

Multiple Authorship in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*?

Canonizations – Deconstructions – Aesthetic Structure

Abstract

This chapter examines phenomena of ‘plural authorship’ in *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* (*The Flowing Light of the Godhead*), a text attributed to Mechthild of Magdeburg. In doing so, it is linked to recent scholarship, which has clarified how the transfer of anachronistic canonical concepts of authorship from the 18th and 19th centuries has been misleading in understanding the production of *The Flowing Light*. This article now relates these findings to questions of authorship on both a textual level and (affective) aesthetic aspects on a reception level. The thesis presented is that plural-collaborative processes of genesis and experience are emphasised by the text, in which God, the writers, and audience are bound together in spiritual, medial, and material ways. This approach not only results in a re-evaluation of the traditional inspiration *topos* but also makes it possible for the ‘unstable text’ with a fragmented transmission history to be included in studying the concept of plural authorship.

Keywords

Author, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mysticism, Middle Ages, Materiality, Mediality, Inspiration

The text *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* (*The Flowing Light of the Godhead*) – associated with the ‘women’s mysticism’ of the 13th century¹ and assumed to originate between 1250 and 1282 – is particularly suitable for demonstrating the heuristic explanatory power of the category of multiple authorship on the levels of production, text, and reception for three reasons.² For one thing, the question of the author of this text and its

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- 1 See Ruh 1993, pp. 245–292. The study of Peters 1988 rightly pointed out the problematic definitions that were (and are) associated with this term.
- 2 For a detailed account of the scholarly discourse, which was also conducted intensively from especially a medievalist perspective, see Sections 1 and 2 in the introduction to this volume, pp. XVI–XXVII.

transmission has occupied scholarship intensively. Secondly, the question of multiple authorship arises in view of a text that understands itself as divine revelation under precarious premises. And, finally, the question of whether and how multiple authorship finds expression in the aesthetic structure of an artefact should be of particular interest in the case of a textual witness to which an extraordinary poetic and aesthetic charisma has been attested.³ It must thus be clarified whether and in what way *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* can be considered an example of multiple authorship and whether phenomena of collaborative and collective authorship can be discerned as well.

Following the explanations given in the introduction to this volume, I understand ‘plural’ or ‘multiple authorship’ as broad generic terms “for phenomena of the communal production process,”⁴ which can appear both synchronously and diachronically and which mark potentially incomplete processes. By contrast, ‘collective’ and ‘collaborative’ authorship are to be understood as tending toward “temporally defined historical processes that are, in principle, concluded.”⁵ Whereas ‘collective authorship’ serves to denote the synchronous contribution to a production process, in which direct contact between the participants and creative interaction is not absolutely necessary, the term ‘collaborative authorship’ refers to targeted joint action that implies some form of creative exchange in determined interaction. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent a text such as *The Flowing Light* depends not on the separation of the different phenomena but rather on their amalgamation.

The focus here is on the question of how correlations can be recognized between the authorship of the transmitted text, its implicitly presented understanding of authorship, and the aesthetic structure of the text. I begin with the history of scholarship on *The Flowing Light*, in which the anachronistic adaptations resulting from a one-sided concept of the author – mostly borrowed from the 19th century,⁶ and seeking to set aside collaborative processes of production – and the eminent editorial and interpretive effects of these adaptations feature especially clearly.

3 See, among others, Hasebrink 2007, p. 91.

4 See the introduction to this volume, pp. XXVII–XXIX, quote p. XXIX.

5 Introduction to this volume, p. XXIX.

6 For detailed information on the problems of a historically undifferentiated concept of the author, see Section 1 in the introduction to this volume, pp. XVI–XXIII. Kirakosian 2021, p. 27, also focuses very clearly on this in her study on the vernacular translations of Gertrud von Helfta: “In research on medieval authorship, the disparity between historical reality and modern terminology becomes evident as the terms ‘author’ and ‘authorship’ are borrowed from analytical studies on modern texts, while medieval textuality is inherently more intricate due to theoretically different concepts of authority and the complexities of the transmission of texts. Attention has been drawn to the inadequacy of a classical ‘author-work paradigm’ when dealing with premodern textuality.”

1. In Search of the Female Author: On the History of Scholarship

Scholarship assumes a Middle German version with traces of Low German as the starting point for the transmission of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, but this version is not extant. It may be assumed that the vernacular transmission only becomes historically tangible via several intermediate stages – partial publications, copies suited to an interested readership and which could also contain “additions” or “some change or another” – when an Alemannic translation emerges in the circle of the so-called ‘Basler Gottesfreunde’ (Basel Friends of God) in the 1440s.⁷ Subsequently follows a further “productive phase”⁸ of attested copies, although in most cases just fragments have survived. The only completely transmitted vernacular manuscript is Codex 277 in the Einsiedeln Stiftsbibliothek from the second half of the 14th century, which is, however, “already disconnected by several intermediate stages [from the] ‘first transmission.’”⁹ Today’s vernacular editions are based on this manuscript.

Yet who was behind the origin of the text’s genesis? It is this question that has occupied scholars since the beginning of their study of *The Flowing Light*, and which has always led to new answers because no historically verifiable attribution of the author exists. In 2010, Balázs J. Nemes,¹⁰ following the approaches of Sara S. Poor,¹¹ meticulously traced the history of this question – which is at the same time a history of editing and interpretation – in order to separate actual facts from habitual scholarly narratives. In the attempts to apprehend the author of *The Flowing Light*, the history of the discipline itself is reflected in large part. I will briefly sketch the three most important stages of this history, largely following Nemes’ findings and assessments.¹² The focus of this sketch is on presenting the scholarly-historical search for the author not only as a history of transmission and the application of a historically inadequate concept of the author but also as a history of the deconstruction of this transmission.

The story of the manuscript’s discovery at the Benedictine monastery in Einsiedeln begins in 1835, almost two generations after the emergence of an emphatic understanding of authorship in the 18th century. A monk, Father Gall Morel, came across the manuscript and determined that it contained the revelations of a nun.¹³ In fact, the Latin and the German preliminary accounts specify a “beguine” (FL, p. 10,2; FT, p. 35) and a “sister”

7 For a summary of its creation, see Vollmann-Profe 2003, pp. 671–673, quotes p. 672.

8 Vollmann-Profe 2003, p. 673.

9 Vollmann-Profe 2003, p. 673.

10 Nemes 2010, esp. pp. 99–307 and 383 for new perspectives on, among other things, the strand of Latin transmission of *The Flowing Light*.

11 Poor 1999; Poor 2004.

12 Nemes 2010, pp. 2–27.

13 Morel 1840, p. 360.

(FL, p. 12,7; FT, p. 36), respectively, as the author.¹⁴ According to the nascent scholarship, this nun is equated with the *swester Mehtilden* named in Book VI,43 (p. 516,13; FT, p. 267: “Sister Mechthild”) of *The Flowing Light*. The sister mentioned in the preliminary account thus can be named in more detail as well as established as the named author in a wider scholarly context.¹⁵ The reference to the ‘writing’ of an unnamed friar, which the preliminary account likewise mentions (*dis bûch samente und schreib ein brûder*, FL, p. 12,13f.; FT, p. 36), is widely disregarded at first; *samente* is understood and emphasized as the activity of editorial compilation. In this, according to Nemes, “the tendency [...] to minimize the contribution of unfamiliar entities to the genesis of the text”¹⁶ and to hypostasize the singular author shows itself in scholarship from the very beginning. This tendency is underpinned by the emerging biographical “Mechthild narrative”;¹⁷ the addition “von Magdeburg” is already adopted from a marginal Latin gloss in Morel, which refers to a canon mentioned in Chapter VI,3 of *The Flowing Light*.¹⁸ There is also an attempt to identify the Dominican brother mentioned in the preliminary account, which reverts back to the Latin version and which in itself refers to Heinrich von Halle. He is also supposed to be Mechthild’s confessor, mentioned in the vernacular text (*bihter*, FL IV,2, p. 236,33; “confessor,” FT, p. 143).¹⁹ From the parts of the text of *The Flowing Light* assumed to be biographical, a life story is reconstructed with the following stages: noble origins; conversion at the age of twelve; beguine status in Magdeburg at the age of around 20; transfer to the nunnery of Helfta ca. 1270 as a result of hostilities; old age and death at the same location.

Much of this is indeed possible, but little is certain – apart from the writer’s status as a sister and her late residence in the Helfta nunnery.²⁰ Above all, it is crucial to see how, in the scholarship up to the post-war period, the constitution of the author and her biographization go hand in hand, a limited perspective that also determines the further practice of interpretation and editing. *The Flowing Light* is thus understood as a biographical-chronological chronicle of experience in the sense of a diary.²¹ Attempts have been

14 Mechthild von Magdeburg: *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* [= FL]; quoted in German after the edition by Vollmann-Profe (Frankfurt a.M. 2003). English translations of the text are taken from the translation by Frank Tobin (New York 1998) [= FT].

15 It should be noted that the naming in FL VI,43, p. 516,13 (FT, p. 267) is not a self-assertion, i.e. it is not made by the otherwise dominant speaking entity but points to another hand in the sense of an ‘epilogue’ at the end of the sixth book; see Vollmann-Profe 2003, pp. 828f.

16 Nemes 2010, p. 4. Nemes 2010, p. 13, emphasizes the ‘principle of singularity,’ once again through evidencing the consequences for the edition.

17 Emmelius/Nemes 2019a, p. 12.

18 Nemes 2010, p. 3; Emmelius/Nemes 2019a, pp. 11–15.

19 See the critical considerations in Nemes 2010, pp. 99–214.

20 As deduced from the Latin text; for open questions on this point, see Emmelius/Nemes 2019a, pp. 15–20.

21 Nemes 2010, p. 13.

made to reconstruct the development of the religious, spiritual life of the historical person Mechthild, with the editorial aim to create an original typical of the author, also involving essentialist gender specifications; Hans Neumann thus describes *The Flowing Light* as “a very feminine, unsystematic work,”²² which the educated redactor and confessor then structured, divided into books and chapters, and furnished with chapter headings. Authorial constitution, gender specifications, editorial practice, and aesthetic evaluation combine here into a mixture that is as perspicuous as it is precarious.

The critical turn came with Ursula Peters’ foundational study “Religiöse Erfahrung als literarisches Faktum” (Religious Experience as Literary Fact, 1988). The title is a manifesto: Peters strictly rejects the biographical interpretation and argues that the self-attributions and attributions to others encountered in *The Flowing Light* do not provide information about the biographical or historical person; rather, it is a matter of “programmatic stylization,”²³ in the sense of a genre- and role-specific, hagiographically informed representation of the “*sanctitas* of a *mulier religiosa*.”²⁴ Linked to this shift in perspective is a change in the image of female authors and the genesis of a new narrative of the author. Peters now sees a female author who, with knowledge of hagiographic and courtly narrative patterns, proceeds in a manner that shows her literary knowledge;²⁵ who – this should be emphasized – by no means necessarily needs a confessor as a companion in the writing process in order to produce a high-quality text, even if, in *The Flowing Light*, the “tradition of self-expression” still resorts to the topos of the imperative to write coming from the *bihter*.²⁶ In any case, this approach makes conceivable texts “that could also emerge independently of the activities and capacity for influence of the pastors,” as the “Latin works on the spiritual life of the Helfta sisters Mechthild von Hackeborn and Gertrud [show], both of which are obviously the joint work of several sisters.”²⁷ Susanne Bürkle has given even further shape to this line of argumentation by pointing out the monastic practice following which “not only the books of Dominican nuns, but also the revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg or the corpus of Christine Ebner [can] be less clearly discerned as the products of an indi-

22 Neumann 1954, p. 68.

23 Peters 1988, p. 58; see generally pp. 53–67. See also Peters 1991, pp. 44f.: At the centre stands “a kind of role-figure [...] that says less about the factual emergence of the work of female mystics than about its objectives.”

24 Peters 1988, p. 64. The confessor who commissions the writing is equally part of the hagiographic concept and thus to be understood as a “schematic role figure” (Peters 1988, p. 118). The “mystical authorial roles of women” associated with this concept are explained by Peters 1991, pp. 42–47, quote p. 46.

25 Peters 1988, p. 192.

26 Peters 1988, pp. 116–129, quote pp. 128f. With her thesis, Peters 1988, pp. 125, tackles one of the “myths of scholarship on mysticism.”

27 Peters 1988, p. 125.

vidual author” than as “‘joint projects’ of a collective of authorial personnel, however assembled.”²⁸ Even if uncertainties remain in relation to historical contextualization,²⁹ both references rooted in biography and the notion of a female author who necessarily requires male assistance are rightly relativized here. Accordingly, the claim to literary expertise is established. In terms of the history of research, this represents a decisive reassessment.

The third approach takes the attempt to acknowledge the sovereignty of the respective textual forms one step further but now detaches itself completely from the notion of the author as an originator or an emphatic figure.³⁰ It is not the intangible author or the intangible original by the authors, but in each case the tangible version that now comes into focus; the manuscript becomes a significant entity *sui generis*.³¹ In this context, the text to be reconstructed no longer appears as a “static construct established by the author”;³² instead, it is a matter of the “life of texts in the polarity between the author, the editors, the mediating scribes and printers, and the receiving audience.”³³ One could also say: it is now a question of the text in the polarity of ‘multiple’ authorship, i.e. of an authorship that refers beyond synchronic, collective activities to diachronic, wider processes of reception as part of the genuine textual production. It is this approach that has been highly successful in medieval studies, partly correlated with approaches of New Philology in the field of philological editing. Rather than the single version, there are parallel copies; rather than the one source manuscript, there are several; rather than the single author, there is a collective production team that is now being recognized.

This awareness of the problem is productively reflected in recent scholarship on *The Flowing Light*; for instance, when Gisela Vollmann-Profe acknowledges that clergy probably produced copies from the milieu of the *büches der swester* for various interested parties, where “with each new copy, whether by the author herself or by the scribes,” changes and interventions are to be expected;³⁴ and when Poor emphatically asserts that Mechthild of Magdeburg was “not the only maker of the book as we have received it.”³⁵ The undoubtedly plural nature of its genesis, which led from the scripture to the

28 Bürkle 1994, p. 138. See also Emmelius 2017b. Under the heading “women writing collectively,” Kirakosian 2021, pp. 25–32, explains the “collective writing culture” (p. 27) of the Helfta scriptorium in detail.

29 See Nemes 2010, pp. 26 f., for a critical account. On the idea of an expanded network, see Emmelius / Nemes 2019a, pp. 15–20.

30 See Nemes 2010, pp. 67–97.

31 See Nemes 2010, p. 69. See also Nemes 2010, p. 70: when it comes to editorial work, one is no longer to work on the basis of mere assumptions, but rather to hold to what is factually available.

32 Nemes 2010, p. 71.

33 Grubmüller et al. 1973, p. 171.

34 Vollmann-Profe 2003, p. 672.

35 Poor 2004, p. 49.

book to the Einsiedeln manuscript, has, Nemes claims, also hit home as an incontrovertible fact in scholarship on *The Flowing Light*.³⁶ As Nemes continues, the fact that interpretations, despite this realization, nonetheless cleave to an emphatic concept of the author – for example, when ‘Mechthild scholarship’ is still discussed – shows how difficult it is to establish an alternative to this canonical understanding of the author on a conceptual level, interpretively, and, in mysticism, also editorially.³⁷

Whereas Nemes suggests new editorial approaches from here, I would like to confront the conclusions that he has developed about production aesthetics once more on an interpretive level in relation to the textual findings, above all on the level of the *discours*, i.e. in an autological dimension,³⁸ and examine anew the textual passages repeatedly used for the question of authorship in *The Flowing Light*. If we are to assume that the extant text is the result of multiple authorship, according to the current state of the art, it will be all the more as pertinent to ask in which manner this heterologically conditioned practice of textual and book production is reflected, presented, and negotiated in the surviving text itself.³⁹ Considering synchronic and diachronic aspects, is collective or multiple authorship exhibited or concealed here? How are the roles of the participating actors described? Which characterizations, gradations, and assessments are made in relation to the writing process? And, finally, are collaborative processes of close, creative exchange also relevant here? Only in this way will it be possible to clarify whether collective, synchronic or multiple, diachronic authorship is to be taken into account solely as the result of a contingent history of the genesis and transmission of *The Flowing Light*, or whether a conceptual status is also associated with these approaches. The question accordingly is whether diverse forms of participation in the production of the text are not only to be discussed as a consequence of disparate conditions of production but

36 Nemes 2010, p. 94.

37 See Nemes 2010, pp. 90f.: “Philology on Mechthild has thus far not been especially impressed by the more recent developments in Old German studies as outlined above”; the reason for this is the “marginalization of scribes, confessors, and co-sisters from the milieu of textual genesis and transmission [...] since it concerns entities that traditionally remain subordinate and subsidiary to the author in the discussion about authorship and the status of a text.”

38 On the dimensions ‘autological’ – ‘heterological’, see the introduction to this volume, pp. XXVII f., as well as the research program of the CRC 1391: Gerok-Reiter/Robert 2022, pp. 26–29 (English translation: Gerok-Reiter/Robert 2025). According to the guidelines of the praxeological model developed in the CRC, the term ‘autological’ primarily encompasses the inherent logics of creative media; the term ‘heterological’ is directed at the heterogeneous contextual conditions, such as those of the respective social practices in which the texts are embedded or from which they are designed.

39 Cf. the clear systematization of the different areas of reference for authorship in Klein 2006, pp. 59–62: the author can be understood a) in the traditional sense as an “empirical subject of a lived-in world” (p. 62); b) as a “category of transmission” (p. 62); c) as a “textually internal construction” (p. 60), possibly as an inscribed “concept” with specific “authorial functions” (p. 62).

also prove to be conceptualized on the *immanent* level of the text. Such a concept would be specific to genre and history and would programmatically establish a collaborative claim, i.e. imply a close, necessary, but above all productive exchange.⁴⁰

2. Pluralizations: Actors in the Text

If we first take a closer look at the preliminary account of *The Flowing Light*, which summarizes the circumstances of its origin first in Latin, then almost word-for-word in German (FL, pp. 10,1–10 and 12,5–17; FT, pp. 35 and 36), the following picture emerges: both passages mention that “this book” (*liber iste*, FL, p. 10,1; FT, p. 35; *dis büch*, FL, p. 12,6; FT, p. 36) was revealed to a “beguine” (*begine*, FL, p. 10,2; FT, p. 36) or a “sister” (*swester*, FL, p. 12,7; FT, p. 36) by “the Lord” or “God” (*a domino inspiratus*, FL, p. 10,3; FT, p. 36; *von gotte*, FL, p. 12,7; FT, p. 36). In what follows, the beguine or sister is described in detail relating to her exemplary countenance toward God. Toward the end of the passage, the Latin text states that the book was written down as well by a certain brother “of the Order of Preachers” (*conscriptus autem a quodam fratre predicti ordinis*, FL, p. 10,8f.; FT, p. 35).⁴¹ In the German text, which is structured in the same way, *conscriptus* is divided, as it were, into two processes. It is said here that the book was ‘collected,’ that is, put together and written (down?) by a brother of the aforementioned order (*Aber dis büch samente und schreib ein brüder des selben ordens*, FL, p. 12,13f.; “But a brother of the same order gathered together and wrote this book,” FT, p. 36).

It should hence be noted first that the function of authorship, in the sense of origination, is assigned here only to God. Both sister and brother are introduced through their function of writing down that which God has revealed. The sister’s writing is not specifically described but is clearly taken for granted, while the brother is mentioned as a ‘co’-writer. The role of the brother is further specified in that he appears as the one who also compiled (‘gathered together’) the book and its components. God, sister, and friar are thus assigned various roles; more specifically, they are assigned particular and differently hierarchized functions. The authority and authenticity of authorship are

40 In this respect, the following remarks also represent an attempt to contemplate further the definitions given in the introduction to this volume, pp. XXVII–XXIX. Collective, synchronous authorship can often hardly be distinguished from diachronic, incomplete processes in the practice of manuscript production; creative potential need not be limited to close, direct (collaborative) exchange; from a meta-perspective, multiple authorship can always mean ‘working together,’ etc. It can thus be assumed that the texts are always richer and more complex than all definitions, as they overlap possibilities which are separated on a theoretical plane and thus drive the conceptual sharpening necessary to impel renewed analysis.

41 Vollmann-Profe translates *conscriptus* in the edition used here as “[r]edigiert” (FL, p. 11,10); Tobin has “compiled” (FT, p. 35).

concentrated in God; the sister participates in this authority as the recipient of divine revelation, of which the detailed description wishes to leave no doubt, whereas the friar clearly ranks third in the hierarchy of attributed functions; this is due to his only indirect access to God as well as to his being mentioned secondarily in terms of textual structure. While this is well known, the ambiguous structure should, at the same time, be noted as it applies equally to both sister and friar despite these differences. The fact that sister and friar participate in the authority of revelation and place themselves at its service is an effective argument, in terms of reception aesthetics as much as strategies of legitimation, and is reason enough to outline their function at the beginning of the text. Because authenticity lies solely with God, however, there is no need for authentication through the mention of their personal names.

Freed from the emphatic ‘lens of the author,’ the passages can certainly be read as an account of a multifunctional process of aesthetic production, in which neither the Latin nor the German phrasing is invested in an emphatically understood form of authorship in relation to the sister or friar. If one compares this with the authorial designations of Chrétien, Wolfram, or Gottfried two generations earlier and at the same time takes into account the strategic conception of the preliminary account, one may assess this opening section as a consequence of the overall textual programme.⁴² It is therefore not surprising that this process of aesthetic production of collective and at the same time differentiated functions, designed in a multifunctional way, is reflected throughout the books of *The Flowing Light*, in the same way as the hierarchized positions are upheld there. A few examples may serve to highlight this.

The origination in God of all that is said remains incontrovertible. Numerous passages insistently repeat this throughout all the books of *The Flowing Light*, albeit in different forms (e.g. FL I, p. 18,1–6, 9–11; FT, p. 39; FL II,26, p. 136,17–19; FT, pp. 96f.; FL IV,2, p. 238,2f.; FT, p. 139; FL V,26, p. 386,5–28; FT, pp. 207f.; FL VII,55, p. 638,27–32; FT, pp. 323f.). *The Flowing Light* also distinctively inflects the function of the female speaker as the recip-

42 Wachinger 1991, esp. pp. 5 and 14, shows that the lack of interest in biographical connections, which can be traced particularly in the frequently anonymous transmission of vernacular texts, remained the norm in both vernacular and Latin transmission until the Early Modern period. Even where literary awareness increased, it was not a question of “the determinacy of texts through an authorial individuality” but rather of the “utility value of authorship” shown by the transmission (Wachinger 1991, p. 23). The mention of the *begine* (FL, p. 10,2) or *swester* (FL, p. 12,3) in the preliminary account of *The Flowing Light* is to be understood in this sense; it requires neither a more accurately denoted name nor a location because it concerns only the religiously based legitimization of the text. As with all ‘objects of utility,’ the statement expressed by Müller 1999, p. 157, also applies here: “The product is superordinate to the producer.” This notion is reinforced many times over, however, by the task of communicating God’s revelation. Klein 2006, pp. 64–99, shows that divinely inspired authorship by no means always presupposes anonymity and can certainly accompany authorial self-awareness. See also Palmer 1992, p. 219.

ient, often captured in the metaphor of the vessel (e.g. FL VI,39, p. 512,9f.; FT, p. 265), as a reflector and reproducer (e.g. FL V,7, p. 334,22; FT, p. 186), as a bride (e.g. FL I,22, p. 38,21; FT, p. 49), and as a writer (FL II,26, p. 136,9; FT, p. 97).⁴³ Less pronounced, but still sporadically recurring, are the references made to a male figure: as a confessor (*bihter*, FL IV,2, p. 236,33; FT, p. 143), as an encouraging supporter (FL IV,2, p. 236,34f.; FT, p. 143), as a teacher (FL IV,2, p. 236,33; FT, p. 143), and as a writer (*schriber*, FL II,26, p. 138,8f.; FT, p. 98). The text does not consider it relevant to clarify whether this concerns one and the same person with a real historical connection to the scribe; the names that surface in the text also remain peripheral in relation to the female speaker and the male figure(s). The concrete mention of the name *Mehthilt* (FL V,32, p. 400,1 and FL V,35, p. 408,1; FT, pp. 214 and 217) or *Meh tilt* (FL VI,42 and 43, p. 516,1 and 13; FT, pp. 266f.), for instance, only seems to be worth mentioning in the vernacular text after years of textual production.⁴⁴

The evaluations in the text consistently emerge not on the personal level but rather on the functional level; they apply here, however, in relation to every function, even in connection to 'mere' scribal activity. When the speaker asks for mercy for the scribe as a reward for his writing service, the text reads:

Do sprach únsere herre: "Er hat⁴⁵ es [das Buch, A.G.-R.] mit guldinen bûchstaben geschriben, also sônt allû disû wort des bûches an sinem obersten cleide stan eweklich offenbar in minem rîche mit himmelschem lûhtendem golde ob aller sîner gezierde wesen geschriben, wan dû vrie minne mûs ie das hôhste an den menschen wesen." (FL II,26, p. 138,12–18)

Our Lord said:

"They have written it [the book, A.G.-R.] in gold letters.

All these words shall appear written on their outermost garments, forever visible in my kingdom
In heavenly shining gold above all their adornment,

Because to love freely must always be the highest value for people." (FT II,26, p. 98)

The material function of writing is elevated in that it is manifested in letters of gold; on the basis of the gold – which guarantees the splendour of divine truth, the mediation of which the writing process serves – the promise is enacted that these very letters will

43 On the motif of writing: Grubmüller 1992, pp. 336–338; on the metaphor of bride and vessel: Egerding 1997, vol. 2, pp. 147f. and 617f.; on the imagery of the mirror: Hasebrink 2000.

44 Five books were probably available around 1265: Vollmann-Profe 2003, p. 671. If one assumes that recordings of the work began around 1250, it takes over ten years before the name is invoked, and this only in its mention in the chapter headings or from a third-person perspective (as well as in the table of contents: FL V, p. 316,27 and 33; Tobin does not have these tables of contents in his edition).

45 Instead of *Er hat* (He has), the E tradition offers *Si hant* (They have). On this passage, see Palmer 1992, p. 225: The text here means "every scribe" who makes himself an instrument of God. On this, see the commentary by Vollmann-Profe 2003, pp. 745f.

become the distinguishing and evidently visible ‘heavenly’ adornment of the garment that already indicates eschatological salvation. The promise of redemption honours the writer in a way that can hardly be surpassed and tends to level out the difference in the value of the work processes by equating his activity with ‘freely chosen love.’

The collective co-operation of different actors in aesthetic production is thus programmatically displayed from the outset. The esteem of this collaboration also includes the final link in the chain of co-operation; indeed, it could not be greater. The emphasis, exhibition, and esteem suggest collective co-operation as an *ideal* concept of authorship. Nevertheless, it must be asked whether the inscribed hierarchies are not counterproductive to this collective concept presented as an ideal. In view of the undisputed and sole authorship of all speech in God, is it possible to arrive at a form of authorship that understands collective action as *interaction*, as creative *exchange* from several angles in a ‘collaborative’ way? Or should we assess this in the opposite manner: does the educated female speaker, who has the largest share of speech in *The Flowing Light*, not simply use the topos of inspiration as a cloak of invisibility⁴⁶ for her own knowledgeable authorship?

3. Disassociations: The Speaker as Medium

Even if one is to assume that the sister involved is a literarily trained, eloquent, and intelligent actor on a real, historical level, the text still creates an image of her that seems ambiguous not only at the beginning but throughout all of the seven books. Seemingly biographical stages of life suggest an autoreferential connection that underlines her status of being elected. The speaker is the recipient of God’s revelation; yet she is not only God’s chosen one but much more: she is a partner in the dialogue with the “incomparable partner”;⁴⁷ a loving partner in the bridal-mystical tradition, addressed by God himself with hyperbolic metaphors;⁴⁸ a sun, beautiful in her own radiance (*schónú sunne an dinem schine*, FL I,18, p. 36,17; FT, p. 48); God’s “deepest longing” and highest honour (*tiefeste gerunge und hóhste ere*, FL I,19, p. 36,24 f.; FT, p. 48⁴⁹); and his “queen” (*kúneginne*, FL II,25, p. 130,19; FT, p. 94). Finally, the recurring self-reference in pronouns such as ‘ich,’ ‘mein,’ ‘mir’ (I, me, mine), etc. equally constitutes a formal dominant that undoubtedly makes her the leading voice.⁵⁰

46 On this figure of thought, but without reference to *The Flowing Light* and using the German word “Tarnkappe,” see Klein 2008, p. 16.

47 Haug 1984.

48 See (with different approaches in each case) Köbele 1993, pp. 71–96; Seelhorst 2003, pp. 85–95; Volfing 2003.

49 Tobin here has “most sublime glory” for “*hóhste ere*.”

50 On the constitution of identity in confrontation with the divine partner in dialogue, see Suerbaum 2003.

At the same time, however, the text works against an impression of personal idealization through several rhetorical strategies. The fact that the autobiographical sections are designed according to hagiographic patterns has been emphasized in various ways.⁵¹ The speaker repeatedly evaluates her own practice of recording what has been revealed to her not as an accolade but as a burden, as a shameful endeavour, because she, the writer, is neither learned nor proficient in German and does not know Latin at all (FL II,3, p. 82,24–27; FT, p. 72), because she is an unworthy person (*unwirdiger mensche*, FL IV,12, pp. 258f.,35/1; FT, p. 153) who has been ‘seduced’ (*verleitet*, FL II,26, p. 136,9; FT, p. 96) into writing. The hyperbolic metaphors are drastically counteracted: she is nothing but a foul pool (*unvletige[r] pfül*, FL II,26, p. 136,26; FT, p. 97⁵²), a “dank prison” (*pfülige[r] kerker*[], FL II,25, p. 130,11; FT, p. 94), eating “the ash cake” of her “own frailty” (*und isse [...] den eschekûchen miner brôdekeit*, FL II,25, p. 130,12–14; FT, p. 94). The metaphor of the dog is used again and again: she is comparable to a useless dog (FL II,3, p. 82,26f.; FT, p. 72). Thus, not only God but also the confessor of the protagonist – a miserable woman (*eim snôden wibe*, FL IV,2, pp. 236f.,37/1; FT, p. 144⁵³), according to her topical self-description – must expressly command her to undertake the recordings (FL IV,2, p. 236,34–36; FT, p. 144).

Yet it is not only these humble self-assertions that work against any sense of self-importance. In the collective writing process, it is also notable that the person of the writer often loses her integral identity, or, rather, when receiving the revelations, she appears as dissociated into individual organs, even as if she were merely consisting of them. The ear and the eye are addressed as inner senses:⁵⁴

Dú grosse zunge der gotheit hat mir zû gesprochen manig creftig wort; dú han ich enpfangen mit wenigen oren miner snôdekeit. Und das allergrôste lieht hat sich ufgetan gegen den ôgen miner sele. (FL II,3, p. 80,4–7)

The great tongue of the Godhead has spoken many a mighty word to me. I took them in with the feeble ears of my lowliness; and the brightest of lights opened up to the eyes of my soul. (FT II,3, p. 70)

The receiving heart is also emphasized in this respect:

Dise schrift, die in disem bûche stat, die ist gevlossen us von der lebenden gotheit in swester Mehtilden herze und ist also getrúwelich hie gesetzet, alse si us von irme herzen gegeben ist von gotte und geschriben mit iren henden. Deo gratias. (FL VI,43, p. 516,12–15)

51 Peters 1988; Linden 2019.

52 Tobin has “filthy ooze” for “*unvletigen pfül*.”

53 Tobin here has “frail woman,” which does not fully correspond to “*eim snôden wibe*.”

54 See Largier 2003.

The writing in this book flowed out of the living Godhead into Sister Mechthild's heart and has been as faithfully set down here as it was given by God, out of her heart and written by her hand. Thanks be to God. (FT VI.43, p. 267)

What appears as a self-assertion in different places is again confirmed here in the voice of the commentator: the origin of that which is written down lies in God, while the heart of the sister is merely the processing location for that which has flowed out of God and which is now to be passed on. In this sense, the hand – which serves as the decisive writing tool for the medial fixing of the flowing revelation and which is always in focus – is also explicitly mentioned. The recognition of the capacity of heart, eye, ear, and hand⁵⁵ for reception certainly does not consist in the profiling contouring of the speaker, but rather, as it says in FL II,26 (FT, pp. 96–98), in the indwelling of God in the foul pool (*unvletigen pfül*, FL II,26, p. 136,26; FT, p. 97): an indwelling through which “a golden house” (*guldin hus*, FL II,26, p. 136,26; FT, p. 97) is erected in that very place, in which not only God but also his mother – “with all creatures, and with [his] heavenly court – settle (FL II,26, p. 136,26–28; FT, p. 97). Exaltation, so it seems, consists in the substitution of the self.

If one looks at these passages – which on the one hand make use of the inspiration topos and on the other follow on from the literature of *vitae* in their attitude of humility – idiosyncratic nuances become clear in their arrangement of the longstanding inspiration topos, which goes beyond the de-emphaticizing of a singular, individual-human form of authorship. The absorption of the outpouring God into writing is most successful in *The Flowing Light* when the location of medial processing – the heart of the recipient, her ear, her eye, but also the hand of the scribe or the compiler – puts itself completely at the service of this realization, i.e. is nothing but a medium.⁵⁶ In this respect, it is not merely the status as medium in itself that is remarkable, because this is in principle always already inherent to the topos of inspiration.⁵⁷ What is remarkable in *The Flowing Light* is rather the exclusivity of this status, which radically gives up any claim to personal action or ability.⁵⁸ All the same, this does not lead to the com-

55 This medial recognition is valid even though – according to FL II,25 – the earthly hand (*irdenschü hant*, FL II,25, p. 134,21) in the fixation of the writing may in some circumstances also be responsible for the difference that separates mere writing from the living voice (*stimme*, FL II,25, p. 134,20) and the fulfilling sound of the heart (*süsse[r] herzeklang*, FL II,25, p. 134,20).

56 The speaker's medial status in *The Flowing Light* has been repeatedly emphasized: among others, Klein 2006, p. 83; for an extensive account, Emmelius 2017a, pp. 383–386.

57 Thus Klein 2006, pp. 17–22; Klein 2008, p. 64; Bamberger/Stellmann/Strohschneider 2018, p. 6.

58 Pertinent in this context is Grubmüller 1992, pp. 339f. Conversely, Klein 2006 and Klein 2008 aim to argue precisely how the topos of inspiration is generally associated with an authorial consciousness of its own – how, under the “cloak of invisibility” of inspired speech, a private “claim to autonomy” can even evolve in a particularly pointed way, ‘subverting’ the concept of inspired authorship defined by “heteronomy” (Klein 2008, pp. 16f. and 38). That *The Flowing Light* ulti-

plete “nihilation” or “self-erasure”⁵⁹ of the speaker. The locations of medial processing appear in a very material way, an aspect which has thus far been given too little attention; they are thoroughly differentiated in their functionality, and it is precisely in that multiple dissociation – mouth, heart, hand as well as command, instruction, writing, writing together, compiling, script, book, etc. – that they receive their own position and value within the transfer of divine truth.⁶⁰ The deconstruction of the author-subject is thus, for one thing, radicalized beyond the topos of *humilitas* in the dissociation of the speaker, but it is exactly here that it tips over into a new valence. What emerges is a plurality of medially necessary and at the same time materially bound functions, which are not equivalent in the authorial hierarchy but which are equally necessary for the event of revelation, since one function is obviously not possible without the others: any one medium needs the other.

Finally, the deconstructions of the self are revealed in a further technique that determines the aesthetic structure of the text as a whole and which, like the dissociations, proves to be ambiguous. Older scholarship – assuming that the positions of the speaker could be referred to as a religious biography of the historical sister Mechthild – had taken as its basis a coherent path of experience that could be historically recovered and read the various books and chapters as a procedural reflection of this path. By contrast, more recent research has been able to sharpen our perception of the discrepancies, disagreements, and vicissitudes of a first-person voice that, through insight into the use of topoi and rhetoric as resources for “textual strategies for creating meaning”⁶¹ in individual textual passages, can be understood as plural. The speaker’s position is thus encountered in the first person but can also become second-person in dialogue with God; she can mutate into a zero-focalized narrator as well as an ecstatic singer; she appears as an instructive sister as well as a dejected soul alienated from herself and as a visionary to Christ’s suffering, as much as the bride of Christ and a worthless dog. The variety of her modes of speech and registers of expression is cor-

mately eludes this dialectic can be seen in Klein 2006, p. 84, contrasting the “self-abasement” of the speaker not with an authorial claim, but with the “auratization of the work” and the “sanctification of the writer” in the sense of religious, rather than creative or literary, exemplarity, as much as in Klein not selecting the mystical text as an example in the 2008 essay. This foregrounds that the esteem shown in *The Flowing Light* is based on a different foundation than the notably very modern juxtaposition of self-abasement and authorial self-awareness would suggest.

59 See the references in the presentation of scholarship in Klein 2008, p. 15.

60 Kirakosian 2021, p. 213, also elaborates on the “correlations between the material and the mystical,” based on the vernacular transmissions of Gertrud’s visions, here especially in relation to “corporeal images” (pp. 133–135) but also in connection with a textual and textile practice of productions and meditation; see esp. pp. 126–147 and 175–210.

61 Linden 2019, p. 196.

respondingly high.⁶² It ranges from real, historical echoes to bridal-mystical exegesis, from biographical allusions to topical patterns, from lamentation to jubilation, from report or instruction to narrative or dialogue, often changing abruptly from one to the other: a voice that speaks of God, that at the same time is able to be addressed by him, or that even becomes his ‘speech.’ If one also takes the interpolations that are added by the chapter headings or that can be read as interwoven commentaries, seemingly by different voices, or if one considers the fact that perspectives can change rapidly even within individual chapters, this results in an extremely heterogenous construct that, in its heterogeneity, cannot ever be assigned a personal, biographical status.⁶³ Burkhard Hasebrink rightly states that *The Flowing Light* assembles “more than 300 different texts.”⁶⁴ Klaus Grubmüller has made transparent the process described: the text shows a “suggestive plurality of speech and experience,” in which “the perspectives [are] interwoven,” a fixed “speaker position is dissolved”⁶⁵ – and this plurality ultimately also determines the level of textual composition, i.e. the aesthetic structure as a whole. In this way, the impression emerges of the “simultaneity of the most diverse forms, content, and speaking postures of a text [...] directed toward synopses and syn-aesthetia,”⁶⁶ which can meet the reader or listener on entirely different levels precisely in the denial of there being one personal path, offering them points of connection for the most diverse emotional states, needs, and experiences.

62 Mohr 1963, p. 380, already emphasizes the “abundance of variants” of the “modes of representation”; see also Köbele 1993, p. 72.

63 Thus also Hasebrink 2007, p. 93; Nemes 2010, pp. 15 f. Older scholarship assessed this differently: Heinzle 1994, p. 82, saw here the “originality of an elementary compulsion to expression”; Mohr 1963, pp. 380–382, understood this as a form of speaking from a personal “attunement,” whose genesis of form could be pursued directly, as it were, in *statu nascendi*; see further examples of the older positions in Köbele 1993, p. 72, note 168. Emmelius 2017a, p. 387, has taken up again the question of the referentialization of “first-person voices” in the literature of *vitae* and revelation in an insightful way with the concise summary, “for the reports of visions in the *vitae* and revelations, the balance seems to be: much ego, little self,” as well as the equally terse and clear suggestion “that not in every text in which a speaker names itself does a speaker also speak of itself.” Rather, it is in the very diversity of ‘first-person voices’ in the literature of *vitae* and revelation, including the dissociations of the self into different aggregate states, that the “speaker’s character as a medium of vision and audition” is exhibited (Emmelius 2017a, p. 387). Emmelius 2017a, pp. 374 f., who also observes the dissociations of the speaker as a process of representation and describes them in relation to Adelheid Langmann’s *Gnadenvita* as the “physical fragmentation of the visionary,” reads these dissociations primarily as metaphors for medial ‘permeability’: the matter becomes “porous,” dissolves. The emphasis I have placed on the material ‘residues,’ however, is indicated in her reference to the speaker in the Mechthild corpus, as a medium of transcendence, is vested “with a voice of her own” (Emmelius 2017a, p. 388).

64 Hasebrink 2007, p. 92.

65 Grubmüller 1992, pp. 343 f.

66 Grubmüller 1992, p. 347.

In fact, it is not a matter of the biographically relevant path, nor is it a matter of the single exemplary one; rather, it is precisely the refusal of the singular personality, as communicated by the aesthetic structure, that demonstrates the kind of detachment from the earthly dependence on the ego and from material captivation that must become a model for anyone who wants to approach the mystical experience. The speaking voice repeatedly casts off, as it were, any concrete, biographical designations, which would bind it to an earthly desire and make it identifiable as a person, in order to become a receiving medium as a figure of the soul, the bride, the bridegroom's beloved, into which not only God but also – and this seems crucial to me at this juncture – the recipient can immerse. The plurality in the aesthetics of production thus opens up to a plurality in the aesthetics of reception. Just as divine revelation can be conveyed only via a multiplicity of medial entities and their interplay, this interplay, as it were, continues in the plurality of possible roles of identification, drawing the recipients into the movement of exchange in which they themselves, even they, are absorbed in conversation with God.

The speech of the self hence loses its self-referentiality through its dissociation into individual medial functions and through the plural unfolding into ever new modes of speech, perspectives, and roles. Through the former, the speaker can mediate divine revelation, as Caroline Emmelius has clearly elaborated,⁶⁷ but the consequences in *The Flowing Light* are to be reflected on in an even more far-reaching manner. In this way, the speaker inscribes herself in God's speech and becomes part of it, and this has effects on the aesthetics of reception, especially in the pluralization of roles. Only when the recipients individually abandon themselves to the speaking entity, and with it to the same inscription, do they become part of that collaborative cycle in which the unrestrained abundance of the divine gift of grace reaches "into all hearts" (*in allú dú herzen*, FL I, p. 18,13; FT, p. 39), and the abundance of which can flow back to God (FL VII,55, p. 638,27–32; p. 323).⁶⁸ It is through this aesthetic structure, extending from the medial and material functionalization of the speaker to the composition of extremely heterogeneous speaking positions, that the recipients can also and precisely inscribe themselves in the event of revelation, in the carrying out of those transgressions that are to be constantly performed.⁶⁹

67 Emmelius 2017a: see the explanation above in note 63.

68 On the motif of abundance, which determines giving and taking, see the wealth of evidence in Egerding 1997, vol. 2, pp. 624–630; and Gerok-Reiter 2022, p. 56.

69 This notion of inscription as a textual goal has been reflected upon from various perspectives: as the result of "monastic techniques of contemplation," meant to lead to the "animation of the 'inner senses'": Largier 2007, quotes pp. 51 und 53; as an exercise of immersion for involved readers: Nemes 2012 and Gerok-Reiter/Leppin 2022, pp. 216f. (English translation: Gerok-Reiter/Leppin 2025); as a "doctrine of spiritual behaviour" that was "consciously promoted in the Dominican Order through the extensive production of *vitae*" and used for didactic purposes: Linden 2019, p. 205.

4. Materializations: God in the Book

And yet the question remains as to whether the recurrence to the one God, who expressly made ‘this book’ (*Ich han es [dis bûch, A.G.-R.] gemachet*, FL I, p. 18,9f.; FT, p. 39), does not supersede those collective and collaborative processes that medially impart the appearance of the divine in the world, if not in their collective plurality, then at least in the collaborative character of an equal, interactive interplay. Hasebrink also observes that, because of the “integration of the seeing, loving speaker into divine [...] secrecy,” as is broached at the very beginning of *The Flowing Light* (FL I, p. 18,6; FT, p. 39), one cannot truly speak of ‘co-production.’⁷⁰ To the extent that speaking radically forms itself “from the Other,” i.e. from God, or – according to my line of argument – that the speaker (or the recipient) is only a medium, the speaker lacks substance of her own, as it were, that could make her into a partner. In Hasebrink’s words, “the ‘speaking from the Other’ turns the female subject of literary speech into a blank space,”⁷¹ a blank space that is, however, doubly coded: “on the one hand by secrecy, the intimate closeness to God, in which the loving soul is elevated to the divine beloved [and is absorbed into the divine beloved, A.G.-R.], on the other hand through that depravity”⁷² that arises through the attachment to the material and the worldly and which, it should be noted, resists that complete absorption. In this way, the difference between mediality and materiality alluded to above is addressed once more on a different level.

It seems, however, that this basic quantum of materiality is precisely what guarantees collaborative authorship in the process of medial self-abrogation and thus fulfils the claim to a direct creative exchange. The scene in which the speaker tells God of her fear that the book could be consumed by fire is revealing in this respect, whereupon the following counter-proposal emerges:

Do offenbarte sich got zehant miner trurigen sele und hielt dis bûch in siner vordern hant und sprach: “Lieb minú, betrûbe dich nit ze verre, die warheit mag nieman verbrennen. Der es mir us miner hant sol nemmen, der sol starker denne ich wesen. Das bûch ist drivaltig und bezeichent alleine mich. Dis bermit, das hie umbe gat, bezeichent min reine, wisse, gerechte menscheit, die dur dich den tot leit. Dú wort bezeichent mine wunderliche gotheit; dú vliessent von stunden ze stunde in dine sele us von minem götlichen munde. Dú stimme der worten bezeichnen minen lebendigen geist und vollebringet mit im selben die rehten warheit. Nu sich in allú disú wort, wie loblich si mine heimlichkeit meldent, und zwivel nit an dir selben!” (FL II,26, p. 136,10–22).

At once God revealed himself to my joyless soul, held this book in his right hand, and said:

“My dear One, do not be overly troubled.

No one can burn the truth.

For someone to take this book out of my hand,

⁷⁰ Hasebrink 2006, p. 398.

⁷¹ Hasebrink 2006, p. 397; cf. Emmelius 2017a, p. 369.

⁷² Hasebrink 2006, p. 397.

He must be mightier than I.
 The book is threefold
 And portrays me alone.
 The parchment that encloses it indicates my pure, white, just humanity
 That for your sake suffered death.
 The words symbolize my marvelous Godhead.
 It flows continuously
 Into your soul from my divine mouth.
 The sound of the words is a sign of my living spirit
 And through it achieves genuine truth.
 Now, examine all these words –
 How admirably do they proclaim my personal secrets!
 So have no doubts about yourself!” (FT II.26, pp. 96f.)

Once again, it is not the “sanctification of the female author,” according to Hasebrink, that is foregrounded but rather “the appeal to an absolute, transcendent authorship.”⁷³ At the same time, however, this claim should be modified to emphasize that the aesthetic materiality of the book is highlighted, particularly in parchment, word, and sound, a materiality in which the trinity of God himself is revealed.⁷⁴ The book as a medium of mediation thus remains bound to a minimum dimension of materiality. In as much as the book that God holds in his hand as his own revelation is at the same time the book that is in the process of being created by the speaking persona, this reciprocal connection is once again entwined. The blank space that the writer as a medium must personally offer, as it were, does not change the material necessity of the parchment for the matter to be written down, and, thus, it should be added, the material necessity of the scribe’s hand, which writes down the matter and uses letters, ink, quill, etc. to do so. This is the paradox that neither the God who reveals himself nor the soul absorbed into the status of the medium can evade.

Even if God alone is assigned the emphatic authorial position in the sense of a creator, his mediation requires those same scribes, hands, compilers; requires the parchment, the word, the voice, and the sound in order to appear;⁷⁵ and requires the aesthetic structure for this to occur suitably. The collaboration of authorship lies in this

73 Hasebrink 2006, p. 394.

74 While this materiality is interpreted allegorically (Palmer 1992, p. 231), what is crucial here is that it nonetheless endures in the literal sense and is even elevated in its dignity through allegorical interpretation.

75 See also Klein 2006, pp. 82–84. Her statement that the “construction of the God-author signifies the death of the (earthly) author” does not pertain, for as a “medium,” the writer nonetheless has a veritable task (p. 83).

reciprocal need in the event of revelation.⁷⁶ This collaboration is at once hierarchical and egalitarian, a manifestation of the reciprocal participation (*gebruchunge*, e.g. FL I,44, p. 60,6–11; FT, p. 59: “enjoyment” for *gebruchunge*) that represents the thematic centre of *The Flowing Light*.⁷⁷ hierarchical, because God is undoubtedly the starting point for the book *The Flowing Light*; egalitarian, because God, as inspiring Creator, needs the earthly medium and the loving desire of the soul for the revelation of himself. The collaboration thus becomes an expression of reciprocal participation (*gebruchunge*), which, as *süsse einunge* (FL II,25, p. 132,28; FT, p. 95: “sweet union”), can lead the plural interplay of all actors in the process of mediation to their goal of the revelation that is being realized in this moment. The forms of collective and collaborative authorship – equally reliant on one another in a way that is at once hierarchical and interactive – that is not only negotiated on a thematic level in *The Flowing Light* but that is also realized in its aesthetic structure, thus proves to be a conceptual design to which an emphatic claim appertains. Against this background, a new light can be shed on the multiple authorship of transmission as the result of an uncertain melange of influences and hands, losses and gains, characterized by contingency and gaps in transmission. If multiple authorship in the sense of a collaborative exchange proves itself to be a necessary condition for the revelation of salvation itself, and if, as a consequence, authorship and mediation are aligned in principle, then subsequent generations – of listeners and readers; adaptors, transcribers, and those who hand down the text; commentators or commissioners – also justifiably have to inscribe themselves into the pronounced open cycle of receiving and giving that is to be constantly updated: because they not only ‘enjoy’ the salvation of the divine author, but also because the revelation of salvation ‘needs’ every single link in the process of its own mediation and makes them co-authors precisely through this process.⁷⁸

76 This is exactly where the God of *The Flowing Light* differs just as essentially from the mythologically exaggerated “Auteur-Dieu” cited by Roland Barthes 1994 [1968], p. 15, as well as from the “fiction of an absolute author” as described by Japp 1988, p. 233.

77 See Zech 2015, pp. 81–144; on the lexeme in Latin and vernacular tradition, p. 25. As a rule, by the term *gebruchunge* in *The Flowing Light* is understood the “state of consumptive enjoyment between God and man.” The aspect of reciprocal need and use, however, is semantically significant: from it results the participation in the other part, which can then be the epitome of religious ‘enjoyment.’

78 The “multi-stage process of communication” emphasized by Emmelius 2017b, pp. 48–54, which is characteristic of “authoritatively secured” revelations as well as “private” ones (quotes p. 49, thus appears in an even more intensified manner. The “mandate for the passing on, multiplication, and publishing of what has been revealed” (Emmelius 2017b, p. 50) also takes on a new dimension through the aspect of the necessity of participation for realizing the event of salvation, going beyond mere mediation. – I owe the inspiration for this idea to the lively discussions, and especially to Lukas Steinacher-Wisioerek, in project C3 of CRC 1391.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has emphasized that authorship, as a historically and culturally variable concept, requires a precise analysis based on the matter under consideration. In the sense of the search for the traces of a ‘different’ aesthetics that questions the canonical specifications inherited from the 18th and 19th centuries, phenomena of multiple authorship have been of particular interest, insofar as their examination can make the canonical pre-eminence of the individual author – with whom notions of creative independence, coherent doctrine, and qualitatively ‘high’ art are often connected – transparent in their implicit specifications and reveal alternative conceptualizations as well as evaluations in the historical field in a particularly succinct manner. The decisive factor here has been, in particular, to start from a concept of the author to which, for one thing, a diachronic and generically varied openness (in the sense of historical semantics) can be attributed;⁷⁹ at the same time, it was vital not to abandon the special claim of ‘emphatic’ authorship – understood as a claim to exclusivity – in the historical field in order not to succumb to one-sided teleological perspectives or to take the edge off the heuristic concept of authorship.⁸⁰ From here, the methodological challenge and the task have been to ask whether, and to what extent, heterologically determined specifications of collective authorship on the level of production can be linked to forms of emphatic authorship, and how the conception of authorship within a text relates to this.

The 13th-century mystical text *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* has proven to be particularly fruitful in this regard, insofar as recent research has already clearly worked out the fatal consequences of an anachronistic transfer of canonical notions of authorship from the 18th and 19th centuries and, in view of the accentuated multiple authorship of the surviving text, has called for the revision of “habits of thinking that have become dear” to us.⁸¹ This endeavour has been pursued by correlating findings from the aesthetics of production with text-internal specifications, forms of expression, and assessments of the question of authorship. Explicit statements within the text had to be taken into account, as well as the aesthetic structure of the text itself. It thereby has become clear how strongly the text announces the mediation of the event of revelation, bound to the authorship of the book, via multiple actors, entities, and medial processes, and how it holds every function of the medial process as a necessary component in the highest esteem – despite the differentiated hierarchization of the actors in relation to their proximity to God. This has been observed above all in the strategy of dissociating the female speaker into diverse sensory functions as a prerequisite for a medial transfer of the divine message that turns out to be as undisturbed and diapha-

79 On this and the sometimes problematically one-sided use of the concept of the author in scholarship, see Section 1 in the introduction to this volume, pp. XVI–XXIII.

80 See the explanations on this aspect in the introduction to this volume, pp. XVIII–XX.

81 Emmelius / Nemes 2019a, p. 10.

nous as possible.⁸² Claims of authorship connected to the subject are therefore not only rejected on the propositional level through formulations of humility but are even more strongly disavowed through the rhetoric of the statements, i. e. through erratic modes of speech and the motifs, metonymies, and metaphors that point to a dissociated ego. Finally, the inclusion of the positions of other actors, as well as the material grounding of the medial transfer, emphasize above all a variety of functions in which all actors have to locate themselves, while thus also making sure that they are necessary and well-esteemed. What is conceptualized here, according to this summary, is not only a collective, synchronic or a plural, diachronic form of authorship in and of itself but also its explicit and positive assessment.⁸³

The rather precarious assertion behind this assessment arises from the fact that the longstanding topos of inspiration in the specific shaping of the text also renegotiates the position of the actual and highest author, God. The function of God as the source, creator, and inaugurator of the 'flowing light' of the message of salvation remains beyond any doubt; indeed, the entity of 'God' is perennially emphasized as the sole source. At the same time, the pictorial rhetoric models and varies a one-side model of inspiration, in that the divine authorship also appears via different processes of representation as part of the cycle of giving and taking, thus inserting itself into this cycle. This occurs not only through the repeatedly used dialogue structure, through ambiguous references to the speaker, and through a complex of themes of emanation and return⁸⁴ – possibly in the Dionysian tradition, due to the metaphor of flowing – but it does so especially through the fact that, in addition to the medial aspects, material aspects gain prominent significance. In this way, the manifestation of the 'flowing light' in book form becomes clear,

82 In this sense, one would follow Spoerhase's summary of Foucault (1969): "Foucault answers the question 'What lies in who speaks?', raised several times in *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* – also raised in *Les mots et les choses* ('Nietzsche's question: Who speaks?') and *L'archéologie du savoir* ('First question: Who speaks?') – thusly: there is indeed something in who speaks, but it is not the ephemeral individuality of the subject that matters ('It doesn't matter who speaks'), but rather the place within the discourse from which the subject expresses themselves ('It does matter from where he speaks')" (Foucault references in Spoerhase 2007, p. 55). More attention must be given, however, to the fact that the status of the subject thoroughly changes when the subject 'moves into' the respective "place within the discourse"; indeed, the status of the subject can almost dissolve, as in *The Flowing Light*.

83 See Kirakosian 2021, p. 32, in relation to the writing community at Helfta: "In an atmosphere of women writing collectively, even initially single-author projects would turn into communal projects. Editing, writing, copying, and indeed embellishing manuscripts belonged to one greater endeavour, which was to uphold religious knowledge and an awareness of the community's history." For the textual corpus with which she is dealing, she notes: "The notion of collective writing as a communal effort is reflected in the texts produced."

84 Connections can be inferred only indirectly at best, but see Leppin 2007, p. 88; on the circular structure, see, among others, FL VI,29, pp. 488 and 490.

in accordance with the event of incarnation,⁸⁵ as an encounter and occurrence of intangible transcendence, spiritual aspiration, and material inclusion, here in the sense of the craft of writing and scribal paraphernalia as a prerequisite for the realization of revelation. Collective authorship becomes collaborative not only in connecting the medial process back to the material but also in the highlighted *necessity* of this connection.

Against this background, three aspects of the aesthetic structure of the surviving text can be better understood. While scholarship has resorted to the search for the 'lost author' for decades, the vernacular text transmitted shows no ambition at all to concretize a person beyond hagiographic efforts at authenticity. The text's clear lack of interest in an author⁸⁶ who may be empirically referenced cannot be explained by "the subordinate role" that authorship takes in *The Flowing Light*,⁸⁷ nor on the basis of a double responsibility,⁸⁸ as has been argued thus far. Instead, it is explained by the process of a multiple, collaborative textual genesis in which God, the writer, and other actors are involved together in a spiritual, medial, and material liaison. What is more, the volatility of the speaker's modes does not result from emotional, 'feminine' writing but corresponds to that multiple, collaborative concept from the perspective of the aesthetics of reception. Its pastoral function consists in 'inscribing' the listeners and readers into the cycle of the realization of revelation through ever new figurations of the soul and inviting them to take on a contributing voice of their own in it.⁸⁹ This opens up to the direct audience and readership nothing less than participation in the realization of the revelation of salvation's divine reality. Yet even this does not exhaust the claim of

85 Possibly with a Bernardine background: Leppin 2007, p. 88; Leppin 2015. See FL IV,14, pp. 266–270.

86 This by no means excludes studies on historical 'networks' (Emmelius/Nemes 2019b); rather, the revision conjugated in this contribution also owes much to their approach. We can therefore agree partly with Haynes 2005, p. 316: "In sum, if historians wish to historicize authorship, they must do more than recover the intentions of authors or interpret the contents of texts. [...] [T]hey must combine literary criticism and discourse analysis with bibliographical excavation and historical research, to uncover the shifting representations, institutions, agents, and experiences of authorship in the past. Only thus will they finally be able to exorcise the demon of the 'genius' that has haunted studies of authorship since the 19th century." In addition to the content of the text and its context, however, the expressive power at the level of *discours* must also enter as a third force in order to bring all *valeurs* into play, precisely because historical inscriptions cannot be hidden in the fractures of design. It should have become clear that the emphatic concept of the author is not a matter of a "demon" that needs to be exorcized; it is a matter, in a more sober but probably more far-reaching way, of an appropriate historical classification and demarcation, i.e. one that corresponds to the respective time and genre.

87 Grubmüller 1992, p. 346.

88 The image of "double authorship," which has been used several times, rather disguises the context, and multiple authorship in no way signifies a 'paradox': Haas 1989, p. 213.

89 On this subject, see esp. FL II,25, p. 134,4–21 and Gerok-Reiter/Leppin 2022, pp. 206f.; Gerok-Reiter/Leppin 2025.

multiple authorship because this concept consequently must also include the future readers, mediators, and writers who constitute the – in this case – temporally unlimited ensemble of collaborative authorship, and thus continue the performative realization of revelation in the ‘unfixed text’ of a fragmented history of transmission.⁹⁰ Only in the synopsis of all three aspects does a ‘different’ aesthetics become apparent in premodern texts like *The Flowing Light*, which – functionally bound – reaches a creative complexity on the basis of a multiple authorship whose emphatic claim can hardly be surpassed.

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90 It would be interesting to factor in the Latin translation *Lux divinitatis*, which was transmitted close to the time of the emergence of *The Flowing Light*. In particular, it would be worth examining whether and how the findings presented here on the medial dissociation and material concretization of the first-person voice are likewise to be encountered in the Latin text, or whether their absence represses the collaborative interplay and thus reveals a completely different realization of authorship despite the historical double-existence of the texts. The considerations of Nemes 2010, pp. 309–380, should be taken into account here.

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