Literary Myths and Social Structure*

HELMUT K. ANHEIER, *Rutgers University*
JÜRGEN GERHARDS, *Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin*

Abstract

The lives of writers are subject to a variety of myths. This article shows that such cultural perceptions of writers bear a close affinity to the social structure of literature in modern societies. Two structural properties seem to encourage the proliferation of myths about writers: (1) the existence of a group of prominent writers who occupy unique social positions and form an amorphous elite and (2) the relation between the elite and the large group of lesser-known, peripheral writers. Elite amorphousness and high relational density among the elite and peripheral "groupness" and sparseness of literary relations among the periphery emerge as two major properties of the social structure. These counterintuitive properties are useful in understanding myth generation in literature; they allow for competing "views" of the social structure, views that seem to develop into contradictory myths of the modern writer. Data on several types of ties among writers were collected and analyzed with block model techniques.

Ever since it was first formulated by Marx, the relation between social structure and ideology has presented one of the central questions of sociology in general and of the sociology of art and culture in particular. Overall, research on this relation in cultural systems (see Williams 1980; Bourdieu 1985; Van Rees 1985; Peterson 1985) has found little evidence to support deterministic and mono-causal models. Increasingly, sociologists emphasize the complexity of the relationship. DiMaggio (1987) demonstrates how the commercial, professional, and artistic principles of art worlds create highly differentiated classification systems in terms of genres and social status. Bourdieu (1979, 1989) points to the different types of capital and symbols used in the status competition within different cultural systems. Differences in social status among producers in the same field have substantial implications for the system's ideology; differences that may lead to the development of heterogeneous rather than homogenous ideologies and to the emergence of contradictory rather than consistent myths.

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It is from this perspective that we approach the proliferation of myths and contradictory images that surround writers.[1] To understand myths about writers it is useful to distinguish the status characteristics of professional writers from both the cultural code of modern literature and the properties of its social structure. Myth generation and myth proliferation, as central ideological components, are a by-product of the indeterminate social position of writers and the uncertainty in aesthetic judgments about their work. These two factors, in turn, are the result of incomplete professionalization of writing as a trade (Freidson 1986; Schwenger 1979), the unpredictability of the market for literature (Coser, Kadushin & Powell 1982), the requirement of artistic innovation, and the dictum of literary originality (Hauser 1951). While the overall social position of all writers is similar, writers differ in terms of their social status and embeddedness in the field of literary production. Literary social networks are central aspects of status differentials and social embeddedness. We suggest that different types of myths about writers are related to differences in social network structures.

The central thesis of this article is that in terms of myths, the ideology of authorship bears a close affinity to basic properties of the social structure of literature in modern societies. Our data do not allow us to test the hypothesis that the literary social structure produces myths. While refraining from casual imagery, we nevertheless detect close affinities between the literary social structure and different types of myths. We will identify two properties of the literary social structure that seem conducive to the generation of competing myths about modern writers. The first and most important characteristic is the existence of a group of prominent and well-known writers who occupy unique social positions and form an amorphous elite. The second characteristic concerns the relation between this elite and the large group of peripheral, lesser-known writers. We will argue that these counterintuitive properties are useful in understanding myth generation in literature by allowing for competing "views" of the social structure that seem to develop into contradictory myths of the modern writer.

The Social Position of the Writer

The social position of the writer is characterized by status indeterminacy and aesthetic uncertainty. Status indeterminacy results from the historical process by which artists dissociated themselves from both the emergent scientific community and court society (Berman 1983; Haferkorn 1974; Rarisch 1976). Consequently, writers' social prestige and income became subject to greater variation, so that today it is nearly impossible for sociologists to assign the writing profession a prestige score. Characteristically, "writer" as an occupational category tends to be absent in occupational-prestige studies. In addition, the unpredictability of the literary market and the incompleteness of professionalization reinforce status indeterminacy (Powell 1985; Coser et al. 1982; Freidson 1986; Schwenger 1979).

For writers the professional characteristic of status indeterminacy coexists with aesthetic uncertainty. Writers no longer agree on literary form, technique,

substance, and style, or on criteria by which to differentiate good from mediocre literature and mediocre from bad literature. Critics and other legitimized experts replace the audience as judges of the quality of art. It is not the domain of the public to decide the quality of literature, and perhaps not even the writers themselves feel confident to judge their own work. Aesthetic uncertainty is reinforced by both the lack of accepted standards of literary production and the requirement of originality and artistic innovation.

Thus, the writer in modern society, faced with these two sources of uncertainty, has an undefined and unstable social position. Largely informal social networks among writers fulfill several functions that in other occupations would be served by formal, institutionalized mechanisms. In general, social networks may reduce status indeterminacy and aesthetic uncertainty[2]: they regulate access to power, resources, institutions, and persons (Kadushin 1976; Coser et al. 1982); they provide rituals, such as "name-dropping," which help construct a shared reality (Douglas & Isherwood 1979); and they channel information, give support and advice, and provide services and resources (DiMaggio 1986, 1987; Kadushin 1976; Powell 1985). In literature, as in other fields of incomplete professionalization, social networks help establish a writer's self-image, social position, reputation, and prominence. Writers depend on both peers and competitors for these attributes.

The meanings of literary products, however, are fabricated by qualified interpreters such as peers and critics (Schücking [1923] 1961; Griswold 1987). Social power and cultural perception influence taste formation (Hall 1979), the emergence of accepted "themes" (Foster 1979), and the nurturing of perceptive audiences (Greenfield 1984). The influence of literary elites of critics and prominent writers, as cultural legitimators, shapes "creative interpretation for the benefit of the creator" (Bourdieu 1985:18) and thus provides data for the competitive audience of peers attempting to attain literary status.

Contradictory Myths and Basic Themes

The lives of writers, poets, and novelists are subject to a variety of often contradictory myths that seek to characterize the relationship between the writer and society. One popular myth presents the overly sensitive, withdrawn, and self-centered writer who struggles against economic hardship. Other myths draw the image of the writer as a helpless subject of economic and societal forces. Another myth portrays the writer as prophet and genius. Indeed, these and similar myths have been prevalent in literature since the Enlightenment (Schmidt 1988; Haferkorn 1974; Berman 1983).[3]

We argue that the various myths relate to a basic theme consisting of two component elements: the writer as *homo singularis* and the writer as *prophet*. These two component elements are the essential code for all literary myths. For example, the *homo singularis* theme can be found in numerous works of literary criticism and writers' biographical statements: writers are seen as solitary, avant garde, and, to paraphrase Thomas Mann, "sensitive and five to ten years ahead of their times." Wilson (1979) refers to the words of poet Conrad Aiken, who describes the artist as "the only true contemporary" (xiv). For Nietzsche (1982)

art and artists fill the place of retreating religion and priests, seeking new ways to immortality and eternity. Benn (1956) describes artists as "statically asocial," who concentrate on their innermost perceptions and feelings. Well-known contemporary writers such as Günther Grass and Heinrich Böll have described themselves as "notorious loners."

The second component element, the writer as *prophet and genius*, concerns the relation between the self and the writer's role as marginal prophet. Corngold (1986) reports on the celebration of the "self" in the works of Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Thomas Mann. Wilson (1979) describes the writer as a "Social Seer," engaged in a "lifelong unflinching confrontation with the self" (148). Like Brecht's *Baal*, writers represent the "antisocial," who, because they place themselves outside society, are capable of true human imagination and recognition. Likewise, for Sartre (1948) writers are the *antibourgeois*, who find their identity "outside" society yet gain understanding of society precisely by not being part of it. Adorno (1973:194-95; 1967) sees in artistic qualities the sole countervailing force to a technocratic, means-rational society. The writer as the true individualist and humanist transcends the modern separation of man from community.

The basic theme of *homo singularis and prophet* has two major variations which both symbolize failure of achievement. The first, the *misunderstood genius myth*, reflects the failure to find aesthetic, literary recognition and acclaim. This myth expresses the tension between the discovery, breakthrough, and public recognition of talent on the one hand and its neglect and encounter with indifference on the other. The second variation is the *poor poet myth*, which relates to the failure to secure economic rewards for artistic creativity and work.

Combinations of the dominant myth and these variations are also prominent. One combination, the *literary circle myth*, stations the writer as "the young rebel" and as "the literary and social outsider,"[4] who, in opposition to established literary elites, joins other writers in literary circles and coffee-house societies (see Gerhards 1986). The *literary circle myth* combines elements of the dominant myth and the *misunderstood genius myth*. A second combination, the *poetry as manufacture myth* (Mayakovsky [1926] 1970), sees the writer as passive subject and producer. This myth combines the element of *homo singularis* with connotations of the *poor poet myth*. It emphasizes the uneasy isolation of the writer as a product of capitalism's hostility toward artistic individuality.

Data and Methodology

Our research design and data collection focused on the social network among writers in a large West German city.[5] Rather than taking a sample, we decided to include the total population of writers living in the selected greater metropolitan area. We defined a writer as any producer of fictional texts, thereby excluding authors of science, travel, and "how-to" literature. Additionally, we specified that writers must be the author of at least one published (or forthcoming) book to qualify for inclusion in the survey population. For poets and short story writers, we required one published poem or short story in an anthology or its equivalent, such as recognized literary magazines and journals.

We specified the population further by requiring that at least one publication should have occurred in the last 15 years. For theoretical reasons we included authors of literary essays. Otherwise, however, we applied neither aesthetic, artistic, social, nor any other criteria to differentiate prominent writers from lesser-known writers, fine literature from mass literature, or high culture from popular culture. Using several published and unpublished directories in addition to information gathered from publishers, critics, cultural institutions, and local writers' groups, we identified 222 writers. We conducted personal interviews[6] with 150 (67.6%) of the 222 writers by administering a semistandardized questionnaire.[7]

The social network among writers was measured in four dimensions or types of ties. In the course of the interview, we asked the following questions, using an "aided-recall" method by which respondents were presented with a complete alphabetical listing of all the over 200 writers identified.

1. Familiarity with the work of other writers (Awareness).[8]
   Question: "On this list, would you please check the names of those authors whose work is familiar to you."
2. Friendship ties to other writers (Friendship).[9]
   Question: "On this list, would you please check the names of those authors who you consider as friends."
3. Received help and assistance from other writers (Boolean union of the following two questions) (Assistance).[10]
   Question: "On this list, would you please check the names of those authors with whom you have discussed manuscripts in the past."
   Question: "On this list, would you please check the names of those authors who were helpful in establishing contacts with publishers."
4. Loyalty and reference ties, such as dinner invitations extended to other writers (Invitation).[11]
   Question: "On this list, would you please check the names of those writers you would like to invite for dinner."

Based on these data, we constructed four binary matrices, whose ij^{th} entry is 1 if a specific tie exists between writer i and writer j. The block model (White, Boorman & Breiger 1976) was obtained by using Johnson's (1967) diameter (maximum) method, a clustering algorithm based on Euclidian distances, as implemented in version 3.2 of the STRUCTURE program (Burt 1982, 1987).[12]

Tables 1 and 2 present the basic block statistics and results of a principal component analysis to obtain reliability and goodness-of-fit indicators. Except for the amorphous elite block, all blocks show acceptable proportions of variance explained by a single component in the distance among occupants of a position (block). Similarly, except in the case of the amorphous elite, reliability indicators are at least .9 or better for all but 4 of the 205 writers in blocks B through G. Thus, reliability indicators suggest an acceptable block model solution.[13] Table 3 presents the density matrices for the four types of ties, and Figure 1 offers a summary picture of the overall social structure. Note that the patterns for Friendship, Assistance, and Invitation are included in the relational pattern of block relations in the Awareness matrix (Table 3).

TABLE 1: Basic Statistics

Block	Description	Block Size	Size (%)	Missing Cases (%)
A	Amorphous elite	17	7.7	29.4
B	Semielite	13	5.9	46.2
C	Junior block 1	14	6.3	0.0
D	Junior block 2	6	2.7	0.0
E	Semiperiphery	59	26.6	15.3
F	Periphery	102	45.9	57.8
G	Folk culture	11	5.0	0.0
Total		222	100.0	32.4

Table 4 helps describe block membership with the aid of variables measuring genre differentiation, dimensions of literary intention, income, professionalism, subjective evaluations of climate among writers, and sociodemographic characteristics. In this table, blocks A and B (elite) and blocks C and D (juniors) have been collapsed to avoid problems and distortions caused by small block sizes.

To measure *genre*, one of art's major organizing principles (Bourdieu 1985; DiMaggio 1987; Becker 1982), we first asked respondents if they saw themselves primarily as poets, novelists, or generalists (i.e., writers with no genre specialization). We then added follow-up questions and inquired if the author wrote in the local vernacular or composed literary essays. Thus, in addition to genre segmentation (poetry, prose, generalists), the distinction between low-culture genre, in the form of vernacular "light literature," and high-culture genre points to a prestige hierarchy.

Literary intentions are based on a recoding of answers to the following questions: "What are the intentions underlying your literary work?" and "How did you come to be a writer?" Literary intentions were recoded in three main categories — (1) critical enlightenment of the reading public, (2) entertainment of the audience, and (3) self- or ego-expression, i.e., the externalization of one's inner feelings and thoughts through writing — as well as in (4) other intentions.

Several variables measure *professionalism*. First, we asked about formal memberships in professional associations, such as the writers' association or the PEN-Club. We also included questions about offices held in these associations and membership in literary circles and informal associations as important mechanisms of status attainment, aesthetic orientation, and taste formation (Back & Polisar 1983; Gerhards 1986). Another variable refers to literary honors and prizes received. Tenure (number of years since first publication) and professional activity (number of books published) help differentiate young, lesser-known writers from the established literati. Similarly, to differentiate well-to-do writers from those struggling against economic hardship, we asked about average monthly income (measured on a seven-step ordinal income scale) and

TABLE 2: Evaluating the Structural Equivalence of Writers Occupying Social Positions B₁

	Block (Position)						
	Amorph. Elite	Semi-elite	Junior Blk. 1	Junior Blk. 2	Semi-periph.	Periph.	Folk Culture
Block size	17	13	14	6	59	102	11
% of variation[a]	38.7	77.5	77.9	90.8	82.6	97.4	93.7
Reliability[b]	.24	.67	.95	.98	.80	all	.98
	.16	.91	.93	.97	.82	values	.97
	.73	.93	.98	.96	.90	greater	.99
	.73	.95	.98	.99	.85	than	.99
	.61	.97	.97	.99	all	.97	.99
	.80	.96	.95	.97	other		.99
	.83	.96	.96		values		.99
	.85	.98	.95		greater		.99
	.88	.98	.97		than		.99
	.76	.98	.97		.92		.98
	.83	.98	.98				.99
	.88	.97	.96				
	.38	.97	.93				
	.77		.92				
	.86						
	.86						
	.59						
Aggregate prominence[c]	.638	.356	.188	.077	.019	.004	.017

[a] Percentage of variance in the distance among occupants of position B₁ (block) that is accounted for by a single principal component

[b] Reliability as the correlation between distance to occupant and the mean distance to other joint occupants of position can be interpreted similar to item reliabilities or factor loadings. Correlations of less than .9 indicate lower reliability.

[c] Aggregate prominence ranges between 1 and 0, where 1 indicates the most prominent person in the network and 0 the least prominent. Aggregate prominence reported here is the mean aggregate prominence for each block.

TABLE 3A: Density Matrix for "Awareness"[a]

	Amorph. Elite	Semi- elite	Junior Blk. 1	Junior Blk. 2	Semi- periph.	Periph.	Folk Culture	Total
Amorphous elite	573	450	274	84	248	55	23	184
Semielite	286	186	82	0	86	57	91	91
Junior block 1	592	357	357	106	167	38	6	153
Junior block 2	392	218	119	600	73	26	0	96
Semiperiphery	545	340	96	44	130	35	9	120
Periphery	210	82	15	18	33	15	26	41
Folk culture	123	105	26	0	34	106	491	97
Total	257	156	68	38	65	24	33	64

[a] Densities as the ratio between possible and measured ties ranges between 0 (no ties present) and 1,000 (all possible ties present).

TABLE 3B: Density Matrix for "Friendship"

	Amorph. Elite	Semi- elite	Junior Blk. 1	Junior Blk. 2	Semi- periph.	Periph.	Folk Culture	Total
Amorphous elite	163	58	37	0	45	6	0	34
Semielite	167	44	61	0	32	11	39	35
Junior block 1	67	38	104	12	8	4	0	18
Junior block 2	0	0	12	400	11	2	0	14
Semiperiphery	40	17	6	3	17	3	2	11
Periphery	8	5	3	13	0	3	0	3
Folk culture	21	14	0	0	0	12	100	12
Total	30	12	13	13	8	3	6	8

the average proportion of that income derived from literary activities.

We included a question on the writer's evaluation of the overall "climate" among his or her colleagues, indicating whether he or she sees it primarily as competitive, collegial, or in terms of indifference and mutual ignorance.

Results and Discussion

The block model analysis reveals a general segmentation of the social structure into a high-culture or "serious" literature segment, containing 95% of all writers, and a folk, mass-culture and entertainment literature segment, containing the remaining 5% (Tables 1 and 3). Table 1 and Figure 1 show that the high-culture segment is differentiated into six blocks. As Table 2 indicates, prominence[14] in the high-culture segment declines rapidly from the highest aggregate prominence, with .638 in block A, to the lowest prominence, close to 0 in block F. We

TABLE 3C: Density Matrix for "Assistance"

	Amorph. Elite	Semi-elite	Junior Blk. 1	Junior Blk. 2	Semi-periph.	Periph.	Folk Culture	Total
Amorphous elite	225	38	24	0	51	9	7	40
Semielite	70	0	9	0	6	6	13	11
Junior block 1	34	33	77	12	5	1	0	15
Junior block 2	69	0	48	400	25	3	0	26
Semiperiphery	97	24	14	0	15	5	0	15
Periphery	15	10	0	8	3	3	0	3
Folk culture	5	14	0	0	6	9	118	12
Total	47	12	11	11	8	3	6	9

TABLE 3D: Density Matrix for "Invitations"

	Amorph. Elite	Semi-elite	Junior Blk. 1	Junior Blk. 2	Semi-periph.	Periph.	Folk Culture	Total
Amorphous elite	234	142	54	14	70	0	0	51
Semielite	76	32	9	0	30	13	0	22
Junior block 1	122	71	71	36	25	5	0	28
Junior block 2	98	13	0	133	6	2	0	14
Semiperiphery	153	65	9	4	19	5	2	24
Periphery	62	5	0	5	5	3	3	8
Folk culture	48	28	0	0	3	7	73	13
Total	74	31	10	8	12	3	4	13

label the blocks based on the prominence scores, the block relations (discussed below), and the information contained in Table 4. The high-culture segment is stratified into elite, semielite, junior writers (2 blocks), semiperiphery, and periphery. In contrast, largely because of its small size and isolation, the folk-culture segment is not internally stratified.

We will first describe overall relational patterns and then focus on the structural aspects that encourage myth generation.

RELATIONAL PATTERNS

Block A represents the elite. On average, members of the elite have the highest prominence scores. The block densities seem to indicate that elite members are familiar with each other's work. They show high internal block densities in all four matrices of Table 3. Members of the elite tend to be both writers and critics: almost 4 out of 5 elite members write literary essays. Moreover, as a group of writers and critics, they have also received the highest average number

of honors, such as awards, prizes, and stipends. Their primary literary intentions are enlightenment and self-expression (Table 4). They have the highest income, earn the greatest proportion of that income from publishing, and are involved in more professional associations. On average, each is a member of three professional associations, and 1 in 5 holds an office in one or more of these associations. They are unlikely members of informal clubs and circles whose membership seems characteristic of nonelite writers. *Block B*, the semielite, shows similar yet less pronounced relational patterns when compared with the elite.

The structural relations between elite and junior blocks C and D are complex. Members of both junior blocks are well acquainted with the work of the elite and tend to select elite writers as dinner guests, but they differ in the extent to which they receive the elite's recognition. Junior block 1 (*Block C*) members have fairly strong ties to the elite and weak ties internally. This group relates more to the amorphous elite than to themselves (in terms of internal block densities); they represent the clients of the elite strata. By contrast, junior block 2 (*Block D*) members have strong internal ties and weak ties externally. They form a fairly tightly knit group. Members of neither junior block exhibit pronounced relations to members of nonelite blocks. Both have the lowest average income of all blocks and earn the lowest proportion of income from literary activities. With 60% holding a university degree in modern languages and literature, they constitute the best-educated group, and with an average age of about 42 years, they are also the youngest group. They have the second highest average number of memberships in professional associations, but they rarely hold offices in these associations. Moreover, about every third member of the junior blocks belongs to a literary circle.

Block E, the semiperiphery, forms the next to the largest block. Like members of junior block 1, members of the semiperiphery are also oriented more to the amorphous elite than to themselves. In terms of their overall relational pattern, they are located between members of the junior blocks on the one hand and those of the periphery on the other.

Block F, the largest block, representing almost 50% of all writers, forms the periphery of the social structure. Its members are not familiar with each other's work, nor can friendship ties, mutual assistance, and invitations be found within this block. While members are oriented to the elite, the relation is not reciprocated. Peripheral writers differ most from members of other high-culture blocks in aspects of professionalism. Mean membership in professional associations is low, and few peripheral writers hold office. Moreover, they are unlikely recipients of literary honors, awards, or stipends. However, in terms of tenure, peripheral writers tend not to be newcomers, having been in the field of literature, on average, nearly as long as elite writers, with a similar number of published books.

To summarize, in the high-culture segment the largest dividing lines exist between the elite and the semielite as a strata, the two junior blocks and the semiperiphery as a second strata, and, finally, the periphery (Figure 2). The overall structural relation within the high-culture segment can be interpreted as a center-periphery structure, with the elite block at the center, relating to itself and, to a lesser extent, to other high-culture blocks. The nonelite blocks, in turn,

TABLE 4:   Genre, Literary Intention, Income Indicators, Professionalism, and
          Sociodemographic Characteristics by Block

	Amorph. Elite	Junior Blks. 1, 2	Semi-periph.	Periph.	Folk Culture
Genre[a]	%	%	%	%	%
Dialect literature	5.6	15.0	3.9	16.3	81.8
Literary essays	77.8	35.0	66.7	44.0	27.3
Poetry	5.6	5.0	15.7	16.0	18.2
Prose/novelists	22.2	40.0	27.7	18.0	0.0
Nonspecialist	22.2	15.0	11.0	20.0	27.3
Intention	%	%	%	%	%
Enlightenment	33.3	25.0	29.4	28.0	18.2
Entertainment	11.1	15.0	13.7	20.0	27.3
Ego-expression	22.2	25.0	15.7	8.0	0.0
Other/combinations	33.4	35.0	41.2	44.0	54.5
Income					
Average monthly income	5.7	2.7	4.8	4.4	3.9
% from literary activity	57.7	17.7	36.7	18.3	18.7
Professionalism					
Professional memberships	2.8	1.9	1.3	.9	.6
Office holders in assoc. (%)	22.2	5.0	5.9	0.0	0.0
Informal circle member (%)	5.6	30.0	21.6	24.0	27.3
Honors and prizes received	2.8	1.0	1.1	.6	.4
Years since 1st publication	23.1	14.8	19.4	21.8	33.6
Books published	9.8	2.2	7.2	9.2	4.0
Evaluation of "climate"	%	%	%	%	%
Collegial, positive	40.0	36.9	24.4	33.3	33.3
Competitive	26.7	21.1	22.0	9.1	33.3
Mutual ignorance	13.3	15.8	39.0	33.3	22.2
Other/combinations	20.0	26.2	14.6	24.3	11.2
Sociodemographic characteristics					
Average age	54.8	43.2	47.1	55.6	61.4
Sex (% male)	88.9	60.0	80.4	82.0	72.7
Literature degree (%)	55.6	60.0	54.9	42.0	0.0
Political org. member (%)	44.4	25.0	35.3	20.0	9.1

[a] Percentages do not add up to 100 because of multiple answers.

FIGURE 1: Segmentation and Stratification
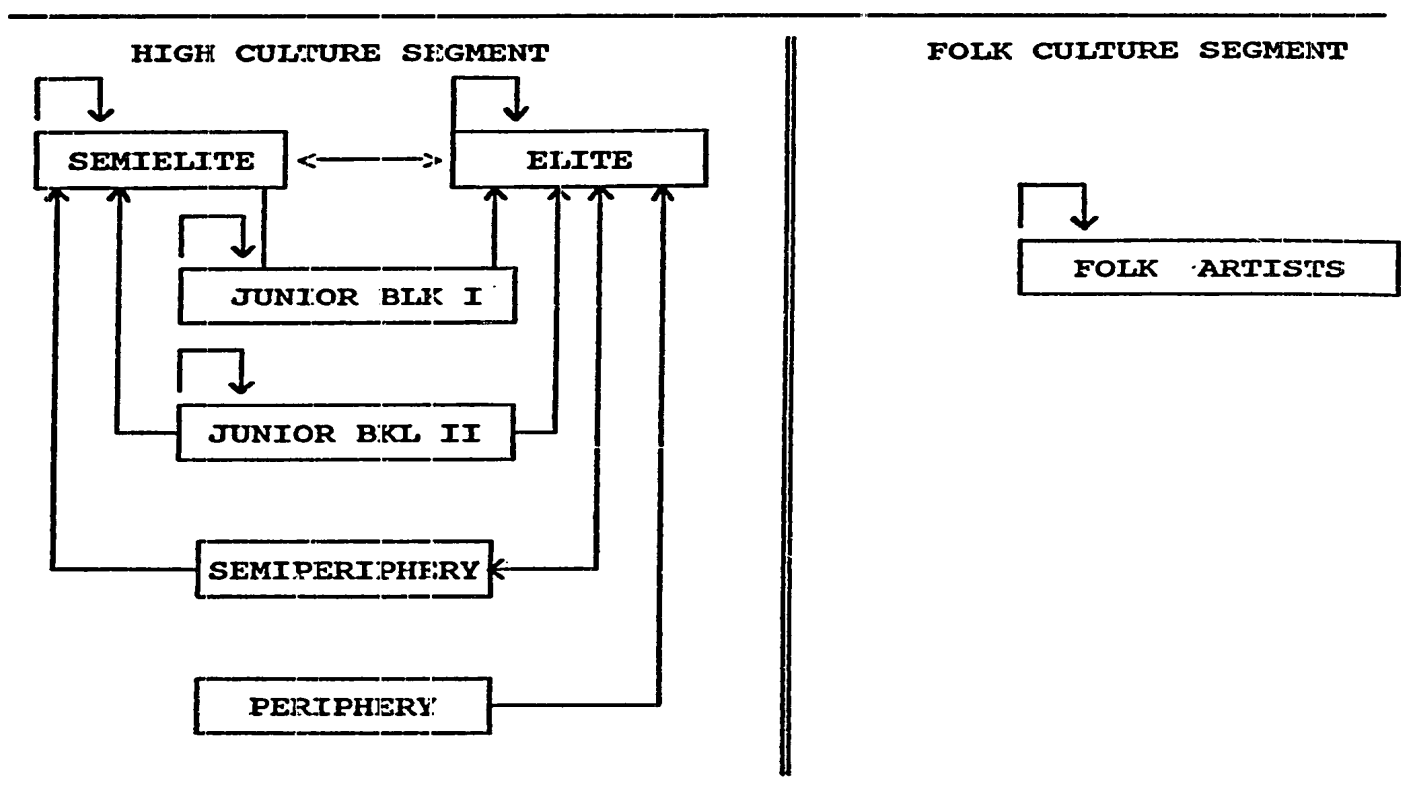
with the exception of junior block 2, relate more to the elite at the center than to themselves.

Finally, *Block G* is generally made up of folk artists writing in the local dialect with a folklore orientation for the purpose of entertainment. Members engage in the least amount of political activism (9.1% as opposed to 44.4% of elite writers), and none of the folk artists has a university degree in modern languages and literature. Like members of the peripheral blocks, they are rarely represented in formal professional associations. In structural terms, the weak relation between high culture and folk culture presents a near absence of both friendship ties and helping behavior between them. Overall, folk culture, structurally separated from high culture, forms an island in the social structure.

AMORPHOUS ELITE

The most striking result of the block model analysis concerns block A, the elite. While comprising 7.7% of all writers, members of the elite do not form a cohesive group in terms of relationship patterns. In fact, the small proportion of variance (38.7%), which is explained by the first principal component in the distances among occupants, suggests a dramatic conclusion: the elite as such does not exist in and of itself as a social entity. The elite is only defined and indeed relationally constructed as elite by nonelite writers. It is misleading, therefore, to classify the most prominent writers as a structurally equivalent group. With few exceptions, members of the elite tend to *occupy structurally unique positions*, as the variances and reliability indicators demonstrate. For all

17 members of the elite, reliability indicators[15] are less than .9, and, in 9 cases, less than .8. These results are different for other high-culture blocks, all of which are oriented toward the elite. In other words, the social structure of writers has no independently constructed, identifiable center. At its center is not a group, but a set of *individuals* who tend to occupy unique structural positions.

The finding of an amorphous elite is somewhat unusual, and in most other studies of elite systems, elites are usually portrayed as homogeneous and densely connected. Structurally, one can think of two possible types of relational elite configurations. In the first type, the elite forms a clique or a closely knit group of prominent writers. In this instance, the elite presents a combination of prominence and cohesion and conforms to its common image as a cohesive group acknowledged in its elite status by the nonelite. This elite type corresponds to the common notion of the elite as the most integrated and least ambiguous structural position.

The amorphous elite in our study represents the second type. It is characterized neither by prominence and cohesion nor by prominence and structurally equivalent relations to nonelites. Rather, this elite type comprises prominence and structural uniqueness. Both the low reliabilities and the overall low percentage of variance explained in the distance among members of the elite are indicators of "amorphousness" as opposed to the "groupness" and cohesiveness of the other elite types. Elite writers are the object of frequent choices, both by their relatively few fellow elite writers and by the much larger number of nonelite writers. Together these choices account for the high prominence scores of the elite. Yet the relatively much more infrequent choices by the elite of the nonelite are directed to a much larger group and appear less patterned. This phenomenon — the many choosing the few and the few choosing some of the many — accounts for the structural uniqueness of elite writers. The elite writer represents the inverse of the writer who occupies a structurally equivalent position.

In this context, we should emphasize two further aspects of the amorphous elite. The high proportion of elites engaged in literary essay writing seems to indicate a genre segmentation within the high-culture segment. By being both writer and critic, members of the elite are in a position to evaluate junior writers' literary work, to set and revise aesthetic standards, and to regulate entry to the elite and access to the literary market (see Hall 1979). The evaluation of the general "climate" among writers follows the structural location of blocks (Table 4). The elite and the junior writers tend to see relations among writers in a positive light, whereas peripheral writers tend to report an experience of mutual ignorance and disinterest among writers.

Second, we should recall that the relational data were collected from writers in one metropolitan area and not from a national sample. One possible explanation for the amorphousness of the elite could rest on the difference between a regional and a national sample. As part of a national social structure, the local elite might constitute a segment of a much larger and more cohesive national literary elite. While available data do not allow us to test this hypothesis, we should recall that the elite appear amorphous when seen from the peripheral point of view and from within the elite stratum itself (see below). A more differentiated national elite located above numerous local elites would not

necessarily alter the basic result of peripheral groupness and elite amorphousness.

To provide further evidence of the amorphous character of the elite, we performed an additional analysis. We excluded the folk-culture segment as well as the periphery and semiperiphery from the network. By selecting non-peripheral blocks only (amorphous elite, semielite, and the junior blocks) for a separate analysis, we hoped to gain a more detailed picture of elite amorphousness. The results were obtained by using STRUCTURE, version 3.2 (Burt 1987), and are partially presented as a spatial map in Figure 2.

Overall, we reached the same conclusion: members of the elite occupy unique social positions. In the area below the major diagonal, writers are separated by larger distances than in the area above the diagonal. With three exceptions, all members of the amorphous elite (block A) are located in the lower triangle. Aggregate prominence scores (represented as rounded one-digit numbers in Figure 2) are also higher in the lower triangle than in the upper one.

The upper triangle contains several clusters. However, only two clusters seem to approach the property of structural equivalence, as indicated by the variance in distance explained. These are the semielite (76.48%) and junior block 2 (block D), with a lower variance of 67.64% (as opposed to 90.8% in Table 2) accounted for by the first principal component. All other writers located in the clientele cluster now form smaller groups of two or three members.

According to the principle of structural equivalence, the position of the junior writers was defined not only by their relation to the elite but also by the (near) mutual absence of their relation to the periphery. Without the inclusion of peripheral writers, the position of junior block 2 writers seems less defined, whereas junior block 1 writers disintegrate into smaller groups oriented not toward each other but toward the elite. The elite, however, is highly individualistic.

AFFINITY OF MYTHS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

How do the two major properties of the social structure, elite amorphousness and peripheral groupness, relate to the question of myths? We have argued that the social position of the writer is conducive to myth generation. The results of the structural analysis help us understand why there are different myths. The dominant myth of the writer as the "notorious loner," the *homo singularis and prophet myth*, seems to correspond to the elite position and its embeddedness in the social structure. The ideology of the lonely genius is in close affinity to the elite's amorphous, individualistic structural position.

Variations of the dominant myth reflect different social positions. The position of junior block writers seems particularly myth-prone. Their fragile economic position is akin to the *poor poet myth*. The missing recognition of junior block 2 and peripheral writers is analogous to the *misunderstood genius myth*. Indifference and disinterest of writers are felt strongest among the semi-periphery (Table 4). Moreover, the participation of junior block writers in informal circles may support the romantic *literary circle myth*. Somewhat excluded from mainstream literary culture, and without the elite's recognition enjoyed by junior block 1 writers, the structural position of junior block 2

FIGURE 2: Spatial Map of Elite, Semielite and Junior Writer Position[a]
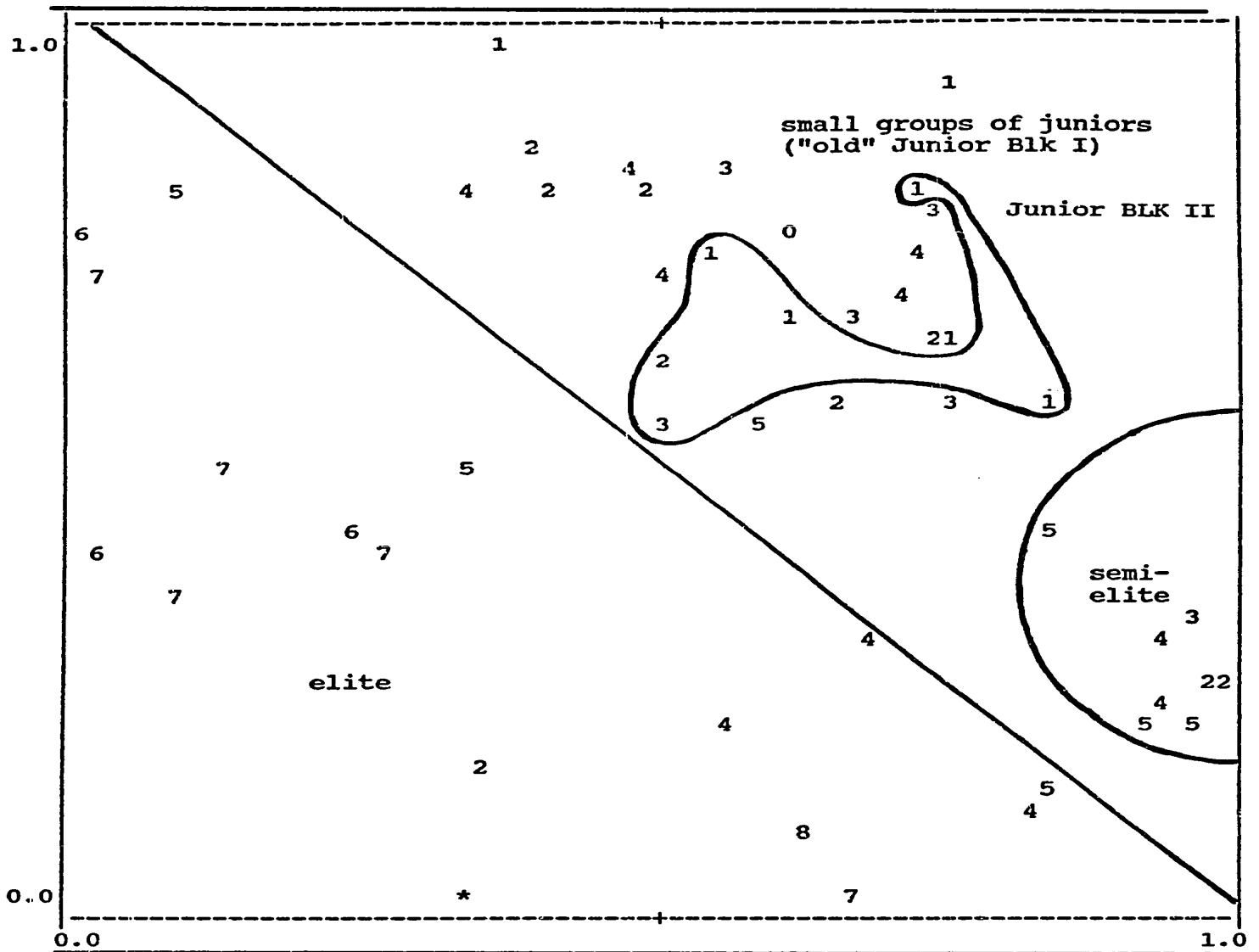
[a] The map, produced with STRUCTURE, is based on an eigenvector decomposition of the network distance data. Scores on both axes (which present eigenvectors for the first and second eigenvalues) vary from 0 to 1. Actors in close vicinity (small distances between them) occupy similar positions. Numbers represent the first (rounded) digit of aggregate prominence scores for writer occupying position. For example, a "5" means that the writer occupying the position has an aggregate prestige score between .450 and .549. The most prominent person is indicated by an asterisk.

writers suggests the image of the young writer in opposition to the literary establishment. The combination of the *poor poet myth* and the *misunderstood genius myth* stands in affinity to the image of the "anonymous producer" of literature among peripheral writers.

As we have seen, elite writers are cultural legitimators who control access to their field by being critic and writer, producer and evaluator, and peer and

superior at one and the same time. This result seems to suggest that elite ideology can easily extend to other parts of the social structure. While the ideology of the *homo singularis* seems to fit the structural position of the elite, other groups of writers, peripheral writers in particular, may be strongly influenced by the dominant myth.

For other groups of writers, the dominant myth of the *homo singularis* may exist although their structural position may be different and even at odds with the myth. The ideology of the lonely elite is stronger than the reality of the lonely periphery. Where the dominant myth meets the isolated groupness of the periphery, it changes from a myth analogous to the structural property of amorphousness to a myth at odds with the social position of peripheral writers. Peripheral writers find themselves in a professionally isolated position that is very different from the "notorious loner" of the elite: the latter may be solitary, but they are uniquely so, while the former is not only solitary but also exchangeable.

The results of the structural analysis suggest a social structure that allows for very different and potentially ambiguous "views" of social positions and the dominant myth. The combination of elite amorphousness and low peripheral densities suggests two possibilities: a social structure with a periphery but no center in terms of social positions, or a social structure with a center of individual elite writers and without a relevant periphery. Both interpretations of the social structure create the conditions for the production of different views. Such views of the social structure, ultimately crystallized as myths, depend on the vantage point of the viewer, i.e., the occupant of a social position. Because of their unique structural position, elite writers will perceive the social structure and their profession differently than will peripheral writers, who incorrectly see the elite as a cohesive group and not an amorphous entity.

Concluding Remarks

This study has looked at the relation between social structure and ideology, structure and superstructure, in cultural systems. We were interested in identifying factors likely to be responsible for the many myths and contradictory images that surround writers. The argument that the existence of competing myths may be understood as a by-product of the particular social structure of modern literature served as the central thesis of our article.

Aesthetic uncertainty and status indeterminacy are the two major characteristics of literary production in modern societies. They are the result of incomplete professionalization, the unpredictability of the market for literature, and the requirement of innovation and originality. Aesthetic uncertainty and status indeterminacy form the basic material from which myths about writers and literary production are made. What types of myths materialize and become prominent — the writer as *homo singularis*, prophet, and genius or some variation of the dominant myth — depends on the actual social positions of writers in a segmented and stratified social structure.

The block model analysis indicated two segments, high culture and folk culture, that are relatively isolated from one another. Within the high-culture

segment, the study identified the existence of an amorphous elite as one of the outstanding features of the social structure. Next to the elite, we found two groups of junior authors. The social structure revealed a periphery and semiperiphery in unreciprocated orientation toward the elite and in mutual isolation to each other.

The combination of elite amorphousness and peripheral "groupness" isolation appears as the source of many myths. As we move from the periphery to the center of the social structure, blocks and groups become smaller until we encounter writers whose social positions are not structurally equivalent. As we move away from the center, the small groups of junior writers constitute the satellites of the atomistic elite writers, and at its periphery, the social structure becomes less dense. Thus, elite amorphousness, combined with high relational density and peripheral groupness, and sparseness of literary relations emerge as two major properties of the social structure. Different myths reflect different social positions. The dominant myth extends to segments of the social structure where it no longer corresponds to structural positions. Alternatively, we suggest that elite cohesiveness and institutional inclusion of peripheral members into professional structures may lead to more homogeneous and less contradictory myths.

Notes

1. Numerous studies have identified the paramount importance of social networks in the field of culture (Kadushin 1974, 1976; Coser et al. 1982; Powell 1985; DiMaggio 1986, 1987; Gerhards & Anheier 1989; Thurn 1985).

2. In the context of this article, it is impossible to do justice to a development as complex as the changes that have occurred in the ideology and social organization of German literature since the Enlightenment (see Hauser 1951; Schücking 1961; Haferkorn 1974; Rarisch 1976; Berman 1983). On the history of the notion of genius in the Enlightenment, idealism and romanticism in the 20th century, see Schmidt (1988). Jurt (1989) offers a recent summary of work in this area.

3. See Mayer's (1975:22) controversial reinterpretation of the relationship between the writer, their fictional characters, and society in *Aussenseiter* (Outsiders). He argues that there is a relationship between fictional characters (Don Quixote, Shylock, Don Juan, Faust, Hamlet, Electra) and the social position of their creators. According to Mayer, both author and character correspond to the underlying theme and defense of the *homo singularis et peculiaris opinionis*.

4. Unlike in other countries, art and literature in West Germany are not dominated by a "cultural capital," such as New York City in the United States, London in Great Britain, or Paris in France. Rather, the country is characterized by several competing cultural centers.

5. Writers were contacted by letter and phone. An appointment was set up, and in most cases the interview took place at the writer's residence. Interviews, which were conducted by students of the University of Cologne and by the present authors, lasted about 90 minutes.

6. To the extent possible we collected data on the missing cases. Using a number of secondary sources, such as recent editions of *Kürschners Literaturlexikon* (the most complete directory of German writers available), we succeeded in gathering data on age, sex, and number of book publications. For all three variables, we found no statistically significant differences between valid and missing cases.

7. This measurement is a cognitive tie measuring awareness of other writers, similar to "citation" ties in other network studies (see Burt 1982; Burt & Minor 1983).

8. Friendships and other close personal relations have often been identified as crucial factors in understanding the background and history of writers and their literary work, e.g., the

friendship cult in the late Enlightenment, literary clubs, salons, and coffee houses (Back & Polisar 1983; Gerhards 1986).

9. This measurement included discussion of manuscripts, assistance in finding a publisher, and help in gaining access to cultural institutions, e.g., initiation and establishment of contacts to arrange public readings.

10. DiMaggio (1986) uses a similar measurement in his study of American resident theatres.

11. Version 3.2 of STRUCTURE was redimensioned to accommodate a specified maximum of 250 actors. Modifications were necessary in several Fortran READ, WRITE, and PRINT statements, as were changes of counters and loops in the relevant subprograms; however, all of these modifications leave the equations and actual calculations unchanged. The program was compiled and executed on a VAX at the Department of Sociology of Rutgers University.

12. To provide support for the general validity of the block model results based on Euclidian distance measures, we performed an additional block model analysis by applying an alternative implementation of the structural equivalence principle. We used ICONE, an iterative combinatorial algorithm (Boorman & Levitt 1983; Romo 1986; Romo & Anheier 1988) which does not follow the Euclidian distance approach suggested by Johnson (1967). ICONE seeks to separate high-density from low-density regions in multiple-incidence matrices. With some differences in block assignment, ICONE yields a similar interpretation of the social structure.

For this analysis, it should be noted that the two central properties of the social structure, elite amorphousness and peripheral groupness, are also revealed by ICONE, the alternative algorithm: ICONE identifies a smaller elite stratum, comprising about 8% of the population, and a periphery, which, as in the STRUCTURE solution, includes every second writer, with other blocks located in between elite and periphery. Most importantly, in support of our general argument, we found that all peripheral writers have reliability indicators of .95 and higher, while the average reliability for writers in the elite stratum is .44. The percentage of variance in the distance among occupants of the peripheral position accounted for by a single principal component is 92%, and only 32% for the elite position.

13. Aggregate prominence, a measure of individual network structure (Knoke & Burt 1983:206-7; Burt 1987, 1982), assigns "1" to the most prominent individual in a network. Less-prominent network members have scores expressed as fractions of the maximum prominence.

14. Readers unfamiliar with the concept of reliability as operationalized in STRUCTURE might think of reliabilities as factor loadings (where the position represents the factor) that indicate the measurement quality of the assignment of individuals to that position (see Burt 1982; Burt & Minor 1983).

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