Knowledge and the Author: The Intentional Fallacy Revisted and (Perhaps) Removed

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Ronald Shusterman, professeur à l'université Michel de Montaigne (Bordeaux III), a publié *Critique et poésie selon I. A. Richards* (Bordeaux, 1988) et de nombreux articles sur la théorie littéraire parus dans des revues françaises et étrangères telles que *Poétique*, *Philosophy and Literature*, *SubStances*, et *Etudes Anglaises*. Formé en philosophie aux Etats-Unis et à Oxford, il s'intéresse aux rapports entre la fiction, les sciences, et l'épistémologie.

Cet article explore la question de "l'hérésie intentionnaliste" non pas par rapport aux textes les plus connus ou les plus récents à ce sujet — ceux de Barthes, Foucault, Couturier, Wimsatt et Beardsley, Hirsch, Eco, Knapp et Michaels — mais à la lumière des divergences entre deux critiques et poètes par ailleurs très proches dans leurs orientations — I. A. Richards et William Empson. Si Richards fut célèbre pour son insistance sur l'autonomie du texte, manifestée dans des ouvrages tels que *Practical Criticism* (1929), son élève Empson devint bien plus circonspect quant à la non-pertinence de l'auteur, publiant à la fin de sa vie un livre-programme intitulé *Using Biography* (1984). Mon intention est d'examiner les contradictions entre la théorie et la pratique poétique de ces deux écrivains, afin de savoir dans quelle mesure la connaissance de l'auteur peut jouer un rôle dans l'interprétation. Le sens d'un poème ou d'un roman peut-il parfois être déterminé par ce que l'on y apprend de la vie de l'auteur ? Enfin, peut-on désamorcer le célèbre débat sur l'"intentional fallacy" en insistant sur le caractère pluraliste des rapports entre l'auteur empirique et son lecteur ?

The debate about how the meaning of a work of art relates to the (physical) author is one of many recurrent debates which can be seen in different forms throughout the history of aesthetics. If Barthes's "La mort de l'auteur" has been the most striking French essay on the subject, Anglo-Saxon criticism has probably been more affected by a seminal article by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946). Other recent contributions to the question include the controversy which arose after the publication of "Against Theory" (1982) by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, Eco's *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992) and, of course, Maurice Couturier's work on *La figure de l'auteur* (1995). Despite differences in terminology and approach, all of these works try to explore the extent to which authorial intention determines the meaning of a work of art. Rather than concentrating on these major texts, I propose to examine the question as it is treated in the writings of two related — yet opposed — critics, I. A. Richards and William Empson. As the author of *Practical Criticism*, and perhaps, indeed, the inventor of "close reading," Richards established a tradition of textual autonomy which set the stage for the argument about the intentional fallacy. Empson, his student, on the other hand, grew reticent about the elimination of the author, publishing at the end of his life a collection of criticism entitled *Using Biography* (1984). What makes this juxtaposition particularly interesting is that both critics were also poets at different times of their lives. Does the "figure of the author" that emerges from their artistic production correspond to their critical principles? Or does it undermine an overly rigid dogma?

Recent literary history, of course, has generally forbidden the pursuit of such questions. To take just one representative example of the way that structuralism and post-structuralism have eliminated the author, we can turn to the preface of Michel Charles' *Rhétorique de la lecture*.[1] The concept of the author is completely absent from the strategy announced in this *Avant-propos*: "Il s'agit d'examiner

[1]. See Works Cited. All page references will be given in the text with appropriate abbreviations when necessary.

comment un texte expose, voire 'théorise', explicitement ou non, la lecture ou les lectures que nous faisons ou que nous pouvons en faire; comment il nous laisse libres (nous *fait* libres) ou comment il nous contraint" (p. 9). Here the autonomy of the text seems so great that there is no need for anyone or anything else — the text does everything by itself. Quite significantly, the only time Charles uses the term "author" in this preface is when he speaks of "d'autres disiciplines (et d'autres auteurs)" — other disciplines and other authors, i.e. critics, who could carry out the research project he has in mind. The only authors around seem to be the critics themselves! Whether or not this has something to do with an endemic professional jealousy is a question I will not pursue.

I will hardly be the first to claim that reading has at least something to do with some kind of search for an author. And Maurice Couturier himself was not the first to underline the "pseudo-scientific arrogance" of "anti-author militantism."[2] For in 1967 E. D. Hirsch was already arguing that the anti-intentionalist theory "has […] frequently encouraged willful arbitrariness and extravagance in academic criticism and has been one very important cause of the prevailing skepticism which calls into doubt the possibility of objectively valid interpretation" (p. 2). What I would like to emphasize is the way the problem of "skepticism" comes into the picture. Clearly, the entire question of the role of authorial intention can be linked to even vaster considerations about the epistemological dimension of literature: To what extent is the meaning of a poem what we learn from it, including what we learn about the author?

I think we can draw a few conclusions from certain concrete examples towards a means of defusing the intentionalist controversy. The context of this question is the general problem of the relation of the literary work to knowledge, and I will try to underline to what extent and in what cases knowledge of the author can be a factor in interpretation. A few years ago I tried to develop, in a number of articles,[3] a distinction between two possible relations between literature and knowledge. In the weak version, the literary work of art is merely an *object* of cognition; in the strong version, it is actually an *instrument* of cognition. The difference between the two is roughly that between a thing which is looked *at* and one which is looked *through* — though with some things you can do both: I can take my telescope apart and see how it works, but I can also look *through* it at passing comets. My conclusion was (and still is) that literature is an object but never an instrument of cognition; it is not an alternative form of science and never a direct exploration of the external world. In the present essay, however, I will try to underline to what extent and in what cases knowledge of the author can be a factor in interpretation. In other words, I will argue that biographical knowledge can be useful in the pursuit of literature as an *object* of cognition.

I like to think of Richards and Empson as forming a kind of chiasmus: their careers followed inverted itineraries. Richards started out as a positivistic theorist and ended up in doubt; Empson began with ambiguity and ended up relatively dogmatic about certain things. Secondly, Richards started in semantics and came to poetry only at the close of his career, whereas Empson's poetical period ended early on, and the rest of his life was devoted to teaching and criticism. One could say — biographers have said — that Empson abandoned poetry because he had nothing more to say in that medium, and that Richards came to poetry because his prose wasn't doing the job he wanted it to do.[4]

Empson was Richards' student at Cambridge, so the differences between the two — at least at the outset — should not be over-emphasized. The early Empson was indeed a Richardsian product — *Seven Types of Ambiguity* was actually written on assignment for Richards. In *Seven Types*, Empson was not especially interested in the biography. In a concluding passage, he mentions an example concerning facts from the life of Ben Jonson and notes:

> All this may be true, and these facts very interesting to the biographer, but they have nothing to do with the enjoyment of the poem. Of course, such a

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[2]. "Il est temps […] de remettre en cause la démarche structuraliste et déconstructionniste qui, en disqualifiant la figure de l'auteur, a autorisé maintes arrogances scientifiques ou pseudo-scientifiques, et maints délires […]. Le militantisme anti-auteur n'est plus de mise, selon moi : la lecture n'est pas une appropriation du texte mais un échange entre deux sujets séparés dans le temps et l'espace" (Couturier, p. 19).

[3]. See Ronald Shusterman, "Réalités virtuelles et arts autotéliques," *Épistémocritique et cognition 2*, *TLE* 11 (1993), p. 147, and, for a more recent statement on the general question, "Fiction, connaissance, épistémologie," *Poétique* 104 (Nov. 1995), pp. 503-18.

[4]. On Richards' turn to poetry, see Ronald Shusterman, *Critique et poésie selon I. A. Richards: de la confiance positiviste au relativisme naissant*, pp. 241ff.

> distinction is hard to draw, and those who enjoy poems must in part be biographers, but this extreme example may serve to make clear […] that I am talking less about the minds of poets than about the mode of action of poetry. (p. 280)

Quite clearly, *Seven Types* is based on the same presupposition of textual autonomy as that preached by Richards and inherent in his method in *Practical Criticism*.

Empson's ire against the intentional fallacy did not come completely unannounced, but he is certainly at his most violently pro-intentionalist in *Using Biography*, published in the last year of his life. Here, to say the least, the title makes his position clear. Empson states that his project involves "using biography" for "our better understanding" but then adds:

> Any such work is excluded by the Wimsatt Law […] which says that no reader can ever grasp the intention of an author. This paradox results from a great failure to grasp the whole situation. Any speaker, when a baby, wanted to understand what people meant, why mum was cross for example, and had enough partial success to go on trying; the effort is usually carried on into adult life, though not always into old age. Success, it may be argued, is never complete. But it is nearer completeness in a successful piece of literature than in any other use of language. (p. vii)

We can note, by the way, that the "completeness" mentioned seems to imply, to borrow a term from Couturier, that a great work of art is "over-determined" by the author — i.e. the greater the work, the lesser the ambiguity. This is far from Empson's original position back in *Seven Types*. In any case, with respect to intention, he goes on to conclude:

> A student of literature ought to be trying all the time to empathize with the author (and of course the assumptions and conventions by which the author felt himself bound); to tell him that he cannot even partially succeed is about the most harmful thing you could do. (p. viii)

More vehement passages can be found elsewhere. In another volume of essays, Empson writes: "To say that you won't be bothered with anything but the words on the page […] strikes me as petulant, like saying 'of course I won't visit him unless he has first-class plumbing'" (1987, p. 125).

Empson's defense of intentionalism is not argued on a theoretical level in *Using Biography* — the justification comes more in the detail of his criticism. One article, entitled "*Ulysses:* Joyce's Intentions," attempts to refute what Empson calls the "Kenner Smear" (p. 204). According to Kenner, Stephen is *not* a tender portrait of Joyce as a youth but the representation of a fatal alternative that Joyce luckily avoided. Kenner sees behind this hostility a kind of Christian message in Joyce's work. Empson refutes this theory by giving evidence from Joyce's biography to prove that he was fond of Stephen and to prove that he kept faithful to many of Stephen's ideas. For example, with respect to the passage in *A Portrait* when Stephen speaks of going to "forge in the smithy of my soul", Joyce's positive use of the verb "to forge" in a private letter would tend to prove that it does not have the negative connotations of "to counterfeit" (see *Using Biography*, p. 205). Empson gives many other examples.

I would like to use the same technique to argue against one of Jean-Jacques Lecercle's interpretations of an Empsonian poem, showing how biography — or at least extra-textual information — can help resolve interpretive difficulties. In the following stanza of "This Last Pain" (1932), Empson speaks of a "slide":

> All those large dreams by which men long live well
> Are magic-lanterned on the smoke of hell;
> This then is real, I have implied,
> A painted, small, transparent slide. (*Collected Poems*, p. 32)

In a recent article, Lecercle renders the idea expressed here by speaking of "un voile ou un écran ("a transparent slide")" (p. 130). Surely this is not exactly correct, for though the poem itself speaks of "magic-lanterns" (which are connected to the idea of screens), language tells us that a "slide" (i.e. une "diapo") and a "screen" are not really the same thing. Secondly, doesn't the text also create a contrast between the dreams which are "magic-lanterned" and the world of reality as represented by the slide? If this "slide" is neither a screen nor a *diapo*, what else could it be? Here is where we use biography. We know that Empson was trained in the sciences — so perhaps what is "real" is not a photographic slide but a *microscopic* slide. "Painted" would then mean "smeared" or "stained," and the idea of the slide as a "screen" — the idea of some barrier between scientific vision and reality — would disappear

from the poem. We can indeed confirm this interpretation with a passage from his prose: in *Seven Types* Empson uses exactly the same image of using a microscope to look at something "properly stained, on a slide" (p. 285).

Biography helps us out of this dilemma — but do we want to be as adamant as Empson about its ultimate usefulness? When we turn to the rest of his poems, we find little use for biography. Here is a first example:

Homage to the British Museum
There is a Supreme God in the ethnological section;
A hollow toad shape, faced with a blank shield.
He needs his belly to include the Pantheon,
Which is inserted through a hole behind.
At the navel, at the points formally stressed, at the organs of sense,
Lice glue themselves, dolls, local deities,
His smooth wood creeps with all the creeds of the world.
Attending there let us absorb the cultures of nations
And dissolve into our judgment all their codes.
Then, being clogged with a natural hesitation
(People are continually asking one the way out),
Let us stand here and admit that we have no road.
Being everything, let us admit that is to be something,
Or give ourselves the benefit of the doubt;
Let us offer our pinch of dust all to this God,
And grant his reign over the entire building. (Collected Poems, p. 35)

Whatever we think of this poem, we recognize that the poet is not inciting us in any way to search for his personality. There is really no "persona" to work out; we are being asked to entertain certain ideas, but it doesn't seem to matter who it is that is doing the asking. All in all, the vast majority of Empson's poems are impersonal in this way.

We can take another poem as a prospective counter-example. One of the most potentially autobiographical poems in his work is the following "Villanelle" (1928):

Villanelle
It is the pain, it is the pain, endures.
Your chemic beauty burned my muscles through.
Poise of my hands reminded me of yours.
What later purge from this deep toxin cures?
What kindness now could the old salve renew?
It is the pain, it is the pain, endures.
The infection slept (custom or change inures)
And when pain's secondary phase was due
Poise of my hands reminded me of yours.
How safe I felt, whom memory assures,
Rich that your grace safely by heart I knew.
It is the pain, it is the pain, endures.
My stare drank deep beauty that still allures.
My heart pumps yet the poison draught of you.
Poise of my hands reminded me of yours.
You are still kind whom the same shape immures.
Kind and beyond adieu. We miss our cue.
It is the pain, it is the pain, endures.
Poise of my hands reminded me of yours.
(Collected Poems, p. 22)

Empson is obviously talking about a love affair, and for once the "you" involved is probably an allusion to a real woman and not the impersonal second person characteristic of much of his poetry. But do we really need biography to understand the poem? In a preface to the "Notes" appended to the poems published in 1935, Empson writes that though the ideal poem should stand on its own, notes are indeed necessary "to explain incidental difficulties" (*Collected Poems*, p. 93). One must conclude that "Villanelle" has no incidental difficulties in Empson's view, since this particular composition gets not a single word of explanation. It is as if the only thing he could say about it would have to do with his private life, and he has no need for that. In general, the notes Empson gives in his *Collected Poems* are purely linguistic indications; explanations of esoteric words or ideas, and so forth. Using biography with respect to Empson will not only prove difficult, it will prove relatively pointless, since the poems seem to work entirely on their own.

There is really little need to document Richards' aversion to intentionalist theory — the very method of *Practical Criticism* amounts to a claim that poems can be efficiently read without any knowledge of the author. It is also true that the spirit of the age — the Twenties when Richards was emerging as a major literary theorist — involved a general emphasis on "impersonality". The extent of Richards' aversion to biography can be sensed in the following quote from John Paul Russo, his (more or less) official biographer: "While [Richards] had both personal and theoretical reservations on anything touching biography, he did not allow them to mar our friendship […]" (pp. xix-xx). Rather than go through the long list of passages where Richards develops his theory of the autonomy of the text, we can turn straight away to two poems which seem to express anti-intentionalism:

A poem's not on a page
Or in a reader's eye;
Nor in a poet's mind
Its freedom may engage.
For I, a poem, I
Myself alone can find
Myself alone could bind.
[…]
I sing, who nevertheless
No accents have or breath.
I neither live nor die.
But you whom I possess…
You, you know life and death
And thoroughly know; so I
What void I fill thereby.
(from "Retort," *New and Selected Poems*, p. 24)

You do not trade too long upon a lack,
And words in poems have rights, say out their say,
Exact and render strict account,
Have little mercy on what's seen its day
Or could betray: all in the troth of the pack.
Sometimes a word is wiser much than men:
'Faithful' e.g., 'responsible' and 'true'.
And words it is, not poets, make up poems.
Our words, we say, but we are theirs too
For words made man and may unmake again.
(from "The Ruins," *New and Selected Poems*, p. 25)

The theoretical content of these stanzas is so clear that it forces the reader to move out of the poem towards Richards' career. The irony is that though these stanzas *assert*, rather explicitly, the intentionalist fallacy, they also incite the reader to *commit* the fallacy by making him look for Richards' theoretical intentions in the text!

When Richards became a poet in the fifties, he often included details concerning the context of composition in his published collections. A poet who includes the place and date of composition at the

end of his poems seems to be invoking details of himself as the empirical author. For example, Richards adds, at the bottom of one poem, "North Conway 17 November 1957." This information attached to the poem has to be processed using the information that we already have — i.e. that Richards was fond of mountain climbing and that North Conway is a small town in the mountains of New Hampshire. Richards' first volume of poetry had as its cover a picture of him in climbing gear high in the mountains of Switzerland. My point is that the reading experience includes all sorts of things — it includes the paratext — and that means it includes the processing of the book's cover. And in this case, the cover gives us knowledge of the author — knowledge which helps determine the meaning of the text.

We can see this autobiographical element even more clearly in poems such as "Harvard Yard in April: April in Harvard Yard" or "The Solitary Daffodil." Both are typical of the way Richards' poetry almost inevitably brings us to his life. In both his role as an academic is underlined. Now I am not saying that such knowledge fully determines the meaning of the text. But can it be wrong to say that such knowledge is part of the experience? Volumes of verse don't simply drop into people's laps; they go out and buy them, and they come to the text with a minimum of knowledge. What surprises me about Richards is that he seems to exploit this fact. We saw how Empson added notes to his *Collected Poems*, so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised to see Richards follow suit. But if we look closely we see that his notes are not at all the same. Here is "The Solitary Daffodil" (*New and Selected Poems*, p. 13) — one of Richards' lighter poems:

> The Solitary Daffodil
> From committee-doodled day
> Beckon'd by the cocktail roar,
> Feeling for what seemed a way,
> I groped, as I had groped before.
> A vivid Presence in the grass
> Held me up. I could not pass.
> A solitary Daffodil!
> Its candid countenance was there
> Speaking of the end of ill
> With mild, confiding, tranquil air:
> Its crisp, translucent whorls so pure
> I grew as sure as it was sure.
> Through golden depths on on it spoke,
> A little Trumpet, grave and deep,
> And nodded lightly as it woke
> The world from transcendental sleep.
> Alone it had been waiting there
> A Herald and a Harbinger.
> So, as a lost word found can say
> The never-so-well-known-before,
> It welcomed me into a Day
> And almost opened me a Door
> Through which I may still step to be
> In recollected Company.

The note Richards appends to this minor poem begins with a personal fact: "This visitant appeared in 1957 without precedent in the waste area, once a garden, beside my office" (*Internal Colloquies*, p. 133). Now it would be naïve to believe that this sort of autobiographical note necessarily tells us the truth of the poem's composition. We learned that long ago from Coleridge's extravagant introduction to "Kubla Khan." But clearly the notes reinforce an autobiographical dimension which is *already in the poem*. There are critics around who will claim that I am begging the question by talking about "what is in the poem." How can I possibly know that the "I" of the poem is necessarily Richards? It is true that I have no way of *knowing* this, but I also have no reason to *doubt* that the author is speaking directly in this particular piece. There are features at work in the poem

which tell us that we are indeed listening to Richards himself, i.e. a professor of poetry — the kind of person interested in making allusions to Wordsworth, "recollected" in tranquillity. In other words, in this poem there is nothing that we cannot believe, nothing that even necessitates a "willing suspension of disbelief" — so what forces us, in this case, to create a gap between the author and some poetic mask? Or, I should say, what forces us to create a gap any different from the gap that psychology has taught to posit between absolutely any voice (poetic or not) and its speaker?[5]

The empirical author exists in the real world. One of the consequences is that knowledge of the author is also knowledge of what else he has written or accomplished. A recent article by Paisley Livingston, "From Work to Work," has explored the complexities of the way several works by the same author can be seen to inter-relate. Livingston's argument is that relating one work to the next helps us understand the entire corpus. Of course, if it makes sense to talk about the corpus, then it makes sense to continue talking about the author.[6] In other words, if the idea of a "life-work," a mutually-modifying corpus, an *oeuvre*, is a viable concept, then the concept of the author is reinforced. My own comment would be to add that the reinforcement of the idea of the author helps revitalize and revalidate the notion of authorial intention. Richards life-work blends both his poetry and his criticism; reading Richards demands an awareness of this fact.

For the moment, the conclusion seems to be that there is no point legislating against a biographical dimension to literary interpretation, since it seems to creep in the most unexpected places. That's a put-down for Richards, but what one can say with respect to Empson is that there seems to be no point in rendering biography mandatory either: Going through Empson's poetry is hardly a matter of going back and forth between the life and the text. What does need to be emphasized, whatever the degree of knowledge of the author necessitated by a text, is that interpretation always has at least *something* to do with the author. I don't see how we can get rid of a communication model of literary art, and to quote just one advocate of this model, we can turn back to Hirsch: "[…] meaning is an affair of consciousness and not of physical signs or things. Consciousness is, in turn, an affair of persons, and in textual interpretation the persons involved are an author and a reader."(p. 23).

But what is the essence of this relationship between author and reader? Maurice Couturier portrays his relationship in the following way:

> […] l'auteur projette dans le texte des images plus ou moins fidèles de lui-même, il les éparpille entre les différents actants, tels des moi parcellaires […]. L'écriture se conçoit alors comme un processus de fuite et d'évitement par lequel l'auteur cherche à assurer sa loi sur le lecteur et à lui interdire l'accès à son for intérieur. […] l'auteur reconstruit comme principal sujet énonciatif du texte […] est inextricablement liée à la censure.(p. 22)

This seems to raise a lot of questions. Does the author always project images of himself? Does he always wish to hide them? Isn't the link between the author and the content of his work often much more indirect? Must we speak of "censorship" in all cases and all ages?

Couturier's argument is brilliant and convincing with respect to the works and authors he has in mind — but should it be generalized as the essence of all relationships between author and reader? When I read Empson, for example, I seek what the author has said; perhaps only indirectly do I seek the author himself. On the other hand, do all authors necessarily "flee" because of some inner or outer "censorship"? Not all authors put themselves into their work in any deep sense of this concept; yet some of those who do, do not seem to be hiding. The problem of the implication of the real author is complicated, as Genette shows in his pages on the concept of "autofiction."[7] There are numerous examples where the author isn't hiding at all and where knowledge of the physical author is part of the reading experience. Take, for instance, the passage from Malcolm Bradbury's *Rates of Exchange* (1983) where an Eastern European intellectual makes a reference to a "campus writer Brodge… who writes *Changing Westward*? I think he is very funny but sometimes his ideological position is not clear" (p. 269). Knowledge about the narrator won't help the reader get the joke; he needs to know

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[5]. If there is nothing specifically "literary" about this gap, if the same gap exists in all human intercourse, then it is not really the business of poetics to study its nature and mode of operation.

[6]. One of the things that most amuses Livingston is the publication of the five-volume edition of Roland Barthes' *Œuvres complètes*, i.e. the life-work of the author who proclaimed the death of the author. See Livingston, p. 436.

[7]. See *Fiction et diction*, pp. 86–87.

about two empirical authors — Bradbury and Lodge — to understand. The reader has to know that Bradbury has written *Stepping Westward* and Lodge is the author of *Changing Places*. More importantly, understanding the joke involves a recognition of Bradbury's intention, his desire to underline the way critics have tended to group Lodge and himself together as writers of a single vein. There is no "hiding" here, only, perhaps, a wry and self-destructive comment by the author on his own career.

Can we really accept, therefore, Couturier's claim that authors have constantly tried to remove themselves from their texts? There are other examples where the author has invented strategies to render his own existence as palpable as possible. B. S. Johnson, for instance, strove to make his presence concrete. In *Albert Angelo* (1964), a relatively early novel, we can see a good example of an author getting fed up with the mask and asserting his own personal identity. The novel is about a would-be architect who is forced to earn his living as a teacher. The story gets told in an innovative way, but without any major break in the narrative illusion, until the end of a late chapter when we read: "OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING!"(p. 163). And then the penultimate chapter begins as follows:

> – fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero […]
>
> – so an almighty aposiopesis
>
> – I'm trying to say something not tell a story telling stories is telling lies […]
>
> – look, I'm trying to tell you something of what I feel about being a poet in a world where only poets care anything real about poetry, through the objective correlative of an architect who has to earn his living as a teacher. (pp. 167–68).

Another example of the way Johnson tries to give us the truth about himself can be found in *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975). In one passage, an extradiegetic narrator who mentions having to invent some more scenes, remarks that he is going to interrupt his writing for a snack:

> I shall eat now, the manuscript stained on purpose with the melting butter.
>
> What a pity it is not possible for you all to read the ms!
>
> Where was I again? (p. 28)

This underlines the concrete reality and the temporal dimension of the writing process and is typical of Johnson's ideal of a total artistic transmission. Far from trying to hide, here the author is fundamentally an exhibitionist, trying to communicate every dimension of his experience.

This *possibility* of a fusion of textual meaning and authorial intention, where knowledge of the text becomes knowledge of the author, does not mean that the relation between text, intention and meaning can always be reduced in this way. Knapp and Michaels are oversimplifying when they state dogmatically:

> The point […] is not that there *need* be no gulf between intention and the meaning of its expression but that there *can* be no gulf. Not only in serious literal speech but in *all* speech what is intended and what is meant are identical. (pp. 17-18)
>
> […] meaning is always identical to expressed intention […]. (p. 21)

The point of their example of a poem written mysteriously on the sand of a beach (pp. 15–18) is that the traces aren't language if we don't posit an author — i.e. an agent responsible for these traces. But the positing of an agent is only identical with the intentionality of the *act* — not the actual *content* of the act. The intentionality of the act of communication is not the same thing as what the act is all about. If I decide to interpret the traces as a poem, then I assume they are intentional — but this recognition doesn't mean that I understand their meaning.

I must confess that I do not always see exactly what the whole intentionalist controversy is all about — at least, as it exists today, if not as it existed for Wimsatt and Beardsley (or Proust for that matter).[8] Let us borrow for a moment Eco's vocabulary of the "*intentio operis"* which interacts with "*intentio auctoris*" and *"intentio lectoris"* (p. 25). Who would want to claim that there must be a perfect identity between these three intentions? Who would want to claim, on the other hand, that there are absolute barriers between them that prevent the slightest correspondence? Philosophers sometimes

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[8]. The difference is that they all had specific battles to fight with respect to previous critical practices that aren't much of a danger any more. Wimsatt and Beardsley's article is actually much less radically anti-intentionalist than many current modern theories. On this, see Hirsch, pp. 11–12

talk about questions of "intensionality" — the "aboutness" of perception; it seems reasonable to argue that the aboutness of a poem can have something to do with what the (physical) author intended. The "aboutness" of a poem — its "intensionality" can even include personal knowledge of the poet. We shouldn't legislate against it, nor should we insist on its presence.

Couturier sees the literary work of art as an "over-determined object": "Écrire, c'est créer un objet surdéterminé mais également désirant et donc habité par l'inconscient de l'auteur et habitable par celui du lecteur" (p. 19). I would agree that the object is over-determined in this way, but that doesn't prevent the interpretation from being *under*-determined. This brings me to what we could call the "Fisher-Price" theory of interpretation. When my son was a toddler I bought him one of those Fisher-Price toys where you are supposed to put the square pegs into the square holes and so on. The toy was somewhat anti-pedagogical since a manufacturing defect enabled any stubborn or devious child to put the triangular peg into the square hole as well. In this sense, the hole "underdetermined" the "interpretation" that could fit into it. The round peg wouldn't go — there are interpretations which are falsifiable — but the square hole authorized two conflicting pegs without providing any definitive criteria for choosing between them.

This underdetermination, on the reader's side, is not an accident of literature but one of its constitutive rules. It is true that authors *try* to over-determine their works, i.e. they try to control meaning, and the search for authorial intention is an exploration of this attempt to control. But the point is that they never can be successful in their attempts at over-determination since interpretation remains under-determined by the material and linguistic dimension of the work. This is not an accident of nature; this is not just the inevitable operation of the "remainder" in language; it is the institutional, constitutive rule of literary art. The whole discussion of the problem of whether the work's meaning "equals" the author's intention is misunderstood if we think of it as the discovery of what is or has to be for some *natural* reason inherent in things. Literary interpretation takes place within an institution, and this involves not natural law but consensual rules of how the game can be played. Knapp and Michaels try to eliminate the question of intentionalism by arguing that meaning just *is* intention. For natural objects, this kind of identity does indeed apply: It makes no sense to ask whether H_2O "can be" the same thing as water — it just *is* the same thing. But a work of art is not a natural but rather a culturally-emergent object. So it does make sense to ask if the meaning of a literary work of art can be the same thing as the author's intention. Yet, ultimately, the answer to this question does not depend on some kind of universal and empirical test; it depends on a decision, and in many cases a value-judgment. And it is such a decision which has made under-determination a fundamental element constituting the literary institution. For it is better for literature, it is better for us, if the text remains open, if there is a variety of interpretation. And given this general need for variety, it is normal for there to be a variety of relations between authorial intention and reading experience.

My point has not been to prove that these works of art where knowledge of the author makes a difference to interpretation are necessarily better or worse than those where such knowledge plays little or no role. My point has only been to suggest that it is foolish to give an essentialist answer to the question, What is the relation between authorial intention and textual meaning? The major claim I would like to make is that the intentional fallacy can be removed: Nobody would insist that the meaning of a poem is *always* limited to the poet's intentions; nobody would deny that the meaning of a poem can sometimes correspond to what the poet wanted to say. Once we abandon essentialism for pluralism, the intentional fallacy disappears — as it should — behind the variety of literary art.

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