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DERRIDA AND MEANING:  
THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORIAL INTENTION

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## Abstract

This thesis examines Jacques Derrida's deconstructive critique of the logocentric concept of meaning and proposes that Derrida's critique maintains the importance of authorial intention for literary critical practice. Derrida's critique of 'meaning' entails a situating of authorial intention as that which, while of importance to a critical reading, is incapable of absolutely determining the 'meaning' of the text.

The introduction gives a brief sketch of the importance of authorial intention in modern literary theory. Chapter One articulates Derrida's critique of Saussure's concept of the sign, showing how such a critique entails a questioning of any meaning beyond the series of differences which is language. Chapter Two demonstrates how Derrida's deconstructive reading of Rousseau in the latter half of *Of Grammatology* situates Rousseau's intention as that which is incapable of fully determining the meaning of his "Essay on the Origin of Languages", due to the undecidable meaning of the word 'supplement'. The third and final chapter is concerned with Derrida's postulation of the 'graphematic structure of the mark' as that which characterises all forms of speech and writing, as well as the structure of intention. The 'graphematic structure of the mark' is seen by Derrida as being that which renders the concept of a fully closed and final 'meaning' a problematical one due to the mark's ability to be grafted from one context into another. The chapter ends with an account of the 'concept' of 'dissemination', and demonstrates how this concept differs from the traditional concept of 'meaning'.

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## Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One : Derrida and The Sign	10
Chapter Two : Derrida and Rousseau	43
Chapter Three : The Iterable Structure of the Mark	55
Afterword	76
Notes	82
Selected Bibliography	97

## Introduction

How does one begin to interpret a text that denies the very logic of interpretative thought, and hence undercuts the reader's every move to assimilate its meaning into some kind of ordered intelligibility?<sup>1</sup>

Derrida and meaning. Or if reversed, meaning and Derrida. What does such a title mean? What borderlines, margins and areas does it hope to delimit? Which meaning of 'meaning' is meant? Which - given the dual processes of reading and translation - Derrida? Is such a title finally readable?

The raising of such questions and the inquiry into the possibility of their being answerable is typical of post-structuralism's strategy of asking questions instead of attempting to answer them. It is a dangerous enterprise, for in doing so post-structuralism is deliberately working against, and yet *within*, the practice of traditional criticism, a criticism which has had as its rule of thumb (be it any number of divergent schools; New Critical, Existential, Reader-response, Archetypal) the conviction that questions raised - leaving aside for a moment the range of issues that such a conviction opens for discussion - by the text, or reader, or rhetorically by the critic, are capable of being answered. Post-structuralism operates not exactly on different tenets but rather on no tenets at all; questions are endless and answers are only always other questions in the process of being asked. As the proliferation of readings of any one text shows, criticism, despite its often avowed intentions, raises further questions concerning the text under its scrutiny. As one of its 'tenets' post-structuralism argues that there can be no

final 'conclusive' reading of a text. The position that there can be no final conclusive reading is held by post-structuralism as being the correct way to view the text.

It is the modern day scepticism of Derrida - a scepticism witnessed in his constant asking of questions without believing in the possibility of their being answered conclusively, in his having no new model of meaning to offer but that of the questioning of all models - that makes a clear exposition of what is meant by 'Derrida and meaning' impossible. For a clear exposition in the case of Derrida's work would be an unclear distortion. To make Derrida 'clear' is to cloud, for it is a notorious trait of Derrida's writing to be difficult, to hide meaning so as to reveal what makes possible meaning's revelation. Derrida's work is somewhat paradoxical as on the one hand it presents the reader with an exposition on what allows any text, be it written or spoken, to signify, yet on the other hand it declares the impossibility of such an unveiling. The reader is caught, like a Zen student in the grips of a paradoxical *koan*, between a feeling of knowing what is being said and precisely because one knows what is being said, a feeling of not knowing what is being said. This dual sensation is an illustration of Derrida's point (in his essay "Signature Event Context") that one can never *fully* say anything, that meaning is *always already* incomplete, for to be able to mean, to be able to signify, is to be a part of a sign system which has as one of its fundamental features the capacity for re-iteration. The bundle of words that constitutes the text of Derrida's work has the capacity - because they are words - to mean, to signify something, and yet this meaning can never be totally determined nor absolutely fixed because the words themselves can be cited, repeated, translated, *re-contextualised* so as to change their meaning. Traditionally the notion of an original meaning, an original context, has served as a touchstone, a centre, for our conceptions of language and how it works. Derrida challenges the security of such a centre, making his work - and how we read the works of others - a matter of ambiguity, a matter of seeking out

centres so as to show their limitations, their failure to be the centres which they propose they are.

Still, to make such claims about the meaning of meaning and not be dismissed as inconsequential, mad, or both, one has to employ certain strategies. One has to be to some degree convincing. Post-structuralism and Deconstruction is stimulating a good deal of debate in many university departments, a good indication that it is convincing enough to inspire both support and opposition. One can, of course, cite numerous cultural reasons why the world, especially the West, is undertaking a questioning of its own interpretive ground-rules: namely the series of theoretical revolutions that mark the modern epoch, beginning with Copernicus and continuing with Darwin, Freud, Einstein and, for some, Saussure. Derrida takes full advantage of these revolutions, reminding us constantly that our frame of reference is about to be changed and that the implication of such a series of changes is that an absolute frame of reference does not, and indeed *cannot*, exist. Derrida has no new model, no new frame of reference, to offer us. His position on meaning is in fact a re-reading, a critique, of Saussure's postulation of the sign and his subsequent 'structuralist' linguistics. Derrida's reading of Saussure is a double one, one working within Saussure's premises while at the same time inhabiting Saussure so as to work against - by disclosing how such premises stand in opposition to certain established hierarchies - the metaphysical presuppositions of the text.

No literary, or philosophical, work is written, or assumes importance, in an historical void. To understand the impact and relevance of Derrida's work it is necessary to take note of the context in which Derrida's work appears. However, this context is difficult to determine for a variety of reasons, for the context surrounding Derrida's work is the problematic 'context' of a cultural, linguistic, and inter-disciplinary *exchange*. It is an exchange which is nowhere present at any one time or place but is rather a movement, an interaction, between various times and various places. Derrida writes in



French, in France - a France both before and after the *événements* of 1968 - and addresses the majority of his work to a borderline area somewhere between the domains of literature and philosophy.<sup>2</sup> As with all exchanges of this sort, the reaction has been one of a feeling of enrichment for some, along with a xenophobic - and sometimes crude - dismissal by others.<sup>3</sup> Any speculations about such contexts must indeed be limited here to a brief and selective background sketch, but within the context of Anglo-American literary criticism, the problem of meaning has largely been addressed in terms of authorial intention.

The debate concerning authorial intention and its relation to the meaning of a text goes back - within the confines of the Modern Era - to I. A. Richards and the New Critics.<sup>4</sup> W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's essay "The Intentionalist Fallacy" written in 1946 postulates a view of the poem as being the reconciliation of opposites which occur and having meaning within the structure of the poem itself.<sup>5</sup> The meaning of a poem, according to the New Critics, was not to be found in the intentions of its author, either during or after the moment of the poem's composition. In their essay "The Affective Fallacy" Wimsatt and Beardsley further assert that the meaning of a poem is not equatable with the series of responses experienced by the reader while reading the poem.<sup>6</sup> For Wimsatt and Beardsley, the poem existed as a self-sufficient 'concrete universal', the meaning of which lay beyond the author's intentions and the reader's response.

Literary meaning was connected by Wimsatt and Beardsley to principles of 'coherence' and 'complexity', principles which were ultimately founded upon their conceptions of what constituted poetry. A literary text was an organic whole, a series of composite units whose differences were reconciled to produce the coherence - even though such a coherence might include ambiguities - that was the poem. For the New Critics, the notion of literary

discourse as a resolution of opposites governed by the principle of coherence provided an interpretive, as well as evaluative, framework that allowed the reader to provide a justifiable reading of the poem in the absence of a conjectured authorial intention. In other words, the New Critics operated from an aesthetically founded critical base which justified, and indeed constituted, their theory of poetry. As Frank Lentricchia succinctly points out:

... working within a neo-Coleridgean heritage, the New Critic tends, first, to ascribe, *a priori*, special objective properties to literary discourse (it is inherently ambiguous, or symbolic, or organically whole), and then, with circular logic, to describe the critical act as consisting in the location, that is, the *finding* of those qualities, wherever they may be.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to say that the literary criticism of the New Critics was without a theoretical basis. It is rather that such a basis was founded upon conceptions of the 'literary qualities' of the text, qualities which were themselves a result of the theoretical practices which uncovered them, a process which was, indeed, circular.

Such 'circular logic' can be seen in Wimsatt's distinction between the Iconic and Symbolic sign in his book *The Verbal Icon*.<sup>8</sup> He makes this distinction following the American behaviourist C. W. Morris: the iconic sign is that which proclaims in itself certain properties of that which it signifies, and the symbolic sign is that which makes no such proclamation, its relationship to its referent being purely a matter of convention. Wimsatt then applies this distinction between the icon and the symbolic sign to poetry, arriving at the conclusion that all poetry exploits the iconic, or directly imitative powers of language. Such a position was later contested by structuralist critics who claimed that poetry did not exploit the 'iconic' powers of language and who proposed a more unified model of the sign than that

of Wimsatt's.

As witnessed in Wimsatt's distinction between the symbolic and the iconic sign, the advent of New Criticism led to a greater concern with reading the text as being composed of distinct units of language, or signs. Rather than construing the poem as being merely a medium for authorial intention, the New Critics conceived the poem as being a self-contained whole which had a *public* meaning regardless of its author's intentions. This public meaning was not only the *denotative* but also the *connotative* meanings of the poem's words. The New Critics' espousal of the public meaning was problematic as it left unresolved the question as to which factor finally determined this 'public meaning'. Was the meaning of a poem determined by the reconciliation of opposites within the structure of the poem, or was the public meaning of the poem determined by the sense of a vague consensus among like-minded public readers? In this way - as we shall later see - the dilemma of the New Critics' conception of public meaning was similar to the structuralist one, as both the New Critics and the structuralists were unable to locate the site of the production of the text's meaning.

From the mid-sixties onwards, critics such as E. D. Hirsch have sought to re-establish authorial intention as the determinant factor in a text's meaning. Hirsch's arguments for re-establishing the priority of authorial intention emerged against the growing influence of structuralist and reader-response criticism in the United States. In *Validity in Interpretation* Hirsch argues that "to banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation".<sup>9</sup> For Hirsch, the absence of any such 'normative principle' is a source of anxiety, since without such a principle it becomes impossible to distinguish a valid interpretation of a text from an invalid one. Hirsch claims that the notion of authorial

intention provides the critic with just such a normative principle. However, Hirsch concedes that his choice of authorial intention is arbitrary:

Since it is very easy for a reader of any text to construe meanings that are different from the author's, there is nothing in the nature of the text itself which requires the reader to set up the author's meaning as his normative ideal.<sup>10</sup>

While it is conceded by Hirsch that there is no reason to posit the author as the determiner of a text's meaning, nevertheless it must be pretended that authorial intention has this determining function: "On purely practical grounds, therefore, it is preferable to agree that the meaning of a text is the author's meaning."<sup>11</sup> In this way, Hirsch's equivalence of authorial intention with the determinate meaning of the text is something of a functional fiction, since Hirsch himself concedes that such an equivalence does not, in itself, have to occur.

While Hirsch seeks to reinstate the author as the determiner of textual meaning, his account of the importance of 'types' throughout *Validity in Interpretation* is similar, in some respects, to the structuralist project of attempting to formulate the rules which govern the production of meaning. According to Hirsch, "the determinacy and sharability of verbal meaning resides in its being a type. The particular type that it is resides in the author's determining will. *A verbal meaning is a willed type*".<sup>12</sup> While the author wills the type of the utterance, it is the conventional nature of the type which produces meaning. Since for Hirsch all meanings must be *sharable* in nature, it is the conventional, that is, sharable, character of 'types' which allows the text to have significance. However, the exact relationship between the author's

will, the conventional nature of the type, and the meaning of the text is, by the end of *Validity in Interpretation*, distinctly unclear. Concerning the issue of implication, for example, Hirsch asserts that

Implications are derived from a shared type that has been learned, and therefore *the generation of implications depends on the interpreter's previous experience of the shared type*. The principle for generating implications is, ultimately and in the broadest sense, a learned convention.<sup>13</sup>

If the principle for generating implications is ultimately a 'learned convention', then one wonders why the generation of the text's meaning as a whole does not depend on just such a learned convention, but is instead viewed by Hirsch as being reliant on the author's intention.

The concept of authorial intention remains, then, a problematic, despite such attempts to define its function, and within this context Derrida has a distinctive place. A deconstructive reading of Hirsch, for instance, would be one which sought the portions of Hirsch's work where the hierarchical ordering of the terms 'author' and 'type' were both temporarily inverted and displaced. Within such a reading, Hirsch himself would no longer be considered the determiner of the text's meaning, nor would the conventional types themselves be construed as producing the meaning of the text. A deconstructive reading of Hirsch would presumably concentrate on the inability of any such conventional types to account for all the workings of the text, as well as their failure to maintain their own self-identity.

The purpose of this thesis is to render, as

clearly as possible, Derrida's critique of meaning. This critique involves a deconstruction of the logocentric conception of meaning, and a new concept of the force, or play, of language, a concept which is a non-concept, a non-word, what Derrida names as *différance*, but also as *dissemination*. Throughout this thesis, special attention is paid to authorial intention, not just because the subject of authorial intention is of general concern to literary criticism, but because one of the current myths surrounding deconstruction is that it seeks to do away with authorial intention altogether. Indeed, as this thesis shows, this is not the case. Derrida's critique of meaning entails a meticulous, and complicated, re-situating of authorial intention. Authorial intention is re-situated by Derrida as being unable to control, or master, the significantional play of the text. Furthermore, for Derrida, authorial intention is never fully self-present or self-identical, but is always already constituted by the play of *différance*. All of these points require further explanation. The purpose of this thesis, once again, is to offer just such an explanation in order to provide a starting point for the understanding of Derrida's critique of meaning and its importance for modern literary theory.