

Introduction

Intention and interpretation from a historical perspective

Intention plays a complex role in human behaviour, intertwined as it is with the desire to understand, covering a range from oral conversation (“what do you mean?”) to the appeal of challenging texts and their inevitable pitfalls including non-understanding, misunderstanding or uncertainty. The interpretation of literary texts is a strong case in point: over the years we have encountered many conflicting views about how far authorial intention should matter when readers deal with literature. These debates have grown increasingly fierce during the post-World War II period, not only regarding literature, but also in other domains such as the arts, philosophy or law. It is against this background that Stanley Fish – with his exceptional talent for hyperbolic one-liners – coined the phrase that intention is “a vexed topic that usually brings out the worst in everyone” (Fish 1989, 116). So I had better approach my topic with detours.

Let me start with a poem:

avenidas

avenidas

avenidas y flores

flores

flores y mujeres

avenidas

avenidas y mujeres

avenidas y flores y mujeres y

un admirador

Even for someone who does not speak Spanish, the structure of this poem is easy to recognise. Formalised, the four stanzas could be something like: a / a + b // b / b + c // a / a + c // a + b + c +/ d. So translating the last stanza should suffice to understand the others: “avenues and flowers and women and / an admirer.” The poem was published in 1953 by Eugen Gomringer, generally known as the father of *konkrete poesie*, Concrete Poetry (cf. Jackson et al. 1996). The poem could be taken as a prototype to illustrate the central features of this movement – its preference for word-material as opposed to sentences, for reduction, for repetition, for logical structures. Gomringer himself confirmed explicitly the exemplary dimension of *avenidas*. In his manifesto-like text “vom vers zur konstellation”,

“from line to constellation”, published in 1955, he uses *avenidas* to illustrate his core concept “constellation”. He defines it as:

the constellation is the simplest possibility of making poetry that is based on the word. It contains a group of words – as a group of stars turns into a constellation in the night sky. Within it, two, three or more words placed next to or below each other – it won’t be too many – given a cognitive-material relationship. And that’s it! (Gomringer 1955, 96–97; my translation, RG)

avenidas is for Gomringer such a “constellation” of, in this case, six words. The precise nature of the relationship within that group remains unsaid – but at least part of it circles around admiration, with three objects and one subject of admiration.

The iconic status of this poem for Concrete Poetry – and, one might add, the affinity of Concrete Poetry with being seen in public space – was illustrated when Gomringer received the poetics prize of the Alice Salomon Berlin University of Applied Sciences in 2011, a university that trains for professions in the sectors of social work, health care or early childhood care and education. As a sign of his gratitude, Gomringer authorised the university to make public use of *avenidas*. The rector decided to have it painted on the façade of the university. Until here, the story of reception and interpretation of this poem does seem rather clear: there is an explicit and plausible frame of interpretation given by the author himself, this interpretation is repeated, confirmed and extended by many scholars (Kyora 2015), all contributing to the canonical status of this poem within Concrete Poetry. More generally, the poem could be seen as iconic for the canonisation of neo-avant-garde poetry itself.

However, this is only one side of the story. The other started in 2016, when the AStA – the General Students Committee – at the Alice Salomon University argued in an open letter to the Senate of their university that the poem should be removed from the façade. Their interpretation was that the poem “not only reproduced a classical patriarchal tradition of art in which women are reduced to the beautiful muses that inspire male artists to their creative acts”. What was more, “the poem reminds in an unpleasant way of the sexual harassment that women are exposed to on a daily basis”. For the critics, the poem is not only an unpleasant reminder of unacceptable behaviour: the admiration for women expressed in the poem, according to the AStA, “leads to fear of harassment, and to the concrete experiencing of these acts”. With this argumentation, the AStA convinced the Academic Senate of the university to vote for a procedure leading to redesigning the façade. In that procedure, design proposals could be made by all members of the university up to 31 October 2017. After an online vote, the Senate finally decided to remove *avenidas* from the façade, and decided

to replace it with a poem written by Barbara Köhler, itself to be replaced every five years from then on. In a public discussion in Berlin after the decision, Gomringer defended his poem against two representatives of the university with the argument that it did not aim at any message one could carry home, let alone a message on gender politics: “Art is absolutely free”. For the student representative, however, the poem remained part of a sexist society that discriminates women: she reads the poem “from a social worker’s perspective” and finds it important “that we will not be denied that reading” (cf. Ingendaay 2018).

The question now, which programmatic or specific intention of the author and/or his work can or should be taken as legitimate and plausible in comparison to competing ones, is fascinating and important. The same goes for theoretical reflections on whether the students’ reading should be regarded as part of the meaning of the poem or just as its effect (“significance”, cf. Hirsch 1967). So are general questions that take empirical-experimental approaches and try to specify the role of authorial intention in interpretation (cf. Guy et al. 2018; Horváth 2015). But these questions and reflections will not be at the core of the present book – though they will be touched upon from different angles. What the book will concentrate on are “readings” in their historical context, taken as documents of reception. They will be analysed from the perspective of to what extent they can be connected to specific historical structural changes in interpretation.

Looking back at the debate on *avenidas*, one might suspect different kinds of historical shifts at work. It might be used as a marker to indicate changes in the public discourse on feminism and sexism in the last decennia, or to indicate changes in the balance of power at universities in Germany in that period. Yet, the point I would like to make takes us to another dimension of this conflict: it can be seen, too, as indicating changes in the conventions of intention and interpretation in general – changes in reading behaviour of literary texts, if one likes. A first version of my central question might be: which role do concepts of intention play in the interpretation of texts? The aim of this book is, accordingly, the reconstruction of the concepts and norms regarding intention that are the most relevant ones for the debate on the interpretation of texts at specific moments in time.

A topic as vast as the history of interpretation with regard to authorial intention needs limitations. Therefore, the focus of this book will be on moments when conceptual changes can be traced. Inevitably, this will lead to omitting many names the readers might have in mind – and rightfully so! – concerning intention and interpretation, from Theophrastus via Jean de la Bruyère to Nietzsche, Freud, I.A. Richards and beyond. The only excuse for these and many other omissions is that this book must aim for a viable way of reconstruct-

ing the history of a debate lasting more than 2500 years. It tries to find that way in establishing a typology, on an exemplary basis. Not with the aim to cover most, let alone all participants in the debate on intention in interpretation. Not with the aim to join or oppose one or more of the parties. The primary aim is to get out of the trenches of Fish and his opponents by reconstructing from a historical perspective the specific implied normativity of the typical positions in the debates.

In order to illustrate this focus with regard to the conflict around the readings of the Gomringer poem, I would like to give an example of the kind of claims that this book will circle around. The claim will be modified in the course of this book, but in its anecdotic version it runs as follows: a conceptual handling of authorial intention as manifested in the interpretation of the students and the Senate of the Alice Salomon University has only been regarded as a legitimate reading of literature from the second half of the twentieth century onwards. This concept consists of at least three aspects:

1. The biographical author's intention x with regard to a text y has been made explicit and is known to the interpreter (or could have been known);
2. The explication of authorial intention x does not run counter to generally accepted values but is, also from the perspective of the interpreter, sincere, respectable, legitimate etc.;
3. The interpreter defends his interpretation ($\neg x$) with regard to y against the authorial intention x, even when 1. and 2. are the case.

In what follows, I will argue that the behaviour in 3. would *not* have been regarded as a legitimate dealing with literary texts until about the middle of the twentieth century. To state the same point positively: readings of *avenidas* such as those of the students and the majority of the Senate are only regarded as legitimate in the aftermath of the article "The Intentional Fallacy" by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, published in 1946 in *The Sewanee Review*. Put briefly, for the sake of the argument at this point, Wimsatt and Beardsley's famous intentional fallacy boils down to the view that in the interpretation of literary texts, authorial intention is "neither available nor desirable" in judging the meaning or the value of a literary piece of art (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, 468; cf. Wimsatt 1968). For Wimsatt and Beardsley this means turning away from established authorities: "The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's [...]. The poem belongs to the public" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, 470) – which is rather close to the basis for the interpretation by the AStA of the Alice Salomon University. Therefore, I will argue that "intentional fallacy" can be regarded as an example of a conceptual shift in the history of authorial intention in the interpretation of texts. After this moment in history, interpretations of literary texts could be de-

fended as legitimate that had not existed before that moment, or at least could not have counted on applause of some significance.

The “Oven of Akhnai”

Such claims are also an invitation for readers to look for counter-evidence, or at least check in their memory for possibilities. In writing this book, I came across one such example that seemed to kill my 1946 darling right from the start. It is a famous story on interpretation from the Talmud, generally known as the “Oven of Akhnai” story, and one of the most frequently discussed traditional Jewish stories in modern times (Boyarin 2007, 354). The story dates from the fifth or sixth century AD (Rubenstein 1999, 58) and reports a debate on the ritual status of a special kind of oven. Rabbi Eliezer claims that the oven is pure, and the Sages (the Jewish authority in legal matters) claim it is impure – more details are not needed for the argument I’d like to make:

It was taught: On that day R. Eliezer responded with all the responses in the world, but they did not accept them from him. He said to them, ‘If the law is as I say, let the carob tree prove it.’ The carob uprooted itself from its place and went one hundred cubits – and some say four cubits. They said to him, ‘One does not bring proof from the carob.’ The carob returned to its place. He said to them, ‘If the law is as I say, let the aqueduct prove it.’ The water turned backwards. They said to him, ‘One does not bring proof from water.’ The water returned to its place. [...] He said to them, ‘If it is as I say, let it be proved from heaven.’ A heavenly voice went forth and said, ‘What is it for you with R. Eliezer, since the law is like him in every place?’ R. Yehoshua stood up on his feet and said, ‘*It is not in heaven* (Deut. 30:12).’ What is ‘*It is not in heaven*?’ R. Yirmiah said, ‘We do not listen to a heavenly voice, since you already gave it to us on Mt. Sinai and it is written there, *Incline after the majority* (Exod. 23:2).’ (qtd. from Rubenstein 1999, 36 – 37)

Departing from the axiom of God authoring the Torah – suspending disbelief and questions of who actually wrote it – this story seems to correspond exactly with the three points of the concept of intentional fallacy noted above: 1) God’s intention is made explicit and 2) there is no sign of doubt concerning God’s sincerity; nevertheless 3) God’s intention is set aside by the majority in order to declare the opposite as valid law – and all this about 1500 years ago. To go from bad to worse, the suggested reading is not only hypothetical, but the story has actually been interpreted that way. For example by Moshe Halbertal, in his study *People of the Book*. For Halbertal (1997, 48 – 49), the story legitimises a way of interpreting that “detaches authoritative meaning from authorial intent”. In his view “the Author’s intention is not relevant to the interpretation of the Torah”. Similar interpretations are defended by many other scholars, mostly within the poststruc-

turalist paradigm such as Susan A. Handelman (1982, 41–42) or in the fields of law and literature by José Faur who claims that Torah interpretation does not aim “to discover the mind of the author but to generate meaning” (qtd. from Stone 1993, 845; cf. 836, 841). So, is there already 1500 years ago a kind of turning away from authorial intention that according to my claim should not be much older than 75 years? I don’t think so.

I have several arguments for this. To start contextually: such a reading of the “Oven of Akhnai” story would violate what is generally regarded as the ruling conventions of interpretation for the Torah. This tradition can be traced back at least to the third century BC. It does not show any doubts regarding the authority of God as leading principle. Of course one is sometimes not sure what the right interpretation is, but there is no doubt that it is *God’s intention* his people should follow. James Kugel summarises this tradition in four principles that according to him are valid at least until the seventeenth century, and in some circles even much longer. The short version of these principles goes: “The Bible is cryptic, relevant, perfect and divinely granted” (Kugel 2007, 21).

Accordingly, and that is my second argument: all the interpretations I just referred to were written after my benchmark date (1946). A sceptical reader might find this interesting but not very compelling, since it might be a question of biased choice from someone trying to make his point. The only way to convince this sceptic would be a systematic, full historical analysis of the reception of Bawa Metsia 59b focusing on the concepts of intentionality. We do not have such an analysis yet, but what we do have are two articles – Englard (1975) and Stone (1993) – that reconstruct large parts of the reception history of the “Oven of Akhnai”. To make a long story short: I have found no pre-1960s interpretation of this story that plays out the Sages and their interpretation against the intentions of God, and that in the end rejects God’s authorial intent.

It is striking that the vast majority of interpretations before the mid-twentieth century do not even stress a tension between God’s will and the ruling of the Sages. Instead, the reading conventions followed by these critics reduce this very tension. Many of them argue that God intended that his true will would be uncovered when the people followed majority decisions – as opposed to following prophetic words. For example, the fourteenth century scholar Nissim of Gerona (a scholar of Nachmenides also known as the Ran) wrote that the Sages did not want to transgress the majority rule of the Torah and believed that “whatever they decide it is what God commanded” (cf. Halbertal 1997, 64–66). Similarly, the famous seventeenth century Rabbi Loew (from Gustav Meyrink’s *Golem*) saw majority rule as the best prescription for making a Godly-inspired decision because it compensated for the limitations of individual intelligence and therefore came closer to what he called the “Supreme Intellect”

(cf. Stone 1993, 862; England 1975, 143, 146). And the late nineteenth century Talmud expert Z.H. Chajes claimed that when God heard his people argue “it is not in Heaven” and “the majority should be followed”, this was “evidence [of] how deeply implanted in their minds was the concept of God’s eternity, i.e. it was not subject to chance or change” (qtd. from England 1975, 149).

These interpretations often claimed extra credibility from an additional passage in the Talmud directly following our story:

R. Natan came upon Elijah. He said to him, ‘What was the Holy One doing at that time?’ He said to him, ‘He laughed and smiled and said, “My sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me”’. (qtd. from Rubenstein 1999, 37)

Although this passage is also open to different interpretations, the picture of a quite satisfied father is, as far as I can see, the dominant one: when all is said and done, God knows that all his children want to do is to follow his will.

A few earlier interpretations however *do* address the tension between God’s intention and the ruling of the Sages. But these exceptions do not form counter-evidence for my claim, because in these exceptions the Rabbi’s decision is judged as wrong and unacceptable – people make mistakes, also in interpretation, and this was one. Such a reading is for example given from a Christian perspective when in the twelfth century Petrus Venerabilis condemns the Rabbis as conscious violators of God’s will, turning away from God. Similarly, but then within the Rabbinic tradition itself, Rabbi Moses ben Isaac of Bisenz (1595: *Darash Moshe*) claims that the decision of the Sages was wrong, and that God laughed because his children wished “to defeat him with fantasies and baseless argument” (qtd. from England 1975, 145). But rebellion, disobedience, wicked deceit or error do not shake the foundation of an interpretive model that in the end uses a concept of authorial intention as its focus and as its final aim, it only makes the conclusion of the Sages non-binding. And by this, the criticism of the Sages confirms in the end that authorial intention has been the guideline of all interpretations of this Talmud story until the second half of the twentieth century.

Points of departure

To what extent can these detours be made productive for research about concepts of intention in the interpretation of literary texts? To start with, I think that the claim has been made plausible that in the second half of the twentieth century structural changes have occurred in the academic conceptualisation and practices of using authorial intention in interpretation – changes obviously not

restricted to literary texts, but visible in other domains of interpretation, too. It seems that a conscious, sincere detaching of reader interpretation from authorial intention, and a consequent rejection of the author's intention, are rare exceptions before the 1946 benchmark. The brief glimpse at the exegesis of Bawa Met-sia 59b – as a random example outside the sort of texts that are regarded as literature at specific historical moments – has confirmed the claim of the conceptual importance of Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" from a historical perspective.

Even more important for this book is a more general point, that can be taken from the two examples discussed so far: ideas about intention obviously have determining consequences for the kind of interpretations that are launched at specific moments in history. Interpretations seem inevitably connected to specific concepts of intention, whether these are made explicit or not. What is more, diagnosing the relevant conceptual changes concerning authorial intention seems to allow for predictions about the possible range of interpretations, at least to a certain degree, in the sense of "no interpretation of the type formalised above with the aspects 1. to 3. will be found legitimate before 1946".

Finally, the detour on the reception of the "Oven of Akhnai" has also shown a striking practice of contemporary interpretations: projection. As the interpretations by Halbertal and others quoted above show, they seem convinced that they can discover contemporary concepts of intention in historical texts on interpretation. But on closer inspection, these historical texts apparently follow other conventions of authorial intention than the ones projected onto them. The differentiated reconstruction of specific concepts of intention in interpretation in this book therefore has a double agenda: first, it wants to contribute to a more precise reconstruction of authorial intention in its historical development than has been given until now. Second, it also wants to stimulate the reflection of implicit normativity in contemporary conceptions of intention, by unveiling their historicity.

Such a reflection makes sense in so far as the debate on intention over the last 60 years can be characterised roughly as a growing polarisation between three competing approaches. With the necessary simplification, and without the pretension to do justice to all differences between them, one might draw the following triptych. First, there are the so-called intentionalists who regard authorial intention as a norm that leads to the best interpretations. Internationally, this position is usually connected to E.D. Hirsch (1967, 1976). Second, there are those who criticise such a view as intentional fallacy in the sense given above, claiming that the relevant meaning is produced in an encounter between text and reader, separate from possible intentions of the author. In addition to Wimsatt and Beardsley, a more recent prominent adherent to that view is Umber-

to Eco (1994) with his concept of *intentio operis*. Finally, there is the third view that interpretation must be seen primarily as an endless production of new meanings that cannot be brought to a head due to uncontrollable shifts of meaning and ever new contextualisations that are impossible to limit. The inspiration for that view is usually traced to the work of Jacques Derrida (1993).

This is a very rough picture, indeed, that will have to be adjusted in the course of this book, but the point I want to make here will not be affected by all these necessary nuances and adjustments. It aims at what these views share, despite all differences: the claim to present a view on intention-in-interpretation-for-all-cases. As far as I can see, in the last eighty years, the question concerning the theorists' own historicity and normativity is not discussed and is not even posed regarding their own models. When the present book wants to do exactly that, then it does so – as I said before – *not* in order to recommend in the end one of these views or reject one or two of them. What it wants to do instead is to reconstruct which choices concerning intention in interpretation have been possible at specific historical moments and to which concepts of literature these possible choices can be related. Which options for conceptual choices were there for actors in the literary field at what time? Or, to put it differently, this book will ask how professionals actually *did* interpret texts with regard to intention. (It will not ask: how *should* texts be read professionally from an intentional angle?) In this enterprise, I am also interested in whether and how conceptual changes in the ideas on authorial intention can be explained and how they relate to other developments in the literary field.

This brings me to the last point of my preliminary remarks. Aiming for explanations needs a theoretical framework in order to answer “why” questions. This framework, as the careful reader already may have expected from vocabulary such as “actors” and “literary field”, will be a variation of the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu. Variation means here that, of course, I will not project the existence of autonomous field structures onto all periods over the last 2500 years. For Bourdieu, the rise of a relatively autonomous French literary field with its dominant literary rules is clearly something that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century (cf. Bourdieu 2008, 61, 144), or, according to others, at the earliest during the seventeenth century (cf. Viala 1985). Instead, field theory will be used here first of all as a tool for relating actions, actors or groups of actors at specific historical moments to what is seen today as field structures. In this way, I aim to produce a systematic descriptive framework for such a vast expanse of time. From that perspective, the behaviour of the different agents on the levels of production, distribution and reception (reception understood here as all activities of judging and interpreting literature) will be analysed as strategic acts in the fight for recognition within the different relevant institutions or institu-

tion-like constellations at specific historical moments (academies, universities, courts, secular and religious interpretative communities, literary critics, publishers, teaching etc.). Conceptions of literature – in the sense of ideas about the nature, function and properties of literature – are at all times an important instrument in these fights. These conceptions inevitably also contain ideas on the role that should be ascribed to the intention of the author in the production and reception of literature (cf. Van Rees 1994; Dorleijn and Van Rees 2006).

Except for guaranteeing minimal systematic relations over time, there are at least two more advantages of this theoretical framework for the questions pursued in this book. One is that the reconstruction of ideas on intention in interpretation may become more reliable when the strategic dimension of the utterances within the specific institutional framework is taken into account, from antiquity to academic criticism in the twenty-first century. The other is that this can also be reversed: the fight for positions through different interpretations can be analysed more convincingly when one takes into consideration which concepts of intention are available in specific historical constellations.

Content of this book

On the basis of these preliminary reflections, the overall question of this book can now be formulated more precisely: if we look at the debate on intention in interpretation from a typological historical perspective, how can the debate be structured and what does this structure tell us about our discipline, literary studies? In order to answer these questions, the main part of the book will consist of a historical reconstruction in chronological order in five chapters. The *First Chapter* reconstructs the birth of the concept of authorial intention from the sixth century BC onwards in opposition to an older poetics of divine inspiration (see Plato's *Ion* and *Apology*). Classical authorial intention with its emphasis on formal aspects of writing and genre will be traced through relevant passages from Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics* up to Cicero, Tacitus and especially Horace's *Ars Poetica*. In the *Second Chapter*, the overlap and the differences between the Classical model of authorial intention and the medieval concept will be analysed in order to reconstruct what will be called the standard model of authorial intention. Both the Classical and the standard model are characterised by a continuum between the intention of the author, the intention to be derived from the text, the context in which the text functions, and the intention which the reader ascribes to the text. However, in the standard model of the long Christian Middle Ages authorial intention is generally conceptualised as the guiding principle of interpretation. This privileged role of authorial intention

very gradually receives a greater emphasis on individual intention at the level of content (as opposed to a more formal and technical understanding of authorial intention in the Classical period). This concept plays a central role in the medieval *accessus ad auctores*. Extracts from Petrarch's *Secretum* will be used to illustrate the relevance of the conceptual intentional distinctions for today's scholarship. The *Third Chapter* will show how Renaissance thinking explored and tested the boundaries of the standard model of authorial intention, without crossing them. Special attention will be paid to Erasmus and his *Praise of Folly*.

Chapter Four will begin with an account of conceptions of authorial intention in early Enlightenment thinking and then focus on the rise of hermeneutics. Friedrich Schleiermacher's posthumous *Hermeneutik und Kritik* (1838) can be taken as representing the first relevant conceptual shift that devalues the standard model and provides the professional critic with new structural possibilities. Here the critic places himself in the position of aiming to understand the author better than the author understands himself because he – the critic, that is – possesses specialised literary expertise not available to an author. This emphasis is found too, for example, in Marxist literary criticism, as in Friedrich Engels' reading of Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine*. The perpetuation of this influential concept will be traced up to the writings of the Russian Formalists and their interpretations of for example Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. In *Chapter Five*, by contextualising "The Intentional Fallacy" within New Criticism, the normative choices enshrined within this version of intention will be analysed. In this context, the chapter will shed light on the poetic and other foundations that underpin "intentional fallacy". From there on, the *Fifth Chapter* will extend to the reception of the intentional fallacy in deconstructive criticism by Paul de Man and others. The implications of the declaration of the death of the author by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault will be analysed and related to those of Jacques Derrida's de-centring of intentionality. From there, a link will be established to the most recent form of intentionalism ("actual" and "hypothetical") in interpretation, including some discussion of the work of those critics who are associated with what is called the return of the author.

In *Chapter Six* the typology reconstructed from a historical look at literary criticism will then be held against relevant comparable discussions in the field of law. In legal matters, an equally intense debate on intention seems to have been raging, especially in the USA around the interpretation of the Constitution and the notion of "Framers' intent". This chapter will be used to tentatively explore the interdisciplinary elements of the topic, seeking to ascertain to what extent the functional dynamics of intention in literary criticism can be applied to legal debates. The book will close with a chapter *Conclusion and Outlook*, briefly summarising the typology from the preceding chapters. Furthermore, it will try to

reconstruct functional regularities on the disciplinary level that the historical succession of the different types indicate. I will argue that the conceptual changes concerning intention in interpretation over time basically seem to converge in establishing more room for differentiation and competition between professional interpreters of literature.

Of course the reader can choose to read only parts of the historical reconstructions – every chapter should be able to stand alone. But those who read all the chapters in the order given here will gain a sharper historical picture of the different types of concepts *and* of the regularities at stake. Hopefully, due to the exemplary character of the book pursuing a typology, they will also feel tempted to look in every period and region of the world for names and concepts that have been omitted, and whether they confirm the general lines presented here or form counter-evidence. This way, reflection on one of the most fundamental topics of interpretation in literary studies should be triggered. If the book works in this way, then intention, for once, will have brought out the best in everyone, reader and author.

Acknowledgments

The groundwork for this book was laid during a fellowship at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) in 2008/2009. I would like to thank the NIAS, its director and the staff as well as my co-fellows for perfect working conditions. The same goes for the Scaliger Institute of Leiden University where I was able to write a first version of the Chapters One and Three in 2018. I would like to thank all colleagues with whom I could discuss the topic of this book over the years in oral or written form – too many to list, but I would like to mention at least those who read parts of the present book and helped to improve them: Margalit Finkelberg, Rainer Grübel, Niklas Holzberg, Catherine A. Johnson, Martin Kayman, Roland Mayer, John Neubauer and Henk Versnel. Katherine Bird corrected my English. Special gratitude goes to Theo Hermans who read the whole manuscript – none of his comments did not lead to changes.

The first version of Chapter Two was published in Cord Meyer, Ralf G. Päslер and Matthias Janßen (eds.): *vorschen, denken, wizzen. Vom Wert des Genauen in den ‘ungenauen Wissenschaften’*, Stuttgart: Hirzel, 2009, and of Chapter Four in Gun-Britt Kohler (ed.): *Blickwechsel. Perspektiven der slawischen Moderne*. München: Sagner, 2010. Second versions of these chapters and a first version of the Introduction and parts of the Conclusion were published in Ralf Grüttemeier, *Auteursintentie. Een beknopte geschiedenis*, Antwerpen/Apeldoorn: Garant, 2011. In

this book also a first version of Chapter Five can be found. An earlier version of Chapter Six has been published in *Arcadia* 49 (2014), 21–39.

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