The Varieties of Authorial Intention:

Literary Theory Beyond the Intentional Fallacy

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Analytic Table of Contents

Introduction: The Origins of an Intellectual Taboo

Polarization of the classic debate around the "intentional fallacy" and the historical background for the popularity of the textualist view. Its connection with avant-garde twentieth-century artistic practices, its appeal to religious and radical critics who seek a source of meaning for literature that transcends the author, and its connection with psychoanalysis. Difficulty of maintaining the textualist attitude in practice. Its distorting effects. The editor's dilemma without recourse to intention.

Chapter 1: Actions, Intentions, Authors, Works

Actions and intentions

Explanation of the basic notions of action and intention as deployed in everyday life. The belief-desire-action triad. Intentional actions not necessarily the result of conscious deliberation.

Is intentional psychology legitimate?

Absence of a serious candidate for replacing intention in explaining individual or even institutional behavior. The "Theory of Mind" hypothesis as one explanation of our power to discern intentions.

Intention and language

The chosenness of words in a particular context makes them worth interpreting for the audience. Example of Borges's story "The Library of Babel." The importance of authorial intention does not mean that evidence from outside the text should necessarily play an important role in literary interpretation.

The varieties of authorial intention

The multiple, deeply embedded character of intentional actions. Three obvious forms of intention for literary works—communicative ones (what the work says), artistic ones (the experience it creates), and practical ones (extra-artistic personal or social goals). Literary theorists failure to make this key distinction. Different conditions of satisfaction for different types of intention. Author's relative lack of authority regarding artistic and practical intentions.

The "Intentional Fallacy"

The problems raised by Wimsatt and Beardsley's famous article "The Intentional Fallacy," especially their failure to make the distinction between communicative and artistic intentions. Impact of the essay's title. A reading of Auden's cryptic poem "This Lunar Beauty" showing that some external evidence can enable the audience to grasp publicly recognizable intentions in the work.

Interpretation and ordinary speech

The account of linguistic intentionality further developed through the conception of linguistic practice as offering cues to the interpreter rather than coded information. This notion of communication as a process of guided inference central to the study of conversational behavior or "pragmatics."

Author and text

Implications of the previous section for the reading of literature. Recognizing the centrality of authorial intention does not undermine the autonomy of the text. Many works not meant to be autonomous, however, but depend upon their relation to other texts. Textual autonomy to be recognized on a historical and case-by-case basis.

Emphasis on the production side of literature not a rival to studying its reception. These are two different valid scholarly pursuits.

Meaning and impact

Addresses the worry that the strong connection between a text's meaning and the author's intention implies that meaning cannot change over time. Need for the key distinction between meaning and impact.

Communication and the powers of inference

Deepens the discussion of conversational pragmatics introduced earlier by explaining Sperber and Wilson's theory of relevance.

The open texture of language

Gives the reader a better sense of the alternative to the code theory of language by stressing the indeterminacy of the words we use, how many

different things they could mean until they are chosen in a particular context. The need for inference in ordinary speech undermines the sense that rhetorical tropes like metaphor and irony are special and deviant from everyday language. Examples of literary reading from Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, and Tolstoy

"Interpretive communities"

Explains why Stanley Fish's influential argument that meaning is imposed upon texts by the communities who read them, though based on some accurate observations, ultimately fails. Work's meaning, though, does not fix impact for later readers.

Does interpreting films depend upon intentions?

The answer to this question illuminates an old debate about the Aristotelian unities of time and place.

The embodiment of words and "textual luck"

The indeterminacy of language does not conflict with our sense of the solidity and integrity of words. Discussion of "textual luck," what happens to the artistic qualities of works when the meanings of their words change.

The difficulty and richness of literary language

The simple size of literary works as very large single utterances a source of interpretive difficulty. Heidegger and the hermeneutic circle. Relation between the difficulties of literary interpretation and the richness of its possibilities. Adaptation to literature of biblical hermeneutics.

A digression on Alice and Humpty Dumpty

Alice's reading of "Jabberwocky," her discussions with Humpty Dumpty and the White Queen as bearing upon the themes treated above.

Conclusion

Chapter 2: Truth, Indeterminacy, Omniscience, and

Other Matters

Uncertainty, indeterminacy, and underdeterminacy

Uncertainty a condition of the observer but indeterminacy a condition of the object of knowledge. Implications of Quine's famous discussion of linguistic indeterminacy. Unrealistically high expectations behind de Man's complaints about the failure of language to accomplish the "unmediated expression of desires" and Derrida's worry about drift of meaning in <u>dissemination</u>.

The "omniscient" narrator

Wayne Booth's key literary term "unreliable narrator" misleadingly set in contrast to "omniscient narrators" instead of simply "reliable" ones.

The "implied author"

Problems with Wayne Booth's attempt to bring the author back into the picture by making an "implied author" a feature of the text.

Can fiction be defined without reference to authors?

Works of fiction only distinguishable from the truthful narratives they pretend to be through the recognition of the author's fictive stance.

Do all poems have speakers distinct from the author?

This is one of the now-universal, key assumptions of criticism and pedagogy based on the textual fallacy. The need to recognize the distinction between the poetic speaker and the poet does not require that the speaker be thought of as a dramatic character. Exemplary reading of Dickinson's "Success is counted sweetest."

The "death of the author" and the "author function"

Discussion of the key 1960s radicalization of the textual fallacy by Barthes and Foucault—its connection with worries about metaphysical truth, modernist artistic experiments, and apocalyptic political hopes for the emergence of new kind of post-human being.

Deconstruction and the metaphysics of meaning

Incorrectness of the common assumption that Derrida denies the importance of authorial intentions. His concern that the author cannot "dominate absolutely" the language in which he writes. A brief sketch of the problem of the foundations of truth and knowledge underlying worries about language, with key reference to the work of Donald Davidson.

Pre-modern, modern, and postmodern

A brief sketch of the deep motivating context for contemporary views of interpretation grounded in the transitions from pre-modern to modern and postmodern literary culture. The key distinction between truth and experience.

Chapter 3: Unconscious Intentions

Is there a single correct interpretation of a literary work?

The multitude of practices that go under the name interpretation. Basic character of utterance meaning. Many critical disagreements aimed at judging the work's impact and so not susceptible of definitive resolution.

Levels of interpretation

The three levels upon which interpretations work: surface meanings, or sets of meanings that constitute the work; the deep meanings that reside at an explanatory level inaccessible to the author; and "interlinear" readings that address the implications of the surface meanings not explicitly acknowledged in the work but not necessarily unconscious in the strong sense. The most subtle and interesting problems for interpretation posed by the latter, as shown with examples from Shakespeare and Dickens.

Freud

Freud's extension of rational intentionality into the unconcious. Need for theory to discover unconscious intentions. Their existence not confirmable by interpretations alone.

Marx

Marxism's positing of a hidden source of intentionality invested in the collective project of history.

Structuralism

Tendency of language-oriented theories like New Criticism, deconstruction, and structuralism to alter the meanings of the texts they are applied to. Benefits of structuralist analyses of the conceptual vocabularies of particular cultures. Its displacement of the locus of thought and meaning from the speaker to the instrument, from parole to langue.

Foucault

Foucault's notion of power as the most complete alienation of agency.

Literary Darwinism

Importance of Darwinian insight into the human motivational system and other subjects relevant to art and literature. Its effect on the impact of literary works rather than their meaning.

Is Actor-Network Theory the antidote to the totalizing modes of "critique"?

Actor-Network Theory's usefully flexible notion of the social. Its erasure of the distinction between human and non-human "actors" not necessary to recognize the impact of individual features of a work and makes a proper account of the agency of the artist impossible.

Then how should we read now?

The recognition of intentionality and the existence of transindividual intentional entities (projects) makes a broad pluralism or eclecticism preferable to a new hegemonic theory.

Chapter 4: Authorship and Literary Value

The Plurality of values

Judgments of value not merely ex post facto but part of the reading process. Literary value just one kind of value among many that a work can have. Not dependent only upon formal characteristics of the work. Anything the author can do well contributes to the literary value of the work. Utilitarian versus "critical" evaluation.

<u>Afición</u>

Relevance of expert judgment and training, the form of appreciation Ernest Hemingway called <u>afición</u>. Expertise does not lead to perfect consensus about the value of literary works. Shortcomings of reductive explanations of value. Holistic and pluralistic aspect of aesthetic value.

Theories of mimesis and the aesthetic

Tendency of mimetic theories like Aristotle's and aesthetic theories like Kant's to consider the work as an object detached from the author's performance. Correlation of this problem with the textual fallacy about meaning. Need for value theories to cope with the fact that the artistic process is relevant to the value of what it produces, imitative artistic performances being valued less than original ones.

Artistic versus aesthetic value

Performance-centered versus object-centered conceptions of literary value.

A new aspect of levels of intention

An alternative to the pyramidal structure of communicative, artistic, and practical intentions discussed in Chapter One.

What is literature?

The advantages of a production- and skill-centered definition of literature rather than the more familiar reception-centered aesthetic definition. Inability of literary institutions to constitute the category of literature. Their role as a forum for enhancing literary value.

The pluralistic character of artistic value

Incomparability of different forms of art in terms of value. Comparisons based on difficulty and talent.

Author versus work

In illusionistic art the impressiveness of performance due to the ability of the author to disappear behind the world of the work. The different relations to literature of popular and elite audiences illuminated through the use of the external/internal distinction.

Meaning and value

Correlation in my treatment of the two concepts.

Conclusion

References