity for almost four centuries and is the antecedent and basis for several other popular translations including the Revised Version and the American Standard Version (ASV).

Editors as Collaborators: Raymond Carver and Gordon Lish

While KJV acts as model for collaborative writing by an explicit committee, the type of explicitly collaborative process that produced the Bible is increasingly rare in today's literary landscape. While explicit collaboration still occurs, and is becoming increasingly common, literary collaboration is more commonly in the form of "coauthorship" as evidenced by the terms "as-told-to," "with," and "and," in the by-lines of books and articles. It has has also been driven underground and taken shape in other unacknowledged forms of collaboration. These unacknowledged, or largely unacknowledged, collaborators have often assumed the role of editors, many of whom play as influential role in shaping a finished text as the attributed author. T.S. Eliot's papers are testament to collaboration between Eliot and Ezra Pound of this category and degree. Through an unusual attempt to claim responsibility for the product, this increasingly common type of collaboration has been recently highlighted in the relationship between popular 1980's short story author Raymond Carver and his friend and editor Gordon Lish.

Carver, considered by many to be America's most important short story writer when he

died of lung cancer fourteen years ago, pioneered and popularized a dark minimalistic literary style that exploded in popularity during the '80s. In an 1998 article in the New Yorker, D.T. Max examined many of Carver and Lish's original manuscripts and met with Lish himself in an attempt to investigate Lish's increasingly loud claims claims that, "he had changed some of the stories so much that they were more his than Carver's" (35). He goes into some detail on the changes marked in the manuscripts which include Carver's 1981 collection, What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, in which Lish, "cut about half the original words and rewrote 10 of the 13 endings." Editorial work of this extent was typical on many of Carver's stories, some of which Lish cut by over seventy percent before they were published (37).

Lish's claims of responsibility for elements of Carver's stories prompted similar claims from others in Carver's life. Carver's wife, poet Tess Gallagher, has made claims on elements of Carvers work arguing that several of his plots were originally hers and comparing Carver's actions to "stealing." After Carver's early death, access to his manuscripts and to his living literary partners has made the collaborative processes behind the creation of his stories unusually transparent to the general public. The scene appears to have been one of rich collaboration between his friends, family, and editors--all of which was hidden during this life.

Many of Lish's edits and additions added touches that were later called "trademark techniques" of Carver's. Max claimed that, "[Lish's] additions gave the story new dimensions, bringing out moments that I was sure Carver might have loved to see" (38). These edits were so extensive that in a letter to Lish, Carver expressed, "fear [of] being caught" (Max 40). In 1982 Carver pleaded to Lish, "please help me with this book as a good editor, the best ... not as my ghost" (40). Carver was aware that Lish's role was more than what an editor "should" be but was unwilling or incapable of interacting with him in a more explicit form of collaboration--coauthorship being the only other option; there was simply no classification in the dominant system of literary production for their type of collaboration. However, regardless of ownership or attribution, the stories are, in most critics opinions, better as a results of the edits; the minimalist style that Carver became fa-

mous for can be almost completely attributed to Lish if the available manuscripts are to be trusted as representative.

Conclusions

While articulated differently, the collaboration between the KJV scholars and Raymond, Lish, and Gallagher served similar purposes and took related forms. Both works are the products of editorial review and a dynamic literary interchange. Each group took the work of others and built, improved, and revised. Each came to consensus on final product--one that was indisputably better as a result.

It is important to remember that neither the processes behind the King James Bible nor Raymond Carver's short stories are exceptional. They are merely documented exceptionally well. Finished in 1611, the KJV was written in a period before copyright and the Romantic enthronement of the author as a creative *individual*. In this period, great works were crafted from those already in existance and, as a result, were the products of literary communities as much as the individuals that put pen to paper. As the call for collaborators on the KJV evidences, the "authors" of the translations sought all qualified collaborators to insure that their book were as informed, accurate, and nuanced as possible. By incorporating more eyes, more minds, and more hands, KJV gained an edge over previous versions that secured its success and persistence.

On the other hand, Carver's literary environment was one that was hostile to the type of collaboration showcased in the creation of the KJV. As a result, Carver took great pains to hide Lish's active role. He was embarrassed by the extent of Lish's contributions to his stories and eventually severed his professional and social ties to his editor--even though he felt and admitted that his stories were *better* as a result of this relationship. He thought, perhaps accurately, that his reputation would be ruined if the extent of Lish's collaboration was revealed. While T.S. Eliot's reputation survived the exposure of Pound's work on, The Wasteland when his papers were released in 1968, Thomas Wolff did not fare as favorably.

Regardless of their divergant outcomes, the two models hint the persistance and power of

collaborative models of literary creation. Viewed together, the two scenarios act as testament to the model's enduring effectiveness in creating better work than would have been possible had the authors chosen to work alone. Even the most brilliant translators of the sixteenth century failed to create a work that rivaled the KJV. Neither Eliot nor Pound, neither Carver nor Lish, produced works of such high caliber while working alone.