Authorship and Criticism


Williamson’s book is discussed in two reviews which reach different conclusions about several of its arguments. Together, the reviews present readings of the text which are sometimes complementary, sometimes at variance.

I The Relativisation of the Romantic Author

The central importance of this book will be its use in first year undergraduate courses where students with backgrounds in high school English courses will need a little persuasion — perhaps — to give up their traditional views of authorship. The four central chapters of the book work as follows. In chapter 2, the traditional or “romantic” conception of the author is outlined and traced historically. Chapter 3 ventures some critiques of this position, using a combination of structuralism, semiotics and Foucault — a position which Williamson calls “neo-rhetorical.” The fourth chapter offers alternatives, using the neo-rhetorical model, centred around a kind of structuralist textual analysis but geared into the “technologies” which produce the effect of an author (such as anecdote, biography and interview). In chapter 5, a case study of the construction of the figure of “Peter Wier” is mounted in order to instantiate the claims made in chapters 3 and 4.

The first of these moves is, in some ways, the most exciting, the most newsworthy. As many critics these days will be aware, there is a traditional, romantic, individualist and expressivist notion of the author as the creative genius whose imaginary reconstruction of the “real world” is supposed to be the well-spring and point of origin of artistic texts. However, in his examination of the historical emergence of this version of authorship, Williamson discovers that the matter is not so clear cut. In fact, along with notions of expressivity have gone arguments that the author should not simply submit to her or his “passion” as a kind of purely romantic indulgence. From Wordsworth to Leavis, and up to and including certain kinds of Marxist aesthetics (particularly those varieties which celebrate realist authors who can express the totality of a class world vision in the face of the purposelessness and fragmentation of cultural forms), the perfect figure of the romantic author has rarely been witnessed. Instead, it is often argued that the fully rounded work of art must come as much from the head as from the heart, as much from objective control of the materials as from a deeply felt attachment to

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them, as much from the techniques of the craftsman as from the natural expressivity of genius. This “dialectic,” as Williamson calls it, and not a simple autonomous subject of creation, is what leads great poetry to become (as Wordsworth puts it) “the first and last of all knowledge... as immortal as the heart of man” (10).

This is why I find it odd that, in his critique of romanticism, in the next chapter, Williamson focuses only on one side of the romantic binary; on the side of the individual genius of creation. What he wants to show here, following Foucault’s “What is an author?” is that this personalist conception of the author is a social construction, confined to specific historical and cultural sites and the effect of specific kinds of moral and political technologies which are imbricated with post-Enlightenment notions of “man” as creator and expresser of a new and fully “human” world. In this sense, Williamson establishes his own (social constructionist) form of totalisation. That is: the term “authorial” is only permitted to apply — within his critical discourse — to this specific conception of the author. All authorialism is reduced to a single side of the romantic authorial doublet. In this sense, what Williamson calls, after Foucault, the “author function” is in fact a sub-section (roughly a half) of the specifically romantic author function. Texts which are not authored in this particular way Williamson calls “non-authored” texts. So his fundamental question is a descriptive one: how does creative genius come to be inscribed in a text or texts — through which specific techniques? And here one has to ask: is this question equivalent to the question of what an author is or could be — under all circumstances — or even under the specific circumstances of romanticist ideology?

Because his project is descriptivist, because it makes its contribution to a “neo-rhetorical” criticism, considered as a practice coming after the fact of textual production, Williamson eschews any theoretical move which could constitute an intervention into authorial practice as such. He regards so-called “post-modernist” moves into a deconstruction of the relations between textual theory and textual practice as “utopian” (33) and as celebrating an impossibly unconstrained “pure play of the signifier” (32). His target here, of course, is the Roland Barthes of “The Death of the Author.” David Wills and I have argued against Williamson’s reading of this paper elsewhere. Roughly our argument is as follows.

Barthes’s project is not a descriptive one. He does not think that, by any means, the standard version of the author has already passed away. On the contrary, his argument is prescriptive. It resides in the domain of value rather than of fact. “Texts, argues Barthes, ought no longer to be traced to a subjective origin, ‘in the mind’ of some actual historical or biographical personage. Instead, they should be considered to have ‘no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.’” It is this last phrase which Williamson fastens upon in his charge of idealism (33). Even though he is, elsewhere, quite acute in his textual analysis, here it goes awry. I think he simply misreads
Barthes (and in fact the whole of the deconstructionist program coming after him). That is: how can one read a phrase such as "language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins" to mean that Barthes "retains the principle of an origin, [namely] language as system or process" (33, my emphasis)? To me this seems logically impossible. If one reads the concept of language such that it is constituted by a process of indefinite (not, be it noted, infinite) deferral of an origin or destination, if this is one's basic position on what language is, then it is clearly impossible to say that this concept itself guarantees origination.

Instead, one could see Barthes as arguing for a change in the use of the term "author," marked by figures such as "écriture," the "scriptor," and so on. While it is true that Foucault is no supporter of traditional authorialist theories and ideas, it is also true that he is unclear on what stance one ought to take in the face of it. Barthes takes more risks, is less equivocal and makes strong suggestions that there is a connection between subjectivist principles of authorial origins and more general Western metaphysical notions of human subjectivity — such that any intervention into those modes can give rise to strategies for the production of less homogeneous and more polymorphous forms of the human subject. And this possibility has been taken up by some feminist writers, by ethnographers, architects, performance artists, inter alia, as direct reconstructions of what it is to write and produce.

In some ways, this interventionist position is not incommensurate with the Foucault of "What is an author?" In fact, Barthes's analytic intervention could be seen as:

an instance of Foucault's author-function in the battle-zone between traditional criticism and poststructuralist theory. The author's 'replacement' by language and language's constant reminder of the questionability of all origins could then be seen as a strategy in that battle. A Foucauldian analysis of the strategy is critical, but to rest content with it only defers the problem of which side one should take. (Writing Pynchon 137)

Moreover, there is a further rethinking of Barthes in Derrida's concept of the signature — which Williamson overlooks. Here the Barthesian idea of author-as-language is retheorised to include Derrida's view that all language is writing. This reinscription of author-as-writing by no means permits a return to simple expressivity or the notion of a controlling intention "behind" a text. The signature allows a double play of singularity and repetition. The signature (for example, on a cheque) is always unique; it is always someone's signature and not someone else's. This marks its singularity. But this uniqueness is precisely what allows it to be both forged and indefinitely duplicated in and on any number of texts. This marks its repetition. And so, in the concept-object of the signature, one finds a theoretical accommodation of the fact that any text may be distinctive and unique (without assuming that this is grounded in an autonomous creative impulse) while at the same time
being the effect of the repetition of textually productive techniques which go beyond that text and which give rise to many others.

This gives us a signature divided into two: i) an act of monumentality or authentification, ii) idiomatic effects dependent on but not restricted to the signatory. (Writing Pynchon 139)

It seems to me that a book like Authorship and Criticism should have been able to take such recent theoretical and interventionary strategies and concepts on board, without simply dismissing them as utopian or idealist. Indeed, it seems to me that they are materialist and practical moves through-and-through. But if Williamson neglects these possibilities, what does he put in the place of standard “authorialist” criticism?

The answer is a telling one. It seems to involve techniques and technologies which play across the space of writing and textual production in general: a kind of structural miscellany of possibilities which produce both the text and the human subject (writer, reader or character). So far, to some extent, so good. But these techniques and technologies come down to the following (in chapter 4): genres and generic codes, textualisation of the authorial work or oeuvre, and sets of significatory conventions. None of these seem to me to be particularly satisfactory, for the reasons I have outlined above: they are confined to a kind of structuralist poetics; they remain on the side of a descriptive project; and hence their potential for intervention into the material domain of textual production remains, at best, inexplicit and, at worst, totally neglected.

To deal with these in order, then: the notion of “genre” has recently come under fire as a stable structural unity. Williamson thinks of genres as “particular forms of textual production and practices of reading by audiences as well as means of critical classification” (52). But, as Freadman has pointed out, the idea that anything like a genre could be held together by a stable set of “defining characteristics” is an impossibility. If anything, a genre could only be a loose “family resemblance” with textual connections being made on a highly piecemeal and localised basis. Williamson suggests this possibility when he writes that “Whilst a genre involves structural processes and relations, these need not be thought of as purely formal, internal properties of the text which govern its recognition” (52). But his discussion of the concept ends here. My suspicion is that an investigation which continued along these lines would end up dropping the concept of genre altogether as yet another means by which unity and stability is imposed on a highly variable set of textual sites and conditions. Indeed, in some recent debates about the English curriculum, a number of critics have suggested that replacing an author-based approach by a genre-based approach entails exactly the same problems of the imposition of mastery upon student readings and, consequently, upon the formation of students’ subjectivities. If one can speak of an author function, then presumably it is possible to map a genre function or genre effect whereby locally specific circumstances produce
textual "clusterings" while dissipating earlier formations. And presumably, in such cases, the significant question for any descriptive analysis would be the political principles of inclusion and exclusion (of both texts and forms of subjectivity) which are brought to bear and valorised. Then the strategic question would be the identification of gaps and fissures within those principles which could be opened up in order to produce different political alignments.

In arguing for a textualisation of "the post-Romantic idea of the unified 'work'" (52), Williamson suggests that this can give us recourse to the general domain of cultural knowledges "without aligning [a text's formation] as the post-structuralists do, with a process of écriture which is assumed to transgress all conventional classifications of writing and knowledge" (53). As I hope to have shown, the concept of écriture by no means involves an idealist transgression but, on the contrary, anchors transgression in a strategic understanding of the conditions of possibility in any given productional locale. By misreading this project, I think Williamson is unnecessarily wary of taking his textualism too far. And so, in his examples, he is only able to cite the ways in which certain literary texts have been read and counter-read in different traditions (for example Leavis's celebration of D.H. Lawrence compared with Millett's early feminist criticism). This is certainly an interesting historical shift: but again it leaves us only with a description of a limited kind of history. It leaves open the question of how one could, should, or might, read such figures as D.H. Lawrence today. Would one still be content with Millett and leave it at that — since it is such a political advance over Leavis? Or could Lawrence become a site for, say, a critical interpretation of standard modes of production of masculine subjectivity, the masculine body and masculine social practice — opening up a space for a critical gender politics by men — a discursive formation which no solely descriptivist position could work with since it has not yet been formed in any clear and tangible fashion.

Lastly, Williamson's third alternative involves an attention to significatory conventions, particularly those associated with the Proppian project (the structural analysis of folk tales). And it is this model which he most relies on in his case study of Peter Wier. It is certainly the case that such a form of analysis runs counter to "our conventional assumption that actions in a story flow from characters as the well-springs of psychological motivations, impulses or desires" (56) — and note here the shift from author-critique to character-critique — but the shift to a structural model of the text is not without its price. Remember that Williamson was critical of Barthes because he seemed to choose language as a new centre or origin of textual meaning (a charge which I don't think sticks). Then it would seem to me to be rather contradictory to invoke Propp (or any other formal structuralist such as Lévi-Strauss) as an alternative: for what one inherits with Propp is the idea of a new unifying structure, a morphology which persists prior to, over and above, beyond,
and at the final destination of, any textual representation "of it." The text becomes the mere (and relatively automatic) product of the structural generating machine. This gives the machine an immense degree of control and autonomy: and it gives the analyst who has relatively unique access to it the position of oracle. Writers write, it would seem, in unconscious knowledge of the structural code; while analysts bring the code to consciousness and show what writers must do despite themselves. In this sense, to adapt Williamson's own phrase, one "retains the principle of an origin, transferring it from the subject to a [morphological structure] as system or process" (33). And so the form of authorialism is never quite undone in this strategy. It remains firmly in place.

Finally then, we could return to the idea that Williamson's critique of the author is a critique of only one side of the romantic binary: the side of expressive subjectivism and the "originating impulse" (70). And so what has become of the other side, the side of technique and control? My reading suggests strongly to me that it has become the very apparatus or figure of Williamson's critical method. For the concepts of genre, textualisation and morphology (which Williamson valorises) seem to me to be ultimately on the side of technique and technicism. And yet they might be read, as the modern equivalents of those nineteenth-century techniques which were associated with "craftsmanship" and which, when in unison with poetic inspiration, would guarantee the harmoniousness of the great work. If so, then a stress on (and critique of) one side of the romantic "dialectic," using techniques from the other side, would leave that paradigm in order — though perhaps in a different order. It would leave open the question of what is yet to be done: in both textual criticism and textual production and in any theoretical or practical strategy which sought to rethink their relations.

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1 Alec McHoul and David Wills, Writing Pynchon: Strategies in Fictional Analysis (London: Macmillan, 1990), 135-37. I apologise here for any excessive self-quotation; the only excuse being that, in a sense, it's not, since most of this is David's — if "everybody had their own" (as my Mum says) — or if authors are to continue to have their due.