Against Theory?

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# Critical Response

## *II*

## Against Theory?

**E. D. Hirsch, Jr.**

I agree with a lot of the theories in "Against Theory" by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels. I see their essay as expressing some of my own oft-stated objections to the pretensions of literary theory and critical method, though Knapp and Michaels imply that it's *my* theory they are arguing against. But on the very first page of *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) I wrote: "No methods of legal, biblical, or literary construction have ever been devised which are not in some instances either misleading or useless."[1] And in a 1982 issue of *Critical Inquiry* I was still repeating my objections to the pretensions of literary theory when it tries to dictate the forms of critical practice.[2] When Knapp and Michaels make similar objections, my instinct is to welcome two forceful writers to the ranks of the antitheoretical theorists. (May their numbers increase!) But I'm sorry that when they turned to the subject of intention they found it useful to turn me into a straw man. Too bad. We antitheorists should stick together. In this brief rejoinder I want to state my intentionalist argument (or rather "the" intentionalist argument, for P. F. Strawson and others have used it) in what I consider to be its accurate form. Then I shall challenge one or two points in the Knapp-Michaels exposition.

It isn't accurate to suggest that before Knapp and Michaels came along intentionalists imagined "a moment of interpretation before intention is present" (p. 726). Knapp and Michaels are certainly right to reject that idea. And the intentionalist argument rejects it too. It holds

1. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn., 1967), p. vii.
2. See my "The Politics of Theories of Interpretation," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (September 1982): 235–47.

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that intention is formally necessary at every moment of interpretation and that there can be no construed meaning without intention. One basis for this claim of formal necessity is as follows: all sequences of phonemes or graphemes can sustain more than one type of construed meaning. For instance, they might sustain allusive or nonallusive, ironical or nonironical, literal or nonliteral construed meanings. But every type of construed meaning is what it is and not some other type of meaning that might have been construed. So terms like "intention," "speech act," and "authorship" are needed to indicate the formally required agency that makes the construed meaning this type rather than that in any instance of interpretation.

That's the core of the intentionalist argument, and versions of it are well stated by Knapp and Michaels. I think they are right to say that there can be no construed meaning without intention, and I particularly like their formulation when they say that "pinning down an interpretation of the sentence will not involve adding a speaker but deciding among a range of possible speakers" (p. 726). But in this formulation Knapp and Michaels believe themselves to be stating a view that is at odds with my own. I wish to assure them that they are not. For I am not now nor have I ever been a proponent of "a moment of interpretation before intention is present." I emphatically agree with their statement that phonemes and graphemes "become signifiers only when they acquire meanings, and when they lose their meanings they stop being signifiers" (p. 735).

Having now incinerated Hirsch the straw man and replaced him with somebody who also rejects the idea of pre-intentional construed language, I still find some points to disagree with in Knapp and Michaels' argument. I just don't see the consequentiality of their argument at its most novel and crucial point—which I take to be their assertion about the practical nullity of the idea of intention. They reach this conclusion in the following comment on their previous exposition: "We have argued that what a text means and what its author intends it to mean are identical and that their identity robs intention of any theoretical interest" (p. 731). That is to say, since authorial intention is always necessarily being realized in all forms of critical practice, intention can be disregarded as an idea that practice needs to pay any attention to.

What has happened in this inference seems to me a case of what Henry Sams used to call "semantic slippage." Up to this point, Knapp

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and Michaels had argued that a text's meaning, being intentional, must always be what *an* author intends it to mean. They now say that a text's meaning must always be what *its* author intends it to mean. That switch would be consequent only if "its author" is taken to mean something special like "the author of whatever meanings are being construed from the text." But the inference would not be consequent if we take "its author" in its usual sense of "the composer of the text." Text-authorship and meaning-authorship are not the same. Moreover, there's a more serious semantic slippage with respect to meaning-authorship itself. Suppose we understand Knapp and Michaels to use the phrase "the intentions of its author" in the normal way to imply the meanings that *had been* intended by the composer of the text in composing it. That would raise problems for their identity thesis. As I tried to explain to Knapp and Michaels in a conversation at Berkeley about a year ago, "what the author intended" and "what the author intends" do not necessarily amount to the same thing. The past tense could refer to a past meaning-event, the present tense to a current and different type of meaning-event. Introducing the idea of history, of pastness, would give the Knapp-Michaels thesis a rather different twist, as in the following reformulation: we have argued that what a text now means and what its author intended it to mean are identical. So long as we stick to the present tense, we are justified only in saying that "what a text now means is what some postulated author is intending it to mean"—a singularly uninteresting observation.

Why did Knapp and Michaels commit such an obvious logical misdemeanor? Certainly not because they are oblivious to logical cogency but probably because they think there is no pragmatic difference between "what an author intends" and "what an author intended." They probably think that in practice what an author intended *is* what the current reader believes that the author intended. Isn't that the sort of point they are making in their discussion of "true belief" on pages 739–41? In their view, our current belief about the author's past intention is the only intention we have. Thus "intends" and "intended" are for practical purposes the same.

But hold on a minute. Even granting, for the sake of argument, the equation of belief and knowledge, still "intends" and "intended" would be the same only if we *believed* we were construing what the author intended. But some critics don't believe they are doing that. For them, belief about what "an" author intends and about what the composer of the text intended are not the same. Even under the pragmatic equation of belief and knowledge "intends" and "intended" are here different. But just at this point Knapp and Michaels seem to relinquish the idea that true belief is knowledge. They say that when Paul de Man or some other critic truly believes his interpretation of a text is not what its author intended, that critic is just making an ontological mistake. He is trying

"to separate things that should not be separated: on the ontological side, meaning from intention, . . . on the epistemological side, knowledge from true belief." These "separated terms are *in fact* inseparable" (p. 741; italics mine). So even if we think we are separating the meaning of a text from what its author intended, we are in fact making a mistake. We always do understand what its author intended. This seems to be "in fact" an empirical claim.

But there is precious little empirical evidence to support such a strong and universalistic empirical claim. Take this example. When Blake re-authored his 1789 *Songs of Innocence* in 1794, he didn't change the texts of the poems at all. But his second interpretation was not the same as "what the author intended" in his first interpretation. In 1794 Blake believes that what he now intends is not what he then intended in 1789 by his text. Is he just stating a "preference" that is "irrelevant to the theory of interpretation" (p. 730 n. 7)? Is he committing the ontological mistake of imagining a pre-intentional language? As far as I can see, neither ontology nor fact support the identification of "intends" and "intended." We do not always understand by a text what we believe its author meant in composing it. The empirical claim of Knapp and Michaels seems to be false.

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When I first started writing about intention in the 1950s, one of my aims was to resist the then current pretensions of literary theory in telling critical practice what it ought to do. The New Critical doctrine which says that it isn't legitimate or possible to consider intention was a rhetorical instrument designed to discourage some critical practices and encourage others. My purpose in resisting this rhetorical use of theory was to liberate critics to deal with all taboo problems that seemed interesting or valuable—including problems of original intention. Knapp and Michaels, despite their antitheoretical disclaimers, seem, like New Critics before them, to want to banish explicit considerations of original intention from critical practice. In this they are as "theoretical" as W. K. Wimsatt or René Wellek, and their theory amounts in practice to straight New Criticism. Knapp and Michaels suggest that there's no point in self-consciously trying to discover an author's intention because we are always already doing so. All the to-do about finding the author's original intention "creates the illusion of a choice between alternative methods of interpreting" (p. 730). But there is no choice. The author's intention is already present in every construing.

What is the practical effect of this "antitheoretical" principle? The most probable effect is to foster the comforting idea that there's no point in pursuing historical scholarship. We are always already doing so. Maybe that effect on practice isn't what Knapp and Michaels intended.

Nonetheless, their argument can readily be taken as a sanction for historically ignorant practice, on the grounds that historical ignorance is really an "illusion." We always do construe what the author means (meant).

One of the best uses of literary theory is to innoculate students against the purely rhetorical influences of theory upon practice, whether that rhetoric is theoretical or antitheoretical. The usual mark of a purely rhetorical use of theory is some ontological claim that we do not "really" have the choices we think we have. My counterclaim is that critical practice is what we choose to make it. Meaning is a stipulative not an ontological entity. It too is what we choose to make it. I prefer this anti-ontological argument against theory to the ontological antitheory of Knapp and Michaels. I'll repeat that argument as I made it in 1967, and with the same intentions: "Any normative concept in interpretation implies a choice that is required not by the nature of written texts but rather by the goal that the interpreter sets himself. It is a weakness in many descriptions of the interpretive process that this act of choice is disregarded and the process described as though the object of interpretation were somehow determined by the ontological status of texts themselves."[3]

3. Hirsch, *Validity,* p. 24.