

# INTENTION AND THE SUBJECT OF INTERPRETATION: A RESPONSE

DUNCAN F. KENNEDY

THESE PAPERS HAVE THROWN UP SUCH A HOST OF DIFFICULT TERMS—the self, the individual, the subject, the object, will, desire, intention—that I cannot hope in my response to do more than to trace from my own perspective some areas of common interest and concern in these four rich and varied papers.<sup>1</sup> As the quotation from Vernant with which Miriam Leonard begins her paper indicates, the notion of will continues to inform the idea of responsibility in politics and, more specifically as intention, in the law. It would be an interesting thought experiment to ponder what a legal system founded on the Lacanian subject might look like in operation. Intentionality is so deeply embedded in our linguistic usage that we tend to take it for granted; recall the modal auxiliary verb with which the future tense is formed in English. For a concept that has been subjected to a fairly sustained critique in the humanities for the best part of half a century now,<sup>2</sup> “intention” seems to be in pretty robust shape. If mired with ideological and metaphysical uncertainty as a result, intention, even for those to whom the term is an anathema, nonetheless retains a powerful presence as a *heuristic* category to explore agency as a goal-directed phenomenon. In practice, agency and intention can be difficult to distinguish in language use. If we say that “Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*” or “the weather kept me in on Thursday,” we have two statements of agency, but it is open to us to distinguish them in terms of the personhood we do or do not attribute to the grammatical “subject” of each statement, Virgil and the weather. But it is also open to us to see a degree of personification in the weather, to see it as malignly, and so intentionally, thwarting our desires. The weather is an object, a thing, not a subject, it might be protested. In practice, this coupling of agency and intention sits comfortably in many discursive contexts, and is actively fostered in a few (poetic ones, for example).

However, in some discourses, this coupling of agency and intention is methodologically fraught. For example, in the natural sciences, causal explanation seeks

<sup>1</sup>My thanks to William Batstone for inviting me to be respondent to the APA panel which inspired this collection, and to my fellow panellists for making it such a stimulating occasion. In keeping with the rest of the contributors to the panel, I have tried to restrict my revisions in the main text of this written version to cosmetic changes required by this context, so as to retain something of the atmosphere of the original event. Any substantive second thoughts, together with documentation I could not supply at the panel itself, I restrict to the footnotes.

<sup>2</sup>Most literary scholars will think at once of the so-called intentional “fallacy,” as termed by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley in the *Sewanee Review* in 1946. For an overview, see Patterson 1990: 135–146.

to bracket off intention in its statements of agency,<sup>3</sup> and the consequences of not doing so pose major problems. A notorious example is the introduction to Richard Dawkins's book, *The Selfish Gene*: "The argument of this book is that we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes . . . . Like successful Chicago gangsters, our genes have survived, in some cases for millions of years, in a highly competitive world. This entitles us to expect certain qualities in our genes. I shall argue that a predominant quality to be expected in a successful gene is ruthless selfishness."<sup>4</sup> We may notice how readily personhood can be stripped away from the level of the organism (you or I become "machines"), and can be conferred on what we might regard as our component matter, which is anthropomorphized by Dawkins and given the characteristics of a person—in this case, piquantly, selfishness. What we think of as "subjects" can easily become "objects" and vice versa. As willed behaviour, even if it is not entirely synonymous with intentionality, selfishness is goal-directed and confers subjecthood.

Intentionality seems particularly to probe the boundary between conscious and unconscious action, and its role in constituting the "human," as Joseph Farrell's remarks on Virgil show. Sympathetic to the search for intentionality as the goal or object of interpretation, Farrell seeks to describe the complex intertextual relations between the *Aeneid* and Homer in terms of Virgil's intentions, but he begins to balk at so doing when Apollonius is added in. And then what about Ennius, and so on? Qualitative judgements (Apollonius is not Homer) are not a major issue here: Farrell is happy to accept the levels of intertextual complexity that Damien Nelis asserts for Virgil and Apollonius. It is something about *Virgil* that is the sticking-point. The degree of conscious control attributed to the poet seems to make him either more than human (Farrell on one occasion [106] uses the term "superhuman"), capable of encompassing in one panoptic and knowing glance the evidence patiently accumulated over many generations by a multiplicity of scholars, or less than human, a data-bank or card-index on legs. The human subject—the all-too-human subject—is, on current reckoning (for the discourse of genius is one we currently shy away from), a flawed and fallen creature, wanting (i.e., desiring, but also *lacking*) many things, and intending many things, but as a result is never wholly present to itself, and in some accounts, notably the Lacanian, is tragically voided. A totalizing vision, wholly conscious of its goal and also, crucially, seen to achieve it, seems either divine or diabolical.<sup>5</sup>

Conscious of its goal and seen to achieve it: this brings me to the question of history. All four papers seek to set their material and questions within a historical context. Historical narratives frame an event or a series of events not only in terms of what is represented as their consequential significance, but of their intentional

<sup>3</sup> Darwinian "natural selection," for instance: nature "selects" blindly.

<sup>4</sup> Dawkins 1976: 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> This is nothing new; against Stephen Hawking's invocation of "the mind of God" to characterize the totalizing vision of a theory of everything, we can think of LaPlace's or Maxwell's "demons": for discussion and references, see Kennedy 2002: 101–105.

significance as well, and it is in the harmony or tension between the two that the historical interpretation and judgement emerges.<sup>6</sup> In composing this response, I have been increasingly aware of the way that when I have been using goal-directed verbs (seeks to, tries to, works toward, and so on), the implicit or explicit apodosis has been "succeeded in" or "failed to." Thus for Basil Dufallo, Propertius seeks to exploit rhetorical patterns and his audience's desire for them, and succeeds. By contrast, James Porter summons up for us a Foucault whose *History of Sexuality* turns out to be intriguingly at odds in so many ways with what scholars have assumed were Foucault's intentions in relation to that project. We may construe authors at the point of inscription as desiring subjects, not fully aware, perhaps, of their desires or unknowing of the reception their work will encounter, but when we represent their texts in terms of their consequences, those desires seem retrospectively to be configured as goal-directed, as "intentional," and as variously hitting or missing the targets we set up for them. It is in this match or mismatch of intention and consequence that Hayden White's troping of history as tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic lies.<sup>7</sup> So long as we historicize, I do not think we can get away from some notion of the will: Vernant or Foucault was trying to do this or that and succeeded or failed in certain respects. It may even be constitutive of it. Recall Fredric Jameson's take on Lacanian theory, where the play of desire in the Imaginary and the Symbolic finds its limits constantly defined not, as Lacan would have it, by the Real, but by what Jameson calls History.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, the way in which we construe that will configures our histories epistemologically in different ways. The notion of intention imposes a strict and distinctive temporality on our accounts, a temporality that expresses a particular epistemological outlook. Thus for Farrell, intention, encoded as allusion, constitutes the goal or object of interpretation. Virgil may allude to Homer or Apollonius, but the moment of inscription (a moment that may, of course, last for a number of years) imposes a closure on these processes. However much Virgil may be depicted as oriented toward the future or the reception of his text, he is not allowed to *allude* to Lucan or Milton. Nor, strictly speaking, can Propertius be allowed to anticipate the discourse of gender ideology that emerges in the late twentieth century. The author's desire is the source of meaning for the text, and the problem for interpretation is to establish whether the allusions are ontologically "there" in the text, and how they are to be discovered. Within this temporality, the text is constituted as an *object*, now severed from the subject that produced it, with *properties*, definable theoretically at least. Epistemologically, this is classic realism. The interrogation of the subject in French thought of the 1960s and 1970s not only seeks to undermine the strong intentionalism that is part of this epistemology (the Barthesian "death of the author"), but disturbs the

<sup>6</sup> For a brief and fascinating analysis, see Buckler 1996.

<sup>7</sup> See White 1973.

<sup>8</sup> See Jameson 1988: 104: "Nonetheless, it is not terribly difficult to say what is meant by the Real in Lacan. It is simply History itself."

temporality that makes of the text a closed and inert object. As the author becomes a figure of desire rather than intention, the emergent notion of intertextuality figures the text as *active*, interacting with other texts created after its physical inscription (the *Aeneid* with *Paradise Lost*, for instance), thus endowing it with some of the qualities of an autonomous subject rather than an object. Such meaning as it is perceived to have is not there *ab initio*, but emerges in the course of its reception as it is construed and reconstrued in its use. From this perspective, Propertius does not anticipate the discourse of gender ideology (how could he, any more than we can anticipate how our words might be construed two thousand years hence?); rather his text is reconfigured in these terms by some of his readers at a certain point in time. The text is endowed with an agency, and a history that may be initiated by its creator, but is not—cannot be—determined by him or her. This is what I would call an anti-realist epistemology of the text. Its meaning is not “there” all along, waiting to be discovered, but continually emergent.

While realism tries to maintain a strong distinction between subject and object as it defines them, and makes the latter its focus, anti-realism works to blur that distinction and to make the former, as it defines it, its focus. Within realist discourse, the subject is the originator of language and the guarantor of meaning. Within anti-realist discourse, language is primary and “speaks through” the subject. As an example of such an anti-realist discourse of the subject, one can obviously adduce Lacanian psychoanalysis, with its assertions that the unconscious is structured like a language, that the subject enters the realm of the Symbolic, and that the Real will always evade discursive capture. But we could adduce others as well. Basil Dufallo has suggested how pre-existing practices and rhetorical topoi can be manipulated by authors like Cicero and Propertius, but in an important sense exist independently of them, and, as it were, speak through them—and through us, thus forging a link between past and present (an issue I will return to in a moment). But this can also serve as a reminder of the way in which the rhetorical tradition is also one of the great anti-realist traditions in its assumptions that texts are not considered as objects of interpretation in themselves, but as the *materia*, the raw material, the pre-text, and as the *copia*, the “copy,” out of which new texts are forged in a continuing chain; and that their writers are not of interest as “authors” in the sense of subjects to be scrutinized for their intentions, so much as they become *auctores*, “authorities,” through the number of citational hits their texts are perceived to attract (shades of Google or bibliometrics).

A concern that all these papers share is the relationship of past and present. Miriam Leonard is concerned that, even as Vernant insists on the historical specificity of the Greek tragic moment, his statements about the limits of ancient subjectivity have what she calls “a strikingly atemporal flavour” (135), and which she further qualifies by saying that “the Vernantian notion of tragedy would seem to stand in for the structuralist critique of subjectivity. Could it be,” she ask, “that tragic man is the very incarnation of the post-Foucauldian subject?” She senses

here a configuration of the past on the part of Vernant in terms of the particular preoccupations of his present, an appropriation to validate its agenda, and a too ready identification. Her own critique in turn seems to posit of Vernant himself “the internal inadequacy of the agent” of which he speaks, so as to historicize Vernant’s position in the manner I explored earlier, as “trying” and “succeeding” or “failing” in his efforts. A similar analysis could be applied to Miriam Leonard herself, in terms of what she was trying to do, and in what respects she succeeded or failed. The procedure has a recursive quality to it. Should that worry us? Not if it constitutes the way we historicize, the way we draw a distinction between the “past” and the “present,” and consign certain elements of the latter (Vernant or Foucault, for example) to the former.<sup>9</sup>

James Porter too is exercised by the issue of what, following Pierre Bourdieu, he terms (130) the difficulty of “objectifying our objectifications.” Bruno Latour has a thought-provoking essay on this theme.<sup>10</sup> He recalls how in the 1960s the mummified body of Rameses II was brought to Paris to be examined by French doctors who pronounced that the pharaoh had died of tuberculosis. Latour ponders what is involved in the historical assertion that Rameses died as a result of something whose aetiology was first described in 1819 and whose agent was isolated only in 1882. “The attribution of tuberculosis and Koch’s bacillus to Rameses II,” he says, “should strike us as an anachronism of the same calibre as if we had diagnosed his death as having been caused by a Marxist upheaval, or a machine gun, or a Wall Street Crash.”<sup>11</sup> With something we can readily configure as an artefact, a technological development such as a machine gun, or a specific historical construction, such as a Marxist inspired upheaval, such a translation to the past seems preposterous, yet the extension of “tuberculosis” to the past is usually accepted without question. Latour’s discussion raises a host of issues I cannot pursue here, but I do want to focus on one. For Latour, as a description or theory (of the aetiology and agency of tuberculosis, say, constructed over a century, amidst controversy, with considerable effort and great cost) *gains in explanatory authority*, so the perception of it *as a description* is effaced, giving way to the realist assumption of straightforward reference to “something out there.” From being “constructed” or “fashioned” (the favoured tropes of anti-realism), it *becomes* “discovered” (the favoured trope of realism) as having been there all along, albeit hitherto unnoticed, and thus reified, or turned into an object, becomes applicable to the past. Put very crudely, if endowed with explanatory value, or taken to be true, even explicitly historical constructs (Marxist analysis or the

<sup>9</sup>To historicize is thus to consign Vernant’s “present” (the temporality of in which his assumptions, models, and terms of reference are taken as “true” and are represented as having an epistemological plenitude—the “strikingly atemporal flavour” of which Leonard speaks) to the “past” (the temporality in which they are seen to be characterized by lack).

<sup>10</sup>Latour 2000.

<sup>11</sup>Latour 2000: 248.

notion of the subject) are objectified and thereby assume a transhistorical status and applicability to the past.<sup>12</sup> We all have our own such quasi-objects,<sup>13</sup> be they rhetorical tropes, rituals, social practices or, in my own case, traditions of realism and anti-realism. These are what Hans-Jörg Rheinberger refers to as “epistemic things.”<sup>14</sup> And it can be fun to do to “objects” what a generation of structuralist and poststructuralist writing has done to “subjects”—void them. As Porter suggests (130), our encounters with the past can all too easily present us with reflections of our conditioned conceptions of the exotic, or the familiar, for that matter, and our most important encounters are those which present us with the sort of unwanted identifications which alienate us not from the past but from the models of comprehension by which we seek to grasp the past. It is thus that we relegate our “former selves” to the past.

Joseph Farrell writes of his sense of a “theory gap” in the area in which he is interested (100), and I suspect that all the contributors here in their different ways share that sense in relation to their own interests. As James Porter has suggested, this may be no bad thing. These days, we are curiously at home in the unconscious, at home with the decentred subject. Thanks to the effort of scholars like Micaela Janan and Paul Allen Miller, writing history within a Lacanian framework seems eminently possible.<sup>15</sup> Is the uncanniness we have associated with such endeavours giving way to a canniness? Now that we navigate the unconscious with such confidence, is it rather the conscious which is the murky depth we cannot plumb and which requires fresh theorization? Has the time come that the “object” is now so uncanny that it, rather than the “subject,” should become the focus of theory once again?<sup>16</sup>

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS AND ANCIENT HISTORY  
UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL  
11 WOODLAND ROAD  
BRISTOL BS8 1TB  
U.K.

duncan.f.kennedy@bristol.ac.uk

<sup>12</sup> They may even be granted an ontological existence then, even if that existence was beyond the notice of those involved, or construed by them in very different ways.

<sup>13</sup> This term comes from Michel Serres (1982: 225); cf. also Daston (2000b), who has coined the phrase “applied metaphysics” to speak of the “coming into being” (and “passing away”) of objects of scientific inquiry (“dreams, atoms, monsters, culture, mortality, centers of gravity, value, cytoplasmic particles, the self, tuberculosis,” 2000b: 1), against the neo-Kantian assumption that scientific objects have a timeless reality.

<sup>14</sup> See Rheinberger 1997.

<sup>15</sup> See Janan 2001; Miller 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Poststructuralism’s focus on the subject has tended to efface its parallel theorization of the object; but, in the guise of “thing theory,” this seems to be coming to the fore once more: apart from Latour 2000, Daston 2000b, and Rheinberger 1997, see now Brown 2004 and Daston 2004.

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