

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

“No Symbols Where None Intended”

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3x06c63m>

Journal

PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 130(3)

ISSN

0030-8129

Author

Gang, Joshua

Publication Date

2015-05-01

DOI

10.1632/pmla.2015.130.3.679

Peer reviewed

“No Symbols Where
None Intended”WHAT DOES THE AVERAGE MIDDLE SCHOOLER KNOW ABOUT CLOSE
READING?

JOSHUA GANG

Launched in 2010 and adopted by forty-three states and the District of Columbia,¹ the Common Core State Standards read like a *Well Wrought Urn* for kids—a New Critical primer for a new generation. From kindergarten through grade 12, close reading is the backbone of literary curricula. With each passing year, students perform close readings of increasing complexity—and with what feels like increasing adherence to New Critical doctrine. According to the Common Core reading standards, fifth graders must be able to “determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.” They must also be able to explain “how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem” (12). By eighth grade, students must be able to “provide an objective summary of the text” and “compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style” (36). And by eleventh or twelfth grade, they must “cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain” (38). Students meeting these standards, we are told, can “readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex literature” (3). In their textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938), which popularized close reading across North American universities, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren announced a similar goal: “to present to the student, in proper context and after proper preparation, some of the basic critical problems—with the aim, not of making technical criticisms, but merely of making competent readers of poetry” (xiv).

But the Common Core standards aren’t entirely faithful to the New Critics—particularly when it comes to authorial intention. In *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), I. A. Richards warned that

JOSHUA GANG, an assistant professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, is working on his manuscript “Word and Mind: Behaviorism and Literary Modernity, 1913 to the Present.” His work has appeared in journals such as *ELH* and *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*.

"whatever psycho-analysts may aver, the mental processes of the poet are not a very profitable field for investigation. . . . The difficulty is that nearly all speculations as to what went on in the artist's mind are unverifiable" (24). This argument became infamous through W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), which argued that authorial mental states couldn't be inferred from literary texts—and didn't need to be: "There is a gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience, which lies behind and in some sense causes every poem, but can never be and need not be known in the verbal and hence intellectual composition which is the poem" (12). But in the Common Core standards it is precisely this "gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience" that students must learn to incorporate into their analyses. By tenth grade, students are expected to "analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise." By twelfth grade, the requirement is that students understand how "an author's choices . . . contribute to [a text's] overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact" (38). In defiance of the New Critics of old, the Common Core wants students and teachers to reconstruct the "author's choices"—his or her decisions, voluntary actions—from the text. In effect, it asks them to infer the author's intentions—to infer from literature the same sorts of things they infer from conversation and texting. The Common Core is deeply flawed in many ways—particularly in the idea that close reading is the only way to understand a work of literature. On this point of the author's choices, however, it's moving in the right direction.

But while the Common Core invokes intention readily, contemporary literary criticism doesn't. We're not as dogmatic about it as the New Critics were. Nonetheless, concerns about intention remain. In recent

discussions of surface reading, readers have been asked to think about the texts in front of them instead of the minds behind those texts. "Though we would not endorse Paul de Man's insistence on the 'void that separates' poetic intent from reality," Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus write in "Surface Reading: An Introduction" (2009), "we remain intrigued by his observation that poetry is the 'foreknowledge' of criticism, and that the interpreter therefore 'discloses poetry for what it is' and articulates 'what was already there in full light'" (12).² In "Close Reading and Thin Description" (2013), Heather Love makes a parallel claim: literary studies, she explains, "might forge an expanded defense of reading by considering practices of exhaustive, thin description . . . forms of analysis that describe patterns of behavior and visible activity but do not traffic in speculation about interiority, meaning, or depth" (404). At the same time, recent discussions of affect have asked the degree to which intentional actions are predicated on involuntary processes. In "The Turn to Affect" (2011), Ruth Leys claims that contemporary theories of affect are staunchly "anti-intentionalist": they believe that "action and behavior" are "determined by affective dispositions that are independent of consciousness and the mind's control" (443). Responding to Leys, Jonathan Flatley argues that "affects and moods may not be directly subject to intentions . . . but this does not mean that there is no way to exert agency in relation to our affects and affective experiences, only that such agency is mediated, variable, and situated" (505). In this framework, intentions are only knowable or accessible insofar as they are mediated or mitigated by affects. And these affects, in turn, are not necessarily knowable by or accessible to the conscious mind.

Surface reading and affect theory may be new to literary study, but the concerns we have about intention today are largely the same as those expressed by Richards and the New Critics. The reasoning is as follows: As a reader

I only have empirical knowledge of the texts in front of me. Much in the way I don't have access to other minds, I don't have access to the author's intentions. At the same time, I also know that many of my own intentional actions are predicated on unintentional processes—whether physiological, cognitive, or affective. Therefore, even if I could access an author's intentions, I'd have no guarantee that they were fully intentional or fully realized.

Nonetheless, my claim here is that intention is an essential concept for literary study. I am not the first person to attempt this argument—nor will I be the last.³ To be clear, this is not a case for strong intentionalism: I'm not saying that we have perfect access to authorial intentions. Nor am I saying that authors have complete control over, or knowledge of, their own works of literature. Instead, I'm suggesting that readers know more about intention than they think—and that the perceived inaccessibility or mitigation of intention doesn't make it any less crucial to language use or critical understanding. In her book *Intention* (1957), the philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe defined intentional actions as “the ones to which the question ‘Why?’ is given application” (24). What matters most for literary critics is not whether we answer that question correctly (though we hope we do) but whether we are permitted to ask it at all.

Indeed, no one doubts that we perceive intentions when we read. If readers didn't perceive what felt like authorial intentions, there wouldn't be a critical prohibition against them. And it goes without saying that we don't generally read literary texts as *unintentional*—as if authors had no intention or agency whatsoever. Therefore, the issue is how we think about the intentions we already perceive. The trouble isn't that these perceptions might be wrong (they might well be). Nor is it that we can't separate them from unintentional actions (which we might or might not know about). Instead, the trouble is that we treat these mitigating factors as absolute

obstacles, as if there were any form of communication that didn't struggle with other minds or mediated agencies.⁴ As critical readers of literature, we hold ourselves to a standard that would paralyze understanding in most other contexts.

For example, a man tells you the road is closed ahead. You're unable to confirm or deny this statement. His cadence, facial expressions, and body language give you no sense of his state of mind. You can't tell if he's lying or telling the truth. All you have is his utterance; you can't infer his intentions or even be sure that the utterance was intended at all. Does this mean that the category of intention is irrelevant here? Should you proceed as if his intentions weren't an issue? A more literary example: “no symbols where none intended,” which is the maddening final sentence of Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt* (1953 [214]) and which returns us to Anscombe's definition of intentional actions. Why end the novel this way? As the final words in the novel, it dangles Beckett's intentions in front of us—but never gives us access to them. We end up in a position like Watt himself, who looks at an abstract painting and tries to calculate all the possible intentions the artist might have had: “he wondered what the artist had intended to represent (Watt knew nothing about painting), a circle and its centre in search of each other, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively . . .” and so on (104). Whether reading *Watt* or debating the road's closure, we can act only by recognizing intention as a relevant category even if specific intentions can't be deduced. Deciding that intention is irrelevant is just not an option.

I'm not suggesting that reading literature is comparable to strange conversations with inscrutable strangers (although it often feels that way, particularly with *Watt*). Nor am I

suggesting that literature is entirely comparable with ordinary language. Compared with ordinary language, literary language is more intricate, aestheticized, transportable, and durable (insofar as it can be read by different people at different times under different circumstances). Also, it's often fictional. But an idea such as intention shows how helpful ordinary language and ordinary-language philosophy can be to literary study.⁵ Whatever type of language we're examining, the category of intention remains essential even when particular intentions are doubted, mitigated, or unknown. Intention is an inherent aspect of language and therefore of literature, whether we like it or not. In *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969), Stanley Cavell suggests that "the category of intention is as inescapable (or escapable with the same consequences) in speaking of objects of art as in speaking of what human beings say and do: without it we would not understand what they are" (198). When we declare authorial intention to be irrelevant, we aren't merely ignoring some ornamental or vestigial aspect of the text. Instead, we are gutting language itself and devaluing our abilities as readers. In our first, second, third encounters with a piece of literature, we perceive authorial intentions, whether those perceptions are right or wrong. As I said earlier, we wouldn't have a critical prohibition if these perceptions of intention didn't exist. It's only later on, when we're writing criticism or teaching close reading, that we offer theoretical arguments for why these perceptions don't matter.

In that way, our trouble with authorial intention is as much a problem of self-knowledge as it is one of other minds. While it's true we'll never have enough information to flesh out authorial intention completely, that's no reason to disregard the information about intention that we have. In dismissing our perceptions of intention in literary texts, we make authorial intention seem all the more distant and intractable. But such distance and

intractability are, in part, products of our own critical suppositions. In *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Gilbert Ryle suggested that "the sorts of things that I can find out about myself are the same as the sorts of things that I can find out about other people" (155). We don't need to agree with Ryle that other minds are just as knowable as our own. But we do need to acknowledge that intentions are not entirely private experiences and that we perceive other people's intentions all the time. This is true whether these perceptions are accurate or not. As readers, we know more than literary criticism allows us to acknowledge. And when we deny that knowledge, we make things less accessible—whether we're examining texts, making inferences about other minds, or describing the world around us. Necessarily, we diminish our effectiveness as readers, as critics, and as teachers.

And this is why the Common Core, however much it gets wrong, is valuable to literary study today. In asking students to think about the author's choices, the standards require them to think about the intuitions they already possess as readers—instead of doubting or dismissing those intuitions categorically. When these students take our classes, they will realize that 1930s-style close reading is not the only way toward "understanding and enjoying complex literature" (3). At the same time, these students might help us shake off nearly ninety years of dogma and cynicism. When they refer to an author's choices, when they talk about an author's possible intentions and the different forms those intentions took, we should listen.

NOTES

1. As of December 2014, the following seven states had either refused to adopt or repealed the Common Core standards: Alaska, Indiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.

2. De Man was not the only poststructuralist to argue against the availability and relevance of authorial intention. In “The Death of the Author” (1967), Roland Barthes suggested that authorial intentions and meanings were superseded by the act of reading. In “Signature Event Context” (1972) and “Limited Inc.” (1988), Jacques Derrida argued that the inherent iterability of language, whether written or spoken, detached authorial intention from any given utterance: “To be what it is, all writing must, therefore, be capable of functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined receiver in general” (“Signature” 8)—as if both writer and reader were dead.

3. Over the past seventy years, there have been a number of different arguments against both the intentional fallacy and poststructuralist rejections of intention. See, e.g., Cavell; McKenzie; Knapp and Michaels; and Herman.

4. In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Ludwig Wittgenstein claimed that no language could be private and that the shared conventions of language were precisely what allowed communication between minds. “Suppose everyone had a box with something in it,” he explained. “We call it a ‘beetle.’ No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But suppose the word ‘beetle’ had a use in these people’s language?—If so it would not be used as the name of a thing” (sec. 292). These beetles, of course, exemplify the problem of other minds. But they also show how shared conventions make this problem more manageable, if only through elimination.

5. For more on the contributions that ordinary-language philosophy might make to literary study, see Cavell; Moi; Lindstrom; Wright; and Quigley.

WORKS CITED

- Anscombe, G. E. M. *Intention*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill, 1977. 142–48. Print.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Watt*. New York: Grove, 2013. Print.
- Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. “Surface Reading: An Introduction.” *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1–21. Web. 3 Mar. 2015.
- Brooks, Cleanth, and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students*. New York: Holt, 1938. Print.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*. London: Cambridge UP, 1976. Print.
- Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. *Common Core State Standards Initiative*. Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2 June 2010. Web. 3 Mar. 2015.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Limited Inc.” *Limited Inc.* Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988. 29–110. Print.
- . “Signature Event Context.” *Limited Inc.* Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988. 1–24. Print.
- Flatley, Jonathan. “How a Revolutionary Counter-mood Is Made.” *New Literary History* 43.3 (2012): 503–25. Web. 3 Mar. 2015.
- Herman, David. *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2013. Print.
- Knapp, Steven, and Walter Benn Michaels. “Against Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (1982): 723–42. Web. 3 Mar. 2015.
- Leys, Ruth. “The Turn to Affect: A Critique.” *Critical Inquiry* 37.3 (2011): 434–72. Web. 3 Mar. 2015.
- Lindstrom, Eric. “Sense and Sensibility and Suffering; or, Wittgenstein’s Marianne?” *ELH* 80.4 (2013): 1067–91.
- Love, Heather. “Close Reading and Thin Description.” *Public Culture* 25.3 (2013): 401–34. Web. 3 Mar. 2015.
- McKenzie, D. F. *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*. London: British Lib., 1986. Print.
- Moi, Toril. “‘They Practice Their Trades in Different Worlds’: Concepts in Ordinary Language Philosophy and Poststructuralism.” *New Literary History* 40.4 (2009): 801–24.
- Quigley, Megan. *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015. Print.
- Richards, I. A. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. New York: Harcourt, 1961. Print.
- Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002. Print.
- Wimsatt, William K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. “The Intentional Fallacy.” *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. By Wimsatt. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1954. 3–18. Print.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, Peter M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Ed. Hacker and Schulte. Chichester: Wiley, 2009. Print.
- Wright, Daniel. “George Eliot’s Vagueness.” *Victorian Studies* 56.4 (2014): 625–48.