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## 4. The Burgher and the Bird

What is an *author*? The word “author” comes from the Latin *auctor*, which means “originator,” “causer,” “doer.” In the late Middle Ages, this *auctor* was virtually always regarded as *someone else*, someone other than the poet, someone who had, in the distant past, caused an *auctoritas* (an authoritative statement or text) to come into being. God, the “Causer” of Scripture, was regarded as the *Auctor par excellence*. The human *auctor* was a famous name from the past (Augustine, Boethius, Priscian, etc.), the value of whose text had been legitimated by its enduring for several centuries. The *auctor*, that is, was necessarily someone who had been long dead.<sup>1</sup> The knowledge imparted by the medieval text is not a previously unknown novelty but rather is the knowledge of the already known. In the late Middle Ages, the living writer, the one who is presently composing, represents him- or herself not as an *auctor*, not as the “originator” or “causer” of the text, but rather as a scribe, as one who is copying down or repeating a text that has already been written. Thus the late medieval narrator, for instance, does not say “I say that X happened” but rather says “The text says that X happened.” The medieval writer’s text, which, properly speaking, is not the *writer’s*, does not originate in the present, does not say something new, but rather has already originated in the past, says what has already been said. Medieval writing is not a matter of “genius” or native intelligence but rather a matter of learning the art of the already written. The scribal writer has a *passive* relation to the already written text: the text speaks through the writer, who is merely the instrument or tool of its discourse. In brief, the medieval writer is not an “author.”

At the dawn of the Renaissance, this temporal gap between the text’s past origin and its present inscription, this difference between the *auctor* and the writer begins to be eliminated. The writer is no longer hesitant to regard him- or herself as the *auctor*, as the “originator” or “causer” of a text which is truly the *writer’s* property. Now it is possible to be a living *auctor*. Thus Dante, for instance, needing in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* to cite an *auctoritas* to support one of his claims, does not cite the words of a venerable *auctor* but rather cites *himself*: