

Hunger for universalism. Methodological comments regarding Walter Benn Michaels's intentionalism and its Polish reception

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Contemporary criticism is deeply influenced by Enlightenment and Romantic thought, as well as modern philosophy. Although this thesis is not surprising, the relationship between contemporary humanistic thought and philosophical tradition warrants closer examination. Understanding how this relationship translates into literary methodology remains crucial. In this way we can avoid cognitive inaccuracies in terms of definitions we use in studying literary texts and the critical-literary practice.

The question of representationalism, i.e. problems with representing reality in literature (figurativeness), and the question of reference, i.e. how literature refers to “the real world”,

have been among the most significant issues for contemporary literary studies and primarily philosophical questions¹. Issues related to representation were already hotly debated in the 1990s, but even today they are still returning in discussions surrounding incomprehensible poetry (i.e. devoid of stable references, nonfigurative). The notion of the author's intention, connected to representationalism, analyzed in the context of works by Walter Benn Michaels, has become one of the most heated critical debates of the past few years.

"Against Theory", a famous paper by Michaels and Steven Knapp, in which they equated the author's intention with the meaning of a text, is ideologically detached from the titular theorizing, forcing readers to focus on interpretative practice. The two authors understand theory as an interpretation of certain literary texts through referring to general conceptualizations of interpretation². According to Michaels and Knapp, who actively participate in the discussion about the status of interpretation in literary studies, readers can focus on what is the most important – meanings – thanks to giving up on considerations regarding the character of interpretation, theory, etc. And those meanings are supposed to result from the author's intention – assuming that authors are aware of their intentions, a text means what its author wanted it to mean³. On the one hand, the author's intention can therefore mean a motivation for writing – from this perspective, a literary work is something created non-randomly, volitionally, due to the creative subject's intention. A similar understanding of intention was characteristic of literary studies (and philosophical) methodologies preceding Michaels and Knapp's intentionalism, which I shall analyze later in this paper. However, what is significant, although the proponents of this concept take issue with the "causative" understanding of intention⁴, it does not seem to be completely unwarranted – we can be motivated to equate intention with motivation by e.g. Michaels and Knapp's example of sign-resembling markings on a desert beach, which I discuss later in this text. On the other hand, intention can be identical with the meaning of a given work, i.e. a layer of meanings recorded in a text, which is directly supported by Michaels and Knapps.

However, before delving into the foundations of intentionalism, elaborating on topics signaled thus far, and analyzing the consequences of taking similar perspectives for literary studies, I would like to focus on the reception of Michaels's (and Knapp's) works in Poland in texts by contemporary literary critics: Paweł Kaczmarzski, Marta Koronkiewicz, Zuzanna

¹ The use of "representationalism", originally a philosophical notion, i.e. rooted in the philosophy of science and epistemology, referring to the way people experience reality, was established in literary studies thanks to important works by Michał Paweł Markowski. In the context of various understandings of the issue in different fields, the terminological choice seems significant – I shall return to this question contextually later in this text. See Michał Paweł Markowski, *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza* [The desire for presence. Philosophies of representation from Plato to Descartes]. (Gdańsk: Słowo/O obraz Terytoria, 1999); Michał Paweł Markowski, "Reprezentacja i ekonomia" [Representation and economy], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2004): 11–27.

² "By «theory» we mean a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretation of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general"; Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory", in: *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, edited by William John Thomas Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press Journals, 1985), 11.

³ "What a text means is what its author intends"; Knapp, Michaels, "Against Theory", 13.

⁴ In *Czym nie jest intencja* [What intention is not] (which I analyze later in this text), Paweł Kaczmarzski distances himself from such a vision (see footnote 7).

Sala and Łukasz Żurek. Their interest in Michaels's considerations is so strong that the so-called school of intentionalism has been recognized, with Wrocław as its center. However, works by Michaels and their critical reception in texts by the authors listed above gained more recognition only after they were incorporated in a specific, critical-literary polemic. The debate in question, between Paweł Kaczmarski together with Łukasz Żurek, and Dawid Kujawa – a critic representing poststructuralism, and more specifically Deleuzoguattarianism, was published in “Mały Format” in 2021.

The debate began with Kaczmarski criticizing affective criticism, a feature of Deleuzian perspectives. He argued that attributing agency and subjectivity to non-human entities, such as the climate, and focusing on emotions distracts from addressing political and scientific problems⁵. This can be illustrated by positive, pro-ecological attitudes: tenderness for nature, attributing matter with active characteristics, or being against plastic straws will not stop the climate disaster from happening – actual effects can only be achieved by noticing the material conditions which generate pollution and fuel the planet's exploitation by corporations, and by stopping them. Kaczmarski thus opposes new materialist conceptualizations inspired by Gilles Deleuze's ideas, somewhat urging to properly work out the “old” Marxist materialism⁶. At the same time Kaczmarski dissociates himself from what he sees as empty theorizing, i.e. conscious, elaborate establishment of research tools and perspectives instead of actually interpreting texts⁷.

In his first response to those accusations, Kujawa explained the character of affective criticism and criticized the notion of representation⁸. According to him, Kaczmarski does not see the actual character of the negated theoretical orientation and – what is far more significant from this perspective – treating literature instrumentally, as a space for creating a discourse simulating its own compatibility with reality, and so able to change it. He draws similar conclusions from Kaczmarski's pro-intentionalism, as according to Kujawa, intentionalism stabilizes meanings of a text thanks to connecting them with the author's intention.

This relates to Kujawa's broader perspective on literature; he claims that art creates selfless enclaves of freedom in a world completely dominated by capitalism. In this vision, negation of referentiality of texts – setting them free from the primacy of meaning, reasonableness, or connection to the “real” world – leads to producing alternative microcosms, which allow to see the world the way it could be rather than the way it is. It should be noted that this

⁵ Paweł Kaczmarski, “Nieczułe narracje. O pewnym modelu zaangażowania w poezji” [Non-tender narratives. On a certain type of engagement in poetry], *Mały Format* 1-3 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/nieczule-narracje-o-pewnym-modelu-zaangazowania-poezji/>.

⁶ Paweł Kaczmarski, “Materializm jako intencjonalizm. O możliwości «nowomaterialistycznej» krytyki literackiej” [Materialism as intentionalism. On the possibility of «new-materialistic» literary criticism], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4 (2019): 191–239.

⁷ Paweł Kaczmarski, “Czym nie jest intencja. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie” [What intention is not. A reply to Dawid Kujawa], *Mały Format* 4-6 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/07/czym-intencja-odpowiedzi-dawidowi-kujawie/>.

⁸ Dawid Kujawa, “Czułość i nieczułość w jednym stały domu. Odpowiedź Pawłowi Kaczmarskiemu” [Tenderness and non-tenderness coexist. A reply to Paweł Kaczmarski], *Mały Format* 1-3 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/04/kujawa-kaczmarski-polemika/>.

thinking remains rooted in the avant-garde visions, especially in futurism, as well as in the anti-modernity of the modern formation⁹. It also has a strong emancipatory dimension. However, emancipation is not perceived as a critical analysis of reality or overturning the existing situation, but as generating worlds governed by different laws which – due to being somewhat Utopian – can determine volatile destination points or alternative possible worlds.

Those topics were discussed by Kaczmarzski and Żurek, who demonstrated that literature already functions in capitalist modes, and described how it is incorporated in various mechanisms of oppression¹⁰. Avoiding stabilization of meanings – ironically referred to as “the eternal drift of significance”¹¹ – is supposed to lead to art’s self-disarming, which can be used in any way in a capital-dominated world – but those ways only make the scope of capital’s domination, rather than users’ freedom spheres, bigger. In his response, Kujawa also referred to the selflessness category, pointing out to the fact that in the Enlightenment, Kantian understanding, a work of art is no “ordinary” product: the fewer clear senses it generates, the fewer applications it has, the harder it is to capture and instrumentalize it¹². Therefore, representationalist art would have an emancipatory dimension by default, as all forms of referentiality facilitate disambiguation¹³.

A short recapitulation and analysis of the texts comprising this polemic – apart from an attempt at a synthetic presentation of conclusions from exceptionally broad and difficult papers – provides useful material for summarizing the issue of intentionalism. As of June 2023 the last word on this topic belongs to Kaczmarzski, who published a two-part paper in “KONTENT” in which he summarized and elaborated on the issues from his previous texts¹⁴. However, as can be seen, this dispute goes far beyond intentionalism, including, i.e., the (in)compatibility of a work of art with the reality, or the problem of its emancipatory, anti-capitalist potential.

⁹ Of course, this relates to affective criticism, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ Łukasz Żurek, “Wiersz i gumowa kaczka. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie” [A poem and a rubber duck. A reply to Dawid Kujawa], *Mały Format* 4-6 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/07/wiersz-i-gumowa-kaczka-odpowiedz-dawidowi-kujawie/>; Paweł Kaczmarzski, “Czym nie jest intencja. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie”.

¹¹ Żurek.

¹² Dawid Kujawa, “Największy mankament poezji. Ciąg dalszy dyskusji z Pawłem Kaczmarzskim i Łukaszem Żurkiem” [Poetry’s biggest shortcoming. Continuation of the discussion with Paweł Kaczmarzski and Łukasz Żurek], *Mały Format* 7-9 (2021), <http://malyformat.com/2021/10/najwiekszy-mankament-poezji-ciag-dalszy-dyskusji-pawlem-kaczmarzskim-lukaszem-zurkiem/>.

¹³ Representationalism concerns both the question of figurativeness of art, as well as – in its original meaning, derived from epistemology and philosophy of science, in which it refers to ways of obtaining knowledge about the world – the question of mental representations. The latter issue is significantly rarer in literary studies – de Saussure’s ideas on signs are typically treated as anti-representationalist, whereas de Saussure can be considered a representationalist on the grounds of language philosophy or epistemology. However, this representation is understood in the mental context, in the case of intentionalism it should be understood in this sense. Although this is not the focus of the present paper, this question should be clarified, as a reference to “the sign character of intention” also appears in Kujawa.

¹⁴ Paweł Kaczmarzski, “Lewicy nie ma, albo o sprawczości tekstu (przy okazji Skurtysa o Okrasce)” [There is no left, or on the text’s agency (inspired by Skurtys’s text on Okrasce)], parts 1 and 2, *KONTENT* (2023), https://kontent.net.pl/dorażny#Lewicy_nie_ma_albo_o_sprawczoci_tekstu_przy_okazji_Skurtysa_o_Okrasce_CZ_1, https://kontent.net.pl/dorażny#Lewicy_nie_ma_albo_o_sprawczoci_tekstu_przy_okazji_Skurtysa_o_Okrasce_CZ_2.

Significantly, although there are a few very long and detailed critical texts on intentionalism, with long lists of references, the subject has not been exhausted. Of course, both in the Polish and American reception a number of methodological and theoretical issues have been raised. However, intentionalism has not been incorporated into the broadly understood historical-philosophical process, which may demonstrate the potential troublesomeness of this phenomenon and simultaneously prove its attractiveness as a research topic.

The very provenance of the notion of intention seems one of the most significant questions here. Kaczmarek explains how intention should be understood according to Michaels and the scholars that inspired him (Stanley Cavell, among others). However, in the philosophical tradition this notion is most strongly associated with Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, and in literary studies – with phenomenological works by Roman Ingarden and others, who adapted the notion for literary analysis. The term has many meanings and can be understood in very different ways – from purely philosophical to psychological¹⁵. At the same time, the fact that Michaels and Knapp equated intention with meaning – although they analyzed it in numerous contexts – is begging to be interpreted in reference to Wilhelm Gottlob Frege's philosophy, and more specifically – in reference to his studies into identity in the context of logics¹⁶.

According to Frege, there are nontrivial identity claims (not $A=A$, but $A=B$). The interpretation of similar cases leads to the conclusion that certain claims have the same meaning (they refer to the same object), however, they can have different senses (various ways of providing meaning). Therefore, the author's intention and the meaning of a text would not be two separate values, which we equate with each other in the process of interpretation, but two different terms for the same object. However, in the analyzed case this is both a universalizing statement – every interpretation process of a literary work is simply searching for the author's intention – and, perhaps paradoxically for intentionalists, destabilizing interpretation: if every meaning we can derive from a text is what we recognize as the author's intention, then we can suppose an infinite number of intentions regarding this work. Such a claim clearly contradicts works by Knapp and Michaels¹⁷.

Curiously, the already mentioned conscious, volitional creation of a piece of work by some agent is the most obvious meaning of intention for literary scholars. Such an understanding has been grounded by Ingarden's phenomenology, which – crucially – did not unequivocally connect the layer of a text's meaning with its author's intention – what Michaels and Knapp did in their radical gesture. However, Ingarden's theory left so-called ambiguous places, i.e. spaces for possible meanings of a text which depend on readers' interpretation. More broadly,

¹⁵See Danuta Szajnert, "Intencja i interpretacja" [Intention and interpretation], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1 (2000): 7–42.

¹⁶"The meaning and author's intention are one and the same – always, by definition" (Kaczmarek, "Czym nie jest intencja. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie").

¹⁷"There's nothing controversial about different texts having different meanings. Controversy arises only when interpreters ascribe different meanings to what they regard as the same text"; Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels, "A Reply to Richard Rorty: What Is Pragmatism?", in: *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*: 140. Further in the text they claim that controversy arises when there is a disagreement regarding the intention of a specific author regarding a specific text. I shall return to the issue of the questionable novelty of similar claims.

the “classical” literary studies phenomenology treated a literary text as an entity which was in a way open, presenting itself to readers with all the consequences of this individual, specific “presentation” – rather than some whole reduced to a certain essence.

At the same time, the return to the context of phenomenology is essential to methodological criticism of Michaels’s ideas. Although he is typically classified as a pragmatist, his ideas were clearly influenced by Husserl’s phenomenology, though this influence is concealed. Nonetheless, noticing it has serious consequences for the intentionalist thought, especially in the context of the title of the article in question: *Against Theory* – whereas in the case of Edmund Husserl’s ideas theory is one of the most important philosophical and methodological notions. Jürgen Habermas’s early work, *Cognitive Interests*, is useful in studying those questions; he analyzes one of the main problems of European philosophy understood as a certain whole: theory, its definition and provenance, as well as how it is connected to practice – here we return to emancipation, a fundamental question for Polish critics – as well as the so-called pure theory¹⁸.

As Habermas points out, ancient philosophy proclaimed the independence of wisdom reflection from something we may call “lifeworld”. Dealing with theory was seen as contemplating cosmos – a universe governed by fixed laws guaranteeing its harmony. This type of reflection allows individuals to detach themselves from their particular sensations, passions and experiences, and to gain access to the cosmic order. Therefore, according to classical assumptions of European philosophy, pure theory offers us a chance to emancipate; this emancipation is understood not in the strictly political context, but as the freedom from “lifeworld” governed by random passions and individual interests, in the name of cognitive objectivism.

This vision is inherited by the modern thought, albeit with some changes. The romanticist philosophy and art theory – Habermas offers Friedrich Schelling as an example – rejected the conviction that it is necessary to do theory in the sense that searching for or contemplating the universal order ceased to be obligatory. Instead of obligation, it chose freedom, which obviously had its consequences in the theory of art and objection to classical, normative conceptualizations. However, the freedom proclaimed by idealists, is no liberty – it is proceeding in accordance with intelligent will, and therefore once again it gains an ethical dimension: what contributes to the harmonious functioning of a community is intelligent. According to idealists, practicing free theory or theory in the name of freedom, theory constrained by the demands of practice – understood classically, as handiness or usefulness for “lifeworld” – was supposed to lead to the subject’s self-improvement and their better communication with other subjects, ultimately translating into the reality. This primacy of theory over practice – theory offering us the freedom of self-improvement – was rejected by Karl Marx, according to whom theory is justified only to the extent it directly serves practice, unmediated by individual subjects: as a philosophical system it is completely subordinated to theory transforming the reality.

¹⁸Jürgen Habermas, “Cognitive Interests”, translated into Polish by Lech Witkowski, *Colloquia Communia* 19 (1985): 158–169.

This outline of classical philosophy, inspired by Habermas, shows that within the European thought, we function in the space of two different realizations of the same goal: emancipation. However, we conceptualize it using various definitions and we reach it via different ways. As a representative of the Frankfurt school, today Habermas belongs to a formation which tried to reconcile two ways of philosophy in terms of defining the roles and status of theory and practice. The Frankfurt school suggested their co-existence: on the one hand, practice impacts theory, as there is no theory that would not be constructed without assumptions located in “lifeworld”; there is no cognition (a reference to the title of his paper) which would not be supported by any, even idealistic (sic!) interest. However, on the other hand, this “lifeworld” cannot be emancipated without referring to theory which would provide us with a cognitive framework.

Towards the end of the text, Habermas focuses on Husserl’s philosophy. According to Habermas, Husserl tried to resuscitate primary, ancient understanding of theory already after Marxist criticism via his famous concept of phenomenology. Husserl believed that the phenomenologist reduction as the main method of fully objective cognition, independent from any external conditions or any contingency, met the criteria of pure theory. It was completely detached from individual cognitive conditions or particular experiences in the process of distilling phenomena from all contingency. Phenomenology is completely detached from practice, it serves the purpose of pure cognition, and in this sense, it offers us a chance for the fullest emancipation from material conditions which blur cognition.

Let us translate those directives – which have never been fulfilled on the grounds of philosophy, as Husserl’s project of phenomenology was unfinished – directly into the interpretative practice of literary studies, ignoring Ingarden’s filter: the process of literary interpretation of a text would lead us to the merit of meaning, i.e. what is obvious, clear, non-contingent. This is what Kaczmarek writes about in *Czym nie jest intencja* [What intention is not]¹⁹, where he defines interpretation as a selection process of those elements of a text which are not contingent on what can be defined as – changing the poetic term “lifeworld” – the conditions of text consumption, particular experiences of the reader. In the introduction to *The Shape of the Signifier*, the only complete work by Michaels translated into Polish²⁰, we read about the process of reading a text, as well about its material dimensions. Michaels writes about removing all contingent elements from literary works so that this text stays the same regardless of how and where it was read – or how it was redistributed. Michaels tries to free the understanding of meanings of a literary work from all material contexts, simultaneously arguing that intention is locked in a stabilized, somewhat universalized form of a specific text. However, for him this text does not have a material dimension, i.e. factors such as the font size and type, paper, etc. do not influence its meaning. This vision of a literary work as something distilled from all contingent, unplanned elements is closely connected with the strictly modernist ideology of form which requires treating texts as complete, essential wholes, independent from not only the reader’s intention, but also from the influence of (subsequent) editions or translations

¹⁹Kaczmarek, “Czym nie jest intencja. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie”.

²⁰Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, translated into Polish by Jan Burzyński (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2011).

(although intentionalism has a certain response to that: subsequent editions may introduce mistakes, and in the case of translation we deal with co-authorship)²¹.

Such an understanding of intention is not necessarily materialistic, as postulated by Kaczmarek²². It remains strongly anti-psychologistic – Knapp and Michaels rely on strictly linguistic and philosophical categories. Therefore, for them the historical author is of far less interest than the intention inscribed in their text, which again directs us towards phenomenology. And in terms of the vision of agency, today this methodology approaches structuralism, and the “creative subject” does not refer to a physical person, but rather – conceptualizing the whole in the context of the theory of communicative structuralism – a partially virtual functor of a text, set free from physicality and specificity²³. According to this concept, a text would be a materialization of intention, yet completely independent from the conditions of circulation or reproduction, and therefore also subjected to phenomenological reproduction²⁴.

We should thus observe that the phenomenological treatment of intention, the creative subject and text protects the analyzed concept from accusations of promoting a banalized version of the author’s intention (“what did the author mean?”), and simultaneously – from imputations of representationalism by Kujawa – in the understanding presented here a text does not represent its author’s intention, it is identical with it. And intention does not necessarily mean the “thought” of a historical character, who signed the text. Meaning – intention – rather remains a certain arrival point of an interpretation reducing everything that is contingent.

Therefore, the phenomenological perspective proposed here seems to favor Michaels and Knapp’s concept, although in the face of the low popularity of phenomenology in contemporary Polish studies, this could be surprising (although it need not be in the American context²⁵). However, such a concept of intentionalism has even more interesting consequences. Phenomenology is pure theory – and theory refers to what is objective, constant, stable, independent from some individual perceiving subject. In America, Michaels is typically perceived as a pragmatist, and in a way “classical” pragmatism constitutes an alternative tradition to the dictionary of classical European philosophy, replacing epistemological discussions with a reference to

²¹For a discussion about the influence of editing and other material factors on the meaning of texts, see e.g. John Bryant, *The Fluid Text: A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen*, translated into Polish by Łukasz Cybulski (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2020).

²²See Kaczmarek, “Materializm jako intencjonalizm. O możliwości «nowomaterialistycznej» krytyki literackiej”.

²³This is how those relationships were defined in the famous communication theory by Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska (“Relacje osobowe w literackiej komunikacji” [Personal relations in literary communication], in: *Problemy socjologii literatury* [Problems in the sociology of literature], edited by Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1971), 109–125.

²⁴In this sense, possible applications of the notions of materialism or matter would require a deeper inquiry and differentiation – the applications discussed by me (materiality of a text in the context of intention and its circulation in the social space, materiality of the historical author and non-materiality of the author as a textual subject) seem to be mutually irreducible.

²⁵Neophenomenology was criticized by e.g. Rita Felski, who commented on the return to “non-contextual”, formalist reading in contemporary American literary studies. Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, translated into Polish by Agnieszka Budnik i Agnieszka Waligóra (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2022), 67.

common sense. When we refer to common sense, we assume that our audience has the same, natural knowledge of the world and cognitive intuition, thanks to which we do not need to analyze certain questions. A similar reasoning is clear in Michaels and Knapp – however, as we can see, it conceals a very strong theoretical foundation: the two scholars put forward universal theses which cannot be empirically verified.

In *Against Theory* Michaels and Knapp offer an example which is supposed to illustrate how the conviction of a text's coherence results from the knowledge that it was created by some subject: a man lands on a desert beach and notices traces in the sand which comprise something resembling a poem. Significantly, the two authors use a specific poem – *A Slumber did my Spirit Seal* by William Wordsworth²⁶. This example can be understood in two ways: a person discovering such traces will not identify them as symbols, and so he will not consider something that resembles a literary text an actual literary text. Instead, he will assume that the random system of traces resembling a text is not a text – according to intentionalists, these would be the consequences of removing the author's figure from sight. On the other hand, recognizing the system of traces as a poem suggests the existence of an author, even if it is a non-human entity like a wave, or someone who replicated the traces.

The phenomenological theory aims to free meaning from the context of reading; accepting the two scholars' assumptions, Wordsworth's poem was written intentionally, and it has a final, established sign form, which should be independent from contingent contexts (such as methods of reproduction). Therefore, referring to the phenomenological reasoning, one could say that it was indeed a poem at Michaels and Knapp's beach – the only unknown would lie in how it was circulated, but this is beyond the scope of our interests, as we have emancipated ourselves from the context of contingent material conditions. A poem will be a poem anywhere – including never seen places. This is the reasoning which seems to be favored by Michaels and Knapp, who at that point consistently argued for the need to refer to any type of subject that could copy those symbols, or considering them as contingent traces. However, it should be noted that the experiment is by definition – i.e. thanks to the assumption that a desert beach exists – impossible to be empirically conducted, and so it remains purely theoretical. This could once again speak to how deeply this concept is rooted in the classical phenomenological thought.

Michaels could be considered a pragmatist only when the traces at the beach are not recognized as a poem, although the same layout found in a book, museum, or building wall would not seem controversial, as such spaces are perceived as possible for displaying works of art consciously, intentionally. In this sense, Michaels's beach traces would be closer to Duchamp's urinal – a utility item in a toilet, and an artistic one in a museum – than to Husserl's classical phenomenology. In the famous pragmatic paper *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Stanley Fish analyzes a series of random words²⁷, which are interpreted according to the context in which they function – an academic class, which also includes the context of “a cognitive hierarchy”:

²⁶Knapp, Michaels, *Against Theory*, 15–16.

²⁷Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, translated into Polish by Andrzej Szahaj, *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2000): 197–211.

the lecturer makes their students interpret a nonsensical system of words, which can be seen as a silent suggestion that it has a certain meaning. However, Michaels and Knapp are against such a vision of pragmatics, asking about the agency behind a text rather than the conditions in which it is read, which constitutes a separate and extremely interesting question – however, Fish is met with criticism in *Against Theory*²⁸.

There remains a question about the consequences of dematerializing the author while simultaneously materializing their intention in the form of a text. In *Czym nie jest intencja*, Kaczmarek argues that it is inscribed in a text. However, defining interpretation as constructing a convincing narrative about what we have read in a text does not require a methodological assumption regarding its author's intention, whereas the question regarding the intentional provenance of the texts we deal with, in reference to the other understanding of intentionality, does not necessarily constitute a universal reader's reaction – after all, Michaels and Knapp did not propose an empirical study of reception habits, and we do not know the dominating cognitive reaction to a series of symbols in various spaces; their considerations are purely abstract. We should also stress that Michaels and Knapp operate mostly within the modern anthropocentric culture and its vision of authorship – their question regarding the agency of the sea in terms of writing poetry does not seem to invite a discussion about non-human creative agents – a historically variable notion and culture-dependent rather than universal²⁹. This last issue is also present in the Polish reception of those ideas: Kaczmarek mentions unconscious intentions or the fact that e.g. the French Revolution can be ascribed a virtual intention behind texts³⁰. In a way, this constitutes a polemical elaboration on the already analyzed, “extracorporeal” yet still strictly human visions of authorship, represented by structural and phenomenological optics; today we could add the question of AI-generated content to this discussion.

Of course, intentionalism can provide answers to those accusations – some of them have already been indicated (e.g. the notion of mistake or co-authorship). However, these answers potentially reveal the susceptibility of the concept to abuse. Intentionalism tries to protect us from searching for meanings where they cannot be found – before constructing meaning and spending time and energy on where and how meanings exist. A “nonsensical” text was intentionally written as such; the ambiguity was intentional; random words which Fish makes his student interpret were intentionally written as random, and their author's intention was to make students think.

Similar conclusions can be as simple as they are basically empty: intentionalist interpretations understood in such a way banalize discussions about literature. We should

²⁸Stanley Fish, “Consequences”, in: *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, 106–131; Richard Rorty, “Philosophy without Principles”, in: *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*: 132–138; Knapp, Michaels, “A Reply to Richard Rorty: What Is Pragmatism?”, 139–146.

²⁹There is no need to refer to the fashionable new materialisms and their non-anthropocentric definitions of the subject – it is enough to consider pre-modern practices such as automated writing rooted in spiritualism.

³⁰In *Czym nie jest intencja*. Odpowiedź Dawidowi Kujawie Kaczmarek states: Class or ideological biases of an author, their perspective, will often be visible in a text, even if they do not themselves see them. A critic is justified in asking about them – but a Marxist critic should not.

remember that intentionalism analyzed in the context of the philosophy of language can lead to paradoxes – identifying intention with meaning allows us to assume that any identifiable meaning is intentional, which would disassemble the basis of the whole concept. Michaels and Knapp's proposal is governed by serious theoretical assumptions. A statement that the meaning of a text remains identical with the author's intention is universalizing, and fundamentally unverifiable (*vide* the desert beach example), and so purely metaphysical. Therefore, this idea becomes internally contradictory, complementary with the internal contradiction of post-structural interpretations: intentionalism is purely a theory criticizing the focus on theory, whereas post-structural perspectives, extremely open to the variety of interpretations, need to be open also to universalizing interpretations.

Intentionalism was supposed to simplify the interpretation process thanks to removing theoretical-literary considerations, but also – what we can see thanks to passing over the metaphysical assumptions behind the concept – epistemological ones. However, as we can see, upon closer inspection the gains it offers may prove problematic. Ultimately, classifying intentionalism as anti-theoretical introduces an important context. Genuine anti-theorization, as described by Habermas, rejects the idea of a comprehensible, unified order of reality or cognition—leading to consequences different from those suggested by Knapp and Michaels. Anti-theorization exposes us to any individual, particular and experiential interpretations to which intentionalists object. Genuine anti-theoretical interpretations – subjective, dependent on the reader's intention – are mostly peculiar to post-structuralist optics, which negate stable sign references³¹, which brings the classical theory of cognition and literary theory closer together – after all, literary theory also deals with the question of universal rules governing cognition, in this case: interpretation.

The anti-theorization (of literature) results from specific premises: anti-theories which emerged in the face of the crisis of the classical vision of theory which guaranteed the existence of the sphere of objectiveness. Meanwhile, in the face of the impossibility of establishing objective, durable, and stable references of signs, the conviction of the absolute instability and fluidity of their references seems to be the only way to avoid the interception and capitalization of signs. On the other hand, if it is inexhaustible, it cannot succumb to any discourse – it cannot be used as a mechanism of oppression.

Finally, we should observe that the crisis of theory stemmed from within theoretical thinking – we can therefore locate it in a certain gap which appeared in the system of German idealism. Its unsealing provoked the problem of the sublime which appears in Kant, Hegel, and a number of other philosophers. What can be sublime? What cannot be represented – something unquantifiable, uncountable, unfathomable, and therefore impossible to theorize. In this sense, post-structuralism proves to be a different perception of possible emancipation, able to see the shortcomings of theoretical thinking and exploiting the inconsistency which takes place within it in order to defend the basic aim of wisdom reflection: freedom. It is

³¹Such an understanding of anti-theorization is well rooted in Polish studies, e.g. *Anty-teoria literatury* [Anti-theory of literature] by Anna Burzyńska on Derrida's deconstruction (Kraków: Universitas, 2006).

therefore noteworthy that within all the methodologies referred to here – phenomenology, deconstruction, pragmatism – we are still operating in the space of the issue of emancipation, as did Kaczmariski, Żurek, and Kujawa.

In this sense, intentionalism represents the emancipatory pursuits of Western philosophy, becoming a specific form expression of the wish to return to some actual, strong theory following a period of weak thought – a theory which would allow to form strong theses regarding texts, or restitution of the notion of truth following its neoliberal and postmodern failures. Such a wish seems natural and interesting following the experiences of humanities from the second half of the 20th century and early 21st century. Intentionalism as such is not protected from post-structural criticism – also because it is mediated through the already mentioned classical and Enlightenment philosophies, and so it remains inscribed in the rhythm of transformations of Western philosophy. Thanks to its roots, in a way it also remains chronologically earlier than the criticism by, among other, deconstruction – and, as has been demonstrated, in many cases it succumbs to accusations stemming from it. More often than not, it also reveals how paradoxically close it is to the optics it objects.

Ultimately, an analysis of the assumptions of intentionalism leads to a significant question: if intentions are all that matter, why read literature? It would seem (also according to Kaczmariski³²) that due to the form of expression: perhaps then even intentionalists would ultimately agree that literature is not about meanings, but about constructing them. In those terms, Kaczmariski's perspective seems to be surprisingly convergent with Kujawa's anti-representationalist vision, who points out to the textual form as a generator of alternative worlds. In *Czym nie jest intencja*, Kaczmariski favors the immanence of intention, which comes from the author, but conceptualized in a certain form, it becomes its integral part – intention becomes the foundation of the autonomy of a text. Those surprising similarities in the starting and concluding points of both sides of the polemic seem to provide material for a different discussion, which would consider various difficulties with the use of the notion of intention proposed here.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

³²Kaczmariski mentions the significance of form analysis or ways of formal construction of a text. Paweł Kaczmariski, "Czym nie jest intencja. W odpowiedzi Dawidowi Kujawie".

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KEYWORDS

I N T E N T I O N A L I S M

Walter Benn Michaels

ABSTRACT:

The paper contributes to the critical discussion about the problem of interpreting literature, studying the traditions used in the process. It analyzes Walter Benn Michaels's intentionalism and its Polish reception in contemporary literary criticism. The polemics between two intentionalists (Paweł Kaczmarek and Łukasz Żurek) with Dawid Kujawa, a representative of post-structural affective criticism, which took place in "Mały Format" in 2021, is summarized. Next, methodological comments regarding the intentionalist project are presented. Although Michaels is typically considered a pragmatist, significant elements of phenomenology can be found in his ideas. Those dependencies are analyzed in the context of the notion of theory, leading to conclusions regarding possible contradictions in the intentionalist thought and its Polish interpretations.

pragmatism

PHENOMENOLOGY

LITERARY THEORY

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