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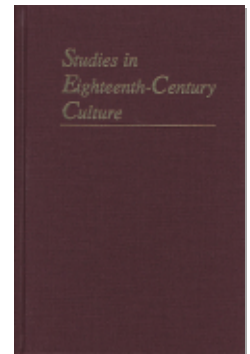
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Art, Intention, and the Constitutive “I”

EDMUND J. GOEHRING

Can the search for intention lead one closer to a work of art? The answer, which is, “yes, so long as you know where to look,” is, of course, widely contested. New Critics, influentially, thought that following the crumbs of intention lured one away from the work, into the obscuring wood of biography and document. Much post-Kantian critique, meanwhile, has tried to bypass or weaken the main premise supporting an intentionalist view of art, which is that humans are the producers of meanings. Thus, according to Adorno, the great achievement of late Beethoven was the discovery of a negative subjectivity: “Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being, are its final work.”¹ Other instances of critique modify agency not through reversing it but by contesting exclusive human ownership of it. To that end, one critic proposes the idea of the “nonhuman actor” in order “to circumvent, as far as possible, polarities of subject and object, ... [and] to place people, animals, texts, and things on the same ontological footing and to acknowledge their interdependence.”² Finally, neostructuralism rejects the possibility of an intending self altogether by trading intentions, meanings, and reasons for signs, codes, and discourses.

For all of their undeniable differences, these various schools take as settled law the priority of language over meaning. If nothing else, such a leveling move ends up producing an unusual syntax. Adorno cannot bring

himself to say “Beethoven acts” but instead that, “in Beethoven’s music, subjectivity . . . acts not so much by breaking through form, as rather, more fundamentally, by creating it” (565)—an expression that, along with being elliptical, is also tautological, since creating forms is what subjects do. A phrase like “language speaks itself” cannot avoid that reflexive pronoun.³ Foucault’s question “what is an author?” is intelligible (just as is the question “what is a human being?”), but not “what wrote that?”, even as performative utterance. People write books, not author-concepts.

Some efforts to defeat intention produce ethical along with cognitive strains. The case of modernist art is especially illustrative. In the absence of nature and convention as guarantors that a work is credible, or even that it counts as art at all, what is left to secure assent is intention, even sincerity. Further to follow Stanley Cavell, modernist art is unusual in using an appeal to chance and especially improvisation in order to *evade* responsibility. As he elaborates, to compose is to risk something, and it is in what a person does with those opportunities that the quality of his mind and the character of his art are known. That is because, crucially, “the means of achieving one’s purposes cannot lie at hand, ready-made. The means themselves have inevitably to be fashioned for *that* danger, and for *that* release—and so one speaks of inventiveness, resourcefulness, or else of imitativeness, obviousness, academicism.”⁴ Yet much of Adorno’s music criticism takes as axiomatic the subordination of the individual to the material, as here: “[Musical material] is nothing less than the objectified and critically reflected state of the technical productive forces of an age with which any given composer is inevitably confronted.”⁵ Even were that so, the choice of material (not to mention its use) remains exactly that—a choice, not an imperative. It is a creative act for which the composer is responsible.

This detour into modernist art can be germane to an appreciation of eighteenth-century music because some of the values of the former have been imported into evaluations of the latter. Various metaphors inadvertently or consciously weaken the agency of the individual composer in the creative process (or, as their proponents might say, topple the false idols of hero worship by demystifying creativity): the composer as software user (and not even as software programmer), or as memorizer and deployer of formula (instead of artful arranger and concealer of formula), or as one who “plays with signs” (rather than, for example, operates with them).⁶ That last metaphor, play, sounds particularly liberating, until one recalls that, in a game, the rules are determined in advance, in which case, the ludic composer abdicates the opportunity for forging a new rule out of old material.

The place to look for freedom is not in a neo-Boethian aesthetic that has the artist buffeted by some external force but in art as an intentional

act. This argument in effect glosses Kant, who holds that "only production through freedom, i.e., through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason, should be called art" (*CJ* §43). If he is right, then our relationship to art is not that of a subject inspecting an object but of an I meeting a Thou.

The difficulties in sustaining a cogent subject-less criticism continue in specific analytical claims about eighteenth-century music. A case in point is a widely cited verdict from Bernard Williams about Mozart's *opera buffa* finales. These ensembles present the listener with a "problem." "none of them perfectly solves the problem raised by its own depth—the problem of relating to the defining normality of comedy the intensity that the work has given to the irregular."⁷ Adverbs like "perfectly" and abstract nouns like "the irregular" constitute a vocabulary that makes art sound like a necessary process, when all we usually ask of art is that it be probable. Other critical approaches transfer agency away from the author and onto an element contained within the author's work but outside of the author's control. In this case, the difficulties that arise are of a metaphysical order. Just as one critic speaks of operatic heroines who "escape the controlling frames" of the comedies that give them their identity (in which case, we have abandoned opera as a mimetic art), so, too, does another speak of the opening theme of Beethoven's Ninth as violently asserting itself in order to avoid its dissolution into the structure that sustains it.⁸

None of the above critics explicitly takes up an anti-intentionalist poetics. They only imply that doing away with authors allows us to see more. With some other critics, however, what was implied becomes overt: "To say 'what Wagner [or, in this case, Mozart] meant' is never to read his intentions directly but to construct hypotheses about his intentions and his poetic universe based on traces which we can read and [on] contextual types of information."⁹ Such reasoning is questionable in part because it assumes the availability of some kind of unmediated, non-contextual type of information. Most of all, though, it dismisses as a liability what is really a tantalizing opportunity. Those inert, lifeless "contextual types of information"—history, philosophy, aesthetics, art, no less the social sciences—are otherwise known as the efflorescences of culture. When one critic defines the so-called poetic fallacy as "the conviction that composers are the *only* significant historical agents in music and that scholarship should be an aspect of their defense *against* social mediation," he is placing the author, the maker, in opposition to culture.¹⁰ But this is impossible. Or, when a critic of popular music cautions us about getting "bogged down" in seeking the "'real' artist ... lying *behind*" the music, he is able to think of authors as ciphers only because he regards intention as a species of efficient cause, prior to and outside the thing the author has done, has made.¹¹ But this is Manichaeism.

Where intention is instead regarded as an act and utterance, the search for it necessarily involves the self in interaction with the plenitude of culture. By this reckoning, intention cannot be thought of only as a verbal commandment existing outside of the action itself, because, as is the case with many human deeds more widely, we don't know what we have done until we have done it. Writing, composing, involve more than transcribing what is already known. They are acts of invention and discovery.

"A world in which you could get what you want merely by wishing would," as Cavell sagely notes, "not only contain no beggars, but no human activity" (199). The "I" sought for in intention is not tyrannical or constricting; it is constitutive. It is the "I" that, to conclude with Michael Frayn, "names and thereby brings into being the irreducible core, the bare quick, at the heart of all our narratives."¹²

NOTES

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," in *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan Gillespie (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002), 566.

2. Rita Felski, "'Context Stinks!'," *New Literary History* 42 (Autumn 2011): 583.

3. Manfred Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*, trans. Sabine Wilke and Richard Gray, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 45 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989), 10–11.

4. Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Scribners, 1969), 200. His emphasis.

5. Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1998), 281.

6. James A. Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 10; Robert Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), esp. 6–7; V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991).

7. Bernard Williams, "Don Giovanni as an Idea," in *W. A. Mozart: "Don Giovanni,"* by Julian Rushton (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 89.

8. Mary Kathleen Hunter, *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), 21; Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991), 128.

9. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "'Fidelity' to Wagner: Reflections on the Centenary Ring," in *Wagner in Performance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 80. Quoted

and applied to Mozart in David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), 97, n. 55.

10. Richard Taruskin, "The Poietic Fallacy," *Musical Times* 145 (Spring 2004): 10. Emphasis added.

11. Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996), 121. Emphasis added.

12. Michael Frayn, *The Human Touch: Our Part in the Creation of a Universe* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 235.