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Preface to *Forum* Issue 12: Authenticity

Tim Milnes

Like many ideas forged in the Enlightenment, ‘authenticity’ has lost much of its lustre. The product of an eighteenth-century culture fascinated with the past, with notions of origins, essences, and depths, it was endowed by twentieth-century existentialism with a numinous quality that many theorists saw as ripe for deconstruction. Indeed, the traditional rhetoric of authenticity is emphatically *un*-postmodern in its auratic essentialism and its concern, in the absence of rational foundations, to locate some kind of centre for what is genuine and real. Such metaphysical earnestness is apt to cause embarrassment today, which is perhaps why commentators not bent on dismantling the notion of the authentic have approached it with circumspection. Among these, Lionel Trilling, whose 1971 study *Sincerity and Authenticity* remains essential reading, worries that ‘authenticity,’ like ‘irony’ and ‘love,’ is ‘one of those words [...] which are best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning [...]’ (120). More recently, Geoffrey Hartman has conceded that “‘Spirit’ and ‘authenticity’ are word concepts that cannot be saved from their own pathos. Perhaps we should not even try to sober them up’ (1). The temperate critic, it would seem, is well advised to handle authenticity with care.

In this instance, critical vigilance counsels close attention to definition and context. This is particularly important since, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the meaning of ‘authenticity’ changes significantly. As the Oxford English Dictionary registers, around this time the senses of ‘authentic’ as ‘authoritative,’ ‘legally valid,’ and ‘not a copy’ either become obsolete or are increasingly restricted to narrow legal definitions, to be replaced by a cluster of new associations, the most important of which are the ideas of ‘being real’ and ‘genuinely proceeding from a reputed source or author.’ According to these models, an authentic thing is less an validated, prototypical or original thing, and more a thing that can be traced to its putative origin. As Hartman puts it, at this point the traditional emphasis placed upon the legitimising power of an external agency is reversed, so that ‘authenticity now signifies a moral strength *not* based primarily on formal or institutional authority’ (viii).

This shift in meaning opens up a significant distinction within the concept of authenticity, that is, between authenticity as a status that is *conferred* and as a condition that is *achieved*. A birth certificate does not gain authenticity, but is granted this status by the state. Similarly, the identity of a person may be legally authenticated, using some ‘official’ form of identification. However, the new accent on truth, actuality, and connection to an origin enabled a deeper, metaphysical conception of authenticity as an achievable state. To attribute authenticity in this sense is not to issue a formal validation but to say something less tangible about a mode of existence, experience or expression; it is to say that an individual or work of art is somehow self-actualised, autonomous, fully realised. According to this meaning, a person or a sculpture or a novel, while legally authenticated, may nonetheless struggle to *become* authentic. In the traditional sense, authenticity is handed down; in the modern sense, it is attained.

The notion of legitimacy, nonetheless, remains crucial, a fact highlighted by authenticity’s cognate, ‘genuine.’ ‘Genuine’ shares with ‘genuflexion’ the Latin prefix ‘genu,’ or knee, which, in the practice of Christian worship, is bent before the authority of God. In the etymology of the term ‘genuine,’ however, the same joint exercises authority by providing a seat for the child whom the father acknowledges as *legitimately* his. A *genu*-ine child is one worthy of being placed on the original, paternal knee. Accordingly, just as the test of a poem’s authenticity comes to reside in its relation to an originating author, the authenticity (reality) of an individual’s everyday life is determined by his or her relation to an original, legitimizing essence: their being. In this way, modern authenticity, as Hartman notes, comes to contrast with ‘imitation, simulation, dissimulation, impersonation, imposture, fakery, forgery, inauthenticity, the counterfeit, lack of character or integrity’ (25).

Hartman does not include ‘insincerity’ in his list of antonyms. Admittedly, authenticity and sincerity are clearly not interchangeable terms. The first hinges on an ontological question (how *real* is this thing or person?), while the second relates to communication (to what extent does this *expression* correspond to an *intention*?). The first is generally seen as a private, the second, a public affair. And yet, the two ideas are intimately connected, both historically and theoretically. Around the same time that the meaning of authenticity is becoming increasingly internalised, the term ‘sincerity’ follows a similar path, shedding its traditional associations with purity and assuming the role of descriptor for the correspondence between a communicative act and a state of mind. As Bernard Williams demonstrates, these two ideas converge most powerfully in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau’s conception of sincerity, Williams argues, presupposes ‘the authority of self-discovery [...] a

real character, an underlying set of constant motives, in which his true self is exposed' (173). Consequently, in his *Confessions*, he takes the authenticity of his own thoughts and experiences for granted; believing it to be 'entirely obvious to himself what he was like, [...] his aim was to make it clear to the world' (Williams 178). According to Williams, however, Rousseau oversimplifies the relationship between the social virtue of sincerity and the private realm of authenticity. I shall return to this point later.

Rousseau's role in forging a connection between authenticity and sincerity reminds us that thinking critically about these terms involves revisiting a network of Enlightenment and romantic topoi. Foremost among these is the discourse of *origins*, which dominates the emerging disciplines of historiography and language theory in the eighteenth century. John Locke establishes the groundwork for the Enlightenment's fascination with origins. His claim that words are the signs not of things, but of ideas, ignites an interest in the history of language. By understanding the thought patterns of earlier, simpler societies, it was thought, one could better comprehend the fundamental principles of language. Heavily influenced by Locke and Rousseau, Lord Monboddo's six-volume *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (1773–1792), for instance, narrates the evolution of language through its initial, inarticulate, musical, and onomatopoeic original stages through to its abstract, classificatory, and more ends-directed functionality within modern society. In this way, the arguments of Monboddo and others encouraged the view that language becomes more complex and abstract as human society develops.

This heightened interest in history and origins had two notable effects. The first is the emergence of 'primitivism,' the fetishization of past cultures, associated with figures such as Robert Lowth, Thomas Percy, and Hugh Blair. The primitivistic idea that language in its 'original,' expressive condition is more authentic because uncontaminated by civilization in turn influences Wordsworth's declared aim in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to write in the 'real language of men in a state of vivid sensation' (118). It also provides the impetus for a series of spectacular literary forgeries by Macpherson, Chatterton and others in the second half of the eighteenth century. As Trilling puts it, 'the whole point of authenticity as a characteristically modern value has lain in the attempt to regain in some reflective form the unexpressed certainties which are supposed to have structured the pre-modern world' (183). What the 'Ossian' affair in particular demonstrates is that from its very inception, this value is already a commodity.

As Trilling's telling phrase indicates, however, the new appetite for the authentic did not simply entail excavating (or counterfeiting) the past, but also involved recreating it 'in some reflective form.' This brings us to the second effect mentioned above: by internalising the antiquarian obsessions of the primitivists, romantic writers attempt to reorganise the psyche in accordance with the idea of an original, expressive and powerful, though not fully articulate ego. For Percy Shelley, accordingly, 'poetry is connate with the origin of man' precisely *because* it is 'the expression of the Imagination' (480). By endeavouring to synthesise the articulate but dissociated sensibility of modern consciousness with its own, expressive but naive origins into a new and dynamic form of awareness, the romantics introduce the idea that authenticity is something that can be *achieved*.

From this point onwards, the fate of authenticity is closely linked with the idea of the modern. As David Kolb notes, one of the central paradoxes of modernity is that it promises 'genuinely novel expansions of possibility that yet remain authentic to what we have been' (61). For the same reason, Paul de Man maintains that *modern* literature is, strictly speaking, impossible, involving both 'a constitutive affinity with action, with the unmediated, free act that knows no past' and 'an interpretative process that follows after an act with which it cannot coincide' ("Blindness 1971" 151-52). If the romantics are responsible for creating this predicament, this is at least in part because they transform what it means to be authentic by burdening modernity with a concern for generating its own forms of normativity.

In doing so, however, they are responding to specific social and political conditions. As Charles Guignon claims, while in premodern societies 'human beings experience themselves as placeholders in a wider totality,' the coalescence of human identity around a punctual subjectivity means that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries society is increasingly conceptualised and experienced as 'other' (18). This places an enormous burden upon the self to define, realise, and legitimize itself. For the romantics, then, 'what comes to light as authentic truth (i.e., subjective truth) is *the activity of self-fashioning or self-making itself*' (Guignon 69). Hegel attempts to circumvent this picture by reconnecting self and society via the dialectical spirit of history. In doing so, he short-circuits the romantics' essentially asymptotic conception of the individual's drive towards self-mastery. Authenticity can be won, Hegel argues, but only when the disintegrated consciousness realises itself in the Absolute Idea. Until then, as Trilling puts it, the 'truth' of the self 'consists in its being *not* true to itself' (44).

Hegel's intervention is seminal, laying the foundations for two competing intellectual traditions that will debate authenticity for the greater part of the twentieth century: phenomenology and historicism. In the first, Heidegger revives the romantic conception of authenticity as something achieved by connecting Hegel's phenomenology to an investigation of being. Rather than consciousness, however, it is *Dasein* that must find and take hold of itself. As Heidegger describes it in *Being and Time*, '[t]he Self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic Self*—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way. As they-self, the particular Dasein has been *dispersed* into the "they", and must first find itself' (167). Consequently, authenticity is not achieved cognitively, merely, but must be won existentially:

If Dasein discovers the world in its own way and brings it close, if it discloses to itself its own authentic Being, then this discovery of the 'world' and this disclosure of Dasein are always accomplished as a clearing-away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars its own way. (Heidegger 167).

While Heidegger's conception of authentic *Dasein* was to influence Sartre and existentialism, it was given short shrift by thinkers who learnt from the Marxist and historicist tradition a suspicion of metaphysical hypostatizations. Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin in particular were alert to what they saw as the links of interdependence between romanticism, irrationalism, and capitalism. Adorno argues that 'authenticity' is a symptom of alienation, a romantic spectre arising, in a reflex of capitalism, as the other of instrumental reason. As he puts it in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, '[t]he bourgeois form of rationality has always needed irrational supplements, in order to maintain itself as what it is, continuing injustice through justice. Such irrationality in the midst of the rational is the working atmosphere of authenticity' (Adorno 38). Heidegger's concern with authentic being, he maintains, farcically repeats history insofar as it presents 'a left-over of romanticism [...] transplanted without second thought into a contemporary situation, to which it stands in harsher contradiction than ever before' (Adorno 46). Having been tarnished by Marxists, the idea of authenticity is deconstructed by postmodern critiques of Heideggerian notions of meaning as 'presence'. Accordingly, Paul de Man argues that language is incapable of bearing presence in the way that Heidegger envisages in authentic expression. On the contrary, '[p]oetic language can do nothing but originate anew over and over again; it is always constitutive, able to posit regardless of presence but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of consciousness' ("Intentional 1984")

6). For de Man, language originates out of nothing precisely because it lacks self-identity; because, in other words, it is inauthentic.

One of the many paradoxes of authenticity, however, is that despite being theoretically disreputable, it remains tenacious in literary criticism and scholarship at the practical level. Even critics and commentators who harbour misgivings about the term struggle to extricate it from their everyday judgements and evaluations. Some questions of authenticity are all but impossible to avoid, such as: ‘was this text *really* written by this author?’ or ‘which version of this text is authoritative?’ Nor are they confined to attribution. Problems of authenticity can also arise where there is evidence that a writer may have been coerced, duped or bribed into writing in a certain way. While the provenance of such works might be clear, doubts may remain (at the ‘deep’ level) about just how *genuine* they are. The persistence of such questions obliges commentators who traduce the notion of authenticity to come up with a compelling alternative.

This doggedness has encouraged some critics and theorists to rehabilitate the notion of authenticity by moving beyond both the traditional model and its postmodern alter ego. One problem associated with the former is that it presupposes a centred, autonomous self, the reality and ‘depth’ of which are challenged by the ‘external’ agency of society. At the other extreme, the radically dispersed and decentred postmodern self allows for no substantial conception of authenticity whatsoever. Accordingly, some theorists have attempted to outline a ‘third way’ for authenticity by developing a reconstructed conception of self, one based not upon a fixed, internal core identity, but upon dialogue and what the philosopher Donald Davidson terms *intersubjectivity*. For Davidson, every ‘self’ is inherently intersubjective insofar as it depends upon interaction with other persons and the world in order to achieve any kind of coherence and stability. Thought itself, indeed, presupposes communication:

We think of dialogue as a process in which fully formed thoughts are exchanged, and we overlook the fact that dialogue supplies the nexus in which thoughts and concepts are formed and given meaning. Thought and rationality are [...] social phenomena. Without language, thoughts have no clear shape; but the shape language gives them emerges only in the context of active communication. What we think depends on what others can make of us and of our relations to the world we share with them. (Davidson 249)

This brings us back to Williams’ critique of Rousseau. According to Williams, by assuming that sincerity was simply the ‘outward’ expression of an ‘inner’ authenticity,

Rousseau overlooked the extent to which the inner self is itself constituted socially or, as Davidson would put it, intersubjectively. It was only in his later work that Rousseau ‘realized that ‘the “know thyself” of the temple at Delphi was a maxim which was less easy to follow than he had supposed [...]’ (Williams 173). The work of Rousseau’s contemporary Denis Diderot, by contrast, displays a concern with how individuals are shaped by their environments. Unlike Rousseau, Williams argues, Diderot ‘installs a social dimension into the construction of beliefs, attitudes, even desires. These are the materials of idiosyncrasy, and the lesson is that we need each other in order to be anybody’ (Williams 199).

Some commentators have gone further. Charles Taylor, in particular, has attempted to re-establish authenticity by reviving Heideggerian and romantic notions of disclosure and expressiveness. Taylor agrees with Davidson and Williams that since humans are not neutral, punctual subjects but only exist within a space of values, reasons, and engagements, ‘[a]uthenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands’ (“Ethics 1991” 41). However, Taylor adds that once Davidson’s view of the self as constituted through communication is conceived as a kind of *embeddedness* within a social situation, the way in which one thinks about oneself changes radically, becoming less like a description of a thing, and more like an activity, something one *does*. In this sense, Heidegger was correct: ‘Even in our theoretical stance to the world, we are agents’ (“Philosophical 1995” 11). Taylor criticizes thinkers like Foucault and Derrida for ‘rejecting outright the notion of ‘a deep or authentic self’ (“Sources 1989” 16). Countering this rejection, he assembles an account of authenticity as expression based upon ‘[e]ngaged agency,’ whereby the self is created in the act of narrating itself. (“Sources 1989” 68).

It could be argued, then, that there is life in the idea of authenticity yet, even after postmodernism. Indeed, if the arguments of Taylor, Williams and Hartman carry the day, authenticity will be conceived not as a hypostatized origin or essence, but as an act that comes into being only through its own telling, and whose legitimacy is always open to question, if not erasure, by the ‘others’ that constitute it. Such deflated or socialised accounts of the authentic certainly have the merit of abandoning much of the hypostatized and often obfuscatory discussion—what Adorno calls ‘jargon’—surrounding the term. What remains to be seen, however, is whether the core meaning of this fundamentally romantic idea can be translated without remainder into a pragmatized language of intersubjectivity.

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