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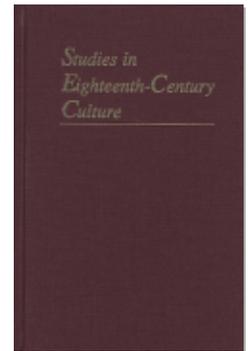
The Best of Intentions

Stephanie Insley Hershinow

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The Best of Intentions

STEPHANIE INSLEY HERSHINOW

What kind of work are we doing when we attend to intention? What disciplinary protocols must we abide by? And what kinds of criticism do we produce, whether we intend to or not? I want to use this brief space to raise what are for me rather urgent methodological questions about what happens when we (I include myself here) turn to philosophy—in particular, to contemporary philosophy—to clarify some of the messiness that surrounds a concept like intention as we encounter it in and around literary texts. In doing so, I take up Jonathan Kramnick’s implicit call in his book, *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson*, for just such a conversation.¹ I say “implicit” because this call is to be found in a footnote to the final chapter of the book, where it appears both to invite attention to methodology and to suggest that that conversation might best be had at some other point. Now is as good a time as any.

The note is attached to Kramnick’s reading of Richardson’s *Clarissa* and addresses Frances Ferguson’s reading of that novel in her landmark essay “Rape and the Rise of the Novel.”² Though unable to do justice here to Kramnick’s careful and provocative reading, I reproduce his note:

Ferguson tends to run meaning together with intention (semantics with actions) so that attention is paid more to ‘intending to mean’ than ‘intending to act.’ This is, it seems to me, a natural result of the disciplines. From Wimsatt and Beardsley onward, we literary critics tend to be concerned with questions of intention as they

impact upon questions of meaning. What did Pope intend to mean by the symbol of the lock, anyway? For the more technically minded philosophical disciplines, intention and meaning might be related but are distinct dimensions to the mind.... This is a source of much confusion for those trying to approach literary questions with help from contemporary philosophy.³

Despite the inclusion of himself in “we literary critics,” Kramnick is expressing ambivalence between traditional critical approaches and what he calls more “technical” ones, between literature and philosophy. This is an ambivalence that I share up to a point. If intention is a source of “much confusion,” then I count myself among the confused. Is the precision of the technical disciplines—with their refusal to allow terms to “run...together”—to be welcomed by literary scholarship? Or does it risk being reductive even as it clarifies?

Kramnick is indebted throughout his book to a model of intention theorized by G.E.M. Anscombe, who separates motive (a mental state) from intention (the manifestation of a mental state in action).⁴ For Kramnick, analytic philosophy enables us to make such distinctions, and they, in turn, help us to produce richer and more rigorous readings of literary texts. Kramnick is certainly not alone in finding Anscombe’s work useful. In a brilliant essay on the anonymous publication of Burney’s *Evelina*, Mark Vareschi argues that Anscombe’s distinction between intention and motive enables us to approach the ubiquity of eighteenth-century anonymity without recourse to imaginary reconstructions of the reasons behind the absence of authorial names.⁵ As Vareschi’s work suggests, one of the appeals of turning to Anscombe is that she provides us with a vocabulary to speak of intention both on the level of character (that is, within texts) and on the level of authorship.⁶ But admirable as this work is, it tends to create a methodological crisis. Although the turn to analytical philosophy helps to expand our understanding of intentionality, it raises the question of what gets left out: the historically functional “messiness” of intention.

Both Kramnick and Vareschi credit (or, rather, blame) Wimsatt and Beardsley for the muddier account of intention that literary criticism has long held onto, to its detriment.⁷ I would argue that Wimsatt and Beardsley got *their* muddy use of intention from the eighteenth century. But the imposition of historicism onto this problem is less straightforward than it may at first appear. Kramnick is careful not to assert the priority of Anscombe over eighteenth-century models. (Vareschi is more reticent on this point.) Kramnick argues instead that Anscombe “abstracts and crystallizes questions about actions that preoccupied philosophers during the period.”⁸ That both

can be true—that contemporary philosophy and the New Criticism have both produced charged definitions of intention derived from eighteenth-century models—bears on the issue of “messiness” that I am raising here.

I will illustrate this by turning to Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* and by making some brief editorial remarks about the senses he gives words related to intention. This is *not* to assert the priority of his definitions over Anscombe’s or Wimsatt and Beardsley’s, but rather to convey a sense of the messiness that analytical philosophy leaves behind so that we can better decide whether we want to follow it in doing so. Here is a selection of Johnson’s entries:

To Intend:

“To mean; to design”

This contains the emphasis on “semantics” that Kramnick finds in literary criticism, an emphasis that also returns in other entries. Nonetheless, the link to “design” suggests another way of understanding the distinction between plan and execution, theory and praxis. This is more fully articulated in,

Intent:

“A design; a purpose; a drift; a view formed; meaning”

This entry includes some repetition, and again, an overlap of means and end. But “drift” is interesting for its connotations of movement—both propulsive and, potentially, wayward. An “intent” here is a setting off, casting a boat upon the sea and hoping it reaches its destination, without the certainty that it will:

Intention:

“Eagerness of desire; closeness of attention; deep thought; vehemence or ardour of mind.”

This entry may be surprising in its reminder of the link between intention and intensity. This elision of intention and *attention* is also suggestive for a (post?) critical method. Does intention name (or inform) close reading? Is this part of the “messiness” involved?

Intentionally:

“In will, if not in action.”⁹

Here is a possible challenge to Anscombe’s distinction. This definition explicitly aligns intention and action, but its provisional “if” seems to capture literature’s (often frustrating) refusal of prescription.

I introduce these definitions not to close down the possibilities but to show just how messy—productively messy—I think conversations about intention can become. Intention is an ideal site for exploring the promise of a wide-ranging, and indeed voracious, practical criticism. But in exploring that promise, we would do well to hold the historical multiplicity of the word’s meanings in tension.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Kramnick, *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010).

2. Frances Ferguson, “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” *Representations* 20 (Autumn, 1987): 88–112.

3. Kramnick, *Actions and Objects* 288, n35.

4. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (1957; reprint Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000). Anscombe is not the only analytic philosopher to focus on intention, or indeed the only one cited by Kramnick, but I refer to her work alone for the sake of brevity.

5. Mark Vareschi, “Motive, Intention, Anonymity, and *Evelina*,” *ELH* 82 (Winter 2015): 1135–58.

6. I want to thank Andrew Franta for speaking to this distinction (or, perhaps better, its absence) in the question and answer period after this roundtable. Unfortunately, I don’t have the space to do his comment justice here.

7. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1982): 3–20; and Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels’s response in “Against Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 723–42.

8. Kramnick, 283n4.

9. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “to Intend,” def. 4; “Intent”; “Intention”; “Intentionally” (1755; reprint, London: Times Books, 1983).