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Stanley Fish

Excerpt

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*Introduction: intention, historicism
and interpretation*

A NOTE ON METHOD

Although it is not fully argued in the essays collected here, underlying the readings I offer of Milton and others is a position on the relationship between intention and interpretation. Indeed, my argument is that it is not a relationship, but an identity. Interpretation just is the act of determining what someone meant by these words (or this picture or that film or that gesture). So the answer to the very old question, “What is the meaning of a text?” is: “A text means what its author or authors intend,” period.

Simply to propose this thesis is, I know, to provoke a host of objections. Why focus on intention which is subjective and elusive when you have the text which is material and immediately available? How does one determine intention anyway? How do you get inside people’s heads? What evidence, apart from the text, is relevant? What about the intentions of authors long dead? What about authors who have conflicting intentions? What about committees and legislative bodies? Can they be said to have intentions?

There are answers to these questions, but before I offer a few of them I want to point out that while the intentional thesis is radically historical, it is not historicist as that word is usually understood. Let me explain. The intentional thesis is historical because it identifies meaning with a purposive act performed by an author at a particular moment. The question is not: “What would Milton have meant by *Samson Agonistes* had he written it in the wake of 9/11?” but: “What did Milton mean by *Samson Agonistes* in 1670 or 1648 or 1659 or 1661?” (all dates proposed by various critics). To answer the second, and genuinely interpretive, question you have to do the historical work of figuring out what Milton had in mind when he wrote (or dictated) the play’s words, and that involves reading those words in the light of an intention Milton could have had at the time of composition.

That is why the dispute about the date of *Samson Agonistes* is interpretively relevant. Archie Burnet observes in his introduction to the new

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Variorum Commentary (Duquesne University Press, 2009) that none of the proponents of various dates “can avoid the autobiographical approach.” That is, they all read the words as composed by a man who was situated in this or that historical context, and the success they have, or think they have, is then cited as evidence that the preferred date is the right one. The procedure, Burnet complains, is circular: “*SA* is interpreted as evidence of Milton’s thoughts and feelings after the Restoration, and such thoughts and feelings are, in turn, interpreted as evidence of the poem’s post-Restoration date.” But this circularity, far from being vicious, is the shape interpretation always takes: it tacks back and forth between the hypothesizing of an intention and the details that are at once its product and its support. If and when those details fill the poem’s landscape and seem answerable to the intention the critic has posited, the interpretation has achieved plausibility and, sometimes, persuasiveness.

This does not always happen. Interpretation can fail, and when it does, it is because a text or a piece of a text has not been linked up to an intention in a way that seems inevitable. (Yes that must be what he meant!) It’s not a lack of historical evidence; it’s a failure to bring a piece of historical evidence together with an argument for an author’s intentional use of it. In the past 350 years, any number of quotations and citations from a variety of sources have been put forward as the key to Milton’s enigmatic phrase “two-handed engine” (*Lycidas*, 130), but so far none of the candidates has won general acceptance from the critical community. It has not proved difficult to find references to a two-handed something-or-other in poems, sermons, proclamations and tracts; what has proved difficult is tracing any of the references back to Milton’s door or, more properly, to the intentional context within which he was writing.

Not that it hasn’t been tried. Just as those who propose various dates for the composition of *Samson Agonistes* cannot “avoid the autobiographical approach,” so can no would-be solver of the riddle of the two-handed engine avoid making biographical/intentional arguments. As Richard Streier has observed, a catalog of mentionings (here’s a two-handed engine and there’s another and another) won’t do the job. Piling up historical evidence is not an interpretive strategy; all the evidence in the world will be irrelevant if it has not been shown to be (a) within Milton’s ken and (b) related strongly to what he was trying to do.

That is why intentionalism is historical but not historicist. An historicist analysis, at least of a certain kind, would go directly from the noting of some set of historical facts (political, agricultural, economic, military) to an interpretive conclusion. In 1638 there was widespread concern about X;

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Lycidas was published in 1638; therefore *Lycidas* is about X. This is of course a caricature of the historicist method which typically is marked by deep learning and sophisticated cultural analysis. But in the end what the method amounts to is *surrounding* the literary text with historical materials (perhaps in obedience to Louis Montrose's celebrated formula: the textuality of history and the historicity of texts) and assuming that by doing so you will have said something about the text's meaning. No, what you would have done is place the text next to an elaborate and elaborated account of the moment of its composition and declared, but not proven, a vital connection between them. Proof, or at least something that could be offered as proof, would require that you begin with a hypothesis about the author's intention – to justify the ways of God to man, to write a pastoral poem with a glance at the state of the clergy, to explore the relationship between faith and positive law by focusing on the example of Samson – and then see if that hypothesis can be fleshed out and thereby confirmed by materials the author can plausibly be said to have known. (What did he know and when did he know it?) It is not a question of whether to be historical or not (a choice never available to us), but a question of which history is to be the primary lens. It should go without saying that when you're dealing with the product of a purposive design, as a poem or epic or play surely is, the primary lens must be the lens of a historically formulated purpose; once in place, that lens – the lens of intention, of the inquiry into what the author was up to – will pick out from the vast and inexhaustible riches of history and histories the items that are, or at least might arguably be, relevant. Naïve historicism (and there's more than a little of it around) has no principle of selection; it is impossibly democratic and accords relevance to anything and everything, and is therefore not a method of interpretation at all but the mere collecting of data.

If collecting data is not interpreting, neither is intellectual history. You can of course ask an intellectual-history question about a text and your question might very well contain the word "mean," but the meaning you are in search of would be more properly called "significance." Questions about significance (in the sense I am using it) regard a literary text as an instance of something or as a piece of information about something rather than as a message from an author to his readers. What does Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" tell us about agrarian conditions in the middle of the seventeenth century? What is the significance of Donne's sermons for the history of prose style? What does Milton's work for Cromwell's government tell us about the intersection of poetic and political careers

in the period? These are historians' questions, and while answers to them might be useful in prosecuting the interpretive task – the interpreter can perhaps do something with the information they elicit – they are not asked in the spirit of that task. To be sure, you might say that these are larger questions because they expand the focus of investigation from the narrow act of intentional composition to the broader context of the culture in which that act occurred, but the panoramas that have been opened up by historical inquiry cannot be directly imported back into the interpretive task and serve as an answer to *its* question. That would be, as I say in “Why Milton matters; or, against historicism,” picking up the stick from the wrong end.

The case is even clearer with that branch of intellectual history called reception history. Here the questions are: “What did Blake think Milton meant in *Paradise Lost*?” or: “To what uses was *Paradise Lost* put by politicians and generals in the nineteenth century?” or: “What do eighteenth-century editions of Milton tell us about his reputation?” Again legitimate and interesting questions, but, again, answers to them are not answers to the question, “What does *Paradise Lost* mean?” because they have not emerged in the course of an inquiry into Milton's intention.

One consequence of the fact that a work means what its author or authors intend is that the meaning of a work cannot change, although our understanding of what that meaning is can and does change. (That's the history of literary criticism.) So it cannot be true, as John Carey claims (*TLS*, 2002) that “September 11 has changed *Samson Agonistes* because it has changed the readings we may derive from it while still celebrating it as an achievement of the human imagination.”

There are several judgments all mixed up in Carey's statement: (1) the judgment that religiously inspired violence is abhorrent; (2) the judgment that because he was a great poet, Milton could not have lauded or excused religiously inspired violence; (3) the judgment that if Milton did in fact laud or excuse religiously inspired violence he is not a great poet; he is a “monstrous bigot” (Carey's phrase); and (4) the judgment that however plausible a reading of *Samson Agonistes* that failed to condemn Samson's act may have been on September 10, it is entirely unacceptable one day later.

The first judgment is debatable. The second and third judgments rest on a dubious theory of literary value. The fourth judgment makes interpretive validity depend on events that occurred long after the author wrote. Milton may or may not have condoned religiously inspired violence; it's the business of interpretation to settle the point if it can, but 9/11 or anything else that happened after 1671 cannot legitimately be brought into

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the process. After 9/11 those who had always read *Samson Agonistes* as a glorification of its title figure may recoil from the play; they may find their view of Milton changed, but they won't find their reading changed, that is, if it is really a reading and not an instance of what has been called "presentism," the practice of importing present significances into past literary productions. Presentism is a form of intellectual history and it has its place. It is perfectly OK to ask about the new conversations a work may enter into by virtue of current events, but it's not OK – it's a category mistake – if the answer is turned into an interpretation of the work. *Samson Agonistes* can't change even if the things you think about when reading *Samson Agonistes* change.

Presentism as a mode of interpretation is an alternative answer to the question: "What is the meaning of a text?" Presentism says that the meaning of a text is the meaning it has for contemporary readers. (The legal analogue is the idea of the "living constitution," the constitution that changes as society's circumstances and needs change.) But this can hardly be a method of interpretation because the only constraints in play are the interpreter's current interests and desires. Presentism substitutes for the question "What does it mean?" the question "What do we want it to mean?" Asking that question is not interpreting; it's just making it up.

The second alternative to the intentional thesis (a text means what its author or authors intend) is textualism, the idea that the meaning of a text is determined by the meanings its words would have had at the time of the text's production; just get yourself a good historical dictionary and you'll be able to figure it out. The problem with this so-called method is that (a) a dictionary did not write the text and (b) an author is not bound by the standard meanings he might find in his dictionary, should he choose to consult it. The meaning a word has is a matter for the author to decide. True, if he decides to employ non-standard meanings (as poets often do) he will pay a price in the difficulty of communication. Standard dictionary meanings are useful because readers will assume their use as a default matter, and if an author wants to assure the highest level of easy communication with his readers, standard dictionary meanings will be the vehicle of choice. But the text alone (a phrase without a referent; there is no text apart from the specification or assumption of intention; there are just marks) won't tell you whether its author made that choice or made another. It is again a question of intention, and rather than declaring its intention and thus being self-sufficient, a text only emerges into readability when an intention has been posited for it, and the dictionary won't tell you what that intention is. To be sure, standard dictionary meanings can

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be part of the evidence for an intention, but they can't be fully determinative unless it has been established by independent means that the author resolved – intended – to be bound by them. Textualism is a non-starter. You can't have an interpretive method that is impossible to perform.

In a way intentionalism is a non-starter too because it is not a method. That is, the intentional thesis – a text means what its author or authors intend – doesn't tell you how to go about interpreting; it just tells you that if you are interpreting – rather than doing something else, like data collecting or intellectual history – you are trying to figure out what someone meant by these words; it also tells you that if you're not doing that, you're not interpreting. To put it another way, the intentional thesis does no work; it just stipulates what kind of work there is to do and then withdraws, leaving you to do it.

And how do you do it? The short answer is “empirically.” Because the intentional thesis is silent on matters of procedure (it doesn't even tell you who or what the intending agent is), it leaves all interpretive questions unsettled, including the question of what is to count for evidence of an author's intention. No piece of evidence is ruled either in or out in advance; any piece of evidence might prove to be relevant – might prove to be evidence – if a line can be drawn from it to the specification of the author's intention. You never know what's going to turn up or whether you will be able to do something interpretively with what does turn up. There is no theory guiding you – interpretation is not a theoretical activity – just the search for pieces of a puzzle, the puzzle of what someone meant by these words, by words like “two-handed engine.”

So in the readings that follow I am not being directed by the intentional thesis as I would be if it were a theory or an “approach” (it's not an approach to interpretation; it *is* interpretation). I'm just proceeding in the understanding that it is interpreting I'm doing and not something else.

THE READINGS

Because intentionalism is not a theory of interpretation but a specification of what it is (and isn't), the theory of interpretation an author may have is irrelevant to interpretations of his work, except as a piece of biographical data. Knowing that your author believed this or that about interpretation will not tell you how to interpret him. You interpret him by trying to figure out what he meant, and you do that even if he himself had a different (and wrong) idea of what interpretation involves, if he were, for example, a textualist or a presentist. (Theorists of legal interpretation often spend a

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lot of time worrying about the theory of interpretation the founders had; but interpreting their words can only take one course – the intentional course – no matter what they might have had to say on the matter.)

It is then a matter of coincidence and serendipity that Milton was himself an intentionalist. His intentionalism – his conviction, expressed in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, that you must look behind Christ's words to the spirit informing them – is part and parcel of his antiformalism, his refusal to rely on rules, texts, kings, prelates, surfaces, images or any outward conveyance for guidance and illumination. When Mammon offers to install interior lighting in Hell and asks: "And what can heaven show more?" (*PL* I, 273b), he gives voice to a form of thinking, a cast of mind, against which Milton does continual battle – the settling of questions of meaning and value by the way things appear, by configurations in the empirical world, by the evidence of things seen.

Here, a master text is Michael's rebuke of Adam for having concluded from some apparently pleasant interplay between the descendants of Seth and a bevy of attractive women that nature's ends are being fulfilled. "Judge not what is best / By pleasure, though to Nature seeming meet" (*PL* XI, 603–604), Michael admonishes, which means: "Don't reach moral or interpretive conclusions by attending to how things seem" (advice Adam has already failed to heed when he falls by submitting to what "seemed remediless"); look deeper for the significance of anything said or done; look to the relationship between actions, words and even thoughts, and the imperative, always in force, first to discern, and then to do, God's will. Keeping the Sabbath because Scripture says so is to risk committing a sin unless your resolution flows from faith and not the "mere" text; breaking the Sabbath is a pious act if it is done at the prompting of the Spirit (*Christian Doctrine*, book 2, chapter 1).

It is clear, then, that Milton's intentionalism is also a morality. He is not interested, as a theorist of intention might be, in intention in general; he is interested in whether agents (including himself) have the right intentions, and, as it turns out, there is only one. This does not mean that there is only one act you can properly intend, but that whatever act you perform – keeping the Sabbath, breaking the Sabbath; staying married, getting divorced; using scatological language, avoiding scatological language; tearing down the temple, not tearing down the temple – must be an expression of the intention to obey God and glorify him. If it is that, then no matter how mean or great in worldly eyes ("though worlds judge thee perverse") it will have been a righteous and praiseworthy act. As Herbert says in "The Elixir," "Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, / Makes that and th' action

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fine.” And Milton echoes him (I am not suggesting direct influence): “were it the meanest underservice, if God by his Secretary conscience enjoin it, it were sad for me if I should draw back” (*The Reason of Church Government*).

In this severe ethic, the danger to be avoided is the assertion or promotion of the self as an entity with powers, motives and achievements of its own. The positive project is the stilling of the self, which, again, does not mean refraining from doing or saying anything, but refraining from saying or doing anything for which one could take credit. It’s called “giving God the glory” and Milton does it when he attributes his writing to the inspiration of his muse (the Holy Spirit) and when he declares (in *The Reason of Church Government*) that if God makes a poet a vessel of his word, “it lies not in man’s will what he shall say, or what he shall conceal.” (Herbert’s view, as we shall see, is even more stringent; his constant theme is that the stilling of the self is an impossible project and that the very effort to prosecute it assures its failure because it itself involves a claim of human agency.)

If the self’s chief error is to believe in its own independence and efficacy, the primary instrument of that error is language, which can be responsibly or irresponsibly deployed in ways that mirror the pious or impious actions men can perform. Just as fallen creatures must give the glory to God and refrain from claiming independent agency, so must language subordinate itself to the task of praising God and describing his handiwork and refrain from substituting its representations for the real thing. Hobbes, among many others, finds in the ability to speak the main difference between men and animals, but he also finds in the ability to speak the vehicle of man’s departure from the straight and narrow. For “With words men can represent to others that which is Good in the likeness of Evill, and Evill in the likeness of Good” (*Leviathan*).

Words can be either the vehicle of our aspirations if we use them rightly, as aids and prods to something more significant than they, or the instrument of our self-worship, if we do not look through them but accept the significances they present (and we have conceived) as the horizon of understanding and truth. It is no accident that when Satan detaches himself, or claims to detach himself, from God, the first thing he does, involuntarily, is to give birth to Sin – a prideful deviation from God – who is received by his associates as a “sign” (*PL II*, 760), that is as a representation, something secondary, derivative. But in time the devilish host forgets the secondary, unreal status of sin and signs, grows “familiar” with them and finally learns to love them (“Becam’st enamoured”). At that point the rebellious self – the self detached from deity – and the new

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empire of signs – signs detached from a tethering ground – go their own way, unconstrained by a higher reality, creating meanings and values ad libitum. (It is a diabolic perversion of the godly command: “be fruitful and multiply.”)

Although Satan meets God’s loyalists with newly invented artillery and gunpowder, his first weapon is the pun. He opens the war in heaven by “scoffing in ambiguous words” (*PL* vi, 568), that is, by using language in a way that, rather than pointing to a prior and stable referent, turns back on itself, plays with itself, and keeps on going, impelled only by the narcissism of self-reproduction. Satan’s puns are the linguistic equivalent of the boast he makes earlier when Abdiel tells him that he and his followers are but creatures: “We know no time when we were not as now; / Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised / By our own quick’ning power” (*PL* v, 859–861). The puffing up of language as a source of infinite semantic fecundity and the puffing up of the creature as a self-generating entity are one and the same. If the self is to be stilled lest it fall into the sin of claiming sufficiency, language must be stilled too.

That’s a hard lesson for a poet; it veers toward antihumanism and indeed antihumanism is the logical extension of the requirement that man renounce all his powers and acknowledge a total dependence. The authors whose works I discuss in the following pages respond to this requirement differently. Milton tries to have it both ways, but in the end he is more a humanist than an antihumanist. If the desire for fame is, as he says, the last infirmity of the noble mind (*Lycidas*), it is an infirmity he never leaves behind, wishing as he does to leave behind something the world will not willingly let die (*An Apology Against a Pamphlet*). Rather than renouncing the claim to virtue and virtuous deeds, he portrays himself in his prose tracts as being in training for virtue. Aware that at best he could only “arrive at the second rank among the Latins,” he resolves instead “to fix all the industry and art I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue.” Knowing that this sounds boastful (as indeed it is), he adds “not to make verbal curiosities the end, that were a toilsome vanity, but to be an interpreter and relater of the best and sagest things among mine own citizens throughout this island in the mother dialect” (*The Reason of Church Government*). In other words, I’m not going to traffic in vanity; I’m just going to get famous. Every time Milton disavows an impure motive, he reveals another one. Every effort at humility turns into a gesture of pride. Even when he tries to give the glory to God, he spoils it. The “abilities” he pledges to use in the service of virtue, are, he says “the inspired gift of God rarely bestowed.” It is more than implied that he is

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one of the lucky gifted ones, and he passes quickly to the glorious deeds he will perform: “to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue and public civility, to allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune, to celebrate in glorious lofty hymns the thrones and equipage of God’s almightiness.” It is clear that the celebrator will also be celebrated, and is being celebrated now.

The posture Milton assumes in these passages – complete with hopes, ambitions and dreams of literary glory – is the one Herbert tries, vainly, to escape in his poetry. What Herbert wants to do – and “do” is the verb that must be left behind – is to somehow exist without making the slightest impression, to act without agency, to write without asserting himself, to be in the world and disappear at the same time. In the poems the first person voice is always thinking to have finally found the way, to have advanced in the art of self-renunciation and abnegation. He’s always announcing, “Now I’ve got it, now I’ve figured out how to be responsive to Christ’s self-sacrifice in a manner that is not self-aggrandizing” only to realize (see “The Pearl,” “Thanksgiving,” “Misery” and “The Holdfast”) that he’s right back where he started from, adding to the good deeds he had tried to disclaim the good deed of disclaiming them.

In a series of poems this game that can’t be won is played out in the context of poetry. In “Jordan II” the speaker recalls his efforts to deploy the resources of his art in the service of praising God, but at the beginning of the final stanza he acknowledges that the interest he was serving in the effort was self-interest, the interest of making a good poetic showing: “So did I weave myself into the sense.” The question is how can you *not* weave yourself into the sense the moment you open your mouth? What can you do? The answer comes at the poem’s end: shut up. “But while I bustled / I might hear a friend / Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence! / There is in love a sweetness readie penn’d: / Copie out onely that, and save expense.*” That is, stop trying, stop weaving, stop writing, stop speaking, there’s no need, it’s already done, it’s already said.

In “The Forerunners,” an early Alzheimer’s poem, what the speaker can’t do voluntarily (because that would be an assertion of the will) is done for him, at least in prospect, by senility. He looks in the mirror and sees white hairs which he reads as forerunners and harbingers of what is to come. He can accept aging, but he finds it difficult to accept the diminishing of his mental and verbal powers: “But must they have my brain? Must they dispark / Those sparkling notions which therein were bred?” The pun on “spark” and “dispark” (dislodge from the cranial territory) is a minor illustration of the ability he is loath to lose. More powerful