

W. van Peer

University of Utrecht

INTENTIONAL FACTS/FICTIONS: RESEARCH VS. OPINION.

Quite a number of debates in literary studies focus on the role an author's intention should (or should not) play in interpreting a literary work. Such debates often seem to be involved in normative matters: *ought* we to accept information bearing on an author's intentions as evidence in discussing his/her work? Interesting as such normative arguments may be, they often remain in the grip of the value systems feeding into them, but which actually remain hidden from the debaters' (or onlookers') views. It is difficult to imagine how one can get out of this stalemate. The present paper will argue that we should stop clinging to *opinions*, and start doing *research*. Such research should concentrate on particular situations in which authors' intentions are known (not) to have played a role of importance, and then to engage in a *comparative* study of the socio-historic forces that were at work in these situations. By systematically confronting the results of such researches, we may gain insight in the general conditions which operate over the (ir)relevance of authorial intention in literary studies. And since such studies will be of a *descriptive* kind, we will have escaped the normative deadlock. Needed, therefore, is more systematic research into the contribution an author may bring to the way in which his/her works are treated.

Now it is certainly no secret that the position of the author in literary studies is uncertain. While in 19th century positivism (with Hyppolyte Taine, for instance), s/he occupied a very central position, the author has been shifted to the very periphery, both in New Criticism and the various schools of «Geistesgeschichte» (that would but venerate the literary work as «monument»), and in the seminal work of the Russian Formalists, whose position in this matter is so wittily summarized in Osip Brik's incisive criticism of «those passionately seeking the answer to the question «Did Puškin smoke?»» (Brik 1923: 90-91). All this led up to Wimsatt & Beardsley's famous article «The Intentional Fallacy», reprinted in *The Verbal Icon* in 1954. In their own words: «The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public» (p. 5). After that blow, interest in the author warred rapidly, and literary studies seemed to care less and less about him/

/her. It seemed as if only the text was important. Who was *responsible* for the making of that text, and why it had been made, or under which conditions, and with what aim, seemed questions that were totally subordinate for the discipline of literary studies.

But neither did the interest in the text prove to be stable. During the 1970s ever more pleas were made in favour of the reader. Such voices came from very different quarters, often even from contradictory philosophies: reception theory, the empirical approaches, post-structuralism and feminism. Within these movements, there is hardly any room for the poor author any more, and Barthes (1968) could rightly proclaim the «death of the author» (although he put his own name on the title page of his book).

However, there is a sense in which this is strange, for most, if not all of these movements since the seventies have claimed a *communicative* view on literature as their major contribution to the «shift in paradigm» — as they like to portray (or flatter) themselves.

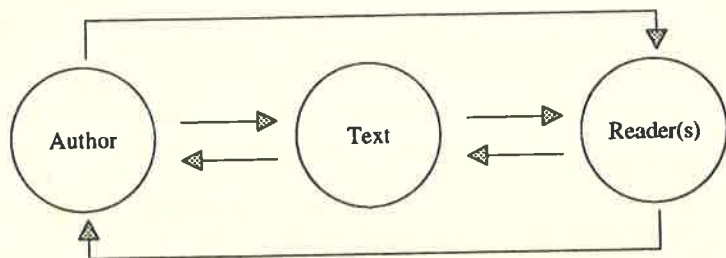


Fig. 1. The communicative model — ideally.

Yet, as *Figure 1* shows, «communication» presupposes different participants, at least one of whom is the author. Thus many of the typical figures which should enlighten us about the nature of the literary communication process, so often encountered since the seventies, pay homage to the author only *nominally*: in practice the bulk of considerations in literary studies went to either text or reader, so that *Figure 2* captures the reality of what goes on in literary studies much more neatly:

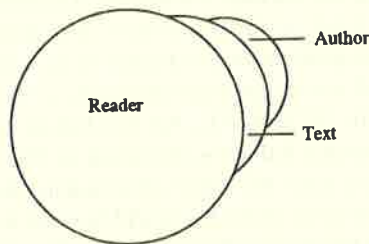


Fig. 2. The communicative model — in practice.

It is mainly the individual (and idealized) reader who gets most of the attention in present-day works on literature; behind this all-devouring reader a bit of «text» lies hidden, itself almost completely covering any concern for the author. This is indeed strange, for it is the author who lies at the basis of the communicative process. Without author, there simply would be no literature. In what follows, some considerations will be devoted to the position of the author in the study of the literary communication process*.

It should be stated from the outset, however, that this does *not* entail a return to 19th century biographical criticism. Nor does it imply a naive support of E. D. Hirsch's claims, less even that we should again engage in unreflected questions as to the author's intentions. We have become too conscious of the problematic nature of authorial intention for that. On the one hand, we are apparently able to dispose of the author altogether; (how much do we know, for instance, about Homer, Shakespeare or Sappho?). On the other hand, there is good evidence that sometimes an author's opinion may be considered irrelevant, whatever he may say or do about it. I wish to consider in some detail one such case, i.e. the poem «Fare thee well», written during the spring of 1816 by Lord Byron, in the midst of the controversial divorce procedures with Lady Byron, which then held their sway over public opinion.

Fare Thee Well

Fare thee well! and if for ever,
Still, for ever, fare thee well:
Even though unforgiving, never
'Gainst thee shall my heart rebel.

Would that breast were bared before thee
Where thy head so oft hath lain.
While that placid sleep came o'er thee,
Which thou ne'er canst know again,
Would that breast, by thee glanced over,
Every inmost thought could show!
Then thou wouldst at last discover
'Twas not well to spurn it so.

There follow another twelve stanzas, written in this vein. For our present purposes, the poem's reception history is highly instructive. I shall make use here of Jerome McGann's description of this reception, though I hasten to add that I do in no way subscribe to McGann's position of «new historicism», a position I deem *as* detrimental for literary studies as positivism or poststructuralism. As McGann (1991) shows, the first responses to Byron's poem were quite favourable: they saw the text as a *cri de coeur*, written by a desperate husband, filled with honest intentions and a loving and forgiving attitude. But soon other interpretations were advanced. According to

these, «Fare thee well» could also be read as a sly and treacherous move by Lord Byron, in order to win public opinion (and indirectly the court) for his own position in the ongoing divorce case. As Lady Byron writes in one of her letters: «He has been assuming the character of an injured and affectionate husband with great success to some». (McGann 1991:197). Byron subsequently tries to win support for his case by having fifty copies of the poem circulate in various London circles. What is clear from all this manoeuvring is that Byron tries to impose one authorial meaning upon the text and his readers, i.e. that of the humiliated but loving husband. Let us follow the fate of this authorial intention for an instant. On 14 April 1816 «Fare Thee Well» is published in *The Champion*, accompanied by «A Sketch», a vehement satire on Mrs. Clermont, a confidante of Lady Byron's. The vitriolic tone of this poem spills over on to «Fare Thee Well», which now becomes more easily read as a settling of scores. Moreover, both poems are preceded by a long editorial comment of *The Champion*, challenging Byron's manipulations. All this creates a new meaning of «Fare Thee Well»: next to the original, *sentimental* reading (fed by Byron), there is now the *hypocritical* reading (preferred by a good many people in his surroundings). And the whole matter has by now become controversial: is this a «love poem» or a «hate poem»? The interesting thing is not so much the existence of the controversy, as the way in which it is resolved: after a while almost everybody prefers the interpretation that goes directly *against* the one proposed by the author himself (while it is also clear that the interpretations are not in any sense compatible: they mutually exclude each other, since they are logically contradictory). Whatever Byron may say or write, it is the hypocritical interpretation which constantly gains ground, until virtually everyone subscribes to it. McGann's conclusion to this piece of history is interesting, as it comments on the position of the author:

«Fare Thee Well» is Byron's farewell to the illusion that he could be the master of the artistic powers which were given to him (p. 204).

and:

The Byron example is especially instructive, I think, because it shows how those interchanges can never be brought under the control of the author. Poems are produced, used, and read in heterogeneous ways.... (p. 205).

Note how the word «never» in the previous quote is *not* corroborated at all by the evidence that has been spelled out. The only thing which has been demonstrated by McGann is that in this one particular case an author has been unable to control the meaning publicly allocated to *one* of his poems. The overgeneralization in the word «never» echoes the generic statements of Wimsatt & Beardsley, and is typical for many similar instances of unfounded extrapolations in literary studies. In the case of McGann it is particularly revealing to see how someone dedicated to a radical historicist stand shows no inhibition whatsoever to come up with statements having universalist pretensions.

Thus anyone who would conclude, on the basis of the Byron-case, that authorial intention is irrelevant, would commit the same basic mistake as McGann. As is well-known (though not always very clear to literary scholars), generalizing on the basis of only one observation is a hazardous enterprise. What the Byron example demonstrates, is that there is at least one case in which an author's intentions were bypassed, or even negated, by the reading public. Any move beyond this conclusion is premature, as the following case will demonstrate.

In October 1930 the Russian poet Osip Mandel'stam wrote a series of poems on Armenia, which to him functioned (besides Georgia and the Crimea) as a substitute of the classical world. The fourth of these Armenia-poems is the one which interests us here. I should like to invite the reader not to be deterred by the Cyrillic alphabet, since the point I shall try to make is understandable also without knowing any Russian.

IV

- 1 Ах, ничего я не вижу, и бедное ухо оглохло,
- 2 Всех-то цветов мне осталось лишь сурик да хриплая охра.
- 3 И почему-то мне начало утро армянское снится,
- 4 Думал - возьму посмотрю, как живет в Эривани синица,
- 5 Как нагибается булочник, с хлебом играющий в жмурки,
- 6 Из очага вынимает лавашные влажные шкурки...
- 7 Ах, Эривань, Эривань! Иль птица тебя рисовала,
- 8 Или раскрашивал лев, как дитя, из цветного пенала?
- 9 Ах, Эривань, Эривань! Не город - орешек каленый,
- 10 Члиц твоих большеротых кривые люблю вавилонь
- 11 Я бестолковую жизнь, как мулла свой коран, замусолил,
- 12 Время свое заморозил и крови горячей не пролил
- 13 Ах, Эривань, Эривань, ничего мне больше не надо,
- 14 Я не хочу твоего замороженного винограда!

It is line 7 in this poem which deserves our attention. In this line we encounter the name of the capital of Armenia, which is, as is well-known, Yerevan (sometimes also transliterated Jerevan). In Russian, that name is spelled ЕРИВАНЬ. However, if one looks closely, that is not what one sees. Instead, line 7 has ЕРИВАНЬ, thus having an initial *З* instead of *Е*.

What are we to make of this? A printing error? But lines 9 and 13 have the same spelling. And if we look for a moment at another poem, number IX out the same series, we again find the same (wrong) spelling ЕРИВАНЬ in line 7.

IX

- 1 Холодно розе в снегу:
- 2 На Севане снег в три аршина...
- 3 Выгташил горный рыбак расписные лазурные сани,
- 4 Сытых форелей усатые морды
- 5 Несут полицейскую службу
- 6 На известковом дне.

- 7 А в Эривани и в Эчмиадзине
- 8 Весь воздух выпила огромная гора,
- 9 Ее бы приманить какой-то окариной
- 10 Иль дудкой приручить,
- 11 чтоб таял снег во рту.

- 12 Снега, снега, снега на рисовой бумаге,
- 13 Гора плывет к губам.
- 14 Мне холодно. Я рад...

Moreover, this line now has also a mistake in the spelling of yet another Armenian place name, Ечмиадзин, which is also (and again wrongly) spelled with initial *З* instead of *Е*. There's method in his madness!

Can't Mandel'stam spell? That seems rather unlikely for a poet so intensely occupied with language. Nadezhda Mandel'stam writes in her *Mémoires* (1971:302): «Mandel'stam never wrote straight away. Everything he deals with he had lived

through intensely». I cannot think of any a priori reasons why we should mistrust his widow on this particular point. But if Mandel'stam never wrote away, how must we explain the fact that he *systematically* misspells certain Armenian names? The answer cannot but be, I think, that we face here, not a slip of the pen, not a mistake, nor a printing error, but an idiosyncratic writing, *willed* by the author.

But that means that Mandel'stam must have had a particular aim or effect in mind when systematically deviating from the conventional orthographic rules of his own language. And this inevitably leads to the conclusion that any effort to understand these parts of the poems will unavoidably lead back to Mandel'stam's intentions. Even if these are not directly accessible, they necessarily guide our explanations and hypotheses into the direction of the one calibration point: *the author*. The text as an autonomous product, of which the general public can freely dispose without restraint, is an illusion here. The link between text and author has not, in this case, been completely broken. Hence to speak of autonomous texts, or of «l'art pour l'art» in the case of Mandel'stam, is suspect, according to Peter Zeeman (1988:39), who in his dissertation on the later poetry of Mandel'stam writes: «to say that literature cannot deal with reality and hence to deny it any propositional truth or cognitive value whatsoever would in the case of a poet like Mandel'stam be nothing less than a perversity».

But this means that we have now reached a conclusion diametrically opposed to the previous one. In the case of Byron we saw that the poet's own intentions (or declarations thereof) were brushed aside, and the poem's accepted meaning was determined by readers not taking Byron's own assertions with respect to his intentions into account. In the case of Mandel'stam's Armenia poems the opposite is the case. Establishing their meaning is not very well possible without calling into mind the poet's exercise of will, related to his aims.

Thus the conclusions we have reached in both cases are contradictory: in one case reference to authorial intention is necessary, in the other such reference is blocked. This observation leads either to aporia or to a new insight. The latter, I propose, is to be preferred. The solution I see is not difficult, nor far-fetched: if the two cases lead to contradictory conclusions, the answer can only be that they cannot both be true at all times and in all places. This means that the role played by authorial intention in the interpretation of literary works is *not* context-independent. Whether or not one must have recourse to the author's intention is not something which can be decided a priori for all cases, but will be dependent upon contextual factors. This also entails that *both* the 19th century positivistic concentration on the author *and* our own century's anti-intentionalism are partially wrong. Epistemologically speaking they are both cases of unwarranted generalizations. Where Positivism goes wrong is not in assuming that the author is important; as we have seen, this may indeed be the case. Where it goes astray is in concluding from there that this is *always* the case. Contrarily, movements such as Formalism or New Criticism are quite right in insisting that authors' intentions may sometimes add little to the study of the text's

meaning. However, they draw a false conclusion from this when they assert that this can *never* be the case.

I wish to finish with a methodological remark. This paper has presented two (rather extreme) cases. Needless to say, they form too narrow a basis for any reliable generalizations. But they did bring to light that neither of the sweeping theories that we are living with can deal successfully with both cases. What is needed, then, is a careful and systematic study of the situations in which authors' intentions are involved. As the two cases have shown, it is not possible to determine a priori when an author's intention will be relevant or not. Yet that does not rule out the possibility that such relevance is governed by conditions. Such conditions presumably will be local conditions, tied to specific types of contexts. Literary studies, however, show a strange preference for grand, global, sweeping theories, which will explain everything at once. Such preference rests on a profound misunderstanding of what theoretical knowledge is and how it comes into being. The most successful theories that mankind has produced so far are theories which describe a limited range of phenomena, and stipulate the initial contextual conditions which must be fulfilled in order for it to operate. I predict that it is not otherwise for a theory concerning the author's role in literary communication.

* Thanks are due for valuable remarks on an earlier version of this paper by Douwe W. Fokkema. I also wish to thank participants in the Madeira Conference for a lively discussion.

References

- Barthes, R. (1968) «The Death of the Author». In: *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, pp. 145-7.
- Brik, O. (1923) «The so-called formal method». In *Russian Poetics in Translation*, ed. L. M. O'Toole & A. Shukman. Oxford, Holdan Books, 1977, pp. 90-91.
- Mandel'stam, N. (1971). *Mémoires*. Trans. from Russian by K. Verheul. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot.
- McGann, J. J. (1991). «What difference do the circumstances of publication make to the interpretation of a literary work?» In: Sell (1991:190-207).
- Sell, R. D. (Ed.) (1991). *Literary Pragmatics*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Wimsatt, W. K. L. & M. C. Beardsley (1954). «The Intentional Fallacy» In: *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: Kentucky University Press, pp. 3-18.
- Zeeman, P. (1988). *The Later Poetry of Osip Mandel'stam*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.