

INTENTIONALITY IN A LITERARY WORK: A NECESSITY?

Abelardo G. Belleza

Over the last three decades one of the most polemical and lively issues in literary criticism has been the relevance of author's intention for the identity and interpretation of a work of art. For instance it has been argued that the author's intention cannot and should not contribute to the identity of a literary work or its acceptable interpretation.

Lifeless, incomplete, and inoperative can be apt descriptions of a literary work on the printed or electronic page apparently lacking completeness or wholeness unless the reader, the spectator or the listener gives it life and meaning. But what role does the author or the creator of the work play in the total appreciation of the supposedly work of art? Among literati, the question of invoking authorial intention becomes paramount when deriving the meaning of the literary work. Whether or not the author's imprint on the work is essential or not for the complete appreciation of a text is still a hotly contested area in literary/critical theory of which each proponent has espoused a school of thought trying to establish its hegemony over its rival. Should the intentionality of the author be invoked or should we even grapple to recover it in its pristine form? This paper attempts to offer a perspective to the question posed which in the course of the discussion might yield even more controversy rather than generate a single decisive solution that will put to rest the contentious issue on role of the author.

The critical views of T. S. Eliot and W.K. Wimsatt as regards authorial intention will be focal point of this paper. How they share their views, support each other's claim, build upon or modify a point through a conversation or a dialog with each other is the basic premise pursued by this paper. Notwithstanding though, snippets of Barthes, Foucault, and other postmodern critical and theoretical thinkers will trickle in side by side with Eliot and Wimsatt in their regard for authorial presence. The frame with which this paper has been shaped revolves around the germinal essays *Tradition and Individual Talent* of T.S. Eliot and the *Intentional Fallacy* of W. K. Wimsatt and Beardsley.

T. S. Eliot in his seminal work *Tradition and Individual Talent* concludes: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (1097). Here Eliot does not deny personality or emotion to the poet but suggests he must depersonalize his emotions. Depersonalization then is eradication if not a total extinction of the poet's personality. Achieving such

impersonality is possible only when the poet surrenders himself completely to the work that is to be done. Eliot believes that the poet can know what is to be done, only if he acquires a sense of tradition, the historic sense, which makes him conscious, not only of the present, but also of the present moment of the past, not only of what is dead, but of what is already living (1093).

In a similar fashion, the inconsequential nature of authorial intentions had been suggested by several earlier critics in the Cambridge-New Critical tradition notably in an article on the *Intentional Fallacy* by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, if the poet succeeded in realizing an intention, “then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do”; if the poet did not succeed, then the ‘critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem. They argued 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” (1375).

In *Tradition and Individual Talent* Eliot's views on tradition pave the way for the theorization of the impersonality in art and poetry. Opposing views about Eliot's theory of objectivity have been discussed in most literary circles but it is observed that critics tend to generalize the theory to a common experience. It is interesting to note that the impersonality Eliot discusses in his criticism does not imply a ‘mechanical objectivity’ but, it owes its origin to the personality that emerges out of the creative personality of the poet. It is understandable that Eliot denies an outright and blind adherence to some peculiar faiths and belief but emancipation from what is very personal or peculiar. He says:

...the poet has not a personality to express but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experience combine in a peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.

In the above quotation it is quite evident that Eliot puts heavy emphasis on the two different aspects of a creator: what he is as an individual and at the same time what he is as a creator. It is an easy inference from the above equation that Eliot's to his critical theories discards the emotion of strictly personal significance and centers his ideals on the transformation of what is personal but something of universal significance.

Eliot's most famous single argument is his claim for authorial

impersonality, which runs counter to the Romantic view of poetry as self-expression. For Eliot as for Mallarmé and Valéry, the poet necessarily disappears as the language of the poem takes over. Once again the poem's existence as a verbal artifact is seen as blocking any direct communication of experience between poet and reader:

If poetry is a form of communication, yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself. . . The poem's existence is somewhere between the writer and the reader; it has a reality which is not simply the reality of what the writer is trying to express. (Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1964, 30)

The irrelevance of authorial intentions had been supported and sustained by several earlier critics in the Cambridge-New Critical tradition, but it was the article "Intentional Fallacy" by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley which gave the proscription its decisive formulation. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, if the poet succeeded in realizing an intention, "then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do; if the poet did not succeed, then the 'critic must go outside the poem' – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem. They conclude 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"(1375).

But the *Intentional Fallacy* liberates the critic from worrying about intentions. "The poem is detached from its author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it" (1376). Wimsatt and Beardsley's position strikes a chord, for example, with poststructuralist notions of the 'death of the author' espoused by Barthes and with deconstruction's freeing of the text from 'presence' and 'meaning.' Barthes (1968) in his essay *The Death of the Author* rejects the traditional view that "the author is the origin of the text, the source of its meaning, and the only authority for interpretation." But there the resemblance ends, for the New Critics still basically insist that there is a determinate ontologically stable 'poem itself,' which is the ultimate arbiter of its own 'statement' and that an 'objective' criticism is possible. This runs quite counter to deconstruction's notion of the 'iterability' of a text in its multiplex 'positioned' rereading.

Critics and modern writers such as Jean Paul Sartre had argued that literature should have a life of its own and that all traces of authorial intervention should be removed. Such critical stance echoes the view of Eliot on 'depersonalization' of the poet and the inconsequential nature of 'authorial intention' as propounded by Wimsatt and Beardsley. The best and most detailed evidence for an author's intention with respect to meaning is almost certain to be found in the work itself, and thus ascertaining the

author's intention will involve very close inspection of the work (Irvin, 2006, p.116).

However, the view that the author's intention has an important role to play in fixing a work's meaning has been persistent. Nevertheless, the New Critical position on the objectivity of a literary work without much regard for the author's presence is not without its weak aspect. Art does not exist in a vacuum as pointed out by art historians and literary critics. Any artifact is a creation by someone at some time in history. Many literary classics are admittedly autobiographical, propagandistic, and some of them are even radical if not utterly subversive. Hence it would be dangerous to assume that a work of art must always be judged or looked at or taught as if it were disembodied from all experience except the strictly aesthetic.

I believe though that a literary work is hardly separable from the intention of the author who creates it or from the intention of the reader who picks up the work and ascribe meaning to it. A literary text or an artefact when it is viewed as a pure physical object, a mere construct of black spots with blanks on paper entirely detached from author and audience alike, that we can say it has an "impersonal" or "objective" existence. Otherwise, we must admit that the work, the author, and the reader form a trinity, each is bound with a common "intention"; therefore, no critical effort can manage to separate them without committing a sort of "intentional fallacy," and to assert the absolute authority of any one of them is impractical if not impossible.

It is a truism that an author's entire creative process includes both the stage of reading and the stage of writing. Admittedly, no one can write anything without reading something. And for an author, to read is to "read" life, which includes the experience of reading books coupled with the multifaceted aspects of his experiences. When an author "reads," he is building up his "intention"; when he writes, he is then turning his "intention" into "extention," which as an external entity can be further read by others, whom we call readers. If one of the readers becomes a critic, that is, becomes one who expresses his idea in oral or written language about an author's work, then he will indeed undergo the process of turning his own "intention" of the author's "extention" into his own "extention," which is again readable by others. Eliot maintains that a good reader must necessarily be trained in reading good poetry and be well acquainted with established poetic traditions.

A highly contestable question though of modern criticism is whether or not an objective interpretation of the text is possible. In approaching that problem, E. D. Hirsch (1967) in his celebrated work *Validity in Interpretation* says that there is no objectivity unless meaning itself is unchanging. And for him the one underlying meaning of the work which does not change is the author's willed meaning, that is, his intention. Hirsch believes that the

meaning of a text “is determined once and for all by the character of the speaker’s intention” (214). If Hirsch’s position is right, then any mode of reading is but a way of approaching the authorial intention; any study of the text, be it intrinsic or extrinsic, is but an attempt to reconstruct the unchanging intention of the author. Thus, the “intentional fallacy” as the Anglo-American New Critics conceived it is out of the question with Hirsch. Further, Hirsch (1967) argues that the author’s intention provides a genuinely discriminating norm for interpreting a work.

The intentionalist camp defends the view that the author’s intention is at least of some importance for identity and it can and should be taken into account. I agree with such claim that the author’s presence should be given importance but the question remains until to what extent or degree should the author’s intention be accorded in a literary work. The intentionalists’ arguments are often motivated by the view that a text has or should be given a unique interpretation and the correct interpretation is determined by what the authors meant by the text.

That the work derives intentionality from the author very strongly suggests that its meaning is in some sense ‘logically’ or ‘necessarily’ connected with the author’s intention, i.e., that the connection can be defended by logical rather than normative or cognitive arguments. It clearly implies on one hand that there is a connection and on the other hand that the connection is necessary (Rantala,1992).

The traditional critics fall into the same trap of committing “the intentional fallacy” because they rely too much on the author’s intention (especially the expressed intention) for interpretation or judgment of his work. The New Critics try to remedy this “fallacy” by calling our attention to the fact that the ‘text itself,’ the ‘words’ on the page is the primary and ultimate ground on which we can base our interpretation or criticism. But what they tend to overlook, however, is that no work can be really detached from either the author’s intention or the reader’s. They do not admit that a poem in fact cannot have a really independent public existence. To think that one can ignore the author’s or the reader’s intention in criticizing works is itself an “intentional fallacy.”

More recent critical theories have tried again to modify and correct the New Critical position. From that effort, however, two new types of “intentional fallacy” have arisen. On one hand, we have such critics as Hirsch, who try to bridge the author and the work by locating the work’s meaning again in the author’s intention both explicit and implicit. These new author-oriented critics are right in pointing out a determinate ground for readings. But they overlook the fact that the meaning of a work is decided not by the author’s intention alone; it is equally if not chiefly decided by the reader’s intention as well. So they also have some “intentional fallacy” of their own. On the other hand, we have such reader-

oriented critics as Fish, who in attacking “the affective fallacy fallacy” and trying to see literature only in the perspective of the reader, have themselves committed the “intentional fallacy” of neglecting the authorial intention.

As I have put forward above, the author, the work, and the reader form a triumvirate that is hardly separable. The work is only an “extension” where the author’s and the reader’s intention engage in a conversation. Neither can we stress that the author’s intention is entirely identical with the reader’s intention through the “extension.” Ideally, we must agree that insofar as communication is possible, there should be a considerable amount of sameness remaining between the author’s intention and the reader’s through the medium of the “extension.” To emphasize the difference (as Derrida and others do) may be logically or metaphysically correct; it is, however, impractical as Abrams has feared. The deconstructionists, in fact, have committed an “intentional fallacy” as well: they turned intended objects into intentionless objects by reducing all things to signs and accounting for an intentional process in terms of non-intentional semiotic relationship.

For Roland Barthes, the notion of author ignores the collective character of artistic production, the important role exercised by the social group, institutions and practices. He thus celebrates the “death of the author,” the rejection of the romantic, religious concept of creativity centered in the subject, describing it as a “characteristic form of bourgeois thought” (Barthes, 1977). Similarly Foucault argues the author is simply “a complex variable form of discourse” valuable as a means of classifying texts” (Foucault, 1977). As for authorial intention, it is impossible to know with precision what the author actually intended during the writing of a work and more significantly the work itself frequently opposed any prior authorial intention (Swingewood, 1986). On the other hand however, there seem to be no cognitive, logical, or ethical reasons to require that readers could not search for other interpretations which are in some sense good, correct, or plausible. As Rosenblatt (1978) aptly puts it, reading is a “transactional experience.” The author, the text, and the reader should actively participate in the creative process of meaning making of a text with varying levels and degrees that are markedly similar if not completely parallel.

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