

# Beyond the Intentional Fallacy

## Rachael Fernflores

We can advance our philosophical understanding of textual interpretation by following Davidson's lead away from the question 'do author's intentions matter?' to the question 'which of the author's intentions matter?' When we do so, we discover that however difficult it is to discern the intentions of authors in textual interpretation, it is clear that certain kinds of authorial intentions figure in any textual interpretation. In the interest of moving beyond the intentional fallacy, in Section One I examine George Dickie and W. Kent Wilson's objections to E. D. Hirsch's view that we *guess* the intentions of authors.<sup>1</sup> Dickie and Wilson argue that we determine authorial intention by inference, not guesswork.<sup>2</sup> Guessing, Dickie and Wilson argue, would never suffice to provide the *knowledge* of intentions that Hirsch's position requires. Furthermore, they charge Hirsch with an infinite regress of intentions in interpreting the utterances of others. In Section Two, I argue that Dickie and Wilson's arguments against Hirsch's view that we guess at the intentions of utterers are short-sighted, insofar as I show that the criticisms they make of Hirsch's view apply equally to their own view of inferring intentions. I also argue that Dickie and Wilson face the same infinite regress of intentions with which they charge Hirsch. In Section Three, I briefly consider Roland Barthes' death of the author thesis as an influential extreme example of the view that authorial intentions are entirely irrelevant to interpretation.<sup>3</sup> I argue that Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels' critique of the possibility of intentionless texts can be directly applied to Barthes' view.<sup>4</sup> In Section Four, I note that contributors to the debate concerning the intentional fallacy often fail to make explicit which authorial intentions they think are or are not relevant to interpreting texts. Drawing from Donald Davidson's work, I provide a sketch

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<sup>1</sup> E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> George Dickie and W. Kent Wilson, 'The Intentional Fallacy: Defending Beardsley', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 53, no. 3 (1995), pp. 233-250.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 142-148.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, 'The Impossibility of Intentionless Meaning', in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 51-64.

of three kinds of intentions that are relevant in interpretation.<sup>5</sup> I illustrate some of Davidson's points through a discussion of an exchange between Robert Morris and Davidson concerning Morris's use of Davidson's textual utterances in a series of blind drawings Morris did in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Their exchange serves as a good example of how we can progress beyond the debate about the intentional fallacy to a deeper understanding of which intentions are relevant to interpretation.

### Hirsch's Guesses & Dickie and Wilson's Inferences

Hirsch is a strong intentionalist, by which I mean that he thinks an author's intentions concerning the meaning of his or her text determine the meaning of the text. According to Hirsch, interpreting a text hinges on knowing the author's intentions, which means knowing what the author's intentions probably are. There are milder forms of intentionalism that are probably much more tenable than Hirsch's for a number of reasons.<sup>7</sup> However, Dickie and Wilson's criticism of Hirsch's account of how we arrive at knowledge of the intentions of authors is illuminating as we think about how to move beyond the debate about the intentional fallacy.

According to Hirsch, to know the meaning of a sequence of words, we have to know what the author intended by the words.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, he readily acknowledges that we do not have direct access to the intentions of

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Davidson, 'Locating Literary Language', in *Literary Theory After Davidson*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), pp. 295-308.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Davidson, 'The Third Man', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1993), pp. 607-616; Robert Morris, 'Writing with Davidson: Some Afterthoughts after Doing *Blind Time IV: Drawing with Davidson*', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1993), pp. 617-627.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Noel Carroll's view concerning 'modest actual intentionalism': Noel Carroll, 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 97-131; Noel Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention: The Debate Between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism', *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 31, nos 1&2 (2000), pp. 75-95. For some defenses of 'hypothetical intentionalism', see: Jerrold Levinson, 'Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies', in *Is There a Single Right Interpretation*, ed. Michael Krausz (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 309-318; Jerrold Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation: A Last Look', in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 221-256; Jerrold Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature', in *The Pleasures of Aesthetic: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 175-213.

<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 31.

others.<sup>9</sup> Hirsch claims that we determine the author's intentions by guessing what they are. He says:

It is perfectly true that the complex process of construing a text always involves interpretive guesses as well as the testing of those guesses against the text and against any relevant information the interpreter might know... But the process and psychology of understanding are not reducible to a systematic structure (despite the many attempts to do so), because there is no way of compelling a right guess by means of rules and principles. Every interpretation begins and ends as a guess, and no one has ever devised a method for making intelligent guesses.<sup>10</sup>

Hirsch thinks that the goal of interpretation is validation of one's interpretation and conclusions, rather than verification. According to Hirsch, a verified interpretation implies "direct confirmation and certainty," which involves demonstrating "that a conclusion is true."<sup>11</sup> Validation, on the other hand, aims at consensus in interpretation among those in the audience and commits one to showing only that on the basis of evidence, the interpretation is probably correct. We arrive at the best interpretation of a text in part by making guesses about what an author's intentions probably are in saying this or that.

Dickie and Wilson identify several problems with Hirsch's view that we guess at the intentions of others. First, Dickie and Wilson do not think that we guess the intentions of others. Instead, they claim that we *infer* the intentions of others. They also argue that Hirsch's guesswork falls short of providing knowledge of intentions. Finally, Dickie and Wilson claim that Hirsch's view of guessing intentions faces an infinite regress of speaker intentions. Dickie and Wilson argue that Hirsch's view flies in the face of common inference-making practices. They claim that "what is commonly thought" about knowledge of the intentions of utterers is that as a rule, we do not guess the intentions of others, but rather, we infer the intentions of others on the basis of evidence.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, to infer intentions about utterances, we must first understand what the utterances mean. The meaning of the words as they are combined is an essential part of the evidence that the interpreter uses to infer intentions of utterers. According to Dickie and Wilson, the only times we guess about the intentions of others are when we are confused by the evidence<sup>13</sup>

For Dickie and Wilson, what a speaker might mean by an utterance cannot change what a speaker has said. Consider the following example from

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<sup>9</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 170.

<sup>12</sup> Dickie and Wilson, 'Defending Beardsley', p. 238.

<sup>13</sup> Dickie and Wilson, 'Defending Beardsley', pp. 237-238.

Dickie and Wilson, which brings out the difference between speaker meaning and utterance meaning.<sup>14</sup> Antoine and Brennan are eating soup together when Antoine notices a fly in Brennan's soup. Antoine says to Brennan, "there is a *filé* in your soup," when what he intended to say is "there is a fly in your soup." The speaker meaning is that Antoine had intended to warn Brennan that there is a fly in his soup. Even if Antoine corrects himself and says "I meant to say that there is a fly in your soup," or if Brennan looks down and sees the fly in his soup, then realizes what Brennan had intended to say, what does not change is that Antoine told Brennan that there is a thickener called *filé* in his soup. The utterance meaning of "there is a *filé* in your soup" is determined by what is public and available, whereas the speaker meaning seems to be at least in part determined by the speaker's intentions. Hirsch's view of interpretation says that for Brennan to understand Antoine's utterance he must know what Antoine intended, and since he has no direct access to Antoine's intentions, he must guess at what they were. According to Dickie and Wilson,

This [Hirsch's view of guessing intentions of others] would be no problem if Brennan could guess correctly what Antoine's intention is *and* know that he has guessed correctly. But how is this to be done?

The way in which it is commonly thought that someone finds out what a speaker's intention is is by understanding the speaker's utterance and inferring the speaker's intention.<sup>15</sup>

Dickie and Wilson give no argument for "what is commonly thought" in their text, nor do they cite any evidence about how we discover utterers' intentions. They also find it troublesome that Hirsch seems to be committed to the claim that we guess at the intentions of others independently of understanding the meaning of utterances, since according to Dickie and Wilson, for Hirsch the utterance cannot be determinate in meaning until the interpreter is aware of the utterer's intention. Dickie and Wilson claim that the usual way of interpreting the utterances of others is that "[w]e infer on the basis of evidence what others' intentions are ... an essential part of the evidence is typically the understanding of what the utterances mean."<sup>16</sup> In other words, on the usual view, Antoine utters "There is *filé* in your soup" and Brennan, who knows the meanings of the words and that there is *filé* in his soup, expresses irritation with Antoine for stating the obvious. According to Dickie and Wilson, Brennan has incorrectly inferred Antoine's intentions, but has correctly interpreted what the utterance meant.<sup>17</sup> Dickie and Wilson claim that Brennan has interpreted Antoine in the

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<sup>14</sup> Dickie and Wilson, 'Defending Beardsley', p. 237.

<sup>15</sup> Dickie and Wilson, 'Defending Beardsley', p. 238.

<sup>16</sup> Dickie and Wilson, 'Defending Beardsley', p. 237.

<sup>17</sup> Dickie and Wilson, 'Defending Beardsley', p. 237.

usual way, which consists of understanding the meanings of the words and then inferring the speaker's intentions (wrongly, as it happens, in the case of Brennan's inference regarding Antoine's intentions). However, Hirsch's view, according to Dickie and Wilson, is that we cannot understand an utterance independent of knowing the utterer's intention, which we guess. According to Dickie and Wilson it is unclear how we can know the utterer's intention independent of the utterance and in such a way that the guessed intention counts as *knowing* the intention of the utterer.

Dickie and Wilson also argue that Hirsch's view of guessing at an author's intentions suffers from an infinite regress. In so arguing, they explain how Colin Lyas also charges Hirsch with an infinite regress of intentions.<sup>18</sup> According to Lyas, Hirsch claims that every word sequence is indeterminate in meaning and the author's intentions give word sequences determinacy. In fact, though, Hirsch says that "[s]ometimes a use of language is uniquely constitutive of meaning" as in, for instance, some cases of translating utterances concerning technical matters from one language to another.<sup>19</sup> What Hirsch actually argues is that most uses of language are not uniquely constitutive of meaning, but that what makes them determinate are the utterer's intentions. Even still, Lyas's charge of an infinite regress, if coherent, would apply to the word sequences that Hirsch would regard as indeterminate in meaning. The basis of Lyas's infinite regress charge is that "it is a condition of having an intention that some set of words should bear a certain meaning and that one be able to represent that intended meaning to oneself."<sup>20</sup> In other words, as Dickie and Wilson point out, Lyas assumes that we can represent linguistically all of our intentions to ourselves, which, as we shall see shortly, makes for a spurious assumption.<sup>21</sup>

Lyas's infinite regress argument focuses on a speaker's linguistic representation of intended meaning to himself or herself rather than on how one interprets utterances of speakers. In the Antoine and Brennan example, and according to Hirsch, "There is *filé* in your soup" does not mean that Antoine intends to warn Brennan that there is *filé* in his soup, because Antoine intends to warn Brennan that there is a fly in his soup. By "There is *filé* in your soup" Antoine intends and represents to himself linguistically "There is a fly in your soup." Upon seeing Brennan's irritation, Antoine realizes that Brennan has not understood Antoine's intended meaning. Antoine cannot convey his intention

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<sup>18</sup> Colin Lyas, 'Wittgensteinian Intentions', in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 132-151.

<sup>19</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Lyas, 'Wittgensteinian Intentions', p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> Dickie and Wilson, 'Defending Beardsley', p. 237.

to Brennan by simply repeating his utterance, since Brennan did not understand Antoine correctly in the first place. Antoine can utter some elucidatory statement such as “I meant to say that there is an insect in your soup.” However, according to Lyas, since Hirsch is committed to the view that word sequences are indeterminate without intentions, Hirsch has to be committed to Antoine’s having an additional intention that he can represent to himself linguistically that gives the elucidatory set of words the meaning that Antoine intends them to have. If every word sequence is indeterminate in meaning without intentions, as Hirsch argues, then the linguistic representation of the additional intention that gives the elucidatory statement meaning must have yet another intention, which Antoine can also represent linguistically, *ad infinitum*.

Dickie and Wilson think that Lyas’s argument may work against Hirsch insofar as Lyas’s infinite regress is directed at Hirsch’s claims concerning interpreting literature. According to Dickie and Wilson, it is reasonable to say that the intentions authors have concerning what they write are linguistic. But Dickie and Wilson also say that it is possible that the intention behind the first-order intention (“There is a fly in Brennan’s soup”) is non-linguistic.<sup>22</sup> According to Dickie and Wilson, it is unclear whether Hirsch thinks that intentions can be non-linguistic. If Hirsch does think that intentions can be non-linguistic, then we can pull the brakes on Lyas’s alleged regress with the first non-linguistic intention. The difficulty is that Hirsch does not argue that intentions can be non-linguistic nor does Lyas argue for his claim that intentions must be linguistic. Consequently, Dickie and Wilson say while that Hirsch’s view does suffer from a problem of infinite regress, Lyas’s argument is “inconclusive.”<sup>23</sup>

Dickie and Wilson argue that on Hirsch’s account, when Antoine says “I intended to say that there is an insect in your soup,” Hirsch is committed to the view that Brennan could only understand Antoine’s original expression if he knows Antoine’s intention in saying “I intended to say that there is an insect in your soup.” However, as we have seen, Dickie and Wilson argue that Hirsch provides no way in which Brennan could know Antoine’s intention. They say:

On Hirsch’s theory, hearers do not have a general, effective way of discovering speaker’s intentions, and consequently, cannot understand the bulk of the utterances they hear.

It is worth pointing out that guessing, even guessing correctly, is not the same as *knowing*, and philosophers have been at pains to distinguish the two. As long as hearers are guessing what a speaker intends, they do not *know* what she or he intends. Thus, on Hirsch’s view, hearers could rarely, if ever, know, i.e.,

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<sup>22</sup> Dickie and Wilson, ‘Defending Beardsley’, p. 237.

<sup>23</sup> Dickie and Wilson, ‘Defending Beardsley’, p. 238.

understand what is said.<sup>24</sup> Since Hirsch thinks we *guess* at the intentions of others as we do not have direct access to intentions, Dickie and Wilson claim we cannot *know* the intentions of others and hence, Hirsch's view is really that we can never understand the majority of utterances.

Dickie and Wilson also argue that Hirsch faces an infinite regress in a slightly different way from the regress Lyas describes when we consider not how speakers give their utterances meaning, but rather how interpreters understand a speaker's meaning. In the Antoine and Brennan example, if we suppose that Antoine is a Hirschian intentionalist, he will take himself to be assisting Brennan when he asserts an elucidatory statement such as "I intended to say that there is an insect in your soup." Brennan will then need to guess Antoine's intention in uttering the elucidatory statement. However, Brennan cannot know Antoine's intention in either the first utterance, "There is *filé* in your soup" or the second, "I intended to say there is an insect in your soup," because Brennan can never be sure that his guesses are correct concerning Antoine's intentions. Antoine could continue to express his intentions indefinitely and Brennan would never be the wiser as to Antoine's meaning, as Brennan would always need to know the intention that lay behind Antoine's most recent expressed intention. However, since Hirsch has it that we guess at the intentions of others, rather than *know* the intentions of others, Brennan cannot know Antoine's intentions. Consequently, Brennan has an infinite regress of intentions that lie behind his first utterance, namely "There is *filé* in your soup," and Antoine is unable to understand either the first or subsequent statements by Brennan because he cannot know Brennan's intentions. The most Brennan can do, if Hirsch is right, is go on guessing at Antoine's intentions indefinitely.<sup>25</sup> Thus, as Lyas argues, Hirsch's view contains an epistemic regress.<sup>26</sup>

### **Guessing, Inferring, Living with a Regress**

In arguing that they do not think we guess at the intentions of others, but rather, that we infer the intentions of others on the basis of what they have said, Dickie and Wilson do not explain in any detail the difference between inferring and guessing, and neither does Hirsch. It is unclear whether Dickie and Wilson are really talking about something different than Hirsch with their talk of *inferring* intentions. Dickie and Wilson claim that as a rule, we infer the intentions of speakers on the basis of evidence and that much of the evidence is the meanings of the words uttered. Hence, it would seem they are assuming

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<sup>24</sup> Dickie and Wilson, 'Defending Beardsley', p. 238.

<sup>25</sup> Dickie and Wilson, 'Defending Beardsley', p. 238.

<sup>26</sup> Lyas, 'Wittgensteinian Intentions', pp. 146-147.

that the distinction between their inferences and Hirsch's guesses refers to a distinction between supported inferences, based on evidence, and unsupported guesses. Dickie and Wilson also think that by Hirsch's account, we guess at the intentions of others without understanding what the relevant utterances mean.

In fact, though, Hirsch's guesses look very much like Dickie and Wilson's supported inferences and Hirsch is not committed to the view that we guess at the intentions of others without interpreting their utterances. Hirsch claims we have to "test" our guesses against the text and against any relevant information we have about a speaker or author.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Hirsch admits that we can construct multiple possible interpretations of utterances and such possibilities are precisely what make interpretation indeterminate without the speaker's intentions. Hirsch's problem is that we cannot rest on a determinate interpretation without knowing the intentions of the speaker or author.<sup>28</sup> We do guess at the intentions of the speaker or author, according to Hirsch, but we do not do so independent of the words uttered. We guess at the intentions of the speaker or author based on the words uttered and any relevant external information (e.g., biographical information about the author's state of mind we may have) or internal information (e.g., the context of the utterance, the words chosen, etc.) we may have about utterers. Since Dickie and Wilson maintain that we infer the intentions of others in large part on the basis of understanding what the words uttered mean, they are in agreement with Hirsch, at the very least, in that the words uttered constitute some of the evidence supporting purported intentions of utterers.

As Hirsch says, there is no science of guessing the intentions of others.<sup>29</sup> All we can do is the best that we can in inferring the intentions of others on the basis of the evidence. Hirsch also says:

... the wit of man is always devising new guesses, and his curiosity is always discovering new relevant information. A validation is achieved only with respect to known hypotheses and known facts: as soon as new relevant facts and/or guesses appear, the old conclusions may have to be abandoned in favor of new ones. In order to avoid giving the false impression that there is anything permanent about an interpretive validation or the consensus it aims to achieve, I now prefer the term "validation" to the more definitive-sounding word "verification." To verify is to show that a conclusion is true; to validate is to show that a conclusion is probably true on the basis of what is known. From the nature of the case, the goal of interpretation as a discipline must be the modest one of achieving validations so

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<sup>27</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 170.

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, pp. 28-31.

<sup>29</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 170.

defined. But it also follows from the nature of the case that interpretation is implicitly a progressive discipline. Its new conclusions, based on greater knowledge, are more probable than the previous conclusions it has rejected.<sup>30</sup>

Hirsch claims that we validate an interpretation of a text by showing that the information we have of the speaker or author is relevant to the interpretation of the words. In addition, the task of interpreting is on-going. Due to the “wit” and “curiosity” of human beings, when we find that someone has said something interesting, we continue to try to interpret it on the basis of new guesses concerning the intention of the speaker or author. These new guesses are based on new information that is considered relevant to interpretation.

Dickie and Wilson do not develop their account of how we infer intentions in detail, but it has to be similar to the way Hirsch claims we guess intentions. For Dickie and Wilson, we infer the intentions of others on the basis of evidence and for Hirsch, we guess at the intentions of others on the basis of evidence. And while Dickie and Wilson do say that an essential part of the evidence in inferring a speaker’s intention is understanding the speaker’s words, they do not say that understanding the speaker’s words is always sufficient for inferring the speaker’s intentions. In inferring the intentions of utterers, we do of course need to attend to the meanings of their words and understand those meanings. However, we also attend to the context in which the words are spoken or written, the tone of voice, and what we know of the speaker.

Hirsch’s choice of the word “guess” is unfortunate. However, he clearly argues that when we guess at the intentions of others, our guesses are educated guesses, not wild guesses. Furthermore, Hirsch is correct in claiming that there is no science of making intelligent guesses even on the basis of evidence about the intentions of others. So Dickie and Wilson’s demand that Hirsch must provide an account of how we can know what another intends is too high a bar to set, unless they simply mean that Hirsch must provide an account of how we can justify our guesses about the intentions of others. If they mean the latter, Hirsch provides such an account and it is virtually indistinguishable from the very brief account that Dickie and Wilson supply concerning inferred intentions.

Dickie and Wilson are of course correct in saying “that guessing, even guessing correctly, is not the same as *knowing*, and philosophers have been at pains to distinguish the two. As long as hearers are guessing what a speaker intends, they do not *know* what she or he intends.”<sup>31</sup> However, it is unclear

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<sup>30</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 170.

<sup>31</sup> Dickie and Wilson, ‘Defending Beardsley’, p. 238.

whether for Dickie and Wilson, inferring yields knowledge. If Dickie and Wilson mean that we can arrive at knowledge on the basis of inference, then Hirsch provides as much (if not more) of an account of knowing the intentions of speakers as Dickie and Wilson do, since the latter's inferences look very much like Hirsch's guesses. Consequently, we 'know' speakers' intentions in the same way according to both Hirsch's and Dickie and Wilson's account.

To return to Hirsch's regress, Dickie and Wilson argue that it consists of the fact that one must have an intention in saying *x*, which the hearer or reader must guess, then another intention in any elucidatory statement *y* about *x*, then another intention in an additional elucidatory statement, *z* about *y*, and so on *ad infinitum*. However, if, as I have argued, Hirsch's guesses concerning the intentions of others are indistinguishable in any important way from Dickie and Wilson's inferences regarding the intentions of others, then we can ask first, whether Hirsch actually faces a regress, and second, if he does face a regress, whether Dickie and Wilson face the same one.

First, I do think that strictly speaking, Hirsch faces an infinite regress. According to his view one can never be sure if one has correctly guessed the intentions of another. Thus, the spoken or written utterance remains indeterminate in meaning in an absolute way, as do any elucidatory statements about the original utterance under interpretation. However, as we have seen, Hirsch does not think that we can know in any final way the intentions of others. Instead, he thinks we must be content with what the intentions of others probably are, given the evidence. Second, barring a more complete account from Dickie and Wilson of just what sort of knowledge inferred intentions constitute in the context of spoken utterances, Dickie and Wilson face the same regress Hirsch does. Inferred intentions are always probable intentions. Brennan cannot ever know with *certainty* what Antoine meant by "There is *filé* in your soup" or any subsequent the elucidatory statement. Brennan may infer intentions for as long as he likes and Antoine may offer as many elucidatory statements as he likes. Still, whether Brennan uses the word 'guess' or 'infer' to describe his interpretive attempts, Brennan can never be sure that he *knows*, in some absolute sense, what Antoine intended to say.

While I believe Dickie and Wilson face the same regress as Hirsch, I do not think that the regress constitutes a refutation of either of their views. Intentions are often evasive things, speaking metaphorically, even in our own cases. Dickie, Wilson, and Hirsch all agree that conclusions about inferred intentions are probable at best. First, in many interpretive contexts, spoken and written, we are very good at ascertaining what someone intends to say, even if we are not infallible. In addition, it is often immediately apparent when we do not grasp what someone has intended to say or meant by his or her words

because of the replies we get in response to our interpretations. For instance, I recently dropped off a letter of nomination for a student award at an office on my campus. Unclear whether I had missed the deadline, I asked the man in the office if I could still submit my nomination. He said “yes, you can, because we haven’t met.” Puzzled by his response, I said “what would happen if we had met before?” A woman in the room started laughing into her desk while the man informed me that he had intended me to understand his utterance to mean that the award committee had not yet met to discuss the nominees, not that he was trying to say he and I meeting previously would have affected my submission of the nomination. My exchange with the man in the office is not the norm. As a rule, we correctly understand what others intend to say and they correctly understand what we intend to say. Second, even if we are not always correct in grasping what someone intends to say, if we do have non-linguistic intentions, then as Dickie and Wilson claim for Lyas’s charge of a regress, the regress ends by appealing to the first non-linguistic intention.

In the case of the written text, an author does not usually have the luxury of immediately responding to how his or her text is interpreted. There is a greater distance between author and interpreter than there is between speaker and interpreter. Often, the author has in fact died and cannot respond to interpretations of his or her work. However, in noting that the distance tends to be greater, we ought not to use the extreme case of distance, such as anonymous writings, as the norm. It is not uncommon for authors to respond to interpretations of their texts. Authors do so respond because they assume that among the continuities between interpreting the spoken and the written word is the relevance of intention in grasping what is meant by the author’s or speaker’s particular combination of words. Authors can also respond to interpretations of their texts by improving subsequent editions or versions by tightening or clarifying the sentences therein to reduce the range of possible interpretations.

### **The Death of the Author and Intentionless Texts**

As Socrates explains, texts have a “strange quality”<sup>32</sup> about them which makes them like paintings.

[Paintings] ... stand before us quite as though they were alive; but if you question them, they maintain a solemn silence. So, too, with written words: you might think they spoke as though they made sense, but if you ask them anything about what they are saying, if you wish an explanation, they go on telling you the same thing, over

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<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. W.C. Helmbold and W.G. Rabinowitz, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), lines 275d-e.

and over forever. Once a thing is put into writing, it rolls about all over the place, falling into the hands of those who have no concern with it just as easily as under the notice of those who comprehend; it has no notion of whom to address or whom to avoid. And when it is ill-treated or abused as illegitimate, it always needs its father to help it, being quite unable to protect itself.<sup>33</sup>

It is impossible to control into whose hands the written word falls or what the reader will do with the written work and, what the written word says now it says forever. In the absence of the author, the text cannot answer for itself and has no defence or reply to the confused, abusive, or critical reader. Ignoring responses from authors concerning their intentions not only belies common sense practices concerning interpretation, it also leaves us with interpretations that are more impoverished than they need to be. For instance, it is for good reason that scholars debate the authenticity of the Thirteen Epistles attributed to Plato.<sup>34</sup> There is much at the level of interpretive enrichment at stake in that debate. If Plato is the author of those epistles, particularly of the Second and Seventh Epistles, then we find ourselves with valuable insight into Sicilian history and Plato's life and character. The epistles also contribute greatly to our understanding of Plato's later thought, especially the philosophical digression in the Seventh Epistle, which helps to round out our explanation of how his thought evolved concerning the relationship between the limits of linguistic meaning and epistemology. That we can never know exactly an author's or speaker's intentions does not detract from the important role that intentions play in interpretation. Attention to responses from authors concerning what they intended to say in their texts can help to narrow the possible range of interpretations of a text. However, encouraging such attention is at odds with Barthes' influential claim that the author dies when he or she commences to write, to which I now turn.

According to Barthes, the critic and reader alike are foolhardy to seek the right interpretation of the text in the one who produced it, because the performing in a written work is not the performance of the author, but that of language. A written text is a series of performative utterances that refer only to practices within language itself.<sup>35</sup> As with other performatives, the statements in the text are not truth-functional and are meaningful only in the "very practice of the symbol itself."<sup>36</sup> For Barthes, the assumption that authorial

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<sup>33</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, lines 275d-e.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, R. Hackforth, *The Authorship of the Platonic Epistles* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1913); and Plato, *Letters VII and VIII*, ed. and trans. R. S. Bluck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947).

<sup>35</sup> Barthes, 'Death', p. 145.

<sup>36</sup> Barthes, 'Death', p. 142.

intentions could contribute to textual interpretation is based on the assumption that in writing, an author acts transitively on the world through the textual utterances. However, according to Barthes, when one writes, one acts not transitively, but instead, intransitively with words, and there is nothing outside of the action to point to in explaining it. By his account, the text is a question, not a description or an account. On this view, the intentions and convictions of the author are irrelevant, because there are no authors. Instead, there are sripters, who do not express the author's deepest sentiments, thoughts, or passions, but instead, leave only the "pure gesture of inscription."<sup>37</sup>

Barthes says that "the modern sripter is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*."<sup>38</sup> If there is no intending subject who stands as author, the text is an instance of intentionless meaning. In discussing the notion of intentionless meaning, Knapp and Michaels do not have Barthes' death of the author in mind. However, I think their arguments are applicable to Barthes' view. Knapp and Michaels argue that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a case of intentionless meaning. In one example they offer we are to imagine walking on a beach and finding marks in the sand.<sup>39</sup> When we step away from the marks, we see these words:

A slumber did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

Initially, we might believe that since we understand what the words mean without knowing the author's intentions, the intentions of the author are irrelevant and we have just experienced a case of intentionless meaning. We could go as far as Barthes and say that not only are the intentions of the author irrelevant, the author dies in the act of writing, and all we have are inscriptions. However, next we imagine that the tide comes in, washes away the words, and when it goes out again, leaves these words:

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees,  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

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<sup>37</sup> Barthes, 'Death', p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> Barthes, 'Death', p. 145.

<sup>39</sup> Knapp and Michaels, 'Impossibility', pp. 54-56.

Now we will be surprised and imagine that the sea is alive or that Wordsworth himself, somehow, writes through the sea. In other words, we will be aware of attempts to attribute the words to an intentional being. Furthermore, upon reflection, we will realize that when we read the first stanza, we had tacitly assumed an author, and not that the writings in the sand were accidental or that the intentions of the author were irrelevant. Since we are now trying to unravel the mystery of how the sea could be alive or how Wordsworth could inhabit and write through the sea, we realize we have replaced an assumption that a wanderer on the beach inscribed the words with possibilities of what seem to be supernatural intentional agents. If we were not to try to ascertain who the intending author could be, we might surmise that the marks in the sand are “nonintentional effects of mechanical processes” such as erosion.<sup>40</sup> But if we were to assume that erosion explains the marks, Knapp and Michaels argue, we would not see the marks as words and instead, we would say that they resemble words. The marks would seem like an amazing accident, but not language, and certainly not poetry. As soon as we see the marks as language, as soon as we see inscriptions as language, we assume an intentional agent or we try to discover the intentional agent who could be responsible for the text in the sand. If an inscription is linguistically meaningful, then there is an intending author, even if we cannot ascertain who the author is.

### **Relevant Authorial Intentions**

Barthes argues, or rather he seems to assume, that statements in a text are meaningful in the “practice of the symbol itself.” However, he does not seem to appreciate that by his account, at least one kind of authorial intent is thereby relevant to the interpretation of texts, namely the intention to utter statements whose meaning can be explained by pointing to those linguistic practices. Davidson’s account of some of the kinds of intentions present in language use that are relevant to interpretation brings this point out. Consequently, I turn next to a sketch of the three kinds of intentions we must attribute to speakers and authors in interpreting symbols as meaningful words.

Both Beardsley and Davidson admit that participants in discussions concerning the author’s intention tend not to say enough about what they mean by “intention.” First, Beardsley:

There have been complaints – some of them surely justifiable – about the slackness of the word “intention” in the phrase “the author’s intention.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Knapp and Michaels, ‘Impossibility’, p. 55.

<sup>41</sup> Monroe C. Beardsley, ‘Intentions and Interpretations: A Fallacy Revived’, in *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 189.

And Davidson:

It seems to me that most of the discussion of this topic in literary theory has been philosophically crude, because so much of it has been cast in such terms as: Does the author's intention matter or not? In order to say or write anything you have to have many intentions, all of them related to each other in very complicated ways. The right question is: *Which* of the author's intentions are relevant to interpreting the work, or appreciating it?<sup>42</sup>

By "author," Beardsley means someone who desires to write a text with the intention "to say something in producing that text."<sup>43</sup> For Beardsley, the slackness of the word "intention" is regrettable for reasons of philosophical rigor and he is surely correct. However, it is Davidson who shows us a light beyond the debate concerning the intentional fallacy and toward a deeper understanding of which authorial intentions to consider in interpretation if we are going to make sense of the notion of interpretation at all. Davidson maintains that intentions are important to meaning, but they do not have the ultimate say on what words mean in any context. He argues that while there may be many kinds of intentions, at least three are always part of language use, spoken or written. All instances of language use involve, minimally, what Davidson calls intentions concerning first meaning, ulterior intentions, and force.<sup>44</sup>

First, all utterances are intended to be interpreted as having specific meanings. Such intentions are "strictly semantic intentions."<sup>45</sup> That is, an utterer intends his or her listener or reader to understand what he or she means by the words he or she uses. For Davidson, these intentions concern what he calls "first meaning." First meaning refers to the meanings we already grasp as interpreters, i.e., to the ordinary meanings of words.<sup>46</sup> We must grasp first meanings if we are to understand any further meanings words have in other contexts. We do understand a text differently depending on whether we think it fact or fiction, just as we understand an utterer differently depending on whether we think he or she is a truth-teller. Still, prior to such judgments, we need to understand what the words ordinarily mean, and what words ordinarily mean is not up to speakers or writers.<sup>47</sup> The intentions relevant to first meaning are first in the order of semantic intentions insofar as speakers and writers must

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<sup>42</sup> Lars Bergström and Dagfinn Føllesdal, 'Interview with Donald Davidson in November 1993', *Theoria*, vol. 60, no. 3 (1994), p. 222.

<sup>43</sup> Beardsley, 'Intentions and Interpretations', p. 190.

<sup>44</sup> Davidson, 'Locating Literary Language', pp. 289-301.

<sup>45</sup> Davidson, 'Locating Literary Language', p. 299.

<sup>46</sup> Davidson, 'Locating Literary Language', p. 301.

<sup>47</sup> Davidson, 'Locating Literary Language', pp. 289-301.

depend on the hearer's or reader's understanding of ordinary meanings of words even if an utterer's use of the words is novel.

The second kind of intentions present in language use are ulterior intentions. The ulterior intentions a speaker might have go beyond language to the purpose or goal the speaker has in mind when making an utterance. Language is not an end in itself. We use language as one way of satisfying our ulterior intentions, as we do, for example, in activities such as teaching or consulting with doctors about care of an ill person. We may or may not know a speaker's or writer's ulterior intentions, because one could have reasons for keeping them secret. Furthermore, it is unlikely that we ourselves are always aware of all of our own ulterior intentions.

The third sort of intention Davidson argues is relevant to interpretation is that a speaker intends his or her words to be understood as having a particular force. The force of the utterance, if understood, contributes to interpreting it as ironic, an assertion, an order, etc.<sup>48</sup> It is likely that speakers and writers usually understand their intended force in uttering or writing a sentence, but the intended force may not always be apparent to the hearer or reader (which increases the range of possible interpretations of any utterance).

Davidson doubts that first meanings are what philosophers of language call 'conventional meanings.'<sup>49</sup> However, his doubts on this matter are separate from his point that speakers and authors intend for us to understand their words in terms of at least the ordinary meanings of words, however those ordinary meanings are established, be it by convention or not. Barthes' does not say whether the "very practice of the symbol itself" is conventional practice, but in any event, the point remains the same: in order to interpret textual utterances at all, as meaningful bits of language, we must attribute to authors and speaker either conventional meanings, or, if we cannot give content to the notion of conventional meanings, as Davidson thinks, then alternatively, we must attribute what Davidson calls first meanings. Consequently, the author is always present, even if only in a minimal sense.

Importantly, to claim that authorial intentions matter in interpretation of texts, or any interpretation of speech, is not to claim that the content and nature of our intentions as speakers or authors is transparent and fully known, even to ourselves, let alone to interpreters. As the following example demonstrates,

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<sup>48</sup> I would add that the collection of words, of which the text is constituted as a whole, also has a force, in that the text is intended as fact or fiction or satirical or another type of text.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Donald Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends*, eds Richard Grandy and Richard Warner (New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University, 1988), pp. 157-174.

understanding the intentions of others (and ourselves) is always incomplete.<sup>50</sup> In the early 1990s, artist Robert Morris did a series of drawings blindfolded, and beneath each drawing, he included notes that described the actions he made in producing the drawings and the estimated time it took. Morris also included quotations from Davidson's writings on actions, events, and language. In separate articles both Morris and Davidson tried to explain why Morris used the Davidson quotations in presenting his work. Davidson could only surmise that perhaps in that context his quotations point us from the particularity of the paintings and autobiographical descriptions of the artist to the "larger canvass"<sup>51</sup> concerning the general nature of action and interpretation. Davidson says that we know why Morris claimed to have used those quotations, by which he means that we know the intentions Morris says he had in using the writings under the paintings. What we do not know, Davidson claims, is whether there are any other, ulterior or hidden intentions that Morris might have had, because he has not told us what they might be.<sup>52</sup> Morris writes that he has a stock answer about what his intentions were in creating the drawings and using the quotations. He started making blind drawings in 1973 because he was interested in what would result from "a search to find a basis for drawing other than straightforward representation on the one hand and the nonrepresentational on the other."<sup>53</sup> He also says that his stock answer fails to explain both his obsession with blind drawings and any other intentions he may have had. He suggests there may be darker, hidden intentions and reasons for doing the drawings blindfolded and using the Davidson quotes. Morris notes that throughout Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events*, Davidson uses many examples involving "dark Oedipal reason[s],"<sup>54</sup> such as murder and disaster to make his points.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps, then, the connection between Davidson's texts and Morris's own intentions is that there is something in Davidson's views that speaks to Morris's own Oedipal tendencies.<sup>56</sup> Ostensibly, he used Davidson's words because he saw some relationship between his artwork and those words. Did he have intentions or reasons beyond that? Morris reminds us to invoke the principle of charity in asking

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Donald Davidson, 'Intending', *Essays on Actions and Events* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 83-102.

<sup>51</sup> Davidson, 'The Third Man', p. 615.

<sup>52</sup> Davidson, 'The Third Man', p. 614.

<sup>53</sup> Morris, 'Writing with Davidson', p. 619.

<sup>54</sup> Morris, 'Writing with Davidson', p. 620.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Donald Davidson, 'Psychology as Philosophy', *Essays on Actions and Events* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 232.

<sup>56</sup> Morris, 'Writing with Davidson', p. 620.

why he used Davidson's writings. However, in attributing to Morris rationality and a holism of beliefs, both Davidson and Morris agree we should not think that in so doing, we will find all of the intentions he might have. The Morris examples show that there may always be many more intentions we had that we ourselves do not see. If an author cannot identify all of his or her intentions, it seems unlikely the reader can. However, our inability to identify all of our own intentions as speakers or authors is evidence of our fallibility, not of the irrelevance of intentions to interpretation.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I have proposed that we move beyond debates about the intentional fallacy toward a deeper understanding of how we learn about the intentions of authors and which intentions matter to interpretation. To that end, I have argued that Dickie and Wilson's view that the "commonly thought" approach to the way in which we infer intentions of utterers is not significantly different from Hirsch's view that we guess at the intentions of others. Thus, authorial intentions are available to us as a result of the probable inferences we make in constructing an interpretation of utterances. Furthermore, while I have also argued that Dickie and Wilson face the same infinite regress as Hirsch faces, I do not think either need to see this regress as damning to their accounts. Finally, I have argued in favour of exploring which kinds of authorial intentions are relevant in interpretation. The brief sketch of the kinds of intentions that are relevant to interpreting texts I have offered, through the discussion of Davidson and Morris, is intended to serve as a gesture I hope will help move debate in that direction.<sup>57</sup>

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