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Critical Response

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Hershel Parker

In their attempts to clarify and improve upon some of the arguments of E. D. Hirsch and his recent follower P. D. Juhl, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels refer to "the meaning of a text" without asking how the text reached the state in which they encounter it. In this they follow Hirsch and Juhl. Defining the argument of *Validity in Interpretation* as "unabashedly and I think necessarily theoretical," Hirsch paid almost no attention to the possible implications of evidence about the history of a text (except in some offhand speculations which strike me as more incisive and ultimately more fruitful than anything American textual theorists were then saying).[1] It was without recourse to evidence of composition, revision, and transmission that Hirsch defined "textual meaning as the verbal intention of the author" and treated "a text" or "the text" as an immutable arrangement of words, if not punctuation marks also.[2] In asking what we are appealing to when we appeal to the text, Juhl likewise did not allow for a challenge of, Which text?—not even when he went so far as to insist that the meanings of minor textual details are intended by the author.[3] Echoing Hirsch, Knapp and Michaels insist

1. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn., 1967), p. x. The speculations I refer to are on p. 233: "With a revised text, composed over a long period of time (*Faust,* for example), how are we to construe the unrevised portions? Should we assume that they still mean what they meant originally or that they took on a new meaning when the rest of the text was altered or expanded?"

2. Ibid., p. 224.

3. See P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton, N.J., 1980), pp. 66–89 (the title of chap. 4 is "The Appeal to the Text: What Are We Appealing To?"); see also in chap. 6 the subsection "Are the Meanings of Textual Details Unintended?," pp. 129–32.

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that "the meaning of a text is simply identical to the author's intended meaning" and that "all meaning is always the author's meaning" (pp. 724, 726–27). Echoing Juhl, they insist that "all local meanings are always intentional" (p. 730 n.8). For Knapp and Michaels there can be, in short, no "intentionless meanings" (p. 727).

As a textual scholar I applaud Knapp and Michaels for admitting the existence of the author and welcoming him back from the banishment first imposed by the New Critics and then reimposed by subsequent critical juntas. But their arguments against theory do not, empirically speaking, get us much farther than the theories of Hirsch and Juhl, and for much the same reason—the failure to pay attention to what lessons can be learned from "particular texts" (p. 723). One lesson is that authorial meaning is not something an author pours into literary work when putting on the last touch, as Michael Hancher seems to argue.[4] Still less can intentionality be conferred upon a literary work at the moment of publication, as James Thorpe so magisterially contends.[5] Rather, as John Dewey says, meaning is infused into the text at the moment each part is written. The "artist is controlled in the process of his work by his grasp of the connection between what he has already done and what he is to do next." He must "at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come"; if this does not happen, there will be "no consistency and no security in his successive acts."[6]

Writers repeatedly fail to achieve their intended meanings during the actual creative process, even though their control over the emerging work is then at its strongest. At best, as Murray Krieger argues, they turn these failures of original intention into opportunities for success in some unexpected direction, but flaws which result from shifting or imperfectly realized intentions commonly survive in the printed text in the form of "contrary details" which we override in our compulsion to make sense of what we read.[7] If writers fail to achieve their intentions during composi-

4. See Michael Hancher, "Three Kinds of Intention," *MLN* 87 (Dec. 1972): 827–51 (see p. 831 n.10, for Hancher's only mention of authorial intention during the process of composition).

5. See James Thorpe, *Principles of Textual Criticism* (San Marino, Calif., 1972), p. 38.

6. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934), pp. 45, 56.

7. See Murray Krieger, *Theory of Criticism* (Baltimore, 1976), p. 27, for the unlooked-for opportunity; and p. 41, for the reader's compulsion to make sense of texts.

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tion, they are even more likely to damage parts of what they had achieved when they belatedly alter a text, whether at someone else's suggestion or at some whim of their own. In revising or allowing someone else to revise a literary work, especially after it has been thought of as complete, authors very often lose authority, with the result that familiar literary texts at some points have no meaning, only partially authorial meaning, or quite adventitious meaning unintended by the author or anyone else. For my own convenience I will cite examples from standard American novels, but it would be equally easy to find examples in other genres and other national literatures.[8]

Often part of a text we read (and write about) has no meaning at all. In chapter 16 of *Huckleberry Finn,* Huck and Jim are going downriver at night on the raft, having unknowingly passed Cairo in the fog. In one paragraph they plan to watch for a light so Huck can paddle ashore in the canoe and ask someone how far down the river Cairo is, and in the next paragraph Huck concludes that there "warn't nothing to do, now, but to look out sharp for the town, and not pass it without seeing it." This nonsense was created when Twain agreed to drop from between the two paragraphs the raftsmen episode, which contained the reason for the decision not to ask anyone else but just to watch out for the town.[9] In *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* as we have long known, several passages refer to the Italian twins in ways that make sense only if they are conjoined, as they were (two heads, four arms, one trunk, two legs) when the original version was completed.[10] In chapter 13 of the published novel a meaningless passage occurs not involving the twins. A delegation of Democrats calls upon Wilson, the village butt, a lawyer who has just tried—and lost—his first case during his more than two decades in Dawson's Landing, and offers to support him for mayor. These men look like fools afflicted with a political death wish, but Wilson's desirability as a candidate survives from the original version, where he had just been catapulted into popularity by successfully defending his first client, the twin Luigi, against the charge of kicking Tom Driscoll (his case resting,

8. I deliberately choose examples from a text Walter Benn Michaels cites in "*Sister Carrie*'s Popular Economy" (*Critical Inquiry* 7 [Winter 1980]: 373–90) and examples from *Tender Is the Night,* celebrated by a coeditor of *Critical Inquiry,* Wayne C. Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* ([Chicago, 1961], pp. 190–95).

9. See Peter G. Beidler, "The Raft Episode in *Huckleberry Finn,*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 14 (Spring 1968): 11–20.

10. I briefly comment on *Pudd'nhead Wilson* in "The 'New Scholarship': Textual Evidence and Its Implications for Criticism, Literary Theory, and Aesthetics," *Studies in American Fiction* 9 (Autumn 1981): 181–97; a long essay on *Pudd'nhead* is forthcoming in the (tardy) Autumn 1981 issue of *Resources for American Literary Study.* See also Philip Cohen, "Aesthetic Anomalies in *Pudd'nhead Wilson,*" *Studies in American Fiction* 10 (Spring 1982): 55–69. In this response to Knapp and Michaels I am not always distinguishing between anomalies which were created by the addition of the Roxy-Tom plot as the manuscript was being completed in December 1892 and the anomalies which were first introduced in July 1893 when Twain pulled out half of his typescript for publication as *Pudd'nhead Wilson.*

of course, on the impossibility of proving which twin did the kicking). Chapter 17 of Stephen Crane's *Maggie* was rendered meaningless in the Appleton edition (1896) by the excision of the title character's climactic encounter with the huge fat man. In this strange text, Maggie no longer explicitly goes down to the dark river, with anyone else or alone, but tall buildings magically jump down there from their place back within the final block.[11] The Appleton edition of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) also contains meaningless passages, such as this sentence in the last chapter, which has no possible referent for the plural "matters": "There were small shoutings in his brain about these matters."[12] In a recent example, the Dial version of Norman Mailer's *An American Dream,* the hero, Stephen Richards Rojack, speaks out of "that calm" when there is no previous mention of a calm in that scene.[13]

Often enough revised texts will contain passages which make a minimal kind of sense but lack the specific meaning they were invented to convey, even when that meaning is literally their reason for being. In *Pudd'nhead* the twins are present at all only because when conjoined they had for months served Twain as a source for hilarious inventiveness, and taking them out of the final text would have required more work than he was willing to perform. Once the twins are (most of the time) separated, Luigi's kick becomes commonplace, and other passages are lifeless: Twain would never have had the twins play duets on the piano if they had not had four hands to put on the keyboard and only one bottom to sit on. (The book illustration shows one twin sitting on the piano stool and one on a chair—no fun at all.)

Clues to specific authorial meanings are sometimes removed with enough of the context left for the reader to arrive at a vague sense of the authorial meaning, although not the precise meaning the author had intended, as in this sentence from *Sister Carrie:* "In her own apartments Carrie saw things which were lessons in the same school."[14] Since the 1900 edition omits the one and two-thirds pages which Dreiser wrote to precede this sentence, the reader has to try to correct that which the

11. See Parker and Brian Higgins, "Maggie's 'Last Night': Authorial Design and Editorial Patching," *Studies in the Novel* 10 (Spring 1978): pp. 64–75.

12. I first suggested reconstructing the manuscript version of *The Red Badge of Courage* in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30 (March 1976): 558–62. For a full discussion, see Henry Binder, "The *Red Badge of Courage* Nobody Knows," *Studies in the Novel* 10 (Spring 1978): 9–47, rpt. in his edition of *Red Badge* (New York, 1982).

13. See my "Norman Mailer's Revision of the *Esquire* Version of *An American Dream* and the Aesthetic Problem of 'Built-in Intentionality,' " *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 84 (Winter 1981).

14. Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie,* ed. James L. W. West III and Neda M. Westlake, Pennsylvania Edition (Philadelphia, 1981), p. 102, and *Sister Carrie,* ed. Donald Pizer, Norton Critical Edition (New York, 1970), p. 77. The Pennsylvania Edition is based upon a fresh transcription of the manuscript, the Norton upon the much-abridged first edition (1900).

author did not set up: he has to assume that "lessons" refers to the conclusion of the once-distant paragraph which now stands just in front of the sentence in question, specifically to the law that "If a man is to succeed with many women, he must be all in all to each." Then, as he proceeds, he is forced to revise that conclusion and take "lessons" as referring rather vaguely to the longings awakened by the sight of prosperous people, but he could never arrive at the original lessons about the crucial difference between having money and being poor. Any resemblance to the process of reading as described by Stanley Fish is coincidental: this is a case of needless, unintended fumbling ignorantly imposed upon the reader by careless excision.[15]

Sometimes a passage in a text will embody two different and contradictory authorial intentions rather than one. For the English edition of *White-Jacket,* Melville added to chapter 27 two new short paragraphs, the second of which is this: "And the only purpose of this chapter is, to point out as the peculiar desert of individuals, that generalized reputation, which most men, perhaps, are apt to ascribe in the gross, to one and all the members of a popular military establishment."[16] Purpose not being a quality which can be infused into an unrevised passage by an act of retro-declaring or retro-wishing, no one assigned to define the purpose of the chapter as Melville first wrote it could possibly come up with any such definition. In the passage from *Maggie* discussed earlier, the revision was designed to keep the text from meaning what it had too obviously meant, and small attention was given to making it mean anything at all in its reduced form, much less to making it mean something else in particular; but in the Appleton *Red Badge of Courage,* where a similar disregard prevailed for what if anything was left of the meaning after the original, objectionable meaning was removed, there was also a deliberate effort to impose a new meaning on the remnants of the original meaning by the addition of a perfunctorily upbeat last paragraph: "Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds." Yet throughout the chapter and the earlier portions of the text as printed in 1895, clues to Henry Fleming's vanity and self-delusion survive despite the excision of the most blatant evidence. The result of the Appleton expurgation was a maimed text which reached classic status because of the power it still retained but which, once the vogue of close reading set in during the 1940s, became the ground on which a

15. Compare the meaning and effect of the "mental conflict" Carrie experiences in the Pennsylvania Edition (p. 91) with that she experiences in the Norton (p. 71). In the Norton, the reader can scour the preceding page and then correctly deduce that the voice of conscience is in conflict with the voice of want, but Dreiser wrote "mental conflict" to refer to the dialogue between the voices in the immediately preceding twelve paragraphs, not a word of which is retained in the 1900 text which the Norton follows, a text which does not carry full and precise authorial intentionality.

16. See my "Melville and the Concept of 'Author's Final Intentions,' " *Proof* 1 (1971): 165–66.

generation of critics battled inconclusively, armed with contradictory indications in the text.

Sometimes passages embodying one authorial meaning are so placed as to read as if they embodied a different one. What we know as chapter 11 of *Pudd'nhead* was written when Tom was merely a local white youth, a sneak thief and a scamp. In the published book, "Tom" from the start is not Tom at all but a changeling, part black and a slave, and chapters 9 and 10 deal with his learning the horrible truth and undergoing great, if temporary, anguish about the news. In writing what is now chapter 10 Twain took some pains to make it plausible that in later scenes Tom would act much as usual, despite his brief mental turmoil, but he did not bother to work Tom's new condition into the parts already written. When he put *Pudd'nhead* together, he hoped in a general way that Tom would seem black in the passages written when he was all white, but he did not make any attempts to *make* him black in those passages, not even perfunctory attempts such as he made to separate the twins in passages where he retained them as characters. As it turned out, Twain got an accidental bonus on the level of local meaning, for any reader of chapter 11 will think that Tom snatches away his hand so the palm-reading Wilson will not find out that he is part black and a slave, not merely that Wilson will find out that he is a thief. Judging from the abundant evidence that Twain did not read entirely through what he salvaged as *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* he probably did not ever specifically "intend" the new meaning of the gesture, even retroactively, although he would have been delighted to get something for nothing. Judging from the contemporary reception and from modern academic criticism, there was no need for the author to have invested any more labor on the salvage operation than he did, for no critic has complained about Tom's being distractingly white in some middle chapters of the book.

Adventitious meanings of scenes in altered texts are more often than not out of keeping, despite the happy fate which befell Tom's gesture. An example occurs in *Pudd'nhead* near the beginning of chapter 13, written when Tom was still white and the rival with the fairer of the conjoined twins, Angelo, for the affections of Rowena, the daughter of the twins' landlady, who is, of course, as white as Tom. Moping along a lane, Tom thinks of calling on Rowena in order to have some "cheerful company," then realizes that "the detested Twins would be there." Seeing Tom's unhappiness, Wilson starts to ask if Rowena has rejected him, but Tom explains that the trouble is that he has been disinherited by Judge Driscoll, his real uncle when the passage was written. Twain was not titillating himself and his readers with violating the taboo against allowing a black to harbor casual thoughts of a flirtation with a white girl; rather, in slapping together a salable text, Twain simply failed to notice that the earlier written passage had accrued unintended racial implications.

Inadvertent, intentionless meanings riddle the 1951 edition of *Tender Is the Night,* the one which Malcolm Cowley reordered chronologically in accordance with an intention Fitzgerald had had at some point in his last years, well after the publication of the book in 1934.[17] This text is in fact a showcase of adventitious meanings which the author could not possibly have intended and could not have wanted if he had become aware of them. They range from large-scale inadvertencies (such as the ludicrousness of the long mystery about what happened in the bathroom at the Villa Diana, when every reader of the reordered text knows just what kind of mad scene Nicole had enacted there) to small-scale inadvertencies (such as the luridness which accrues to the screening of Rosemary's movie, *Daddy's Girl,* once every reader knows that Nicole, who is watching the movie, was driven insane by committing incest with her father). Dozens of local details lose precise authorial meanings and seem to gain nonauthorial meanings, even though almost all the words of the original text are retained. Authorial functions for parallel scenes, for instance, are subtly altered when the scenes are spaced either further apart or closer together, and authorial functions are altered even more drastically when scenes, images, and words are reordered, so that the reader encounters what was meant as an echo before encountering the occurrence which the echo was designed to recall.

More recently, in revising the *Esquire* version of *An American Dream,* Mailer made some tiny excisions which reduced the mutual awareness of male characters and thereby altered the characters' functions in unintended ways. The ex-prizefighter Romeo, for instance, inadvertently rises in the hierarchy of characters; it is no longer clear that the contest Rojack has with Romeo is meant as a kind of hysterical parody of the more significant contest that has just occurred between Rojack and Detective Roberts, a psychological equal of the hero in the serial but not explicitly so in the book.

As these examples suggest, nonmeanings, partially authorial meanings, and inadvertent, intentionless meanings coexist in standard literary texts with genuine authorial meanings. It happens all the time, and almost nobody minds. Now and again a critic will even take the trouble to celebrate adventitious meaning over what the author really intended, all in the name of respecting the authority of the author ("It's his text, isn't it?"). One pious critical argument is that if an author "accepts an editorial change or suggestion, his acceptance is the equivalent of a creative act, even though the act is the initial responsibility of an editor."[18] Editorial theorists have made scripture of a rationale of copy-text which cannot accommodate cases of revision because it as-

17. See Higgins and Parker, "Sober Second Thoughts: Fitzgerald's 'Final Version' of *Tender Is the Night,*" *Proof* 4 (1975): 129–52.

18. Pizer, "On the Editing of Modern American Texts," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 75 (Mar. 1971): 148.

sumes, contrary to all we know about the creative process, that an author's creative state of mind, and therefore his authority over the text, is sustained indefinitely, throughout a lifetime.[19] We all have a long way to go before we can talk confidently about the authority of the author. One could start that hazardous journey by taking quite literally the truism that literary criticism depends upon textual scholarship. So does literary theory—which will no doubt continue to flourish despite the ingenuous pleas of Knapp and Michaels.

19. See W. W. Greg, "The Rationale of Copy-Text," *Studies in Bibliography* 3 (1950–51): 19–36. The best description of the creative process I have seen, aside from some comments by literary men and women, is Albert Rothenberg, *The Emerging Goddess: The Creative Process in Art, Science, and Other Fields* (Chicago, 1979), esp. chap. 13, "Goddess Emergent: Creative Process and Created Product," pp. 345–80.

What I say here about the author's final intentions differs somewhat from what Steven Mailloux extrapolates from my earlier comments in his *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), p. 112 n.51. What's wrong with modern editorial theory is that it is incompatible with what we know about the finality of decisions made during the creative process.