

Zadie Smith's and Judith Butler's Novelistic Inconsistencies

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This article argues that the novel's embrace of inconsistency over rigour and commitment is its key distinguishing feature as a form of thought. Whereas critical theory, like other academic disciplines, tends to valorise rigorously argued and consistent ways of thinking, art – and in particular, the novel – has the capacity to generate different forms of knowledge through its inconsistency. Moreover, though, I also contend that the novelistic mode is a way of thinking that is not confined solely to texts that are themselves novels: it is also a mode that critical theory can engage. In this article, I analyse two texts characterised by this novelistic inconsistency: one by a novelist (Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*), the other by a theorist (Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*). Whereas Smith is open about her "ideological inconsistency," Butler (as befits a writer of critical theory) tends to mask the discrepancies in her thought. I argue, however, that in their treatment of the question of authorial intention, both Smith and Butler adopt surprisingly similar positions: though predominantly loyal to

the psychoanalytic and poststructuralist critique of intention and of the sovereign subject more broadly, they nevertheless at times defend the idea of authorial intention. This inconsistency, I argue, is an important virtue in Smith and Butler's discussions of intentionality, especially as it relates to the context they are both concerned with: the university campus.

The article is divided into four sections. In the first, I locate my intervention in terms of the reception of Butler's critical thought and Smith's writing, and in terms of a broader debate within literary studies about the relationship between literature and critical theory. I then move on to a discussion of Zadie Smith's ambivalent treatment of psychoanalysis in her work, arguing that, despite criticizing certain forms of psychoanalytic thinking, her novels – in particular *On Beauty* – in fact both draw on and usefully expand Freudian insights. The third section turns to Judith Butler's discussions of hate speech in *Excitable Speech* and *Precarious Life*. I identify an important change in her position between one text and the other: whereas *Excitable Speech* puts forward a rigorously anti-intentionalist theory of hate speech, Butler's argument in *Precarious Life* is rather more complex, and, despite her anti-intentionalist rhetoric, often functions in practice as a defence of intention. The final section of the article puts Smith and Butler in direct conversation, via a comparative reading of two passages (one from *On Beauty*, the other from *Precarious Life*) that each focus on faculty meetings where a professor's theoretical allegiance to the critique of intention is tested. These two novelistic moments, I argue, are valuable above all for their inconsistency.

1. A Defence of Inconsistency

In the foreword to her first collection of essays, British novelist Zadie Smith admits that the process of reading through the pieces that make up the volume forced her “to recognize that ideological inconsistency is, for me, practically an article of faith”: hence the title she gives the collection, *Changing My Mind*.¹ It is a “confessional” title, she says, but also an “apt” one: it admits to a characteristic – inconsistency – that might commonly be understood as a deficiency, but in copping to it so brazenly – on the cover of the book – she prompts her readers to

consider its virtues.² In the parlance of social media, a humblebrag is a “seemingly modest, self-critical, or casual statement or reference that is meant to draw attention to one's admirable or impressive qualities.”³ Smith's title does something similar, if also subtler. The humility – the admission of inconsistency – functions not as a rhetorical cover for the brag; rather, Smith's transparency regarding her tendency to change her mind does the reparative work of suggesting that inconsistency may itself be a quality worth bragging about.

But whereas it is relatively easy to accept that inconsistency may be an appealing quality in a novelist and journalistic essayist, it is harder to make the case that the same can be said of other forms of thought: critical theory, philosophy, literary scholarship. Such is the case of Roland Barthes, whose seeming drift away from the rigours of structuralism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis over the 1970s won him popular readers but cost him critical respect. In the final year of his life, Barthes lamented that “fickleness is never well regarded . . . what the Doxa admires is immutability, the persistence of an opinion.”⁴ In aesthetics, inconsistency can be a virtue; in spheres that value rigour and commitment – theory, politics, philosophy – it is more likely to be understood as a vice. When he spoke these words in 1980, Barthes was in fact less interested in producing theory or criticism, and more drawn to art. It was in literature – and above all the novel – that Barthes sought an antidote to the doxic valorisation of “immutability” and “persistence.” In the novel, he found a form that could accommodate the quality he shared with Smith: what Smith calls “ideological inconsistency” and what Barthes called nuance, or (as he puts it in his seminar about the process of preparing to write a novel) the ability to “change, vary, but in a nondogmatic way, like the shimmering of mottled silk (that is to say, without fanfare) on the curtain of life.”⁵ Therefore, despite the fact that Smith subjects Barthes (at least his early work, especially “The Death of the Author”) to stinging critique in *Changing My Mind*, the two of them have more in common than might be evident on first glance. The early Smith and the late Barthes both prefer flexibility to commitment, eclecticism to correctness, variety to consistency. And crucially, for both thinkers, their preferred qualities are aligned with literature rather than theory.

In this article, I take up the case that Smith and Barthes make for inconsistency, and for the novel as an especially compatible vehicle for this principle. My argument is this: that there are certain theoretical questions that demand inconsistent answers, and therefore in such cases the novel, rather than the critical-theoretical essay or monograph, is the form best suited to addressing them. The specific theoretical question I focus on is authorial intention, a question that entails a series of further questions: to what extent are an author's intentions accessible? To what extent are statements of authorial intent helpful for understanding a text? To what extent are they relevant to an aesthetic judgment of the text? How, if at all, can an author be held responsible for the intentions a text may seem to express? At this point, there is within literary studies a relatively well-defined canon of theoretical sources that provide an array of answers to these questions. It runs from Plato's *Ion* through Freud ("Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming"), to New Criticism (T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy"), French Theory (Barthes's "The Death of the Author"), and its Anglo-American reception (Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in "Against Theory").⁶ As different as the positions each of the above texts offer are – for Wimsatt and Beardsley, statements of authorial intent are completely irrelevant to critical inquiry⁷; for Knapp and Michaels, intention and meaning are identical to one another⁸ – what all of these anthologized essays or selections have in common is a degree of rigorous internal consistency that belies the complexity of the issue at stake.

In the pages that follow, I turn to two writers whose approach to the issue of intentionality is notably – and, I argue, *valuably* – less consistent: Zadie Smith and Judith Butler. By comparing a novelist (Smith) and a theorist (Butler), I aim to demonstrate not that novels are inconsistent and theoretical monographs consistent, but rather that good answers to the questions inherent in the issue of authorial intention (and Smith and Butler both provide good answers) are necessarily inconsistent, whether they are found in the pages of a novel or of a work of theory. In the case of Butler's theoretical work, though, this inconsistency, however valuable, tends to be masked, whereas Smith, as established above, is brazen about her tendency to change her mind.

The argument that I make here intervenes at two different levels: first, in terms of the reception of the specific texts I analyse – Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), and Butler's *Excitable Speech* (1997) and *Precarious Life* (2004) – and second, at a broader level, in the question of the relationship between literature and critical theory. In the remainder of this introductory section, I lay out in more detail the nature of these two interventions.

Generally speaking, Smith and Butler have been read as members of opposite camps when it comes to the question of intention: Smith as someone who would defend its importance, and Butler as someone committed to its critique. In Smith's case, this perception is no doubt linked to her *Changing My Mind* essay "Rereading Barthes and Nabokov," in which she traces the chronological process by which she came to be a writer: from reading Dickens at secondary school, through the critical essays she read and wrote during her undergraduate studies, to her career as a writer of both fiction and non-fiction. Barthes's power-to-the-reader thesis in "The Death of the Author" represents an important but intermediate stage in Smith's process of development. It allowed her to feel a part of the way a text produces meaning, but it ultimately side-lined the question of "what the author felt or wished you to feel"; when Smith became a writer, she tells us, she "felt the need to believe in [writing] as an intentional, directional act, an expression of an individual consciousness."⁹ In *On Beauty*, furthermore, Smith takes the Barthesian critique of authorial intention – embodied in the novel's protagonist, poststructuralist Art History professor Howard Belsey – as one of the key targets of her satire. A number of critics, understandably, have read the novel as an instance of the author "writ[ing] back" to the declaration of her death,¹⁰ or as an overturning of "postmodernist pieties about the impersonal sources of all subjective agency."¹¹ In this article, however, my claim is that *On Beauty's* position with regard to the critique of intention is, to its credit, considerably more complex, and that it is in fact predominantly – albeit inconsistently – anti-intentionalist.

In the case of Butler, on the other hand, I am interested in the moments when the anti-intentionalism she has consistently avowed slips. For Butler, the critique of authorial intention is part and parcel of a larger critique of the autonomous humanist subject; the issue of intention, for her, exists at the intersection of what Barthes calls the death of the author,

and what Fredric Jameson calls the “death of the subject.”¹² In *Precarious Life*, Butler explicitly draws the link between these two figures, referring to “the author-subject”: that is, the sovereign human subject understood as the author of itself, as fully intentional.¹³ As Mari Ruti has argued in *Between Levinas and Lacan* and “The Bad Habits of Critical Theory,” Butler’s continued “allegiance to the ritual of slaying the humanist subject” in texts like *Precarious Life* can have unfortunately limiting consequences: her rigid commitment to the critique of the agentic subject, for example, results in a blind spot when it comes to situations that require a more robust model of agency.¹⁴ But Ruti also points out that – especially in her more avowedly political work, work that is more in touch with the exigencies of lived experience (work that, as we will see, could be characterized as more *novelistic*) – Butler occasionally has “moments of ambivalence” about her loyalty to the project of decentring, demystifying, and disrupting the author-subject.¹⁵ My reading of Butler, then, points out something like a stifled sympathy between her wavering theoretical allegiances and Barthes’s rejection of the expectation that theoretical work be rigorously consistent. Barthes, over the course of the 1970s, gradually moved away from his early critique of the author-subject – a critique that motivated not only “The Death of the Author” but also other earlier work, in both a Marxist vein (*Mythologies*) and a structuralist one (*S/Z*). Butler, by the time of *Precarious Life*, has also begun to question her earlier anti-intentionalist arguments, even if she is not quite prepared to admit any interest in “the rehabilitation of the author-subject *per se*.”¹⁶

The reason it is especially helpful to think Smith and Butler alongside each other is that, for each of them, the inconsistency in their anti-intentionalism, the sympathy they display for authorial intention, becomes especially visible in the same context: discussions of hate speech and freedom of speech on university campuses. For both writers, this particular issue is one that highlights the limitations of a dogmatic version of anti-intentionalism: it is extremely difficult to engage in a nuanced way with questions concerning hate speech without recourse to a vocabulary of intentionality. My reading of Smith and Butler suggests that a willingness to depart at times from the anti-intentionalist training that both writers took part in (Smith as student, Butler as teacher and

thinker) is a crucial step towards being able to have a productive conversation about hate speech and academic freedom.

The second intervention I make in this article is in a conversation about the relationship between literature and other forms of thought – in particular, between the novel on the one hand and critical theory on the other. This is a conversation that has, for a number of reasons, been especially active in the last decade. Against the background of an especially fraught moment in what has been termed the crisis in the humanities, literary scholars have felt a renewed need to engage with the question of the precise kind of work that literature does in the world. For some, arguing that certain forms of theorizing have lost their vitality and political utility, it is important to show the ways in which literature can provide a source of resistance to the encroachments of theory – specifically, the form of theory that Rita Felski and others have referred to as *critique*. In Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker's edited collection *Critique and Postcritique*, Anker makes the case for J. M. Coetzee's novel *The Childhood of Jesus* as a text that "solicits the application of theory only to confound theorization."¹⁷ Here, literature is the bulwark against the dangers of an excessive and dogmatic "allegiance to theory" and critique.¹⁸ For Marxist-oriented scholars like Anna Kornbluh, on the other hand, it is precisely an understanding literature *as* critique that must be "the basis of championing the humanities in endless crisis."¹⁹ As opposed to Anker's understanding of critique, which focuses on its negative attributes – "interrogation, debunking, and exposure"²⁰ – Kornbluh emphasises "both the negative and affirmative poles of critique": the fact that it builds new worlds as well as debunking existing ones.²¹ For her, the value of a novel such as Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* is that it does *the same kind of work* as Marxist theory, diagnosing the negative aspects of its subject *and* positing utopian, affirmative alternatives.²²

At the same time, with the increasing institutional proximity of literary and academic knowledge production that Mark McGurl surveys in *The Program Era*, critical theory and the novel have become increasingly intertwined.²³ Hence projects like Judith Ryan's *The Novel After Theory*, or Mitchum Huehls's "The Post-Theory Theory Novel." As much as both of these critics emphasize the very specific ways in which critical theory has

made its way into novel-writing, they nevertheless maintain a relatively rigid distinction between the two spheres. The novel writes back to theory, which is also to say that it is something other than theory. The theory novels that Ryan reads “incorporate theory, they reflect on it, complicate it, and sometimes go beyond it,” but they remain separate from it.²⁴ For Huehls, working on “a younger generation of writers . . . who were just as exposed to theory, but only after it had lost its cachet as the one true faith,”²⁵ theory is likewise incorporated, but remains at arm’s length: “the post-theory theory novel avoids directly applying [theoretical] concepts to itself.”²⁶ This is a markedly different position than that of Katie R. Muth, who argues for the importance of understanding *Blood and Guts in High School* by Kathy Acker (one of Ryan’s novelists after theory) as itself “an act of theorizing.”²⁷ For Muth as for Kornbluh, reading the novel as theory is a way of engaging with “the question of what literary art is good for.”²⁸

The question as it appears more or less explicitly in these scholars’ work is this: does the novel *respond to* theory, or does it *do* theory? My own answer to the question is more closely aligned with Kornbluh and Muth than with Anker, Ryan, and Huehls. Like Muth, I am interested in a “more unified postwar canon” that includes texts across genres: novels, theory, and texts that unsettle the boundaries between these two fields.²⁹ Indeed, I want to reframe the question slightly, since to say that the novel does theory is to give theory a kind of categorical priority. I would be more inclined to put the two forms of thought on more even terms, as distinct but overlapping ways of approaching similar sets of questions. It is not so much that the novel *does theory*, but simply that the novel and theory often both do the same kinds of thing. But crucially, there is a difference between these two modes of doing. As Barthes suggests, what distinguishes the novel as a form of thinking is its openness to inconsistency. It is this nondogmatic, novelistic form of thought that I aim to make visible in both *On Beauty* and *Precarious Life*.

2. Zadie Smith and Psychoanalysis

In *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (2016), Lee Konstantinou insists that “it would be a mistake to describe Zadie Smith as a literary-critical reactionary”: she is undoubtedly “uneasy” with the

legacy of literary postmodernism and critical theory (and the critique of the author-subject that is inherent to both), but that does not mean that she wants to “roll back” this legacy and return to a simpler time, when the author was alive and well.³⁰ Konstantinou briefly cites as evidence for this claim Smith’s preference for formal innovation, in her own work and that of other writers. In this section, I reach a similar conclusion to Konstantinou, but from a different angle. *On Beauty*, drawing as it does on E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* as well as the postwar campus novel, is Smith at her most formally traditional. Furthermore, it repeatedly connects Howard’s “postmodern” theoretical positions – his persistent need to critique, to subject the text and its author (or the painting and its artist) to forceful exposure and debunking –to his ethical and pedagogical failures. Indeed, the former often functions for him as an excuse for the latter: Howard’s loyalty to the postmodern critique of the author-subject is part and parcel of the fact that, as his wife Kiki tells him, “all you ever do is rip into everybody else.”³¹ But *the critique of the critique* of authorial intention is not necessarily the same as the reassertion of authorial intention. That *On Beauty* manages to exemplify the first without sliding into the second makes it all the more compelling as evidence that Smith is far from “a literary-critical reactionary.” In the passage from *The Preparation of the Novel* quoted above, Barthes distinguishes between two types of intellectual change: on the one hand, one can “change but dogmatize each change . . . worship what you have hitherto burned, and vice versa”; on the other hand is the kind of “nondogmatic,” “shimmering” change that he associates with the novel.³² It is easy to interpret “Rereading Barthes and Nabokov” as exemplifying the first kind of change: Smith seems to worship what she had hitherto burned – that is, authorial intention. Here, my claim is that *On Beauty*’s position with regard to authorial intention is actually much closer to the second type. Smith’s shimmering nondogmatism is especially visible in the way in which *On Beauty* engages with psychoanalysis, the example *par excellence* of a theory that undermines the idea of the sovereign intention.

In “Rereading Barthes and Nabokov,” the flip side of Barthes’s power-to-the-reader thesis is the “bold assertion of authorial privilege” that Smith admires in Nabokov.³³ And in Smith’s argument, such an assertion of the right to actualize authorial intentions goes hand in hand with an

aversion to psychoanalysis: “Nabokov’s profound hostility to Freud was no random whim – it was the theory of the unconscious itself that horrified him. He couldn’t stand to admit the existence of a secondary power directing and diverting his own. Few writers can.”³⁴ Nabokov cannot stand Freud because Freud critiques the idea of the author-subject as fully intentional, as fully in control. Smith, on the other hand, although she admits to “a vocational need to believe in Nabokov’s vision of total control,” has a far more ambivalent attitude towards Freud.³⁵ This is visible in Smith’s debut novel, *White Teeth*, which engages sympathetically with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and its theorization of trauma, the death drive, and the repetition compulsion.³⁶ Five years later, in *On Beauty*, Smith’s position in respect to psychoanalysis is ambivalent, but nevertheless far more open-minded than Nabokov’s. She is dismissive of a certain vulgar Freudianism, but accepts and even expands the basic psychoanalytic insight that our conscious intentions are constantly and fundamentally undermined by the unconscious.

The first of the two extra-marital affairs that Howard has is with his colleague and long-time friend, the poet Claire Malcolm. Claire goes twice a week to see a psychiatrist in Boston named Dr Byford, who interprets her symptoms as part of “a pattern . . . rooted in her earliest babyhood”³⁷: Claire is, according to Dr Byford, “a woman still controlled by the traumas of her girlhood.”³⁸ This version of psychoanalysis is not one that is presented in an especially positive light. It is certainly one that Lacan, with his disdain for American ego-psychology, would scoff at, not least because Dr Byford sees the unconscious residues of trauma as immunizing Claire against all responsibility – “It made more sense to put her three-year-old self in the dock”³⁹ – whereas Lacan sees the psychoanalytic discovery as making the subject precisely *more* responsible for their actions.⁴⁰ This crude version of psychoanalysis is essentially a story told to explain away irrational behaviour, for the purposes of comfort and stability.

But there is a better, less trite reading of Freud that informs *On Beauty*, one in which we are not reducible to comprehensible, pleasure-driven intentions and the obstacles that stand in their way. Smith is especially interested in the role of the body in relation to our conscious intentions, and in that sense, the closest theoretical parallel to what she

does with psychoanalysis, I would suggest, is Shoshana Felman's *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*. Felman's project in this book is to bring together Lacanian psychoanalysis and J. L. Austin's work on the performative in order to theorize the speech act as a specifically *bodily* act. For Felman, "the relation between language and the body" is one "of incongruity and inseparability."⁴¹ Judith Butler summarizes her argument as follows: Felman "suggests that the speech act, as the act of a speaking body, is always to some extent unknowing about what it performs, that *it always says something that it does not intend*, and that it is not the emblem of mastery or control that it sometimes purports to be."⁴² Felman's reading of Freud (alongside Austin and Lacan) is one that undermines the sovereign intentional subject much more profoundly than Dr Byford's clichéd ego-psychology. For Felman, "Freud discovers not simply that the act subverts knowledge" – this would be Byford's reading – "but also that it is precisely from the *breach in knowledge*" – that is, the unconscious – "that the act takes its performative *power*: it is the *very knowledge that cannot know itself*" – again, the unconscious, here in Lacan's definition⁴³ – "that, in man, *acts*."⁴⁴ To put that more simply, the unconscious is not a mere obstacle to the speech act – it is a fundamental part of what speaks. And it is through the body that this unconscious-driven, perpetually misfiring speech act takes place.

A similar interpretation of the Freudian insight is visible in *On Beauty*, in the way that Smith's speaking bodies always say and do things that they do not intend. The most important example here is Kiki, who is all too aware of the ways in which her body, combined with the cultural history in which it is entwined, exceeds her intentions:

Kiki suspected already that this would be one of those familiar exchanges in which her enormous spellbinding bosom would play a subtle (or not so subtle, depending on the person) silent third role in the conversation... The size was sexual and at the same time more than sexual: sex was only one small element of its symbolic range. If she were white, maybe it would refer only to sex, but she was not. And so her chest gave off a mass of signals beyond her direct control: sassy, sisterly, predatory, motherly, threatening, comforting . . . Her body had directed her to a new personality; people expected new things of her, some of them good, some not.⁴⁵

Here, as in *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, the body is “that which acts in excess of what is said.”⁴⁶ But Smith also departs from Felman, in that she is much more interested in the social. In this specific example, Smith is interested in the part that race plays in the black female body’s excessive signification. And more broadly, she’s interested in the ways in which our intentions are undermined by *other people* – by the conscious intentions and by the unconscious drives and desires of those with whom we share the world.

In *On Beauty*, then, Smith draws on Freud’s analysis of the ways in which the unconscious undermines our conscious intentions, but she is also interested in the many other forces that undermine our intentions. To put it another way, she draws on the psychoanalytic insight about the ways in which our intentions fail because of *our selves*, but adds to this a consideration of the ways in which our intentions fail because of *others*. Thus, on the one hand, Smith consistently demonstrates the ways in which our unconscious drives us towards things from which our pleasure-driven intentions would run the opposite way. This tendency is visible in a passage in which Howard goes wandering and ends up, without realizing, on the doorstep of the father he has conscientiously avoided for four years: “He had no plans – or at least, his conscious mind told him he had none. His subconscious had other ideas.”⁴⁷ It is also visible in the way that Claire offers herself to Howard, even though “she had not really known why,” even though she is in a stable relationship with someone else, and even though she had “no sexual desire whatsoever” for him.⁴⁸ But on the other hand, Smith also brings out the complex negotiation that takes place between *our* desires (conscious and unconscious) and the desires of others – family, friends, or lovers. Sometimes our intentions fail because another character has the opposite intention: “I know that wasn’t your original intention, Howard, but given the circumstances . . .”⁴⁹ Sometimes they go awry because another character has the *same* intention, as when Howard and Kiki fight: “Howard was intent on slamming the door behind him, and Kiki was equally determined to kick it shut. The force of it knocked the plaster picture to the floor.”⁵⁰ And sometimes, as in the example discussed above, they fail because of the complex interaction between our intentions, our

bodies, the racial imaginaries through which others see them, and our corresponding perceptions of those others' perceptions.

3. Judith Butler's Disavowed Defence of Intention

In the following section, I consider Judith Butler's treatment of the same question. Smith's approach to intentionality, I argued, is characterised by a Barthesian shimmering nondogmatism: intentions are complexly determined and of shifting visibility and effectiveness, rather than simply either sovereign or irrelevant. Butler, by contrast, seems dogmatic: the pose she adopts is consistently anti-intentionalist, at least at the level of her rhetoric. But by comparing the way in which she analyses a single topic – hate speech – from two different perspectives (the addressee of hate speech in *Excitable Speech*, the one who is accused of committing hate speech in *Precarious Life*), it becomes evident that Butler's position is rather less consistent than it initially seems. My claim is that, in *Precarious Life*, Butler may attempt to frame her intervention as a critique of intention, but it is actually closer to a defence. Smith's proudly affirmed changes of mind and the inconsistency that Butler attempts to mask therefore put the two of them in closer conversation than their contrasting ways of framing their work imply.

In 1997's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, as the subtitle suggests, Butler's main project is to translate the insights about performativity she developed in *Gender Trouble* into the scene of the politics of speech: speech understood as having a performative function, and as having concrete political stakes, such as the fighting words doctrine, hate speech, and other forms of legally regulated expression. Butler understands hate speech as form of injurious speech,⁵¹ but also wants to maintain that its effects are not as determined as Catharine MacKinnon – who argued in *Only Words* that pornography authoritatively and deterministically “wields a performative power” that cannot but injure women⁵² – would maintain. Hate speech, for Butler, is a citation, a repetition of a term that carries with it a long history of sedimented meanings, just like the gender norms she analysed in *Gender Trouble*. Hence its degree of authority is unstable: where there is repetition, for Butler, there is the possibility of subversion. Hate speech attempts to silence its addressee, and may well succeed, but it may also provide the

addressee with the unexpected opportunity to expropriate its power via a process of subversive resignification that, like the drag performances of *Gender Trouble*, contains the possibility of resistance. This possibility is what Butler understands by agency. She maintains that her critique of sovereignty and of the author-subject does not mean “the demolition of agency,” but rather that “agency begins where sovereignty wanes”: agency for Butler is always situated and conditioned, and always preceded by “a linguistic field of enabling constraints.”⁵³ This is therefore very much an anti-intentionalist discussion of hate speech. The person who utters the hate speech cannot ensure that their utterance is (to use the vocabulary of J. L. Austin, on whom Butler continues to draw here) felicitous: “the subject does not exercise sovereign power over what it says.”⁵⁴ The intention of the one who utters hate speech matters little; her focus instead is on the addressee of hate speech, and the ways in which they can resist the violent interpellations of the one addressing them.

In the fourth chapter of 2004's *Precarious Life*, however, Butler's focus shifts away from the addressee of hate speech, and toward the addressee of the *charge* of hate speech. And in this shift, Butler ends up doing two important things. First, she demonstrates the ways in which the framework of intention and effect elides the ability to talk about hate speech with any nuance. And second, against her anti-intentionalist history (on full display in *Excitable Speech*), she carves out a certain degree of space for intentionality.

If *Excitable Speech* is an argument against institutional control over speech (see especially chapter 2's extended critique of the then-current “Don't ask, don't tell” policy regarding homosexuality in the U.S. military), “The Charge of Anti-Semitism” is a more extended analysis of the consequences of such institutional control, specifically in the context of the university campus. The chapter's starting point is a statement made by then-President of Harvard, Lawrence Summers, on September 17, 2002 – around the time that Zadie Smith would have arrived at Harvard as a Radcliffe Fellow. Butler begins as follows:

When the President of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers, remarked that to criticize Israel at this time and to call upon universities to divest from Israel are “actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect, if not their intent,” he

introduced a distinction between an effective and intentional anti-Semitism that is controversial at best.⁵⁵

Although Butler frames this chapter in her preface to *Precarious Life* as primarily a discussion of the censorship of certain kinds of critical speech,⁵⁶ the chapter turns, as its opening sentence makes clear, on a discussion of intention, and its relationship to effect. Her argument about Summers's controversial distinction between intent and effect runs as follows. First, she points out that what Summers is talking about is a kind of speech act that has an anti-Semitic *effect* "even if [anti-Semitism] is not part of the conscious *intention* of those who make the utterance itself."⁵⁷ That is, we have something like the inverse of the situation that Butler imagines in *Excitable Speech*. There we had an utterance that, because of the potential for subversive repetition, may *fail to have* an injurious effect *despite* having a conscious intention to injure. Here, we have an utterance that supposedly *does have* an injurious effect, despite there having been *no* conscious intent to injure. What remains the same, importantly, is that intention is beside the point. Summers, like the Butler of *Excitable Speech*, approaches hate speech from a specifically anti-intentionalist point of view. Of course, his reasons for adopting this perspective seem to be different from Butler's: whereas anti-intentionalism is part and parcel of the critique of the author-subject to which Butler is committed, Summers seems to be avoiding imputing the intentions of the intellectuals he discusses for more pragmatic reasons. It is a group of "serious and thoughtful people," he tells us, in "progressive intellectual communities," whom Summers is accusing of effective anti-Semitism – some of them, presumably, his own colleagues. Accordingly, it makes sense for Summers to avoid giving the impression that he believes them to be harbouring hateful views (intentional anti-Semitism), even if the alternative is rather patronizing ("I know you don't really *mean* to be anti-Semitic, but..."). Regardless of the particular reasons for Summers's anti-intentional method, though, what is interesting and unexpected here is that, in arguing against his approach, Butler ends up departing in an important way from her own position in *Excitable Speech*.

Her argument continues by examining two separate interpretations of what Summers could mean by effective anti-Semitism. The first possibility she considers is that Summers is imagining that, in "the public

sphere of the US,” there exists a dominant “acoustic frame” that governs the reception of criticisms of Israel, such that these criticisms cannot but be heard as anti-Semitic.⁵⁸ In this case, “we are asked to conjure a listener who attributes intention to the speaker,” which means that “the only way to understand *effective* anti-Semitism would be to presuppose *intentional* anti-Semitism.”⁵⁹ Under that possibility, then, the intent/effect distinction that Summers tries to draw collapses, in that the *effect* of the utterance is imagined as retroactively determining its *intention*, even if the intention was entirely different.

The second possibility Butler considers is “that critical statements *will be used* by those who have anti-Semitic intent.”⁶⁰ Butler acknowledges that a criticism of Israel does indeed run the risk of being exploited in this way, but maintains that if Summers is going to claim that this risk means that those criticisms have a determinately anti-Semitic effect, then he is ceding far too much power to the imagined exploiters. “Here again,” she writes, “the distinction between effective anti-Semitism and intended anti-Semitism folds, insofar as the only way a statement can become effectively anti-Semitic is if there is, somewhere, an intention to use the statement for anti-Semitic aims, an intention imagined as enormously effective in realizing its aims.”⁶¹ It is worth pausing over this. In that last phrase – “an intention imagined as enormously effective in realizing its aims” – Butler is presenting her argument as a critique of sovereign intentionality. This is the same move she uses in *Excitable Speech*, when she critiques Althusser’s theory of interpellation for similarly relying on an idea of the policeman’s speech act of hailing the subject as sovereign⁶² – as “enormously effective in realizing its aims.” But in this chapter, the anti-intentional rhetoric belies the larger point she’s making: namely, that under both the possible interpretations she considers, she argues that Summers gives too much interpretive power to the reception of an utterance, and *not enough interpretive power to the one who utters it*. In other words, she is putting forward a defence of intention. This point emerges all the more clearly a few pages later:

According to Summers, there are some forms of anti-Semitism that are characterized retroactively by those who decide upon their status. This means that nothing should be said or done that will be taken to be anti-Semitic by others.

But what if the others who are listening are wrong? If we take one form of anti-Semitism to be defined retroactively by those who listen to a certain set of speech acts, or witness a certain set of protests against Israel, then what is left of the possibility of legitimate protests against a given state, either by its own population or by those who live outside those borders? If we say that every time “Israel” is uttered, the speaker really means “Jews,” then we have foreclosed in advance the possibility that the speaker really means “Israel.”⁶³

“But what if the others who are listening are wrong?” What if the speaker meant what they said? What if their intention really was that transparent and accessible? This is Butler at her most un-Butlerian, her most anti-intentional. It is Butler, against all odds, advocating something like surface reading, or at least leaving open the possibility that surface reading might, in some circumstances, have better interpretations than suspicious, paranoid, depth reading. In *Excitable Speech*, she argued that the addressee of an utterance can subversively resignify it, short-circuiting its intentions. Here, she critiques Summers for arguing what appears to be the same thing: that utterances can be “characterized retroactively by those who decide upon their status.”

But my point here is not to criticize Butler for her inconsistency. Insofar as I disagree with Butler, it is for the way she tries to mask her inconsistency. My contention, rather, is that the contradiction between her position in *Excitable Speech* and her position in “The Charge of Anti-Semitism” is evidence that sometimes – and hate speech is a case in point – inconsistency is necessary.

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler talks about speech acts that contain the possibility of failure: speech acts where the effect does not match the intent, infelicitous speech acts. And in that book, she *wants* for those speech acts to be infelicitous, because she is invested in the project of giving the addressees of hate speech agency, and agency, for Butler, is a matter of subversive repetition – a matter of subverting the intentions of a speech act. In “The Charge of Anti-Semitism,” she is also talking about infelicitous speech acts. But here, she *wants* for them to be *felicitous*: she wants for somebody to be able to voice a criticism of Israel, and for that

criticism to be read precisely *as a criticism of Israel*, as intended. There, she was talking about turning actual hate speech into something that resists hate speech. Here, she is talking about statements that are not hate speech, and safeguarding their status as not-hate-speech. There, she needed to be able to counter an understanding of speech as fully and sovereignly intentional. Here, she needs to be able to counter an understanding of speech in which intentions are irrelevant. Yes, there is an inconsistency regarding the status of intention there, but it is for good reason. It is important to be able to think both the subversive repetition of hate speech and the academic freedom to voice criticisms of Israel at the same time, and doing so means saying, essentially, that no, intentions are not deterministic or sovereign – *and* no, intentions are not irrelevant either.

4. The Humanities Quandary

By this point in the article, I hope to have established the following: that despite their differing sets of theoretical allegiances, and despite Butler's attempts to frame her theoretical work as consistently anti-intentionalist, *On Beauty* and *Precarious Life* both demonstrate a significant degree of nondogmatism or inconsistency that helps them to engage with the question of authorial intent in a more generative manner. In this final section, I want to extend that argument, linking it explicitly to the question of novelistic form. The kind of generative inconsistency that I have identified in Smith and Butler is a quality that Barthes associated with the novel. Here, I look at two particular passages – one from *On Beauty*, the other from *Precarious Life* – that share not only this quality of generative inconsistency, but also a striking degree of similarity in content *and* form: both take place in universities, at meetings of faculty and administration, focusing on a professor whose theoretical allegiance to the critique of intention runs up against limitations, and both are *novelistic*: not only in that they are narratively driven, but also in that they stage what Amanda Anderson and Sianne Ngai both identify as one of the key tensions of the novelistic tradition (especially in the realist mode): “the relation between ideas and life, or how one might live theory.”⁶⁴ It is this encounter between theory and lived experience that is at the heart of the connection between inconsistency and novelistic form: when it

encounters the messy contours of lived experience, as both *On Beauty* and *Precarious Life* render all too clearly, theory, no matter how rigorously argued, finds it difficult to maintain its consistency. This is not to try to point out a fatal flaw in the project of theory. Far from it: my aim here is rather to show how the theoretical and the novelistic – understood as modes in which any text, whether its cover proclaims it a novel or its bookstore placement categorizes it as a theoretical monograph, may partake – augment each other. “Inconsistency” is one way of naming the creative results of that messy, augmentative encounter.

The two novelistic moments I am concerned with here centre respectively on Howard Belsey and on Judith Butler herself. In the first case, Howard runs into a conflict between his theoretical positions and lived experience when his rival, Monty Kipps, proposes to deliver a series of lectures with the Stanley-Fish-esque title “Taking the Liberal Out of the Liberal Arts.”⁶⁵ Anticipating that the lectures might “contravene the internal ‘hate laws’ of” the college where Howard and Monty teach, and eager for an opportunity to cut his rival down to size, Howard asks that the faculty “be given a proposed outline of these lectures; or, failing that, we shall be told this morning *what the intention of the lectures is*.”⁶⁶ Howard, that is, commits the intentional fallacy – a fact Monty seizes on with glee: “I am afraid I am quite unable to answer his frankly bizarre request for their ‘intention’. In fact, I admit it surprises and delights me that a self-professed ‘textual anarchist’ like Dr Belsey should be so passionate to know the *intention* of a piece of writing.”⁶⁷ Monty seizes here on the inconsistency between Howard’s anti-intentionalist theoretical stance and his request that Monty divulge his “intention,” leaving Howard in a double bind. He finds himself in need of the very same ideas that prop up the “mytheme of the artist as autonomous individual” that he has been so committed to interrogating: intentionality, determinacy of signification, the author as the origin of the text and guardian of its meaning.⁶⁸ Sticking to his poststructuralist guns would mean ceding to Monty’s arguments; maintaining his request for Monty’s intention entails facing accusations of hypocrisy. He doubles down on the latter, interrupting Kipps’s vague outline of the proposed lectures, not this time to ask what their intention is, but, more intentional-fallaciously still, to claim knowledge of Monty’s “clear intention of antagonizing and alienating various minority groups on

this campus.”⁶⁹ At this point, the meeting turns into a carnivalesque face-off. With Howard having adopted the nominally conservative position of claiming that intention is accessible and relevant, Monty mimics the opposite view:

Now is it not *you*, Dr, who speaks of the instability of textual meaning? Is it not *you*, Dr, who speaks of the indeterminacy of all sign systems? How, then, can I possibly predict *before* I give my lectures how the “multivalency” . . . of my own text will be received in the “heterogeneous consciousnesses” of my audience?⁷⁰

Monty is speaking in a warped version of Howard’s own “textual anarchist” voice. He adopts Howard’s Barthesian approach in both content and form: his speech is a tissue of unattributed citations (“the ‘multivalency’ . . . of my own text”; “the ‘heterogeneous consciousnesses’ of my audience”), making it impossible for Howard to work out exactly what he is being accused of, or by whom.

This dilemma is the one Butler refers to as “the humanities quandary”: “no one knows who is speaking and in what voice, and with what intent. Does anyone stand by the words they utter? Can we still trace those words to a speaker or, indeed, a writer? And which message, exactly, was being sent?”⁷¹ It is a quandary in which the question of authorial intention is made newly urgent, and it is one that, near the beginning of *Precarious Life*’s final chapter, she describes encountering for herself. As in *On Beauty*, the encounter takes place at a faculty meeting – here, during a discussion of the crisis in the humanities. Faced with the sense “that something called the humanities was being derided from some direction or another” – even if she is unable to work out precisely who is levelling this charge – Butler feels the need to respond.⁷² Her ability to respond effectively, however, is undermined by the fact that the charge (that the humanities have lost their moral authority) has no clearly discernible origin: it is filtered through multiple layers of reported speech and rhetorical evasiveness, meaning that “it was not always possible to tell which view was owned by whom, or whether anyone really was willing to own a view.”⁷³ Just as Howard wants a simple answer to a complex question – what are Monty’s intentions for his lecture series – Butler appears momentarily tempted by the old fantasy of transparently

accessible authorial intentions. If she could just work out “who is speaking and in what voice, and with what intent,” then maybe she would be better equipped to defend the humanities. The double bind, the humanities quandary, the novelistic tension between ideas and life: here they rise to the surface, troubling Butler’s rigorously theorized anti-intentionalism.

Of course, in the end she remains committed to the critique of “the author-subject.”⁷⁴ “[I]t would be paradoxical,” she claims, “if I were now to argue that what we really need is to tether discourse to authors, and in that way we will reestablish both authors and authority. I did my own bit of work, along with many of you, in trying to cut that tether.”⁷⁵ Here she alludes to *Excitable Speech*, in which her focus was on “*untethering* the speech act from the sovereign subject.”⁷⁶ In this essay from *Precarious Life*, as in “The Charge of Anti-Semitism,” Butler props up the theoretical consistency of her career-long critique of the author-subject via the rhetoric of anti-intentionalism. The chapter proceeds to leave this novelistic scene of tension and temptation behind, turning away from anecdote and lived experience to a discussion of Levinas. Having put paid to the spectre of intention, Butler returns to her theoretical comfort zone.

But as brief as Butler’s hesitation is, my aim in this article has been to suggest that there is something about this kind of moment of inconsistency that not only provides a better way into questions having to do with intention and hate speech, but which also can be understood as distinctly novelistic. The novelistic mode, then, is one that – as Elizabeth Anker and Judith Ryan suggest – complicates and at times resists theory by putting theoretical concepts into unpredictable and volatile contact with lived experience. But it is also – as Anna Kornbluh argues – a way of working in parallel to theory, an alternative form of critique. What distinguishes this novelistic form of theorizing – and the precise reason it is most worth attending to – is its inconsistency.

¹ Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), xi.

² Smith, *Changing My Mind*, xi.

³ *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “humblebrag,” accessed March 12, 2018,

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humblebrag>

⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the*

Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980), ed. Nathalie Léger, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 267.

⁵ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 267.

⁶ Extracts from all but the last of these can be found in Seán Burke's *Authorship* reader. Seán Burke, ed., *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995). For the last, see Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 723-42.

⁷ W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3-20.

⁸ Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," 724.

⁹ Smith, *Changing My Mind*, 43.

¹⁰ Pankratz, Anette, "'Nothing That Is Worth Knowing Can Be Taught': Artists and Academia in Novels by A.S. Byatt, David Lodge and Zadie Smith." In *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Thing in British, Irish and Canadian Fiction after 1945*, ed. Anette Pankratz and Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012), 274.

¹¹ Dorothy J. Hale, "On Beauty as Beautiful? The Problem of Novelistic Aesthetics by Way of Zadie Smith," *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2012), 820.

¹² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 306.

¹³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 129.

¹⁴ Mari Ruti, "The Bad Habits of Critical Theory," *The Comparatist*, no. 40 (2016), 9.

¹⁵ Ruti, "The Bad Habits of Critical Theory," 9.

¹⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 129.

¹⁷ Elizabeth S. Anker, "Why We Love Coetzee; or, *The Childhood of Jesus* and the Funhouse of Critique." In *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 205.

¹⁸ Anker, "Why We Love Coetzee," 206. See also Martin Paul Eve, *Literature Against Criticism: University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016).

¹⁹ Anna Kornbluh, "We Have Never Been Critical: Toward the Novel as Critique," *Novel/50*, no. 3 (November 2017), 399.

²⁰ Anker, "Why We Love Coetzee," 184/

²¹ Kornbluh, "We Have Never Been Critical," 398.

²² Kornbluh, "We Have Never Been Critical," 406-07.

²³ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). Lee Konstantinou, however, notes that McGurl spends relatively little time on this particular question: for him, the influence of theory on literary production is "a serious literary-historical gap in the otherwise compelling story of" *The Program Era*. See Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4-5.

²⁴ Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 7.

²⁵ Mitchum Huehls, "The Post-Theory Theory Novel," *Contemporary Literature* 56, no. 2

(Summer 2015), 286.

²⁶ Huehls, "The Post-Theory Theory Novel," 307.

²⁷ Katie R. Muth, "Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory: Kathy Acker's Blood and Guts in High School," *Narrative* 19, no. 1 (January 2011), 104.

²⁸ Muth, "Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory," 105.

²⁹ Muth, "Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory," 104.

³⁰ Konstantinou, *Cool Characters*, 3.

³¹ Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2005), 392.

³² Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 267.

³³ Smith, *Changing My Mind*, 43.

³⁴ Smith, *Changing My Mind*, 55.

³⁵ Smith, *Changing My Mind*, 55.

³⁶ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), 140, 211.

³⁷ Smith, *On Beauty*, 223.

³⁸ Smith, *On Beauty*, 226.

³⁹ Smith, *On Beauty*, 226.

⁴⁰ Renata Salecl, for example, argues that from a Lacanian standpoint, despite the fact that one speaks more and differently than one intends, "the subject cannot escape responsibility, even if this responsibility accounts for no more than the mere fact that he or she is a subject." Renata Salecl, *(Per)Versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 1998), 124. Mari Ruti argues in *Between Levinas and Lacan* that my opacity to myself is not "a get-out-of-jail-free card" but "an invitation to a radical form of self-responsibility." Mari Ruti, *Between Levinas and Lacan: Self, Other, Ethics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 60.

⁴¹ Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, Or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 67.

⁴² Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 10 (emphasis added).

⁴³ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, 132n23

⁴⁴ Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, 67.

⁴⁵ Smith, *On Beauty*, 47.

⁴⁶ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 11.

⁴⁷ Smith, *On Beauty*, 291

⁴⁸ Smith, *On Beauty*, 223-24.

⁴⁹ Smith, *On Beauty*, 331.

⁵⁰ Smith, *On Beauty*, 208.

⁵¹ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 50.

⁵² Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 67.

⁵³ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 16.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 34.

⁵⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 101

⁵⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xvi.

⁵⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 104 (emphasis added).

- ⁵⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 104-05.
- ⁵⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 105 (emphasis in original).
- ⁶⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 106.
- ⁶¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 106.
- ⁶² Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 32.
- ⁶³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 110-11.
- ⁶⁴ Amanda Anderson, "The Liberal Aesthetic." In *Theory After 'Theory'*, ed. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 2011), 259. Ngai cites this passage in the introduction to *Our Aesthetic Categories*, and develops the idea further throughout the book's chapter on the interesting. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 6-7, 110-73.
- ⁶⁵ Smith, *On Beauty*, 326.
- ⁶⁶ Smith, *On Beauty*, 326 (emphasis added).
- ⁶⁷ Smith, *On Beauty*, 327.
- ⁶⁸ Smith, *On Beauty*, 252.
- ⁶⁹ Smith, *On Beauty*, 328.
- ⁷⁰ Smith, *On Beauty*, 328.
- ⁷¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 129.
- ⁷² Butler, *Precarious Life*, 129.
- ⁷³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 129.
- ⁷⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 129.
- ⁷⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 129.
- ⁷⁶ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 15 (emphasis added).

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