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## What is Authorial Intention?

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## WHAT IS AUTHORIAL INTENTION?

**Abstract.** For seven decades, professors of literature have considered referral to an author's intentions to be theoretically out of bounds, while in practice they do it all the time. I suggest that one reason for this undesirable gap between theory and practice is that, for literary scholars, the notion of intention itself is poorly understood. Authorial intention is thought of as single, simple, rationally generated, and pre-existing in the author's mind rather than the multiple, complex, and process-based phenomenon that it is. In this essay I provide a bottom-up account of intention with the aim of dispelling this misunderstanding.

IT HAS BEEN ALMOST three-quarters of a century since "The Intentional Fallacy," the famous article by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, established a canonical taboo among scholars of literature forbidding the recourse to authorial intention.<sup>1</sup> Its effects on the field were wide-ranging and deep. New Critical textualism paved the way for structuralist and poststructuralist *écriture*, and texts, detached from their authorial sources, would hence either prove fascinatingly unstable, elusive, and resistant to understanding or they would dissolve more readily than ever into their social and historical contexts. The discovery of meaning became, in theory, a transaction between texts and individual readers or between texts and "interpretive communities." Works in various genres acquired new sources of meaning like "implied authors" and "poetic speakers." Two decades later, with the Barthesian pronouncement of the "death of the author," the movement from works to texts was confirmed.<sup>2</sup>

Taboos make for sacred objects, and in literary studies the "text" did acquire hieratic and iconic qualities. Performing operations on texts became a distinctive element of the literary scholar's professional identity.

But the taboo protecting the text, like many regulations, could only be enforced with intermittent and partial vigilance, authors and their intentions having shown a stubborn capacity to haunt their orphaned works. Textual editing still largely relies upon authorial intention, creating the odd situation in which critical interpreters locate semantic indeterminacy in texts that have only been established on the basis of what their authors must have meant to say. Scholarly biographies of authors continue to be written, and scholars continue to define their expertise in relation to the writers they study. Those who write about literature as a form of political agency inevitably resort to authorial intention, and some narratologists, practicing what they call “rhetorical” criticism, openly renounce the intentional taboo,<sup>3</sup> while scholars of lyric poetry—the original forcing ground of the New Criticism—adhere to it most scrupulously.

Deconstructive critics recognize the importance of intentions while demonstrating their elusiveness, and psychoanalytic critics somehow evade the taboo entirely because the intentions they discover are unconscious; it is as if they themselves are unconscious of the fact that they are breaking the taboo. Marxist critics, meanwhile, discover quasi-intentional sources of meaning in the functioning of class structures, and scholars working under the aegis of Michel Foucault see purposeful agencies and discourses of power operating everywhere, not only interdicting human wishes but shaping them to their own ends. The intentionality and agency that were suppressed from the making of literary texts have reappeared in so many forms and guises that even some long-time practitioners of “critique” and the hermeneutics of suspicion have compared the mindset of the field to paranoia.<sup>4</sup> Recently, the tendency to displace or redistribute agency and intentionality have taken what might be its most unexpected turn in the form of Actor-Network Theory, according to which inanimate objects acquire an agency in some way analogous to that of human beings.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, on account of the intentional taboo, the field of literary scholarship suffers from formidable contradictions stretching across the lines of professional expertise, theory, and practice. These contradictions are evident in the writings of individual critics, who respect the intentional taboo in principle while breaking it in practice when it serves their purposes, a peccadillo often covered with quasi-superstitious disclaimers. The same contradictions appear in scholars’ personal relations to their subjects, as they struggle to express their own intentions and defend their own views against anticipated misunderstandings and objections while

only reluctantly attributing similar capacities to the authors they write about. We take the clarity and stability of meaning of our own works as desirable achievements, while in the works created by our subjects they are seen as a threat to interpretive freedom.

How could it happen that the notion of intention should be so constantly in use by so many scholars in so many ways while at the same time the accessibility and relevance of intentions are so commonly denied? Has the taboo itself made forbidden intentions irresistible? Elsewhere I have attempted to sketch the complex historical background of this development. Any short list of factors would have to include the symbolist and modernist turn in artistic practice away from representation and expression and the accompanying rise of formalism and aestheticism; the mid-century vogues of positivism and behaviorism in philosophy; the psychoanalytic promotion of unconscious over conscious intentions; the structuralist promotion of *langue* over *parole*; and the broader currents of suspicion in modern culture.<sup>6</sup>

The crystallizing role of Wimsatt and Beardsley's article should not be underestimated; it produced a stereotype of New Critical procedure as anti-intentional that became effective after the fact. Instead of taking up this complex history here, however, I would like to make a much simpler point. Having been driven underground by the taboo, the notion of intention in the scholarly mind has itself become pervasively misleading and unclear. The distinctions between the different kinds of intentions that go into the making of a literary work have gotten blurred, with the result that the skepticism about authorial intentions held by most literary scholars is based on a natural and persistent confusion about the very nature of the concept. What I offer here, then, is a ground-up reconstruction of the kinds of intentions that go into the making of a literary work, starting with how the conceptual apparatus that I provide differs from the common scholarly understanding.

I will begin, on a general level, far away from the details of authorial intentions in literary texts, with ordinary actions, but I hope the reader will be patient as I try to peel away decades of misprision. I hope to show not only why language, including literary language, demands reference to intentionality but also why the fact that it does so does not have the undesirable consequences that scholars associate with authorial intention.

## I

Asked to explain the notion of intention, scholars frequently describe a popular concept closely linked with planning or preconcerted decision-making, but, as recognized in the philosophical literature, the concept as it appears in everyday life and in scholarly contexts is much broader. Intention is the defining quality of human agency and action; anything we do deliberately and with a purpose is intentional, whether it is pre-conceived or not. I am driving to school in the morning, and the action is so habitual to me that I am not even thinking about it. Nevertheless, I know I am doing it, and my action is self-evidently intended. Let us say that on one particular morning I am so worried about being late for my class that I decide to run a red light; I see the light just about to change and begin to slow down, but the fear of being late overrules my usual caution and I deliberately go through it. Afterwards I may be surprised at my recklessness and decide not to repeat the experiment, but in the moment of decision I am committed to it. In spite of the improvisational character of my action, I have again acted intentionally.

These examples show how close the relation between intending and carrying out an action can be. Many actions do have a preliminary intention that distinctly precedes them in time. We typically imagine our future actions vaguely and as a whole, only to make them concrete and effective as we carry them out. So it is important to distinguish preliminary intentions from the active ones that guide us in motion.<sup>7</sup> But not all actions have preliminary intentions, and psychologically, there may be no space at all between my decision to run the red light and my doing so. The two can be virtually simultaneous. Routine actions like driving make this especially clear. We often act, just as we often speak, on the fly, without prior consideration, but these actions still belong to us. Furthermore, in saying that my action was intentional, I need not imply that I acted according to principle, or that my action was rational, or wise, or in any way predictable, though in the case of running the red light it did have a purpose, which was to get me to school faster.

There is no incompatibility between the intentional and the spontaneous, the whimsical, the confused, or the inspired. The one thing intentional actions cannot be is *accidental*. If I had run the red light because I simply failed to see it, I would not have run it intentionally. I would still, of course, have run it, and, if caught, be subject to fine, but I would have run it inadvertently, in the course of carrying out *another* intention, that of driving to school. In the case of some serious actions,

legal institutions take a lot of trouble to establish whether or not they were intended with an understanding that makes those actions culpable.

The red light example shows another key element of intentionality—that a single action typically involves multiple intentions. I ran the red light in order to get to class on time in order to carry out my responsibility to my students in order to be a good professor, earn my salary, serve the humanities, and so on. We can distinguish the intentions embedded in a single action because each of them has its own separate goals or conditions of satisfaction. Further, connected to each of my desires is a set of beliefs in light of which my actions make sense.

The structure of intentions has an obviously hierarchical aspect. My manner of driving, for example, as I run the red light, is being dictated by my higher-level concern about doing the best for my students. Similarly, driving a car in general requires a complex and hierarchically structured repertoire of physical skills that are more or less habitual. All I have to think about consciously as I drive is where I want to go, and even the destination can become automatic if it is frequent enough. I can drive to work almost without thinking about it because of the habits I've acquired in past intentional performances, so my conscious intentions can proceed on a very general level of activity so long as routine conditions prevail. I am in the flow, so to speak. My actions are mine, intentional, even though they take place on the fringe of my awareness. I am thinking of the general goal, not the particular steps it requires.

## II

Let us think, now, about the intentional character of literary creation as an example of intention in action. Missing from Wimsatt and Beardsley's account are all the complexity and multiplicity of intentional actions as well as their spontaneous, in-the-moment character. "Intention," they say, "is design or plan in the author's mind" ("IF," p. 201), and they write throughout their essay as if intentions were single, simple, and complete in prospect. But clearly the making of a work of art requires multiple levels of intention with different kinds of goals and multiple intentions within each kind.

I will start by distinguishing three general types. The most distant or ultimate intentions are the practical ones that motivate the artist's activity. These are often the least interesting to scholars, and artists tend to have them in common—the achievement of compensation, recognition, influence upon the world, or the simple joy of making. This kind

of intention is not a source of controversy. It can, but need not, tell us anything terribly interesting about the literary work. At the next level, though—the level of artistic intention—things get more complicated. When it comes to literature, the essential artistic action is using words to create a valuable experience for the audience, one that at the very least will sustain and repay audience attention. The artist need not be thinking consciously about the audience as she invents her work any more than I think about the road when I am driving. The artist's own expressive impulses, habitual skills, creative instincts, and aesthetic responses may be enough to guide the process. But putting things (words, ideas, events) in proper order—essential as it is to literary making—involves a necessary anticipation about the psychological process of reception.<sup>8</sup>

To say that an artist composes a work intentionally, then, is only to say that she is attempting to engage in a certain kind of performance in order to create a certain kind of effect. As the Latin word *intendere* suggests, she is *stretching toward* an object, a goal, and the resulting work is the product of her intention. Here we can apply the lessons of the red light example. Saying that the work was written intentionally does not mean that the intention was psychologically distinguishable from the writing itself, nor does it mean that the process of composition was any more rational, transparent, preconceived, linear, unspontaneous, or programmatic than other activities. Indeed it may have involved unexpected swerves and instant decisions. The enactment of artistic intentions precludes neither inspiration nor whimsy. Indeed, these things can only emerge in the context of some intentional orientation, some form of directedness. Like other expert performances, writing calls upon a structured repertoire of skills that in practice may be virtually unconscious; children writing poems have to think about how to spell the words or even how to make the letters, but practiced poets need not even count the syllables to make a line of verse.

Some of our ways of talking seem to contradict this account, but they are ways of talking that sound distinctly odd because they feed upon the idea that “intentional” means preconceived. It sounds a little odd, for example, to say before the fact that Shakespeare intended to write *King Lear*, as if he knew when he started writing what we now know as “*King Lear*” was going to entail. It is more natural to say that Shakespeare wrote the play intentionally because the beliefs and desires motivating his intention undoubtedly evolved as he composed the play, perhaps starting with nothing more than an inkling that the subject was a good one. Scholars experience the same development as their projects evolve

from preliminary insight into finished work. Writing is an intentional process, not a simple act. Psychologically, it is a little like catching a fish. You put your hook down into promising waters and hope to catch something, but you don't know precisely what you're going to get. If you manage to catch a twelve-pound bass, you don't say you intended to catch a twelve-pound bass, as if that had been entirely up to you. But you do say you were intentionally fishing; people who don't fish don't catch. Intention, evidently, sounds best in adverbial form, belonging more naturally to the process than the product, to the verb rather than the noun. In the writer's case, the intended goal may seem to wriggle away because her powers, conscious or unconscious, will not cooperate, but if they finally do cooperate, it is because her efforts finally led to a result she could accept.<sup>9</sup>

The defining intention that goes into literary works is that of creating artistic value, which is an inherently normative enterprise. A work can have many kinds of value—political, intellectual, social, religious—and all of them may contribute to the value of the experience offered by the work; artistic value does not depend upon formal qualities alone. But whatever further goals may be in view, and however wide the range of concerns addressed by the work, the writer's purpose is always to create an experience at least valuable enough to sustain the reader's attention. From the reader's point of view, however, as well as from the critic's, the crucial question about value is not what the writer intended but what she achieved. This point is stressed in "The Intentional Fallacy" ("IF," pp. 201–2), and it is perfectly correct as applied to the artistic level of intention. As a matter of artistic value, what the artist actually achieved is much more important than what she intended to achieve. If the work doesn't succeed on its own, no intention, however pious, will save it. And even if the author fully succeeds according to her own values, the audience may not find those values worthy; further, even if they are deemed worthy, the audience may not agree that they have indeed been achieved.

Wimsatt and Beardsley, however, being anti-Romantics and anti-historicists, go too far in making this point when they imply that the author's intentions are of no critical value whatever, that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" ("IF," p. 201). Denying the availability of artistic intentions, they make it sound as if we cannot recognize such intentions even when they fail, which is hardly the case; denying the value of artistic intentions, they neglect the fact that, even



if the artist's aims are not definitive for the audience, they still have explanatory value. Generally speaking, there are good reasons to be interested in what authors think they are doing, and the most superficial survey of scholarly writing shows that scholars do take broad interest in the process of creation even when considered apart from its products. Artists are interesting commentators about the nature of art and their times, and information about an artist's intentions can sometimes be a helpful guide to what particular works actually do accomplish, even without being definitive.<sup>10</sup>

### III

Having progressed from the level of intention that is involved in mere actions to the level of literary making, we can now proceed to the ground level on which writing takes place, the communicative level. For the most part, authors approach the task of creating literary value by making meaningful utterances. Not all literary works do so. Nonsense poems and absolute poems in the vein of Stéphane Mallarmé may not be saying anything. They rely upon acoustic effects and the residues of meaning left in words by prior usage. They offer meaningfulness rather than meaning. With this qualification, though, we can say that literature is for the most part a form of *making by saying*. The failure to distinguish the artistic level of making from the communicative level of saying was Wimsatt and Beardsley's key error and a great source of confusion. They failed to recognize that understanding what a poem says and evaluating how well it works as a poem are two very different operations. To understand how a poem works, one has to go beyond the author's intentions to her actual achievement, but to understand what a poem says, and indeed to establish the fact that it is to be read as a poem in the first place, nothing more is needed than to recognize what the intention was. So it makes perfect sense to say that we recognize what the author was trying to *do* in a poem but her attempt to do it has failed, while it makes no sense to say we recognize what an author was trying to *say* in a poem, but her attempt to say it has failed. We may not like what the poem says; we may not like the way it is said; its mode of expression may seem ungrammatical or stylistically incompetent. But on the point of meaning it cannot be faulted. However bad the poem may be, it is still a poem that says something or other.

The act of communication, then, as far as it goes, succeeds by simple transparency. Failed jokes make the distinction between kinds of

intention particularly clear. We often recognize that a joke is intended, and we *get* the joke, but we still don't find it funny. The communicative intention achieves its goal of being understood but the artistic intention, so to speak, the attempt to provide a valuable experience, fails.

The difference between the success of the communicative act and the success of its further aims is a general aspect of language. Wimsatt and Beardsley missed this point, and it is crucial to the confusion they created. They claimed that "practical messages" can succeed "if and only if we correctly infer the intention" ("IF," p. 202). In other words, practical messages have only a transparency requirement, while literary works have further, effectiveness requirements; they have to "work." Because of literature's need to be effective, Wimsatt and Beardsley rule the author's communicative intentions, which aim at mere transparency, to be irrelevant to the reader and out of bounds for the critic.

The problem with this position is that the notion that practical messages succeed in their practical aims simply if we "correctly infer the intention" is obviously false, as indeed the label "practical" would suggest. Practical messages like commands and requests also have effectiveness requirements that can't be met just by communicating an intention. If they do not elicit the hoped-for response, they fail. Even factual statements fail if they do not inspire belief. We never say anything simply to have it recognized that we are saying it, with no further aim in mind. If the presence of further intentions and goals beyond the communication of meaning were enough to make communicative intentions irrelevant, as Wimsatt and Beardsley believe, this would apply to all uses of language. The practical success of speech acts like "Will you marry me?" or "Give me five dollars" would not depend on what was meant by those words in context or whether they were spoken seriously. That can't be right.

#### IV

At this point, readers may feel that my exposition of the nature of intention has taken me past the place where I can expect many literary critics to follow me, for I am making the distinction between meaning and artistic success using the notion of intention, whereas skeptics about intention can recognize the distinction between the semantic and artistic qualities of the work but still claim that it can be made simply on the basis of the text itself. Why isn't the text enough? The deepest and simplest reason is that a text is only a physical object, and physical objects are not meaningful or symbolic by nature. Someone has to endow them with symbolic significance in a way that can be recognized by others.

Any lasting object can become a sign, but a user is required to make it so.<sup>11</sup> The arbitrary meanings that sounds acquire in use must begin with communication between at least two people. As the knowledge of them spreads, the signs become conventional and a public possession. This is what gives them the appearance of independent meaning, the sense that language speaks to us rather than the other way around. Add the rules of grammar to semantic convention and the independence of words can seem complete. The disciplines of logic and semantics, and much of metaphysics, have depended on the attempt to establish firm connections between words or sentences and their referents without considering the communicative use of language.

This is not the place to comment on the viability of those projects, but for our purposes as literary scholars, the important thing is that they are simply not relevant. Literary works, the things we study, are not simple words, sentences, propositions, or signifying systems but utterances, attempts to communicate in a particular way for a particular purpose in a particular context for a particular audience. We deal essentially with the ways the established resources of language have been used to create engaging and interesting meanings and effects in works of literary art, and this cannot be done on the basis of established meanings and grammatical rules alone. The dictionary meanings of words and the patterns of grammar and syntax established by past usage play an important role in the process, but that role is always partial. The primary phenomenon of literary language is grounded in the activities of authors in context.

The relevant branch of linguistics for literary studies, then, is not semantics but pragmatics, which describes the fascinating array of cognitive maneuvers by which speakers exploit listeners' powers of inference, using remarkably exiguous cues to communicate intentions that go far beyond the standard meanings of sentences and words.<sup>12</sup> To give one example, over the breakfast table you might say, "If you happen to be at the market, we're out of cereal." A Martian, innocent of human ways and taking these words at face value, might respond, "I'm obviously not at the market, and what's that got to do with cereal?" But a human interlocutor will be able to fill out what's missing in the opening clause, reading it as, "If you happen to be at the market *sometime soon, maybe later today*," and will take the news that "we're out of cereal" not as a mere report about the cereal supply but a request to buy some, the request being slightly softened by the phrase "if you happen to be." Filling in missing information and deriving of intended implications and attitudes such as these are not abnormal elements of linguistic interpretation.

They are pervasive both in literature and in conversation. Literary tropes like irony and metaphor demand them most clearly. The efficiency of communication of all kinds depends upon the exiguous character of the message and the multiple functionality of our limited verbal resources, which is why potential ambiguity and misunderstanding are so endemic to language. As interpreters we are aiming not to discover what the utterances, including texts, must *necessarily* mean but what they were most probably intended to mean. We have to intuit retrospectively the writer's anticipations of her audience in context. Without the author's intention, the words and sentences of natural languages don't actually say anything definite. All they have is the range of potential meanings acquired through prior usage, while actual use alone gives them specific content and point. This is why people who are feeling lonely don't look up the word "hello" to make themselves feel better; in the dictionary, nobody is *saying* hello.

To make vivid the difference between standard meaning and intentional relevance, consider the sentence "One plus one equals two." In its standard usage it is surely one of the simplest and least ambiguous sentences in English. It corresponds with " $1 + 1 = 2$ ," a resource in an artificial language from which ambiguity has been deliberately excluded so there is no need to think of it as an utterance depending upon an individual speaker. But now imagine a context not involving a very young child in which you could actually use this sentence as an utterance in its standard meaning. Outside the playpen it has no relevance. (Here, of course, I am discussing it but not actually using it.) Go up to some friends on the street and say "One plus one equals two" and none of them will take it as a statement of arithmetic. They will either search for some ulterior implication (a sexual innuendo?) or think you are just being silly.

There should be no need to persuade literary critics about the pervasive ambiguity and underdeterminacy of literary language, though they may not be accustomed to the latter term. The omnipresence of underdeterminacy has been demonstrated endlessly by New Critics, deconstructionists, reader-response critics, and interpretive communitarians. The text radically underdetermines the message and requires interpretation by the reader, and this underdeterminacy exists at every level, from the sentence to the work as a whole. On this everyone seems to agree. The question is what to make of it.

The extreme textualist position is to move from textual underdeterminacy to undecidability and indeterminacy, making them so endemic

to language as to undermine its value, leaving the reader to supply the elements lacking in the text regardless of what the author intended. But those claims depend upon a notion of language that takes its intentional malleability and context dependency as deviant, signaling a general failure of communication. Jacques Derrida, for example, places extraordinary emphasis upon what he calls *dissemination*, the structurally necessary rupture that separates the written word from its original context. Derrida is right that contextual drift introduces an extra element of uncertainty into the interpretation of literary texts, and indeed the farther we get from authors in historical time, the wider the gap for the interpreter to fill. But the need to intuit the meanings of utterances is already essential to conversational utterance, so perfect certainty is too much to expect even when speaker and listener are together in the same place under ideal conditions.

Derrida's complaint that language does not permit certainty is based on a metaphysically motivated standard that is simply inappropriate to our actual use of words.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the moral that Jonathan Culler derives from deconstruction—that no “univocal theory” can provide a complete account of language—is perfectly correct, but the notion that this is a fault again depends upon the application of an inappropriate standard. Why would we want a “univocal” account of language, one that stresses only one term? Why leave out any of the key terms—intention, convention, grammar, or context? A complete theory of language should incorporate all of them. To be consistent, those who see the text as undecidable should either leave the text alone because it is nonsense or divide it into what can be decided and what cannot, leaving the question of how the decided part got decided still to be answered. And those who would appeal entirely to the reader's activity miss the fact that without taking proper account of the author's contribution—both the contextual contents and the limits it provides—there is simply no basis on which the Martian reader can choose between logically viable options.

The difficulty of gaining access to intentions is no argument against the dependence of meanings upon intentions. To use the language of philosophy, that is an epistemic worry, not an ontological one. In fact, since we know that language does often fail, any proper account of how language works must allow for it to fail. The fact that the conveying of meaning is a probabilistic affair based on inferences intentionally prompted by texts in context does explain why interpretation has its epistemic hazards. If texts were perfectly self-explaining, there would be no space for misprision. Finally, if we were to adopt any of the other

popular candidates to replace authorial intention as the source of textual meaning—the reader, for instance, or the community of readers—we would be no closer to perfect certainty. How would we know how individual readers or communities of interpreters are reading a text if we cannot intuit the probable meanings of *their* words? Ascribing meaning to readers or communities only pushes the problem one step further back.

## V

I have been discussing the qualities of language that make it especially serviceable for literary use, but I have not mentioned the principal difference between literary and other kinds of language, which is its much less direct relation to the world. Artistic works do not accomplish worldly tasks like ordering, requesting, promising, cursing, christening, or giving factual information for its own sake. That is why we do not take them “literally.” If fiction makes reference to the real world, it is only in matters of general observation, and even if a poem happens to convey verifiable facts, there is always the sense that they are being used for artistic effect; their informative value is not essential. So what, precisely, if not information, does the author’s contribution allow the reader to infer that is not in the text itself? Why can’t we see the text simply as the source of an experience?

The reason is that the experience of the text depends upon its being understood. To explain why we need the author for that, I could simply return to the author-guaranteed inferences needed to understand the sentences in any text and the need of an author to fix its context, but there are several elements that go beyond that. First is the very status of the work as a work of art. Once we know it has been designed as such, we will be willing as readers to suspend disbelief in favor of all kinds of literary conventions and to adopt certain global attitudes toward the subject being presented. A novel presented as a history may contain no special marker of its being fictive, for example, or of its point of view being satiric, but we will misread it if we cannot grasp these generic intentions.<sup>14</sup>

Further, literary texts are full of indirect references and allusions to things in the world as well as to other texts, and again the reader must infer which interpretations the author expects. And, although factual information is beside the point of most works of art, they do obviously tend to convey a certain point of view, a certain way of seeing. They seem to tell us this is the way the world is and here is how you might

feel about it. Call it wisdom or call it ideology, the work's point of view cannot be a mere effect of language.

But of all the contributions that being authored makes to the literary text, perhaps the most salient is that it underwrites the assumption of the work's overall coherence. The text is a sequence of words and sentences which we interpret in the light of the whole. To see it as suitable for reading is to accept it as a single utterance, and however great the interpretive difficulties posed by such large and complex utterances, without the author's guarantee of coherence, its parts would have no necessary relevance to each other. Literary works demand not only that we recognize allusions to other works without being guided by explicit instructions but also that we recognize internal echoes and allusions with the same freedom. It would be easy to mistake texts like Joyce's *Ulysses* or Dante's *Commedia* for collections of an author's writings, or even as collections of works by different authors, and this would radically change the mutual relevance of their parts. Or, to invert the example, imagine looking at the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* simply as a text, without being able to distinguish its contents by author. The works it contains have all kinds of potential relevance to one another, but the only relevance guaranteed by the text itself is their mere physical proximity. To get anywhere in reading we would need to situate the authors.

## VI

I have been describing a concept of authorial intention that is multiple, multilayered, probabilistic, and enacted in composition as a process of discovery. As such it is markedly different from the one mooted in "The Intentional Fallacy," which seems suitable less to a human than to a divine intelligence—or to the intelligence of Paul Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*—being, as I have said, single, simple, and complete in prospect. Indeed, its theological aspect bears reflection.

My argument that meaning in literature depends upon authorial intention should not necessarily be taken as a plea for author-based or thematic criticism, as opposed to criticism that focuses on the formal qualities of texts, their mediation, or their reception; all are valid subjects of inquiry, and intention plays its role in all of them. And when it comes to issues of value, separating communicative and artistic intentions strengthens rather than weakens the New Critical sense that the author's values have no special claim on the reader. I have said nothing that undermines the centrality of the work itself as the

literary phenomenon par excellence. But my hope is that recognizing the multiplicity, complexity, and processual character of the intentional activities that go into literary making and the generally probabilistic nature of communication will help dispel an old taboo and bring new clarity to the concept of intention, which, as the record shows, the field of literary studies simply cannot do without.

## CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

1. William Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 201–10; hereafter abbreviated "IF."
2. Authorship and intention are, of course, the subjects of a classic scholarly debate, some of the landmarks being E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 142–48; Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 100–20; Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 723–42. For a compact treatment of the philosophical debate on authorship and authorial intention, see Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), chap. 3.
3. The influential narratologist James Phelan, for example, describes interpretation as "a feedback loop among author, text, and reader" (James Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* [Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007], p. 5).
4. See, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), chap. 4; and Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225–48. The implications have recently been drawn out in Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
5. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
6. See John Farrell, *The Varieties of Authorial Intention: Literary Theory Beyond the Intentional Fallacy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), chap. 1.
7. For the distinction between "prior intention" and "intention in action," see John R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 83–91.



8. I say that using words to “create a valuable experience,” rather than to “give pleasure,” is the defining quality of literature because, since the beginning of the twentieth century, artistic experiments have expanded the range of experiences that art can effectively offer, not all of which can be described as pleasant.
9. The more speculative the success of an effort and the less it depends upon the agent’s capacities alone, the odder it sounds to use the word “intention.” It seems plain wrong to say that you intended to win the lottery; still, you can’t have won it accidentally; you were *trying*.
10. I am discussing Wimsatt and Beardsley’s treatment of intention as it applies to artistic intentions, but the distinction between artistic and communicative is one they do not make. They would be right to say that, if the communicative intentions of a work failed, it would be impossible to recognize them.
11. I am leaving aside here, of course, symbols that have a natural or causal relation to the things they signify, the way smoke is related to fire.
12. See, for example, Robyn Carston, *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).
13. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 15.
14. In the discussion above I grouped the meaning of jokes or works of art and the fact that they are put forward as jokes or works of art together under the heading of communicative intentions, but in the strictest accounting they are distinct intentions that can succeed or fail separately; one can recognize that someone is attempting a fiction or a joke without understanding what is being said, and one can grasp the meaning of something that is being said without recognizing that it is intended as a fiction or a joke.