THE INTENTIONAL FALLACY:
A CHALLENGE TO LITERARY CRITICISM.*

Lúcia Helena de Azevedo Vilela
— UFOP —

Whenever a critic proposes the judgment of a literary work based on his assumption of the author's "intention," or aiming at identifying it in the work of art, two questions should emerge: Is this kind of analysis possible and accurate? Is it desirable?

Collingwood's analysis of the expression of emotion will elucidate the first question. He states that "The expression of an emotion by speech may be addressed to someone; but if so it is not done with the intention of arousing a like emotion in him. It is addressed primarily to the speaker himself, and secondarily to any one who can understand."[1] He expounds the process of expression of an emotion. He claims that the poet is not conscious of an emotion until he expresses it. At the moment he expresses his emotion by speaking, he becomes aware of its nature, he individualizes it, but he does not label it as an instance of a general kind. As a result, the audience may be affected by this emotion in a different way from the author himself since he does not describe it. Now we have come to a point that is very important to the matter of "intention." If the poet himself is not aware of an emotion until he expresses it through words, how can a critic determine

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the source of this same emotion? On the other hand, the audience may be affected by this emotion in a different way from the author. The critic, being part of the audience, may misinterpret the author's "intention" by merging it with his own emotion. In doing so he is violating the work of art. As Wimsatt remarks, "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."[2] Once an emotion is expressed by speech, it no longer belongs to the author. Consider now our second question: Is there any point in determining what the author's "intention" was even if we were able to ask him? The judgment of a work of art should be done outside the author. Certainly the author's knowledge and experience may lie behind every line he writes, but do they really matter to the understanding of the poem itself? The author's notes and epigraphs should be judged as a part of the poem and not as way of identifying his "intention." A critical inquiry should not take into consideration what was in the author's mind when he wrote a certain poem; otherwise this intentional fallacy will end up obliterating the poem itself.

Collingwood raises the importance of the audience in relation to the work of art when he says that "when some one reads or understands a poem, he is expressing emotions of his own in the poet's words, which have thus become his own words."[3] The artists are the ones who express what all have felt, share the emotions of all. The work of art becomes thus the point of intersection between the artist and the audience. If the artist does not bring himself into relation with the audience, his aesthetic experience is incomplete. The emotion expressed by the artist is shared by the audience, but it is

independent of the artist himself. If one of the members of the audience tries to relate the artistic expression to its author, part of its value will be lost, because it will be associated with other factors external to it. The aesthetic experience of the artist and the audience are different. As Collingwood points out, "For the artist, the inward experience may be externalized or converted into a perceptible object. For the audience the outside experience is converted into that inward experience which alone is aesthetic."[4] This perceptible object, or the work of art, is the only means the audience has to share the emotion expressed by the author. If a literary critic as part of the audience seeks to associate this emotion to what was in the author's mind at the moment of expression, he is interfering in the harmony of the process, and searching for something that is not intrinsic in the work of art itself.

In Robert Penn Warren's "Introduction: Faulkner: Past and Future,"[5] the reader ascertains how Warren, as a Southerner, came to read Faulkner and how he sees his novels as a relfex of Southern reality. Warren explains that it was by an immediate intuition that he felt the impact of Faulkner's work. He suggests that Southern history is not important to the understanding of his work when he says, "I may add that it is in this perspective that the non-Southern, even non-American, critics have done their greatest service, for, not knowing Southern life firsthand, they have sometimes been freer to regard the fiction as a refraction in art of a special way of life and not as a mere documentation of that way of life."[6] He seems to contradict himself in the next paragraphs when he looks at Faulkner's work in another perspective.

The way he starts the next paragraph makes evident the

kind of judgment that will follow; he says, "Let us look back to the place and time when Faulkner began to write."[7] He picks out some important facts of Faulkner's life and relates them to some aspects of his work. From Warren's point of view, Faulkner's sense of "outsideness"[8] lies in the fact that he belonged to the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War I. Well, this may be an important event in Faulkner's biography, but it cannot be applied to his work and to the characters created by him. Warren even goes as far as to say that Percy Grimm and Hightower, of Light in August counterpart the author. He says that they are "projection and purgations of potentials in Faulkner himself."[9] In other words, he is identifying the work of art with the author himself. These characters who live in a "dream of sadistic violence" or in a "romantic dream of the Civil War" are, in his opinion, nothing but a reflex of the author's "admiration of the crazy personal gesture."[10] These peculiarities of the characters are part of the literary work and may be a reflex of time and history inside the work of art itself and not of the author's life or intention when he expresses his emotion through words.

Another matter brought up by Warren is concerned with Faulkner's political ideology. He says that the commercial failures of Sartoris, The Sound and the Fury, and As I Lay Dying were due to the current leftist's assumption that these works were an apology for fascism. In both the public's and the critic's arguments, we can see that the search for the author's intention underlies all the discussion. Warren points out the various reasons people had to reject or accept Faulkner's work. Referring to those who reject it, he quotes Norman Podhoretz when he says that Faulkner's work lacks intelligence and meaning. Warren admits that it "really lacks a sense of history."[11] He seems to agree with Podhoretz when

he says that "Faulkner "doesn't even hate" the middle class "accurately," his Jason being as much creature of compulsion as Quentin without "sober choice."[12] The reason why Faulkner's work attracted readers is "the sense that the world created so powerfully represents a projection of an inner experience of the author somehow not too different from the one the reader might know too well."[13] At the end of these psychological and political considerations, Warren leads the reader to the conclusion that he should read Faulkner because his work is a projection of his experience and because "he is an a-political writer."[14] The value of the work of art is then transferred to the author. His novels should be read not because the author is leftist or fascist but because he is a-political. Does this fact really matter to the understanding and appreciation of the work? In order to judge a work of art the critic should avoid taking into consideration the author's ideology, even if he praises it as Warren seems to do when he mentions the fact of Faulkner's being an a-political writer.

Warren finally confirms the idea of interest in the author's intention as being helpful to literary criticism. He concludes that:

> Though much has been written about Faulkner and the South, much is repetitious, and there is clearly need for further thinking about the writer and his world. Related to this but not to be identified with it, are the questions of Faulkner's own psychology — his own stance or temperament. Both these lines of interest are primarily genetic, they have to do with <u>the question of how the work came to exist; but if this kind of criticism is</u>

> pursued with imagination and tact, it can lead to a new awareness of the work itself,[15] with a fuller understanding of the work as that unity of an art-object and a life-manifestation.[16]

As Warren makes clear, the study of the author's psychology and biography may contribute to a fuller understanding of the work itself. The notion of the work of art independent from the author and belonging to the public is thus put aside. According to him, the more we are able to learn about the author the more we will understand his work. In other words, the closer we can get to what his intention was at the moment of the literary creation the better we will be able to judge his work. Even though he defines it as a different kind of criticism, he agrees that it is an important line to be pursued.

It seems doubtful that the matter of intention positively brings any contribution to a critical appraisal of a work of art.

The text itself should be dealt with as the analyzable vehicle. The use of biographical evidence in literary criticism should not be taken into consideration since the author's intention is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.

NOTES

[1] R. G. Collingwood, The Principle of Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 111.

[2] W. K. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon (Lexington: The University of Kentucky, 1954), p. 5.

[3] Collingwood, p. 118.

[4] Collingwood, p. 301.

[5] Robert Penn Warren, "Introduction: Faulkner: Past and Future", in Faulkner ed. Robert Penn Warren (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 1-22.

[6] Warren, p. 2.

[7] Warren, p. 2.

[8] Warren, p. 3.

[9] Warren, p. 3.

[10] Warren, p. 3.

[11] Warren, p. 16.

[12] Warren, p. 16.

[13] Warren, p. 12.

[14] Warren, p. 17.

[15] emphasis is mine.

[16] Warren, p. 21

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