AUTHORITY AND THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF RECOGNITION:
POETICS, POLITICS AND SOCIAL THEORY

BO G. EKELUND

Lear: Thou hast seen a farmer’s dog bark at a beggar?
Gloucester: Ay, sir.
Lear: And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog’s obeyed in office.¹

Literary authority, like any form of authority, exists only when it is recognized. The creature runs from the cur because the office is heard in the bark. If you do not recognize the authority of my claim, perhaps a quote will tip the balance: “Something is authoritative only if it is binding, and makes a claim on the subject of its authority.”² And if that does not do it, we will turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer, and say with him that the “word ‘authoritative’ … refers … to a form of validity which is genuinely recognized”.³ It follows that an understanding of literary authority presupposes an understanding of the particular processes of recognition by which it comes into existence. Recognition itself, though, comes to us partly as a literary concept, as part of a distinct literary tradition. In the argument that follows – an argument that is ultimately about literary authority and critical practice – the issue of authority figures indirectly but crucially as that which is

² Rebecca Kukla, “Myth, Memory and Misrecognition in Sellars’ ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’”, Philosophical Studies, CI/2-3 (December 2000), 166.
³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age, Cambridge, 1996, 119. The fact that I am misrepresenting Gadamer by offering a quote that places the emphasis elsewhere than his discussion seems a proper way of introducing authority and recognition. It would be in better faith to quote “Genuine authority is recognized as involving superior knowledge, ability and insight” (ibid., 121).
recognized and that which authorizes a particular recognition. In literary and visual narratives of the 1980s and 1990s, one of which I will examine here, the plots and scenes of literary recognition rely on a social scene of recognition which must be reconstructed by a critical social theory. ^4

I begin this essay by considering three conceptual domains in which “recognition” has had particular relevance for a reading of the cultural authority that is invested in literary and other types of narrative in our own time. ^5 The three domains I will discuss are poetics, group-based politics and critical social theory. The first domain corresponds to what I will call the primary recognition in a narrative, that which is so familiar as to need no exposition, or which is made, at an early stage of a narrative, to appear familiar. For literary scholars, the concept as a classical one in poetics has this self-evident ground. Second, there is a complex and internally contested field of use that centres on questions of group identity and a “politics of recognition”. Identity politics figures here as the social scene of recognition, the set of relevant circumstances which makes the moment of disclosure possible and, in a sense, desirable. This discourse is located largely within political philosophy, where the concept takes as its antecedent Hegel’s analysis of civil society. Finally, social theory’s deployment of the concept of recognition has many points of connection with the discourse in political philosophy, but from its roots in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic it must be followed along its own routes. The concept in social theory corresponds to the “radical re-Cognition” triggered by a powerful recognition scene that, I argue, can open a space for rethinking the familiar order of things.

The logic of significant disclosure inherent in the literary device, combined with the lived relevance of the social scene of recognition

---

^3 It should perhaps be added that the literary recognition scene is “given” only in the sense that it is offered in the text for a competent reader to recognize. It should perhaps also be added that a discussion of literary recognition scenes and their relation to social scenes of recognition is analytically distinct from a discussion of literary recognition as the process whereby authors gain recognition within fields of cultural production. The framework of this type of analysis, I believe, has been laid out by Pierre Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel, Cambridge, 1996 and by Gisèle Sapiro, in *La guerre des écrivains*, Paris, 1999.

^5 As will be clear from my example, Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game* (1992), my argument relates to forms of authority invested in storytelling in various media. However, I will speak of literary works and literary authority as shorthand for that more accurate, but clumsier formulation.