Intentionless Meaning

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Critical Response

VII

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William C. Dowling

It has occurred to me a number of times in the years I've been reading *Critical Inquiry* that the "Critical Response" section ought perhaps to be accompanied by another simply entitled "Scholia": a place for unpolemical remarks on arguments set forth in earlier issues. In any event, I want to be clear at the outset that what follows isn't prompted by anything like disagreement or discontent with Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels' exciting article, the implications of which readers are surely still assimilating. My remarks are intended (fateful word!) precisely as scholia, concerning one technical, one historical matter.

The technical matter is this: Knapp and Michaels get a certain amount of rhetorical mileage out of the repeated claim that authorial intention ("the author's intended meaning," as they phrase it) and textual meaning are identical, and by so doing they turn against E. D. Hirsch what has always been his only real weapon in the wars over intentionality; but the rhetorical gain comes, I think, at the cost of a point that won't stand up to closer logical scrutiny. There is, it seems to me, a kind of too-hasty conceptual elision going on in the claim that "once it is seen that the meaning of a text is simply identical to the author's intended meaning, the project of *grounding* meaning in intention becomes incoherent" (p. 724).

It is the first part of this assertion that gives pause: to say that either of two terms—here, intention and meaning—is entailed by the other is not, surely, to say that one is identical with the other, and in all sorts of cases the distinction turns out to be logically significant. By simply collapsing one term into the other in the way they do, Knapp and Michaels

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in effect deprive one or the other term of any independent function. Yet in this sort of situation, one ought to bear in mind Wittgenstein's injunction that if everything behaves as though a sign has meaning, then it does have meaning. "Intention" and "meaning" behave, at any rate, as though they had independent meanings.

The business of mutual entailment, on the other hand, is tricky enough to *look* like an identity of the two terms involved in many cases, which is why the point often gets fudged in arguments of the sort that Knapp and Michaels are making. I'm reminded of a story told by a friend of mine about a philosophy seminar he once took with John Searle. The discussion was about the concept of promising, and my friend was having difficulty with how, at a certain point in the act of promising, a new thing called an "obligation" materializes out of nowhere. Where does it come from? Searle's instant rejoinder was: "Look, Schueler: you're in a football game. Your quarterback hands you the ball. You zig; you zag; you run into the end zone. Where do the six points come from?"

A witty rejoinder, as one expects from Searle, but on examination it seems only to translate the original difficulty into other terms: Where, indeed, *do* the six points come from? Yet this football analogy does demonstrate why it is so easy to mistake, in such cases, mutual entailment for identity: we might want to say, put to the question, that what we meant by "touchdown" was just running into the end zone under conditions specified by the rules of the game. Here we have something almost perfectly analogous to what Knapp and Michaels want to say about the identity of intention and meaning. Still, such mutually entailed terms as "promise" and "obligation," "intention" and "meaning" do, under closer scrutiny, retain a stubborn logical independence from each other.

"Promising," in fact, may be taken to illustrate the point. If for purposes of discussion we allow "obligation" to mean only that form of obligation that ensues from having made a promise (as opposed to other, more general kinds of obligation, such as being dutiful to one's parents, etc.), it seems reasonably clear that promise and obligation are never simply different names for the same thing: my obligation to help you paint your kitchen on Saturday is not identical with the act I performed in promising you to do so, if only because the obligation persists when the act is over. (The distinction in this case is between a state and an act:

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obligation as a *state* that ensues from the *act* of promising or having promised.)

This is the sort of mutual entailment that Knapp and Michaels are trying to put their finger on; what they want to say is not that meaning and intention are identical but that there is something incoherent in any attempt to treat one independently of the other. My obligation to help you paint your kitchen may not be identical with my promise to do so, but it is quite meaningless to speak of my having that obligation if I have made no promise to do so. Conversely, it makes no sense for me to speak of having made you a promise if I do not recognize the act as having bound me to an obligation. What we are dealing with, in short, is the complicated logic of a situation in which either of a pair of terms is rendered meaningless when treated in isolation from the other.

Knapp and Michaels almost say this, in fact. One passage early in their essay might be regarded as their retreat from the "identity thesis," the first sentence being a mistaken formulation of the relation between intention and meaning, the second being a formulation that, because it does not assert identity, gets that relation exactly right:

> The mistake made by theorists has been to imagine the possibility or desirability of moving from one term (the author's intended meaning) to a second term (the text's meaning), when actually the two terms are the same. One can neither succeed nor fail in deriving one term from the other, since to have one is already to have them both. [P. 724]

Because identity and mutual entailment behave so much alike, moreover, Knapp and Michaels' larger argument survives their blurring of the distinction.

All this is worth going into, I think, because it accounts for a historical asymmetry in Knapp and Michaels' theory of the intention-meaning controversy: Hirsch's intentionalist theory of meaning is opposed to those of various contemporary critics, like Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller, whose notion of indeterminate meaning testifies to the recent influence on Anglo-American criticism of various continental schools of theory. Yet Hirsch's original argument was of course not directed at these critics and in fact appeared when such movements as post-structuralism were not yet a cloud on the Anglo-American horizon (interestingly enough, Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* and Derrida's *De la grammatologie* appeared in the same year, 1967). One must look elsewhere for the original targets of Hirsch's argument.

Hirsch's real opponents in 1967 were, of course, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, whose famous article on the intentional fallacy in effect founded formalism as a school of criticism and whose account of

objective meaning remains a classic of modern theory—so much a classic, in fact, that one might have expected it to have received a more extended treatment from Knapp and Michaels. Yet Wimsatt and Beardsley get only a belated footnote, and a quite misleading account of their position: "For . . . W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, the objective meanings sought by positive theory were to be acquired precisely by *subtracting* intention and relying on the formal rules and public norms of language" (p. 736 n.16).

It might be, of course, that Wimsatt and Beardsley are mentioned so perfunctorily because their argument, made nearly thirty years ago, can be regarded as something of a museum piece. I don't think so, though. I think that Knapp and Michaels, quite properly excited at having worked through to an important new insight into the intention-meaning problem, and also having failed to distinguish between identity and mutual entailment, failed to see that they had discovered just the point that gave Wimsatt and Beardsley's argument in "The Intentional Fallacy" its power. In effect they show why that argument worked.

As I've suggested, the reason that Knapp and Michaels were led in the first place to speak repeatedly of "the author's meaning" is undoubtedly that Hirsch does so throughout *Validity in Interpretation,* and it is an incoherence in Hirsch's argument they want to expose. Moreover their asserting an identity between intention and meaning allows them to do this without embarrassment. But as soon as they actually turn to discussing an instance of ambiguous or disputed meaning, their terms shift in a certain significant way. "Author" becomes "speaker":

> For a sentence like "My car ran out of gas" even to be recognizable as a sentence, we must already have posited a speaker and hence an intention. Pinning down an interpretation of the sentence will not involve adding a speaker but deciding among a range of possible speakers. Knowing that the speaker inhabits a planet with an atmosphere of inert gases and on which the primary means of transportation is railroad will give one interpretation; knowing that the speaker is an earthling who owns a Ford will give another. But even if we have none of this information, as soon as we attempt to interpret at all we are already committed to a characterization of the speaker as a speaker of language. [P. 726]

It was precisely the distinction between author and speaker that licensed close reading as a distinctively formalist or New Critical mode of interpretation: one was to stop asking what Marvell meant or intended to mean in "To His Coy Mistress" and ask what the speaker (a voice or presence "internal to the poem") was saying or trying to say. Knapp and Michaels are quite right in saying that Wimsatt and Beardsley wanted to get rid of authorial intention; that was, so to speak, the negative part of

the formalist program. It was balanced, though, by the positive demand that the literary work be reconceived in dramatic terms as having an internal speaker, audience, and so on.

The great virtue of Knapp and Michaels' account of intention is that it allows us to see just how this notion of an internal speaker is more than just a convenient New Critical metaphor: since meaning must always *in purely formal terms* involve intention (as opposed to intention as the prior psychological state of a deceased author) and since where there is an intention there must always be an intender, interpretation must begin by positing something like the internal voice or speaker of formalist theory. What their account makes plain, once the notion of mutual entailment is substituted for that of identity, is that "speaker" is not just one of the necessary fictions of discourse abstractly conceived but an invariant condition of any possible mode of discourse.

In a sense, then, Knapp and Michaels' extremely perceptive discussion of indeterminate meaning can be viewed almost as a rudimentary exercise in formalist interpretation. Consider, in light of that discussion, such a sentence as "I was whipped." The fact that it can mean "I was lashed with thongs" or "I was badly beaten in a tennis match" or "I was extremely tired" (and not some entirely different meaning like "I wanted a vanilla ice-cream cone") shows that (1) certain rules of determinacy are already in force and (2) that an account of meaning *already* assumes that an intention (somebody intending to mean something) is also present. As Knapp and Michaels make clear, what is added when we learn that the speaker is a sadomasochist, a tennis player recounting a weekend match, or a tired commuter returning from the city is not an intention but information about an intention.

The discovery that information about an intention was invariably information about an internal speaker lay at the heart of the formalist program of objective interpretation. The theoretical interest of such sentences as "I was whipped" is that they are short enough to look fairly indeterminate; any expansion ("I was whipped when I got onto the 5:36 for Greenwich and ordered a martini; fifteen minutes later I felt better") moves us toward the clearly defined "internal" speaker of formalist theory. (Stanley Fish is great at figuring out ways to suggest that this principle is false, but even he would have trouble if we were allowed to expand indefinitely and at will the sort of example utterances he favors.)

A revised history of formalism, then, might look something like this: at the level of practical interpretation, close readers like Cleanth Brooks had discovered that positing the existence of the sort of internal intention Knapp and Michaels talk about sets in motion a complex dialectic of objective inference; the more one could discover about this intention the more one knew about a speaker internal to the work, and the more one knew about this speaker the more one knew at any given moment about his intention, and so on. Thus the speaker of "To His Coy Mistress"

emerged as a young man of a certain level of education and breeding trying to persuade a beautiful young woman of his own social class of the wisdom of their sleeping together.

This was the context, in turn, in which authorial intention began increasingly to look dispensable in any account of objective interpretation: Knowing all this about the speaker of "To His Coy Mistress"—and being aware, moreover, that all this would remain true if it should come to light that someone other than Marvell actually wrote the poem—could one really learn anything more, or anything essential, by inquiring into "Marvell's intention"? More than an inaugurating manifesto, "The Intentional Fallacy" was a coup de grâce to the crude intentionalism associated with an older genetic or biographical criticism. What Knapp and Michaels make clear is that the formalist argument succeeded in its season by exploiting to the fullest an intentionality that is already and inevitably entailed by the very notion of meaning.