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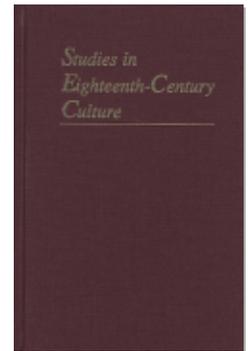
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Forum Introduction: Intention and the Eighteenth-Century Text

MARK VARESCHI AND JESS KEISER

At least since W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), intention has played an uneasy role in the interpretation of cultural artifacts. In the wake of their seminal essay, critics warred over the meaning, use, and abuse of intention in art and culture. While the 1970s and 1980s saw writers of a post-structuralist persuasion radicalizing Wimsatt and Beardsley's attack by linking the latter's fallacy with their own anti-humanist stance, the 1990s witnessed a resurgence of critics defending intention as an analytic category. These decades demonstrated that more was at stake in debates about intention than critical praxis; ethics, politics, and institutional formations were all tied into how one understood intention.

It is easy to assume that, with the new millennium, the debates about intention that exercised Wimsatt, Beardsley, and their heirs have fallen by the wayside. But the following essays tell a different story. The problem of intention has persisted in cultural criticism, and it is arguably at the heart of a number of innovative, new approaches in eighteenth-century studies. From new materialism's reappraisal of agency, which has raised questions about the relation between the actions and intentions of actors both human and non-human, to digital humanities' scaling up of its objects of analysis to the point where intention may well be regarded as a collective, rather

than individual, phenomenon, intention has been a persistent—if rarely explicit—concern in recent critical work.

These essays look to the eighteenth century as a key period for thinking through the problems and potentials of intention. They seek new ways of defining the concept by exploring Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*; surveying the reception of Beethoven's music as a way of reclaiming intention for contemporary criticism; looking to Defoe's *Crusoe* to consider the friction between a person's motivations and actions; and discovering in eighteenth-century pornography a conception of intention that belongs not to individual bodies but to larger collectives. In doing so, they are building on important recent work in eighteenth-century studies that has turned away from earlier rejections of intention. Frances Ferguson's important essay "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," with its nuanced examination of the role intention plays in eighteenth-century legal fictions, arguably sparked this resurgent interest in the topic. Following Ferguson, Jonathan Kramnick's *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson* and Sandra Macpherson's *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* demonstrate that there is more at stake in eighteenth-century accounts of intention than efforts to confirm or dismiss the plans and designs ostensibly hidden away in the author's mind. By asking us to rethink the relationship between willful subjects and the actions they (ostensibly) intend, Kramnick's and Macpherson's books reveal the ethical, political, and even ontological stakes of eighteenth-century writings on intention. In this work, intention is neither the bogeyman to be avoided nor the master key to textual interpretation; intention becomes one feature among many requiring interpretation.

The essays in this forum reflect this expanded account of intention. Basing themselves on Ferguson's, Kramnick's, and Macpherson's seminal writings, they reconsider the place of intention in the creation, reception, and content of cultural objects. Stephanie Hershinow raises the question of disciplinary difference in accounts of, and engagements with, intention and intentionality in literary studies and analytical philosophy. Sarah Ellenzweig considers the ongoing material turn in humanities scholarship, which asks us to attribute agency and intention not simply to human beings but also to non-human things. The essay combats the presentism of this "new materialism" by tracing its concerns to a cluster of eighteenth-century texts. Edmund Goehring argues for the continued relevance of artistic and authorial intention in the work of interpretation. Crucial to his argument is an account of artistic objects as actions or utterances in which intention may be read off the objects themselves. By thinking about the relationship between intending and remembering, Sarah Eron seeks to overcome the mind-matter binary. Her essay argues that only minds embodied in flesh and blood can remember,

and take ownership over, their intended acts. Thomas Salem Manganaro explores the phenomenon of *akrasia*, where one acts in a manner other than one intends. Finally, Kathleen Lubey asks if people in the eighteenth century intended to have sex? Her provocative answer: “maybe not.”

Central to the question of intention has been the problem of defining the term. Wimsatt and Beardsley famously described intention as a “design or plan in the author’s mind.” Stanley Cavell and others have challenged this definition. The essays in this forum do not come to a consensus on a definition. Instead, they offer lively debate, showing that intention remains a vital and vibrant area of critical and historical concern for those interested in the creation, circulation, and reception of cultural artifacts.

NOTES

1. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1954), 3–18. The essay appeared first in *The Sewanee Review* 54.3 (1946): 468–88 and has been reprinted widely.

2. Stanley Cavell, “A Matter of Meaning It,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 213–37 (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 226. See also Quentin Skinner, “Motives, Intentions and Interpretation,” in *Visions of Politics Vol. 1* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 98. Joshua Gang, “Behaviorism and the Beginnings of Close Reading,” *ELH* 78.1 (2011): 18.