The Memory Function

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While walking down the street, you come across an object. A feather, floating lazily from some building above. As it twists and twirls, you do not quite know *why* it strikes you as special. But, something about the amber of its hue or the way it reflects the patterns of the wind makes the object stand out from the world around it. This moment is as critical as it is beautiful; for the feather, endowed with your particular consideration, has transformed into an *art-object*.

When Marcel Duchamp created *Fountain (1917),* submitting a urinal at a ninety-degree angle with the signature "R. Mutt" to an exhibition, he was doing just this. He did not create the object itself, and yet, by assigning it meaning and bringing it out of the natural world into an encounter with others, he transformed it into art. Fame, controversy, and criticism ensued; but, with each article written, the object's relevance only grew. Most people would declare this as self-evident: when we discuss *Fountain* or go to see its replica, we are not excited by the porcelain of its bowl, but by its fame, by its history, and especially by the momentous *intention* that defined the object as art: "what on earth was he thinking?"

However, if *Fountain* was a literary work, and not an art-object, the literary critic would hesitate to pose this question. I am fascinated as to why in art we relish intention as one of the many meanings of an art-object, while so many literary critics categorically dismiss it.[1] In Duchamp's work, there is a certain clarity to the question of intention: the art-object, as a complex matrix of meaning, doesn't just comprise the physical piece of art, but carries the active intent with which he created it, as well as the fame, controversy, and story that congeal to form the artwork's character in the present. However, for the three essays I respond to throughout this

[1] The importance of *memory* in the academic sphere of art is consecrated by its principal mode of academic inquiry: "Art History."

paper—Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy," Barthes' "The Death of the Author," and Foucault's "What is an Author?"—things aren't this simple. They forget, or willfully ignore, what I believe to be the defining feature of language and art-objects in general: the ability to hold *memory*. Loosening up the traditional restrictions placed on this function, as is my intention in this paper, it might help if we temporarily reconfigure the "*literary work*" as its more dynamic cousin, the "*art-object*." Towards the end of the paper, jumping from refutations into novel territory, we will re-conceive the ontology of the literary work, returning it to itself.

The debate on authorial intent in the 20th century began with the New Critics. Responding to the vulgar trend of criticism to locate a singular, true meaning of an art-object based on an author's conscious or unconscious intent, William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley published the essay "The Intentional Fallacy" in 1946. *Their goal*: to reestablish the text as the only relevant object of analysis, rigorously asserting that the bounds of a text contains all of the relevant information needed to interpret it (1199). For them, authorial intention is a "private" factor, part of the "gross body of life" behind every poem, "but can never be and need not be known" (1206). Opposingly, art-objects are "public" objects, things that live actively in the external world and can be interpreted for their meaning without needing to default to a psychological appraisal of an author's state of mind or a historical inquiry into the zeitgeist in which an author lived (1200). Although I take issue with this mode of analysis on many levels, it has its benefits: by dislodging the common fallacy to equate authorial intention with singular—capital T—Truth, Wimsatt and Beardsley do for literature what the "white box" method of curation does for art, forcing us to look deeper at the meaning that exists in each word and sentence, in each semantic gesture.

Alas, in the moment that they impose their hermeneutical limit of the "text," the art-object becomes distorted in two ways. First, in delineating the text as *public* and dismissing all other information as *private*, Wimsatt and Beardsley arbitrarily dismiss the private information that is inextricably linked to the art-object itself. This information, such as the work's intention or its historical context, is often part and parcel with the "being" of the work, even if it is not literally included in the text. Take *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. If we could not orient it in the Holocaust, in the unique Jewish-Dutch experience of the second-world war, much of the meaning and worth of the work would be lost. Similarly, if we are to read Nietzsche, it would be irresponsible, if not impossible, to turn a blind eye to how his work provided a moral underpinning to the regime that caused Anne Frank's death. So, in rejecting Wimsatt and Beardsley's mischaracterization of the *public* and *private* facets of a text, let us instead define the art-object's *memory function*: the known information in the general "cloud" or public character of a text.[2] With this function, we make this external "gross body of life" a proper part of the art-object itself, omitting psychoanalytical, speculative excavations that attempt to reduce a work to a singular meaning, while also allowing for important, known external information to be used as one of many factors in interpretation. Conceding that art-objects have a memory of their own doesn't mean that we should *have* to uncover this information, scavenging dusty letters from an author's estate, in order to know what the text is about; but, if we know something valuable, it seems folly, and indeed dangerous, to ignore it.

Wimsatt and Beardsley make their second fateful mistake in a semantic mischaracterization of intention. By claiming that a poem "is detached from the author at birth"

[2] Here, I am not defining specifically where to draw the line, as I do not want to fall into similar problems of rigid, authoritative definition that Wimsatt and Beardsley do. Known, public information is simply defined by whatever one *does* know when engaging with an art-object. It is the shimmer of the "text" and its reflections from and into society at large.

(1199), they conceptualize intention as something that occurred in the past, an act that is separated from the continuous "being" of the poem. But, when we look at the artist's stroke on a painting, are we not looking at the active embodiment of intention? Paint, as the material that constructs these strokes, transmits the active motion it carries. The intention of an artist is *frozen* in these art-objects as part of their ontology, existing not in a single point of immaculate conception, but in the now, framing the way the art-object is delivered in discourse.[3] So, although Wimsatt and Beardsley provide a small textual provision for the author, saying that "the poem itself shows what [the poet] was trying to do" (1198), they render authorship rather useless by asserting intention's purely archaic, passé role. If intention doesn't exist simultaneously to the art-object it is attached to, irony, for instance, would be rendered moot, and we would be forced to take works like Swift's "A Modest Proposal" at their word.

With the rise to fame of "The Intentional Fallacy" after 1946, New Criticism dominated critical scholarship on authorial intention. However, many in France launched their own repudiation of intention as a mode of interpretation. Roland Barthes in his essay, "The Death of the Author" reconfigures the author as something that is "never more than the instance writing" (1269). From the moment the pen leaves the paper, detaching the writing from its immediate context, "it is language which speaks, not the author" (1270). This move is similar in effect to the textual focus of "The Intentional Fallacy," casting off the yoke of original intention from the critic and the reader, but, as expected from French post-structuralists, Barthes takes a more radical turn. In his eyes, language serves as a sort of fabric harvested from innumerable sources. It moves and tangles, and importantly, will always be seen based on our current associations with the text, each time it is read, each time it is experienced; indeed, "every text is eternally written

[3] It is important to note that when we turn to the "material" of texts, things get a little trickier. Barthes and Foucault both focus more on language as a medium, and why it demands different considerations.

here and *now*" (1270), allowing—or mandating—that the reader themselves *perform* inside the blank, undefined space of language. Barthes, in doing so, locates the essential meaning—if any such thing exists—with the reader's impressions, rather than with the opinions of the writer.

Although he puts forth a more dynamic conception of the linguistic art-object, allowing various impressions and meanings to rhizomatically exist concurrent with one another,[4] I take issue with a couple of points in his essay. First, in severing language from its origins, he fails to acknowledge how language can carry memory. Words are associative by nature and entangle themselves in their histories and connotations. It is enough to read the first few words of the Jabberwocky, *"'T was brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe…"* to feel Lewis Carroll's presence and his pen. Yes, language as a semiotic code evolves constantly in the now, but to deny language its roots is to deny its existence altogether. Secondly, as criticism was engaged in that unhealthy, singular focus on the author at the time, it is no wonder that Barthes' language-centric model believes "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text" (1271). However, the interpretive device of "authorship" is not always a toxic designation; it is, in my view, decidedly not mutually exclusive with other meanings (even those that contradict authorial meaning) but seem to be one of many in the memory of an object. Take, for instance, the entire oeuvre of Franz Kafka. Anyone who has felt the intimacy and discomfort of Kafka when reading his work knows how much he "is" alongside his work. Kafka as an author was so powerfully present, his aura took on that fantastic word "Kafkaesque." Here, language, supposedly divorced from the writer in the post-structuralist view, has internalized him inside language itself. In other words, Barthes' conception of an all-powerful, dynamic language moves to gobble up Barthes' own thesis attempting to place an authorial limit on it.[5]

[4] This resolves the issue I took with the temporal placement of intention in "The Intentional Fallacy."
[5] Barthes himself found it useful to sign his own name on his essay, so authors cannot be entirely useless...

Michel Foucault is perhaps the best example of a critic that comes close to acknowledging the multifaceted form of a literary art-object. In his essay, "What is an Author?" Foucault, like Barthes, destroys the creator of literary texts, only he does so *in light* of the cultural formations of an author. As such, despite the "disappearance" of the creator in the act of writing, the author is reenvisioned in the "author function" of an art-object once more, serving a purpose in characterizing "the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (1400). Here, Foucault acknowledges that the author still holds weight in discourse, that the author function is a "role" that is played both inside a text's linguistic signification but also in culture at large. In my critique of Barthes, I point out how he omits the power of language to absorb the author; Foucault formalizes this power by thinking of the author's name as a kind of class. For instance, he mentions the name "Aristotle" and says that when we use his name, "we are using a word that means one or a series of definite descriptions of the type: 'the author of the analytics' or 'the founder of ontology,'" (1399). "Michael Jackson" can now designate not just "prolific singer, dancer, and songwriter" but also "alleged child molester" when we engage in discourse with his name. In this way, Foucault preserves the author's role, unlike Barthes, as an ever-changing designator of a work and everything that accumulates in its memory. Compelling as it is, I take issue with Foucault because he doesn't practically offer us anything to work with. The mode of his criticism is to dissolve everything into the insoluble motions and forces that constitute things, but, when applied, his method becomes too elusive, too meaningless in all of its meaning. I believe the author must always cause a text, giving it its first layer of interpretation, its first fixed memory.[6] With a Foucauldian view, any measure we take to look at

[6] Even if that memory disappears with time, as with the Homeric writings.

an art-object from a particular angle just dissolves as soon as we hold the object in that light. It forces us to look through the object and not at it.

Throughout this paper, I have tried to better understand the *literary art-object* and expand what it might encompass. Wimsatt and Beardsley fallaciously reject the memory function altogether, author and all. Barthes mischaracterizes language as something untraceable. Foucault, although I believe he is correct in diagnosing functionally what an author can do to orient an art-object in discourse, doesn't do the work to reconstitute what an art-object, or a literary work, is. I believe literary works, like art-objects, are best seen without any limits: a matrix, or singularity if you will, that contains the text and the set of all experiences that bring the text into an encounter with its reader. It is, in this sense, a shard of a culture's collective memory, accumulating meaning democratically via association throughout the life of the work. Without this ability to gather memory—a quality I defined as the *memory function*—works of Literature are rendered into ontologically dead objects. For, it is only the public's consideration that that something *is*, preceded by the author's momentous dream that something *could be*, that distinguishes something, like the feather, from the natural world. So, to address the critics opinions on the author directly: if we do not accept authorial intention as one possible meaning that delivers an object in discourse, we would be set adrift on a sea of faceless documents, of undefined words, unable to communicate anything of meaning to one another. For if signs are forcibly severed from the reality that they signify in this manner, the entire basis of memory would be rejected. The dystopia of this event can be caught in glimpses in Borges' story "The Library of Babel," where the universe is but a labyrinthine library, containing every possible combination of letters in an infinite set of hexagonal shelves. Conceivably, this library has among its shelves every novel, every play, every missing gospel of the bible, and every lost scroll from the fires of

Alexandria; indeed, even this page I am writing right now could be found somewhere in that monstrosity. But, none of it would be a literary work. For none of them, unless picked up and projected upon, would have a memory of its own creation, a presence behind the text that makes any mode of meaning possible.

If we step out of the overly academic commentary of literary critics, I think that people generally accept this ontology of literature as common sense. In our culture, we recognize writing in both its interior and exterior development; in its effects on us and on others; its authorial intentions but also the life of the literary work outside of the author. Indeed, we read novels about racism in the south, samizdat from the Eastern Bloc, and the Upanishads from ancient India in order to communicate with the memories contained therein. Precisely what is so magical about art-objects is that they present such dynamic possibilities within their singularity: even a feather, when looked at for a single moment, becomes indicative of so much more.

Works Cited

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