

Against Theory 2: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction

Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels

1. Introduction

In “Against Theory” we argued that a text means what its author intends it to mean.¹ We argued further that all attempts to found a method of interpretation on a general account of language involve imagining that a text can mean something other than what its author intends.² Therefore, we concluded, all such attempts are bound to fail; there can be no method of interpretation. But the attempt to imagine that a text can mean something other than what its author intends is not restricted to writers interested in interpretive method. In fact, the denial that meaning is determined

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1. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, “Against Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 723–42; see also “A Reply to Our Critics,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (June 1983): 790–800, and “A Reply to Richard Rorty: What Is Pragmatism?” *Critical Inquiry* 11 (March 1985): 466–73. These essays are reprinted in *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1985), pp. 11–30, 95–105, and 139–46, respectively.

2. One plausible misinterpretation of our claim that a text only means what its author intends it to mean is that we consider the terms “meaning” and “intention” to be, as Stanley Cavell puts it, “identical in meaning” (“The Division of Talent,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 [June 1985]: 524). But we don’t. Not all intentions are intentions to mean (not all acts are speech acts)—which is one reason why, to adapt Cavell’s own example, looking at someone intentionally need not amount to looking at someone meaningfully.

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by intention is central to projects as indifferent to method as hermeneutics and deconstruction. For hermeneutics, a text means what its author intends but also necessarily means more, acquiring new meanings as readers apply it to new situations. For deconstruction, an author can never succeed in determining the meaning of a text; every text participates in a code that necessarily eludes authorial control. Since both these projects are committed to the view that a text can mean something other than what its author intends, they are also committed to the view that a text derives its identity from something other than authorial intention. The text is what it is, no matter what meaning is assigned to it by its author and no matter how that meaning is revised by its readers.

What gives a text its autonomous identity? On most accounts, the answer is linguistic conventions—the semantic and syntactic rules of the language in which the text is written. One of our aims in the present essay is to criticize the particular notions of textual identity advanced by hermeneutics and deconstruction, but our more general target is the notion that there can be any plausible criteria of textual identity that can function independent of authorial intention. Because there can be no such criteria, nonmethodological versions of interpretive theory are as incoherent as methodological ones and, like the methodological ones, should be abandoned.

2. *Hermeneutics*

According to Paul Ricoeur, “there is a problem of interpretation,” a problem that arises from “the very nature of the verbal intention of the text.” Because “the objective meaning is something other than the subjective intention of the author,” a text “may be construed in various ways.” But this problem, for Ricoeur and for hermeneutics generally, is also an opportunity, since the “surpassing of the intention by the meaning” frees interpretation from its dependence on the author’s intention, which is “often unknown to us, sometimes redundant, sometimes useless, and sometimes even harmful as regards the interpretation of the verbal meaning of his work.” Liberated from the author, we can now understand the text in the “nonpsychological and properly semantical space” that “the

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text has carved out by severing itself from the mental intention of its author."³

It is above all in writing, according to Ricoeur, that the "semantic autonomy" of language, "nascent and inchoate . . . in living speech," becomes fully manifest (*IT*, p. 25). In living speech, "the subjective intention of the speaker and the discourse's meaning overlap each other in such a way that it is the same thing to understand what the speaker means and what his discourse means." In writing, however, "the author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide" (*IT*, p. 29). Because intention and meaning come apart, the "text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it" (*IT*, p. 30). Or, as Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, "What is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships."⁴ This step, the text's becoming available for new relationships, is what opens the possibility of hermeneutics. The text takes on a life of its own and henceforth can be understood "only if it is understood in a different way every time" (*TM*, p. 276). "The real meaning of a text," Gadamer writes, "does not depend on the contingencies of the author . . . for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history" (*TM*, p. 263). Nor is this merely the epistemological commonplace that understanding is always contextual; it is the ontological claim that a text's interpretive history is part of the meaning of the text itself.

For readers acquainted with American formalism, the claim that a text "has detached itself from the contingency of its origin" and therefore that its meaning always in principle goes beyond its author has a familiar ring. As long ago as 1946, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley argued in their essay "The Intentional Fallacy" that a poem "is detached from its author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it."⁵ For Wimsatt and Beardsley, the meaning of a text was determined by "public" features of language such as "semantics and syntax."⁶ But where for Wimsatt and Beardsley the meaning of the text itself, once detached from authorial intention, was permanent and unchanging, for Gadamer the detachment of meaning from intention

3. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Tex., 1976), p. 76; all further references to this work, abbreviated *IT*, will be included in the text.

4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translation ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York, 1975), p. 357; all further references to this work, abbreviated *TM*, will be included in the text.

5. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ky., 1954), p. 5.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

shows, as we have noted, that “a text is understood only if it is understood in a different way every time.” And this recognition defines “the task of an historical hermeneutics,” which is “to consider the tension that exists between the identity of the common object and the changing situation in which it must be understood” (*TM*, p. 276). In other words, for Gadamer, interpretation goes “beyond mere reconstruction” of the author’s intention (*TM*, p. 337); the changing situation in which the text must be understood is itself part of the text’s meaning. Thus the “fundamental hermeneutic problem” is inseparable from what Gadamer calls the “problem of application,” how to “adapt the meaning of a text to the concrete situation” of the interpreter (*TM*, pp. 274, 275).

The importance of application for Gadamer can be seen in his discussion of the “exemplary significance of legal hermeneutics” (*TM*, p. 289). Laws may be produced by particular legislators on particular historical occasions, but they only function as laws insofar as they can be applied in contexts very different from the ones in which they are produced. It is the role of judges to work out the relations between the original meaning of a law and its application to each new case. And insofar as the context in which the law was produced differs from the context in which the law must be applied, the judge is “entitled to supplement the original meaning of the text.” In so doing, Gadamer writes, “he is doing exactly what takes place in all other understanding” (*TM*, p. 305).

To see what application involves, consider an example. A law is passed restricting traffic in a park much frequented by joggers. The text of the law reads, “No vehicle shall be permitted in the park.”⁷ A bicyclist is arrested for riding in the park; a judge must decide whether the law applies to bicycles. On the same day, someone else is arrested, this time for pushing a baby carriage in the park; the judge must decide whether the law applies to baby carriages. Reasoning that the legislators only intended to exclude dangerous vehicles (the ones most likely to injure joggers), the judge rules that bicycles are prohibited but baby carriages are not.

Is this the sort of example Gadamer has in mind when he claims that “a text is understood only if it is understood in a different way every time”? After all, the text of the law explicitly mentions neither bicycles nor baby carriages; in deciding that the law refers to bicycles but not baby carriages, isn’t the judge interpreting the law by supplementing it—that is, bringing out a meaning that the legislators never intended? But this is not what happens in the example as we have described it. The judge didn’t mean to go beyond the legislators’ intention but only to decide what that intention was; when they said “vehicles,” the judge

7. This example is a familiar one in legal theory; our formulation of it derives from Paul Brest, “The Misconceived Quest for the Original Understanding,” *Boston University Law Review* 60 (1980): 204–38, although our conclusions differ from his.

decided, they meant dangerous vehicles. The only “problem of application” was to decide what vehicles were dangerous. But this cannot be application in Gadamer’s sense, since for Gadamer application is part of interpretation, whereas in our example the judge only applies the law after first figuring out what it means.

Suppose the judge determines that the legislators intended to prohibit all vehicles, including baby carriages, but decides that prohibiting baby carriages is unreasonable and thus rules that they are permitted. This seems closer to what Gadamer has in mind when he writes, for instance, that a judge “cannot let himself be tied by what, say, an account of the parliamentary proceedings tells him about the intentions of those who first worked out the law” (*TM*, p. 291). Interpreting the law in such a way that it permits baby carriages, and thus going beyond what the legislators intended, the judge in our example now seems to perform the “work of application” that, according to Gadamer, “is involved in all forms of understanding” (*TM*, p. 305). In our first version of the example, the judge merely interpreted the legislators’ intention and then applied it. But in this version, the judge appears to go beyond the legislators’ intention in an act of “creative supplementing” (*TM*, p. 294) that gives the text a new meaning.

But why should application in this sense count as interpretation? Why not say that a judge who goes beyond the legislators’ intentions in order to make the text mean something more than *they* meant is not interpreting the text but changing it? The act of “creative supplementing” would thus be an act of creative writing, producing not a new interpretation of the legislators’ text but a new text.⁸ In Gadamer’s view, however, not only is the judge still interpreting, but the discrepancy between what the legislators intended and what the judge interprets the text to mean points to “the true centre of hermeneutical enquiry,” since the “task of an historical hermeneutics” is, once again, “to consider the tension that exists between the identity of the common object and the changing situation in which it must be understood” (*TM*, p. 276). Instead of two different texts, Gadamer sees one text (the “common object”) with two different meanings. But why are these two different meanings meanings of the same text? What is common in Gadamer’s common object?

Obviously not intention, since the whole point of the example is that the judge’s interpretation and the legislators’ intention no longer coincide. What is required for the hermeneutic notion of application to work is a criterion of textual identity that will allow the text to remain the same while its meaning changes. As we noted earlier, hermeneutics finds this criterion in what Ricoeur calls the “verbal” or “objective” meaning of the

8. The question of whether judges should rewrite laws or simply interpret them is, of course, a political one and has nothing to do with the question of what it means to interpret.

text, which, because it is “something other than the subjective intention” of the author, may be “construed in various ways” (*IT*, p. 76). Although, for Ricoeur and for hermeneutics generally, it is in writing that the difference between verbal meaning and subjective intention fully emerges, there is no reason in principle why it cannot emerge in speech as well. In what circumstances might it seem plausible to say that the verbal meaning of a text or utterance transcends the author’s intention?

Suppose someone says “go” in circumstances suggesting that he must mean something else. Perhaps the speaker is a passenger in a car that has just pulled up to a railroad crossing. He says “go,” but the driver hesitates when she notices that the gate is down and a train is approaching. The problem she faces is the apparent discrepancy between the verbal meaning of “go”—what “go” means according to the rules of English—and what she takes to be the speaker’s likely intention. But isn’t her problem only a negative version of what we characterized earlier as the hermeneutic opportunity? If a text can have a conventional meaning different from its intended meaning, then its meaning is clearly not fixed once and for all by intention; it is, as Gadamer says, “free for new relationships.”

But does this example show that a text or utterance can have a conventional meaning independent of authorial intention? Suppose the driver decides that the passenger is being ironic. Is irony a case where intention and meaning come apart? After all, the utterance only counts as ironic if the speaker’s meaning is not simply the conventional one. At the same time, however, the utterance only counts as ironic if the speaker *intends* that both the conventional meaning and the departure from conventional meaning be recognized. Since both aspects of an ironic utterance are equally intentional, irony in no way frees the meaning of the utterance from the speaker’s intention.

If irony is not a case where a text’s verbal meaning transcends its author’s intention, is there any case in which it does—any case in which the author’s or speaker’s intention really does seem, in Ricoeur’s words, “useless . . . as regards the interpretation of the verbal meaning of his work”? Suppose the driver knows that when the passenger says “go,” he simply means “stop”; nevertheless she insists on taking “go” to mean what it means according to the conventions of English, that is, “go.” There is no question this time of the speaker being ironic: he doesn’t intend the conventional meaning to be taken ironically; he doesn’t intend the conventional meaning at all. The driver, knowing what he intends, chooses to disregard it, preferring instead the conventional or “verbal” meaning. Such a response might seem odd in the context of this example, since disregarding the passenger’s intended meaning could be suicidal. But perhaps the driver wants to commit suicide; in any event, cases in which an author’s intention is known but disregarded are (allegedly) typical in literary criticism. What might seem odd in all such cases is not

the possibility of disregarding the author's intention but the possibility of knowing it in the first place. After all, the whole point of the example is that the passenger is not following the rules of English; so how does the driver know what he means? What does she know if she knows that the speaker means "stop" when he says "go"?

What she knows, presumably, is another set of conventions, a set of conventions that link the sound "go" with the meaning "stop." Insofar as these conventions are different from the conventions of English, and insofar as the identity of a language is determined by its conventions, the passenger isn't speaking English but some other language. What the driver knows is the other language; she knows that "go" in English means "go" but that "go" in the passenger's language means "stop." By choosing the English meaning over the passenger's meaning, she is not simply choosing one meaning over another, she is choosing one set of conventions over another—one language over another. But if the passenger and the driver are following different linguistic conventions, in what sense do "go" as he says it and "go" as she hears it have the same conventional or "verbal" meaning? And if the verbal meaning is not the same, how can verbal meaning provide the "common object" that, according to Gadamer, makes it possible for a single text to mean what its author intends and also something more?

Would this outcome (the disappearance of a common verbal meaning) be altered by a stipulation that the author and the interpreter share a single language? Suppose the driver disregards the passenger's intention not because he is speaking a different language but because she prefers a different meaning of the English word "go": he means "get out of the car" but she prefers "drive forward." Here, perhaps, it could be said that the verbal meaning of "go" (the meaning assigned to "go" by the conventions of English) includes *both* meanings; hence it might seem that the "go" he says and the "go" she prefers, despite their difference in meaning, amount to a single object. And this third version of the example does seem to yield the principle that, in our view, lies at the heart of hermeneutics: a single text can't mean just anything ("go," in English, can't nonironically mean "stop"), but a single text can mean anything the conventions of its language allow it to mean. Unlike the case of irony, where the author intends both the verbal meaning and some departure from it, and unlike the case of translation, where there is no common verbal meaning, in this case there is a common verbal meaning that includes both what the author intends and what the interpreter prefers. The work of application would thus consist of selecting the most appropriate meaning from the range of meanings made available by the language, a meaning that might or might not coincide with the meaning intended by the author.

If what hermeneutics needs is a criterion of textual identity such that a text can mean what its author means and also something more,

then the stipulation that author and interpreter share the same language (so that the text means what its author means plus whatever else it can mean in that language) is indeed one way of satisfying that need. The trouble is that it is by no means the only way. For if there are other criteria that will serve equally well, the question arises, Why choose this one? Suppose one were to locate the identity of the text not in its verbal meaning but simply in the letters on the page. In that case, anything those letters might mean in any language would count as a valid interpretation of the same text. The same text—"go"—would mean what it meant in English and also what it meant in the passenger's language, as well as what it could be used to mean in any language, living, dead, or yet to be invented. Why, then, choose verbal meaning over letters? Presumably for the very reason that the criterion of verbal meaning limits the range of possible meanings (while still allowing more than one), whereas the criterion of letters would allow an infinite range of meanings. Allowing every meaning the letters would allow would be like playing poker with all cards wild. The interest of the game—the "tension that exists between the identity of the common object and the changing situation in which it must be understood"—can only be preserved if the range of possible interpretations is somehow limited.

But while this consideration justifies the choice of verbal meaning over letters, it won't explain why hermeneutics chooses verbal meaning over some other equally limiting criterion. Suppose we revise the rule that a text means what its author intends plus whatever else it can mean in a given language to read that a text means what its author intends plus whatever else it can mean in a given language—except for its verbs, which mean what the author intends plus the antonyms of whatever they can mean in the language.⁹ An English sentence like "No vehicle shall be permitted in the park" could now be correctly interpreted to mean "No vehicle shall be excluded from the park." Why prefer the stipulation that verbs mean what they can mean in the language to the stipulation that verbs mean the opposite of what they can mean in the language? Obviously not because it limits the range of possible meanings; both stipulations accomplish that. The answer must be that the range of possible meanings provided by the language rule is somehow more appropriate than the range of possible meanings provided by the antonym rule. A judge who interpreted "No vehicle shall be permitted in the park" to prohibit baby carriages and a judge who interpreted it to allow them would still seem to be interpreting the same law. But would a judge who interpreted it to allow *all* vehicles—cars, trucks, tanks—still be interpreting

9. It might be objected that the second rule is not quite *equally* limiting, since in allowing each verb to mean what the author intends plus the antonyms of what it can mean in the language, the rule adds one meaning for each verb. This objection could be met by a stipulation that the antonym of one possible meaning of each verb—say, the second meaning in some specified dictionary—be excluded.

the same law? How could there be a law (how would anyone *follow* a law) that could be correctly interpreted to have two contradictory meanings?

At this point, the apparent advantage of verbal meaning as a criterion of textual identity becomes clear. While the antonym rule allows interpretations directly opposed to the author's intentions, and while other imaginable rules would allow interpretations utterly irrelevant to the author's intention,¹⁰ the verbal meaning rule limits interpreters to meanings that may go beyond the author's intention but nonetheless seem plausibly related to it. And this claim to establish some relation to the author's intention is what saves verbal meaning from being just one game among others. But is it true that limiting interpreters to the meanings allowed by the author's language guarantees any degree of proximity to the author's intention? Suppose the law excluding vehicles from the park was written after 1936, when I. A. Richards introduced the terms "tenor" and "vehicle" to name the two halves of a metaphor.¹¹ Is the judge who, following the verbal meaning rule, interprets the law to exclude poems any closer to the legislators' intention than a judge who, following some other rule, interprets the law to exclude cabbages? Indeed, one can imagine cases where following the verbal meaning rule will yield the same result as following the antonym rule: for example, in contemporary American English "bad" can mean "good." What such examples show is that there is no necessary relation between the meaning the author intends and any one of the meanings the author's words can have in the language—except for the one the author intends. And the relation there is not one of relative proximity but of identity.

Since the rules of the language don't provide a range of meanings that are necessarily closer to the author's intention than the range of meanings provided by any other set of rules,¹² how are they relevant at all? They are relevant not because they provide a range of possible meanings but because they provide clues to the meaning the author intends. The dictionary definition of "vehicle" is useful not because it determines the range of possible meanings "vehicle" can have but because it provides clues to what an English-speaking author might mean by "vehicle." But if the interest of verbal meaning reduces to an interest in clues to what an author intends, what sense is there in appealing to the notion of verbal meaning as a way of going beyond authorial intention?

The hermeneutic choice of verbal meaning as a criterion of textual identity, then, turns out to be either arbitrary or incoherent. If what hermeneutics wants is only a criterion that will allow a text to mean what

10. For instance, the meaning of each word could include the meanings of all other words in the language with the same *number* of letters.

11. I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936; rpt. New York, 1965), p. 96.

12. Any other set of rules, that is, that allows the author's intended meaning as one possible meaning.

its author intends and also something more, then the choice of verbal meaning is arbitrary—other criteria (letters, antonyms, and so on) will do just as well. And if the choice of verbal meaning isn't arbitrary—if it can be justified by regarding verbal meaning as evidence of authorial intention—then the notion that it gives the text an identity independent of authorial intention is incoherent. The “common object” that will allow a text to mean what its author meant and also something more thus disappears; either the common object is the product of an utterly arbitrary choice or there is no common object. In either case, there is no “tension” between the identity of a “common object” and the “changing situation in which it must be understood.” If the choice of a criterion is arbitrary, there is no tension because the rules of the game can be adjusted to make the common object fit any situation. And if there is no common object, there is no tension because the interpreter who disregards the author's intention is not interpreting the same text but producing a new one. Because, in both cases, there can be no tension between the permanent identity of a text and the “changing situation” in which the text is understood, what Gadamer calls the “problem of application”—how to “adapt the meaning of a text to the concrete situation” of the interpreter—never arises. If, in Gadamer's view, the “fundamental hermeneutic problem” is the “problem of application,” in our view, the problem of hermeneutics is that there is no fundamental hermeneutic problem.

Our aim in this section has not been merely to attack the hermeneutic notion of application but, more important, to attack the hermeneutic account of the role played by linguistic convention in constituting textual identity. For an interest in appealing to linguistic convention as a criterion of textual identity is by no means limited to the hermeneutic interest in allowing a text to mean both what its author intends and something more. In a recent article, Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin combine a conventionalist account of textual identity with a professed indifference not only to authorial intention but to meaning itself. According to them, textual identity “is a matter pertaining solely to the syntax of a language—to the permissible configurations of letters, spaces, and punctuation marks—quite apart from what the text says or otherwise refers to.”¹³ If this criterion of textual identity were applied consistently, then any text could mean anything; indeed, any text could mean anything any other text could mean. If the only criterion of identity were syntax, difference of meaning would no more amount to difference of text than identity of meaning would amount to identity of text. In short, there would be no relation at all between figuring out what a text meant and knowing what text it was.

13. Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin, “Interpretation and Identity: Can the Work Survive the World?” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Spring 1986): 570; all further references to this work, abbreviated “II,” will be included in the text.

We have no argument against defining textual identity in this way, but it's hard to see how an interpreter (that is, someone who is trying to figure out what a text means) could adopt this definition and still maintain an interest in distinguishing one text from another. Goodman and Elgin, however, apparently do maintain such an interest, since they distinguish, for example, between "literary" texts, which exhibit "rich multiplicity of meaning" and "subtle and complex ambiguity," and "scientific" texts, which don't ("II," pp. 569, 568). But if the only criterion of textual identity is syntactic, how can we ever tell whether any given text is literary (rich, subtle, complex, and so on) or scientific? Perhaps, then, the criterion Goodman and Elgin really have in mind is not syntax alone but syntax as a device that defines a range of semantic possibilities, in which case their criterion is not far, after all, from the hermeneutic criterion of verbal meaning. But the criterion of verbal meaning would be no more useful in distinguishing between literary and scientific texts than the criterion of syntax. Is the word "vehicle" literary (and hence rich with complex ambiguity) or scientific (and hence limited to a single technical usage)? According to Goodman and Elgin, "the identity of a literary work is located in the text, and texts can be randomly produced." Thus, they argue, a monkey at a typewriter can count as an author, the identity of whose text would of course be determined independent of intention ("II," p. 574). But would "vehicle," typed by a monkey, be a literary or a scientific text? Neither syntax nor verbal meaning could answer that question; the only thing that could would be an account of what, if anything, the monkey intended.

At the heart of hermeneutics, we have seen, is the claim that linguistic convention provides a criterion of textual identity that enables an interpreter to give a text a meaning that goes beyond the author's intended meaning. At the heart of Goodman's and Elgin's account of textual identity is the claim that linguistic convention renders the author's intention simply irrelevant. Thus, according to hermeneutics and to Goodman and Elgin, the meaning of a text can be altered by the interpreter while the text itself remains unchanged. We have argued, however, that convention cannot provide such a criterion of identity; if the intended meaning is altered, so is the text.¹⁴ Conventions are only relevant to interpretation insofar as they help interpreters arrive at the intended meaning. But if conventions play no role in enabling interpreters to go beyond authorial intention, what role do they play in enabling authors to produce texts in the first place? This question, as it is raised in Jacques Derrida's writings on speech-act theory, provides the focus of our next section.

14. This is not to say that competing interpretations of an author's intention amount to interpretations of different texts. Different accounts of the same object don't produce different objects.

3. Deconstruction

One way to characterize the original argument of “Against Theory” is as an attack on the formalist notion that linguistic convention determines the meaning of a text. In the previous section of this essay, we extended that attack to the hermeneutic assumption that linguistic convention determines the range of possible meanings a text can have in addition to the meaning intended by its author. Unlike formalism and hermeneutics, and like “Against Theory,” deconstruction denies the determining force of linguistic rules or conventions, or what Derrida, in “Signature Event Context,” calls “code.” Indeed, a central point of Derrida’s essay is to show how “the authority of the code as a finite system of rules” is necessarily disrupted by the dependence of meaning on context, which is infinitely variable.¹⁵ A text cannot by itself determine meaning; as Derrida puts it in “Limited Inc abc . . . ,” “no mark can create or engender a context on its own, much less dominate it. This limit, this finitude is the condition under which contextual transformation remains an always open possibility.”¹⁶ In our terms, the dependence of meaning on context is simply another way of describing the determination of meaning by intention: because a mark means whatever it is intended to mean, the same mark can have different meanings when it is produced in different situations. But for Derrida, the same principle that makes it impossible for convention to determine meaning makes it impossible for context to determine meaning. Context cannot determine meaning because its own “determining center,” intention, is inadequate: “the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content” (“SEC,” p. 192). Hence what looks to us like an argument against convention and for intention counts, for Derrida, as an argument against both convention and intention. In fact, the main target of Derrida’s polemic is not the “authority of code” but the authority of intention as the “source” of meaning (“SEC,” p. 193).

The principle that, according to Derrida, undermines the authority of intention is what he calls “iterability.” In order for a sign to be a sign, it must be able to function beyond its original context—that is, it must in principle be readable by someone other than its author or the audience for which it was intended: “A writing that is not structurally readable—iterable—beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing.” And this principle “holds also, for the same reasons, for the sender or the producer”: “the sign possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not

15. Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” *Glyph 1* (1977): 180; all further references to this essay, abbreviated “SEC,” will be included in the text.

16. Derrida, “Limited Inc abc . . . ,” *Glyph 2* (1977): 220; all further references to this essay, abbreviated “LI,” will be included in the text.

know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he wrote it, i.e. abandoned it to its essential drift" ("SEC," pp. 180, 182). Consequently, intention, while it will "have its place," cannot "govern the entire scene and system of utterance [*l'enonciation*]" ("SEC," p. 192).

In one sense the claim that intention cannot govern the scene of utterance seems to us correct. Even if, as we have argued, intention determines meaning, there can be no guarantee that the intended meaning will be understood. To say that the author cannot govern the scene of utterance is only to say that the author cannot enforce communication. A speaker or writer can always fail to communicate; misinterpretation is always possible.

But Derrida is not primarily concerned with cases of misinterpretation. When he speaks of the "mark" continuing "to produce effects independently" of the author's "presence" ("SEC," p. 177), what he has in mind are not cases where the author's meaning is misunderstood but cases where the author's mark is "*cited*, put between quotation marks." For Derrida, the possibility of citation (the principle of "citationality") shows that every mark "can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable" ("SEC," p. 185). Since, for Derrida, intention is the "determining center of context" ("SEC," p. 192), this possibility of taking a mark *out* of context amounts to the possibility of making a mark mean something other than what its original author intends.

Derrida's argument, however, goes beyond the hermeneutic claim that a text can acquire new meanings once it has been freed from authorial control. For him, the text—to be a text—must *from the start* be free from authorial control. The break that interests him is not between what an author makes a mark mean and what the mark is made to mean by interpreters; what interests him instead is the "break" that "intervenes from the moment that there is a mark." This break is not simply something that can happen to a mark, it is "the positive condition of the emergence of the mark. It is iterability itself" ("LI," p. 190). For Derrida, the failure of intention to govern linguistic effects (misinterpretation, citation, and so on) points to a deeper failure of intention to determine the meaning of a mark in the first place.

What prevents intention from determining a mark's meaning is the fact that the mark is "constituted in its identity as mark by its iterability"—the fact, in other words, that it is necessarily "organized by a code" ("SEC," p. 180). Although the infinite variability of context makes it impossible for meaning to be determined *solely* by code, the principle of iterability, understood as the condition of the identity of any mark, makes it impossible for meaning to be determined apart from code. Because the mark derives its identity from its participation in a code—because its identity is essentially conventional—its meaning cannot be

determined by intention alone. Because every linguistic intention—every intention to make something mean something—thus involves reference to a code, no intention can fully succeed in determining meaning. Iterability, the “very factor” that permits the mark “to function,” that is, “the possibility of its being repeated *another* time,” “breaches, divides, expropriates the ‘ideal’ plenitude or self-presence of intention, of meaning (to say) and, *a fortiori*, of all adequation between meaning and saying” (“LI,” p. 200).

Derrida’s denial that meaning can be determined by intention thus depends on the claim that language is essentially conventional. But why should the claim that language is essentially conventional, even if it were true, undermine the possibility of saying what one means? Why should the need to follow the conventions compromise an intention if the intention is an intention to follow those conventions? Such an intention would appear to succeed whenever anyone said something in the way it was conventionally said and meant by it what speakers conventionally meant. And, of course, such an intention would fail when a speaker tried to say something in a conventional way but didn’t. But the possibility of failure in this sense is built into the possibility of acts in general. What is it about *linguistic* acts that converts the mere possibility of failure into the general inadequacy of intention? The answer is iterability; insofar as producing a conventional sign entails, in Derrida’s view, abandoning it to its “essential drift,” the producer of a sign can never succeed in fixing its meaning. Convention, not the author, determines what the author has done; the iterability of any conventional sign frees its meanings from authorial control.

The kind of failure that Derrida has in mind emerges in the course of his discussion of J. L. Austin’s theory of the performative utterance. And, in fact, performative utterances, as analyzed by Austin, do seem like cases where a failure to follow the appropriate conventions amounts to a failure to mean, that is, produce the speech act one intends to produce. According to Austin, a performative utterance has no meaning apart from its status as a conventional act; it doesn’t describe something, it does something: “When I say, before the registrar or altar, &c., ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it.”¹⁷ It clearly is possible for such an act to fail: if, for example, I am already married and am thus excluded by convention from marrying again. But has the speaker who has failed to marry also failed to mean? Insofar as marrying is identified with successfully performing a speech act, and insofar as in this case successfully performing a speech act is identified with successfully following certain conventions, the answer must be yes. But does it make sense here to identify the act of meaning (successfully performing a speech act) with the act of marrying (successfully following the conventions for marrying)? Suppose we paraphrase “I do” in the following way: “By

17. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, 1975), p. 6.

the sounds I am now making I am entering into marriage." The paraphrase holds both for the case in which the speaker says "I do" and succeeds in marrying and for the case in which the speaker says "I do" but doesn't. What, then, is the difference between these cases? The meaning of "I do" is the same in both; the only difference is that, in the first case, what the speaker says is true because the speaker *is* getting married, while in the second case, what the speaker says is false because, as it turns out, the speaker isn't getting married. Saying "I do" when one is already married is indeed an example of failing to perform the conventional act one intended to perform, but it is not an example of failing to perform the *speech act* one intended to perform.

So far, then, there is no discrepancy between what the speaker intends and the speech act the speaker has in fact performed. But what if we revise the example along the lines suggested by Jonathan Culler in the course of his defense of Derrida's theory of meaning? Suppose, Culler writes, "after apparently completing a marriage ceremony one of the parties said that he had been joking when he uttered his lines—only pretending, just rehearsing, or acting under duress. Assuming that the others believe his report of his intention, it will not in itself be decisive. What he had in mind at the moment of utterance does not determine what speech act his utterance performed."¹⁸ There is no doubt that cases like this could arise. But should they in fact be understood as cases where the intention is irrelevant to determining what speech act has been performed? Why, after all, might it make sense to hold the speaker to what he said even if you were convinced he was pretending? Clearly not because the intentions of speakers when they say "I do" are in principle irrelevant. The whole point of a marriage ceremony is to provide a framework for declaring and carrying out certain intentions; that's why it would make a difference if a speaker said "I don't." The reason a speaker who pretends is nevertheless taken seriously is not that his intentions don't matter but simply that he is held to have had the intention that in these circumstances ordinarily goes with these sounds. The point of holding someone to the intention that ordinarily goes with certain sounds in certain circumstances is not linguistic but social. Letting people back out of marriage and other contracts on the grounds that they were just pretending, given the difficulty of proving whether they really were pretending, would make all contracts virtually unenforceable. If the social aim is to enforce contractual obligations, then it makes sense to hold people to standard intentions—that is, to stipulate that, whatever intentions they had in fact, they will be

18. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp. 122–23. One of the three conditions, "acting under duress," would not be relevant, since there would be no question of a discrepancy between intention and speech act. The only question would be whether the speaker should be held responsible for a speech act he was forced to perform.

treated as if they had the intentions deemed appropriate to the circumstances. On the other hand, in a society less strict about contractual obligations, it will make sense instead to hold people only to whatever intentions they claim to have had. The choice between the alternatives is a purely social one and has nothing to do with the relation between meaning and intention. Either the speaker in Culler's example will indeed be allowed to have performed the speech act he had in mind, or he will be treated as if he had something else in mind. In both cases, the speech act the speaker will be held to have performed will be determined by the intention he will be held to have had.

None of these versions of a marriage ceremony going wrong, then, amounts to an example of a speaker failing to mean what the speaker intends. In our first version of the example, the speaker succeeds in meaning what he intends but fails, for another reason, to marry. In Culler's version of the example, the speaker produces the speech act he intends, but his intention and the speech act are both set aside, for social reasons, in favor of another intention and another speech act. The alleged discrepancy between intention and speech act turns out to be a discrepancy between two different intentions (or two different speech acts). In every case the meaning of the speech act itself is determined by the speaker's intention. In no case has the speaker failed to determine the speech act's meaning.

What would a marriage ceremony have to be like for the meaning of "I do" not to be determined by the speaker's intention? Suppose a marriage ceremony is constructed as a game in which saying "I do" is replaced by rolling dice—rolling six or under substitutes for saying "I do," rolling seven or over substitutes for saying "I don't." Someone who rolled a six would thus succeed in marrying, someone who rolled a seven would not. Now suppose, in a variation on Culler's example, that someone who did not want to marry nevertheless rolled, say, a five. This would indeed be a case where her intention did not determine what she had done—not, however, because she *failed* to do what she intended but because she didn't even try. Insofar as she had any relevant intention at all, it was only the intention to roll the dice, and in that intention she succeeded. She never intended to roll any particular number, she only *hoped* that the dice would come up seven or over. Rolling something other than what you hope to roll is not an example of meaning something other than what you intend to mean—in fact, it isn't an example of meaning at all. In the marriage game, the rules determine what you do but not what you mean, because you never *mean* anything. You never mean anything because rolling dice is not a speech act, and if saying "I do" were like rolling dice, then saying "I do" wouldn't be a speech act either.

It is true, as Derrida puts it, that "failure is an essential risk" intrinsic to "all conventional acts" ("SEC," p. 188). By failing to follow the appropriate

conventions, a speaker can fail to marry. But, as we have shown, a failure to marry is not necessarily a failure to mean. In all our examples, the speaker either succeeded in meaning or (in the game example) didn't even try to mean. Does this show that speakers always succeed in producing the speech act they intend to produce? Does it show that speakers can never fail to mean? Obviously not. You can intend to say something but fail to produce any sound at all, or intend to say something but fail to produce the right sound. But neither of these failures has anything to do with convention; you have simply failed to do what you intended. You meant to produce a sound but didn't, or you meant to produce one sound and produced another instead. The risk of such failures is essential not to conventional acts but to acts in general.

There is one way, however, in which a speaker can fail to mean by failing to follow conventions, and that is by *intending* to follow some convention but not doing so. Suppose, recalling our example in section 2, the passenger intends to tell the driver to stop but says "go," believing that "go" means "stop" in English. Here at last failing to mean and failing to follow conventions coincide. But this example still doesn't show that the kind of risk essential to conventional acts is the same as the kind of risk essential to meaning. It would be the same if following conventions were the only way the passenger could say what he intends, just as one can marry only by saying the right words in the right circumstances. But in fact the passenger need not have intended to follow the conventions of English or, for that matter, to follow any conventions at all. Suppose that, instead of saying "go," the speaker had intentionally produced a noise belonging to no existing language and never before produced in similar circumstances. It might still have been possible for the driver, noticing the oncoming train, to understand what he meant and so correctly to interpret his speech act. And even if the driver failed to understand—even if the passenger failed to communicate his intention—he would not for that reason have failed to mean. The driver's success or failure in understanding would be logically irrelevant to the passenger's success or failure in producing the speech act he intended to produce; she might equally have misunderstood him if he had intended to follow the rules and had done so.

For Derrida, intention can never fully succeed in determining meaning because the mere act of using a mark or sound to represent an intention is not itself the act of meaning. For the mark would not yet be a signifier. To function as a signifier, the mark must be, as we have seen, "constituted in its identity as mark by its iterability"; it must be "organized by a code." After all, how could a mark produced for the first—and perhaps the only—time be readable? How could it be recognized as a signifier unless it was already part of an organized code? How could it even be *used* as a signifier unless its producer already understood it as part of a meaningful code and intended it to be recognized as such? What our example shows,

however, is that the sound the passenger makes is in principle fully interpretable without belonging to any existing code. It shows, in other words, that you can succeed in meaning when you don't follow any convention at all. You succeed in meaning whenever you produce a meaningful sign, and you produce a meaningful sign whenever you use something to signify your intention.

This is not to deny that an unconventional mark or sound can become conventional—if, for example, the passenger makes the same sound at the next railroad crossing and once again means “stop.” This time the passenger uses what has now become a conventional signifier, and the driver relies on her knowledge of the convention when she identifies that signifier and interprets it. And indeed, for Derrida, this *possibility* of the signifier being repeated matters more than whether it is in fact repeated. Hence Derrida distinguishes between actual “iteration” and “iterability,” claiming that iterability “can be recognized even in a mark which *in fact* seems to have occurred only once. I say *seems*, because this one time is in itself divided or multiplied in advance by its structure of repeatability” (“LI,” p. 185). But this only makes sense if the way the driver understands the passenger's utterance the second time (by reference to convention) is the same as the way she understood it the first time (without reference to convention). Derrida assumes that the mere fact that the signifier can *become* part of a code suggests that it was always functioning as if it *were* part of a code. But our example shows that the possibility of the signifier becoming part of a code is irrelevant to the way it functions when it is not in fact functioning as part of a code. (It means the same thing both times the passenger says it, but it doesn't function in the same way.) While it is therefore true that any mark or sound can be repeated and can thus become conventional, it is not true that whenever a mark or sound is used to mean something it must already be functioning as if it were conventional.

Neither convention nor the risk it entails, then, is essential to meaning. And the reason for this is implicit in everything we have been arguing: following conventions is only one way of doing what *is* essential, namely, giving clues to your intention. Conventions are indeed important, but only because they often provide convenient ways of signaling what you intend.¹⁹ They don't add to, subtract from, or alter your meaning; they simply help you express the meaning you intend. And if the conventions don't help you express the meaning you intend—if, for example, you use the wrong conventions—they don't replace your meaning with some

19. As Donald Davidson puts it: “Knowledge of the conventions of a language is . . . a practical crutch to interpretation, a crutch we cannot in practice afford to do without—but a crutch which, under optimum conditions for communication, we can in the end throw away, and could in theory have done without from the start” (*Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* [Oxford, 1984], p. 279).

other meaning. Your meaning doesn't become a different meaning when you fail to express the meaning you intended. If it did, if speech acts were indeed conventional acts and not just acts that sometimes employed conventions, then Derrida would be right: intention would be inadequate to determine meaning. But Derrida is wrong. Speech acts are not conventional acts, and if they mean anything at all they mean only what their authors intend.

4. *Conclusion*

We began the previous section by noting an apparent point of agreement between Derrida's account of meaning and our own: both reject the notion that linguistic conventions determine the meaning of a text.²⁰ And even hermeneutics weakens the determining force of conventions by assigning a crucial role to the interpreter. In the context of American literary theory, both hermeneutics and deconstruction thus represent a significant departure from the strong conventionalism we earlier identified with Wimsatt's and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy." For Wimsatt and Beardsley, the rules of language gave each text a unique and unchanging meaning, irrespective of its author's intention. As we have shown, however, the rejection of conventionalism by both hermeneutics and deconstruction is only partial; while convention, in both these theories, ceases to provide a unique and unchanging meaning, it nevertheless gives the text an identity such that it can acquire meanings that are independent of its author's intentions. And, as we have further shown, these weaker forms of conventionalism won't work either. In the case of hermeneutics, weak conventionalism won't work because there is no coherent sense in which conventions give the text an identity that will allow it to mean both what its author intends and also something more. In the case of deconstruction, weak conventionalism won't work because although it rejects the determining force of conventions, it nevertheless accepts the mistaken view that speech acts are essentially conventional acts.

Our aim in "Against Theory" was to argue against the strong conventionalism underlying various forms of interpretive method; our aim in the present essay has been to argue against two (nonmethodological) forms of weak conventionalism. All our arguments, then, have been anti-conventionalist—which is to say, intentionalist. For any consistent argument against the notion that conventions are essential to meaning turns out to be an argument that what *is* essential to meaning is intention. In one sense, this conclusion is the opposite of Wimsatt's and Beardsley's: where

20. For a recent discussion of Derrida's anticonventionalism with conclusions different from ours, see S. Pradhan, "Minimalist Semantics: Davidson and Derrida on Meaning, Use, and Convention," *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 66–77.

they thought all that mattered was convention, we think all that matters is intention. But in another sense, our conclusion matches theirs: like them, we think that a text has only one meaning, and that whatever that meaning is, it never changes.

Our point in this essay, however, has not been to defend (for some ethical, professional, or political reason) the notion that a text's meaning is unique and unchanging. Our point instead has been to expose the confusion of projects that reject some conventionalist claims while nevertheless clinging to conventions. In contrast to these, we have argued that conventions play no role in determining meaning. We have denied that they can give a text an autonomous identity that will allow it to mean more than its author intends. And we have made a further point about the relation between convention and meaning, maintaining not only that conventions provide no source of meaning in addition to intention but also that they impose no necessary constraint on how intentions can be expressed. They provide no additional source and they impose no necessary constraints because their role is not to determine a text's meaning but only to provide evidence of what the text's meaning is. And its meaning is whatever its author intends.