

This is a PDF of John Holbo's post, "Near Theory (My creation, is it real?)" and the sequel/conclusion, "Near Theory II (Bits and Pieces)". Here's a URL, in case this PDF ever gets separated from its source:

http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/near_theory_my_creation_is_it_real/

No links in what follows, but I've tried to indicate where they were, so you can look at the original if you are curious.

Part I

Little game. Get out your pencil. Provide the following (or just click and find out what I'm on about under the fold.)

1. Singular noun. Two syllables.
2. Verb. One syllable.
3. Plural noun. One syllable.
4. Singular noun. One syllable.
5. Singular noun. One syllable.
6. Plural noun. Two syllables. Must rhyme with the selection for 1.
7. Singular noun, two syllables.
8. Singular noun, one syllable.
9. Verb, one syllable.
10. Verb, one syllable.
11. Adjective, three syllables.
12. Plural noun, one syllable.
13. Plural noun, one syllable.
14. Plural noun, one syllable. Must rhyme with the selection for 10.

Following up on **Sean's post**, I am inflicting on Knapp and Michael's "Against Theory" a refutation by mad lib. I ran this little experiment on the wife as test subject; here is the product.

An ashtray did my spirit seal;
 I rode no human shoes;
 She seemed a vase that could not feel
 The tent of earthly news.
 No anthill has she now, no horse;
 She neither knits nor toasts.
 Rolled round in earth's bejeweléd course,
 With frogs, and blots, and ghosts.

As you can see, we are punching out bits of the Wordsworth poem whose interpretation is - by tradition - the bone of contention in these sorts of arguments; we're slotting in our selections. As you can guess, the form of the refutation is, basically: no author, no authorial intention. But plainly the thing is meaningful; you could interpret it. (We shall.) So Knapp and Michael's thesis that

meaning simply is authorial intention must be false. The obvious response would be: but if you interpret it you are assuming an 'as if' stance, positing an author. This doesn't work, but it will take a while explaining why not.

Here's the original, with the variable bits underlined to facilitate your private performance of the above exercise. (Please feel free to show us your results in comments.)

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

Anyone want to write a script? Pencil and paper is lo-tech, sitting at home of a Sunday afternoon when there are courageous pioneers out there on the bleeding edge of *near science*! (You really must watch **the video** of three guys delivering their randomly generated papers.) Favorite lines:

We need epistemologies that will be symbiotic, flexible, and also operate on a large scale.

Assumption: there are only child-like adversaries.

Extremely mobile information underwater

... And so it prevents the world wide web!

And and then there's **this**. That's all the jokes I've got. Unless you are interested in philosophy of language, this is your exit; go amuse yourself somewhere else. I believe this is the longest blog post anyone has ever written. I think it's pretty clear, but still ... It's a paper draft, an alternative explication of points touched on in my **Nabokov/chess piece**.... You have been warned.

You can read the first five pages of Knapp and Michaels' original essay yourself, in *Against Theory*. Amazon is handy sometimes. Read 'excerpt'. Then, if you want to read three more pages, 'search inside' for a distinctive phrase - oh, say 'genius of the shore', which will get a hit on the next page; then go next page, next page. And that's all Amazon will allow. But the first five pages contain the thesis, relevant definitions, and full statement of the argument to the conclusion that, necessarily, meaning just IS authorial intention; that "The meaning of a text is simply identical to the author's intended meaning" (p. 12).

The argument is a thought-experiment. Fish's argument in his *NY Times* editorial alters nothing but incidental stage-dressing. See **Sean's post** for discussion and lengthening comment thread. (Matthew Yglesias **offers** a refutation similar to my mad lib strategy.) I'll quote a long bit before the NYT firewall is kindled:

Suppose you're looking at a rock formation and see in it what seems to be the word "help." You look more closely and decide that, no, what you are seeing is an effect of erosion, random marks that just happen to resemble an English word. The moment you decide that nature caused the effect, you will have lost all interest in interpreting the formation, because you no longer believe that it has been produced intentionally, and therefore you no longer believe that it's a word, a bearer of meaning.

It may look like a word - it may even seem to be more regularly formed as such than the scratchings of someone who is lost - but in the absence of the assumption that what you're looking at is a vehicle of an intention, you will not regard it as language. It is not until you change your mind and become convinced that the formation was, in fact, designed, that the marks will become language and it will be appropriate to interpret them.

Even then you are not home free; just because you're now sure that the marks spell the word "help," you still don't know what it means. It could be a message from a person in distress. It could be a direction like those on a computer screen ("Need help? Look here."). It could be a petition to God. It could be a reference to a Beatles song. Scrutinizing the word won't tell you which of these things it means.

This is why Justice Scalia has it backwards: if you're not looking for what is meant, the notion of something being said or written is incoherent. Intention is not something added to language; it is what must already be assumed if what are otherwise mere physical phenomena (rocks or scratch marks) are to be experienced as language. Intention comes first; language, and with it the possibility of meaning, second. And this means that there can be no "textualist" method, because there is no object - no text without writerly intention - to which would-be textualists could be faithful.

Knapp and Michaels do the same work by imagining successive stanzas of Wordsworth - what seems like Wordsworth - washing up on the beach. At first you see words in the sand - what seems like words - and you assume someone scratched them there. Then a wave washes it away and replaces it with a fresh stanza (excuse me: pseudostanza.) What is causing it? Speculate away! But (allegedly) all explanations fall into two piles. "You will either be ascribing these

marks to some agent capable of intentions (the living sea, the haunting Wordsworth, etc.) or you will count them as nonintentional effects of mechanical processes (erosion, percolation, etc.). But in the second case - where the marks now seem to be accidents - will they still seem to be words? Clearly not. They will merely seem to resemble words" (p. 16).

This argument fails, right down to the awkward formulation of the conclusion. (Surely we can grant the scratchings really resemble words, since this is actually stipulated.)

I think Knapp and Michaels have been decisively refuted by George Wilson and Searle's "Literary Theory and its Discontents," which appears in *Theory's Empire*. As Sean mentions, my Nabokov/chess piece contains another refutation. This post is, in effect, another angle. One may as well also note: what seems like the correct, obvious objection turns out to be really correct. Why should I say these things in the sand 'clearly' aren't words? It isn't clear at all. Yes, it's weird to say 'the sea is writing words.' But saying they aren't words won't make it less weird what the sea is doing. But Knapp and Michaels' argument hinges crucially on intuition and usage being 'clearly', unambiguously, in their favor.

Still, a failed argument isn't all bad, so long as it teaches. Mostly I'm not going to be knocking them down but kicking off from them when they're down to end up somewhere interesting. And, let it be said, a big reason why the refutations are so decisive in this case is that Knapp and Michaels' argument is absolutely clearly formulated. No room for wriggling off the hook, although two failed wiggles have been attempted to date.

Let's spell out my refutation-by-mad-lib. No meaning for any line of the poem you see above, "An ashtray did my spirit seal," was intended by any intentional agent. Certainly no meaning was intended for the poem as a whole. Wordsworth didn't, I didn't, and my lovely wife, Belle, didn't. That exhausts our slate of candidates. The poem has no author and so, by Knapp and Michaels' argument, is no poem. Indeed, it is not made of words. Only of word-resembling pixel patterns. So if I can convince even of so much as this - that thing you will see by scrolling up is made of words - Knapp and Michaels are refuted. But surely it's made of words because I asked my wife for words. Combining them can hardly have annihilated their natures.

What will Knapp and Michaels reply? I think they will say that, to the contrary, there is a great deal of intention here. The 'poem' is like a parody of Wordsworth, so there are blots and ghosts of the original author's intentions rolling around. I, John Holbo, have intentions: I didn't do this by accident; I intend to refute Knapp and Michaels. I also intend that the result of my very deliberate and stagy exercise should be interpreted. Belle has intentions. She intends certain words. Her stipulative acts make the poem come out as it does.

Does this save Knapp and Michaels? No. All this only goes to show is that there are different senses of 'intention'. When we sort them, we find the plurality prevents the running of the argument. Without further ado, three senses of intention:

1. Intentionality. A technical term denoting anything that exhibits aboutness, be it a thought, sentence, proposition, anything. Searle employs the term in this sense, usually capitalizing, to make clear the usage is non-standard. (Brentano first breathed modern life into this medieval term of art. **Here's a nice article**.) If you omit the capital, but employ the term in this sense, you get something like 'meaning is intention' as a tautology. We need to keep this in mind, because Knapp and Michaels may skim illicit plausibility off it. We need to scrape that off, because none of the anti-intentionalist views they are denying are attempts to deny that meaning and aboutness go together.

A point of possible confusion. From the linked article: "As the latin etymology of 'intentionality' indicates, the relevant idea of directedness or tension (an English word which derives from the Latin verb *tendere*) arises from pointing towards or attending to some target." This is significant because the New Critics, the usual anti-intentionalist suspects, favor a rhetoric of hermetic textual autonomy - 'poem should not mean but be' - which may suggest a quite absurd refusal to admit that poems exhibit Intentionality. Obviously the denial that poems mean, i.e. are linguistic - as if poetry were some sort of 'absolute music' - is absurd. This New Critical stance is a merely rhetorical gesture, or just a brush off to those they like. When the New Criticism was ascendant, this sort of bullying had effects; when it declines, this extreme rhetoric gets cited to produce an erroneous sense that somehow 'meaning is intentional' - in this basic sense - is something anyone has seriously denied. We shouldn't bother pretending to take the rhetoric literally.

Another point of confusion: Knapp and Michaels quote Searle, "there is no getting away from intentionality," by way of hinting he is just being timid in not pushing his view to its logical conclusion, i.e. their conclusion. But what Searle is getting at is: everything intentional, i.e. about anything, is either mental, e.g. thoughts, or a derivative product of willing actors who have minds. Symbol systems are conventional, not natural; conventions are established by creatures with minds and wills. This primacy of mental agency may seem to get us all the way to Knapp and Michaels; they hint so; but it is not so. The dispute between intentionalists and formalists isn't a dispute between those who think languages are man-made (made by beings with minds and wills) and poor deluded fools who think languages grow on trees or bubble out of the ground. The dispute isn't whether languages need to be made, i.e. whether there is always some intentional act at the root, but whether every subsequent use of language also needs a constitutive intentional contribution to sustain it. A theological analogy: all Christians believe that God created the universe. Occasionally, Christians have been occasionalists; occasionalists believe God's successive acts of will maintain the universe, moment by moment. Intentionalists like Knapp and

Michaels (and Fish) are, in effect, occasionalists about language. This is a non-trivial bit of metaphysical speculation. More theology below.

2. Intent. 'Intent' means plan. (Obviously the sense of directedness towards something is operative here.) My intent, in producing "An ashtray did my spirit seal," is to refute Knapp and Michaels, also to facilitate making other points. Although this plan is ultimately communicative, many plans are nothing of the sort. It is my intent to eat dinner. This does not turn me into a symbol for dinner eating. (Then again, people planning to eat dinner are good things to feature in restaurant ads.) In my Nabokov/chess piece I talk about moves in chess. You shouldn't move without having a plan, although you can. But, by formulating a plan and executing it, I am not telling my opponent anything, in a semantic sense. The clearest way to see this is to imagine non-standards case in which chess moves might convey semantic content. Sherlock might establish a code. When he moves his king for the third time, Watson is to go to the drawing room. Or perhaps I am losing and move my king right out in the open so as to say: 'I don't care anymore. I quit.' Mostly this isn't how it goes: moves don't send messages. (You can investigate the meaning of any move, of course, even if no one is sending you messages via it; but that just shows we have too many senses of 'meaning' floating around. More below.)

Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'intentional fallacy' seeks to rule out 'author's intents' in this sense of plan: intentions to do, or realize certain effects. This is rather sneaky, as the most plausible sense of 'intention', qua candidate for being the meaning of a poem, is the one that comes next.

3. Authorial intention. I want to subdivide this category promptly into Gricean and Hirschian piles. H.P. Grice and E.D. Hirsch have highly contrastive - not necessarily inconsistent - intentionalist theories of meaning. (Not that these theorists are necessarily the best, but they are representative enough.)

Grice's notion of conversational implicature. Normally a bad move in chess is not a way of saying something. That changes when the opponent can run through a plausible line of thought, like so: 'he can't fail to see it is a terrible move, and also see that I can't fail to see it is a terrible move, and that I must see he sees that I see this; there is no point to such a move unless he is telling me something ...' Clear enough, apart from some daunting complexities elided on the way to 'I quit!', as conversationally implicated via mutual recognitions of intents to communicate x by saying/doing y.

Hirsch's notion of an intentional horizon. An intentional horizon marks the limits of an author's - or anyone's - awareness, consciousness (and perhaps subconsciousness.) The normative proposal is that, in interpreting a poem, one should stay within this horizon. "The probability of an interpreter's inference may be judged by two criteria alone - the accuracy with which he has sensed the horizon as a whole and the typicality of such a meaning within such a whole.

Insofar as the inference meets these criteria it is truly an explication of textual meaning. It simply renders explicit that which was, consciously or unconsciously, in the author's intention" (*Validity in Interpretation*, p. 223).

It would be interesting to make a study of how Grice and Hirsch might complement and/or contradict each other. Hirsch says little about intents - i.e. plans that x be recognized as an attempt to communicate y. (It is not clear authors intend to communicate their 'intentional horizons' to audiences.) Grice deals well with cases that are, in effect, solvable riddles: tidy allegory, proverbs, metaphors that are poetic packages for messages. He may deal less well with more wide-open terrain - a whole poem that, plausibly, isn't an attempt to deliver a discrete propositional packet according to a protocol of mutually recognized intents. On the other hand, the two views may mesh. I won't try to settle that. Let's just stipulate that 'authorial intention' denotes content - real thoughts in the real mind of a real author - that constitutes the semantic content that an interpretation of a text should (or must) find. (I am strictly reserving 'intent' for plan and 'intention' for candidate meanings.)

I return to Knapp and Michaels and the proposal that my mad lib doesn't refute intentionalism because it is fairly thick with intentionality. The problem is it's the wrong sort. We have Intentionality, but that just begs the question if it is regarded as resolving the question; there is primary intentionality, for example in Belle's stipulations of words. We have intents: my plan to refute Knapp and Michaels; no doubt Wordsworth had plans of his own. But I trust it is clear that the textual meaning of "An ashtray did my spirit seal" - the meaning a close reading of the poem will produce, if any - is not: John Holbo wants to refute Knapp and Michaels; nor, Belle picks 'ashtray'. These plans and acts of stipulation are not candidate meanings of the proper sort. What we do not have here is any 'authorial intention', per sense 3 above. Because, per Hirsch, there is no intentional horizon; the semantic labor is distributed with no one conscious agent having access to the big picture, which is just what the horizon is. Per Grice, no one is in a position to have planned or intentionally determined that, by x, y is meant, and that the audience should get to y by recognizing the plan. For example, no one can have planned that by 'an ashtray did my spirit seal,' the reader is to come to recognize the author's intent to communicate an anti-smoking message, or anything of the sort.

But even by proposing that (rather obvious) reading, am I starting to construct a way out for the intentionalist? Knapp and Michaels can fall back to the position that one can always take up an 'as if' stance. Even if one knows there is no author, one can posit ... an author with an anti-smoking message. And take it from there. Here are Knapp and Michaels, describing the scene by the shore before and after you realize no one wrote the words (or non-words): "You had, without realizing it, already posited an author ... Only now, when positing an author seems impossible, do you genuinely imagine the marks as authorless. But to deprive them of an author is to convert them into accidental likenesses of

language. They are not, after all, an example of intentionless meaning; as soon as they become intentionless they become meaningless as well" (p. 16). Presumably one could recover the meaning by the simple expedient of positing again. In this way my mad lib is deflected as a counter-example to the thesis.

This doesn't work. Explaining why not will be my final point, for which I will need more resources.

First, please note how my distinction between types of intention undoes the neat either/or Knapp and Michaels depend on: "You will either be ascribing these marks to some agent capable of intentions (the living sea, the haunting Wordsworth, etc.) or you will count them as nonintentional effects of mechanical processes (erosion, percolation, etc.)." To the contrary, a mad lib is the product of agents capable of intentions - me - but not the right sort to count as textual meanings. In the present case the meanings are unintended effects of intended mechanical processes. (You could say the effects are intended *de dicto*, not *de re*, if you like saying things like that.)

This leads on to another incidental point that may be nagging, because it is really a huge point. Back to Fish's op-ed:

The moment you decide that nature caused the effect, you will have lost all interest in interpreting the formation, because you no longer believe that it has been produced intentionally, and therefore you no longer believe that it's a word, a bearer of meaning.

First, the news that natural rock formations cannot be interesting to interpret will come as a crushing disappointment to geologist readers of the NYT everywhere. Second, my mad lib is very like the message on the rock; a random production. But it was produced intentionally. It's just that the intentions can't be its meaning. So Fish, too, is operating with a false dichotomy. Third, it is surely not the case that there is never any interest in interpreting even randomly-generated linguistic products. Whimsy is not a harsh mistress, but she can be a steady one. Fourth, in the mad lib case, the fact that this product has been made a stake in a philosophical debate - the fact that there are people planning and meaning things on both sides - lends it significance. It is a move in a game. We wonder about the implications. Ergo, authorial intentions make it meaningful, if you like. (Perfectly standard usage.) But these are not the right sorts of intentions, for Knapp and Michaels' purpose; see above. Furthermore, these are not the right sorts of meanings.

Let me distinguish four senses of 'meaning'.

1. Sentence meaning
2. Speaker meaning
3. Implication

4. Significance

What Knapp and Michaels are concerned to do in "Against Theory" is collapse 1 into 2, in a very strong sense. My mad lib is a counter example: a case of 1 but no 2. So 1 must be distinct from 2. But before resuming the push, it is noteworthy that Fish (and I think Knapp and Michaels as well) are neglectful of 3 and 4, as distinct from 1 and 2. This is shown by the oddity of Fish's failure to consider that a natural formation - particularly an odd one - might cry out for interpretation. We want to know what causes things, and what things imply about the world. None of this has anything essential to do with language or intentions to mean, but it is rather easy to get the two crossed. In my chess piece, I quote Pale Fire:

Reading from left to right in winter's code:
A dot, an arrow pointing back; repeat:
Dot, arrow pointing back ... A pheasant's feet!

The fact that pheasant tracks imply pheasants is not a semantic fact. But, especially since we use 'imply' in Gricean sorts of cases - by x, someone means y; and because we are willing to interchange 'meaning' for 'implication', i.e. 'this means pheasants'; and because we use 'significance' when the implications turn out to be interesting ... well, the ground is laid for a failure to distinguish 3 and 4 from 1 and 2. In short, it is a bit unfortunate that the deep ethical question of the meaning of life is a homonym of the lexicographer's puzzle as to the meaning of 'life'.

Take the chess example (for longer treatment, see my chess piece.) As mentioned above, we can always ask what moves mean. This is shorthand for a twofold inquiry into plans and implications. We want to know what the intent of the mover is; we want to explore the combinatorial possibilities. Some suitable vector of these is a move's significance, you might say. A move is significant if the plan is good or bad or intriguing, and/or if the combinatorial possibilities are decisive; if the move is a turning point. (Trivially, every move implies a vast range of possibilities; not all of these are significant.) Yet none of this is meaning in either sense 1 or 2. To make matters more confusing, chess does have meanings in senses 1 and 2. Each move is, if you like, a sentence. Moving your knight to square d5 is functionally equivalent to announcing 'knight to d5', which is a sentence, and which works through your opponent's recognition that, by announcing that, you intend it to be recognized you are making a move etc. etc. But chess meaning has relatively little to do with either 1 or 2; the action is all in 3 and 4. To understand chess notation is to understand everything there is to know about chess meaning, in senses 1 and 2; but that is tantamount to understanding almost nothing about the meaning of a game, or move, or position, or opening, or combination, or plan.

Neither 3 nor 4 is a function of 1 and/or 2 - and not just in chess; in poetry and novels and life. So how can Knapp and Michaels and Fish hope to settle,

decisively, questions of 'meaning' and interpretation, simply by handling 1 and 2? Possibly Fish would say he simply didn't have the space in his op-ed to deal with every such complication. He is simply concerned to collapse 1 into 2. This isn't good enough, but at this point there's a fork in the argumentative road. First, there are serious philosophical problems with collapsing 1 into 2, never mind about 3 and 4. The most philosophically interesting aspect of these problems may be confusion about the word 'theory'. Fish, Knapp and Michaels' usage is telling in a way highly relevant to our late *Theory's Empire* discussions. But an equally decisive way to run the refutation is just to show that practical criticism doesn't work the way Fish, Knapp and Michaels suggest. This can be done without too much heavy-duty philosophy. I handle that practical angle in part II. Go straight there if you're sick to death of philosophy and just want it over with.

Let's consider some standard philosophical objections to Knapp and Michaels' attempt to collapse 1 into 2. In "Literary Theory and Its Discontents", Searle makes the simple point - made by Wilson before him - that it is perfectly fine to regard something as a word in virtue of its shape. He quotes some concessions in this regard from Knapp and Michaels' 1992 response to Wilson and simply notes:

But once they concede ... that "the physical features of a set of marks intrinsically determine whether that set of marks is a token of a sentence type in a given language," then they have already conceded what they claim to be denying, namely that there are at least two types of meaning, the conventional sentence meaning and the intentional speaker's meaning ... This allows for precisely the possibility that they have been claiming to deny, namely, that a text can be regarded as either a string of sentence tokens and its meaning examined independently of any authorial intent, or a text can be regarded as a product of an intentional speech act and its meaning examined in terms of the intentions of the author. (p. 161)

This really ought to be game, set and match. But in *The Shape of the Signifier* Michaels attempts a response [you can search inside at Amazon and see context]:

As Searle eventually put it, "In linguistics, philosophy and logic words ... are standardly defined purely formally"; hence, "it is simply not true that in order for a physical token to be a word ... it must have been produced by an intentional human action." The appeal to the "purely formal" here is an appeal to the physical, to the shape of the signifier. Clearly the marks are shaped like language - they look just like English words. But is being shaped like language enough to be language? Is what makes a word the fact that it's being used as a word or the fact that it's shaped like a word? (p. 58)

Michaels considers a case in which we find giant stone letters on the surface of Mars, suspiciously Wordsworthian when regarded from an orthographico-low orbital point of view. (Michaels is in the process of discussing Kim Stanley Robinson, so there is a sort of motivating fictional occasion for the Martian landscape, but a rather strained one.) But now suppose that there is some incidental problem recognizing whether one shape is more like an 'r' or an 'a'. This is supposed to be a problem:

For if shape were decisive ... then something that looked like an r would necessarily be an r.

But what are the criteria for looking like an r? There aren't any, not because we don't have some idea of what an r looks like but because, even if something looks to us like an a, we don't have any argument against someone who says that the same thing looks to him like an r. How could we? (p. 59)

After some more notes in this vein:

Are there letters on Mars? It depends on your perspective. But which perspective is the right one? You might be able to answer the question which perspective is the most beautiful or which perspective is the most interesting, but you obviously can't answer the question which is right ... The question of whether those formations really are letters regardless of your perspective makes no sense, since as long as the relevant criterion is formal (its shape), the question of whether the formations really are letters is a question that is crucially about your perspective ... Because what something looks like must be what it looks like to someone, the appeal to the shape of the signifier is at the same time an appeal to the position and hence to the identity of its interpreter. (p. 60)

The first thing to say in response is that Searle already went over this: "From the fact that every syntactical token is a physical entity, such as an acoustical blast or a physical mark, it does not follow nor is it the case that syntactical categories are categories of physics. Notions such as "sentence of English" cannot be defined in terms of, for example, acoustics or mechanics" (p. 163). Searle says it is because something's being a sentence only makes sense against what he calls the Background. Mostly, this is the point about occasionalism made above. The fact that someone had to make a language by intending something does not imply that intention is needed for each linguistic occasion. But there is more, and I don't think Searle really puts it as clearly as he could.

The thing Knapp and Michaels crucially miss, from the start, is that word and sentence and so forth are vague categories. These terms are family resemblance terms, as Wittgenstein would say. This means there will be clear yes and no

cases and some grey area cases. (It also means linguists and philosophers and other interested folks can perfectly well carve out sharp definitions of wordhood and sentencehood, from the more or less cloudy mass of ordinary usage. The warrant for such sharpened concepts will be utility relative to some intellectual or systematic project. Knapp and Michaels' suggestion that their argument effectively ends the project of trying to come up with just such theorists precludes them saying this is what they are doing, however.)

The criteria that determine membership in the family of sentences and the family of words and so forth fall fairly neatly (but probably not completely neatly) into two piles: intentionalistic and formalistic. A paradigm case of a word or sentence is one in which something of a standard shape is backed up by a standard sort of intentionality. A paradigm case of a non-word or non-sentence is something of a non-standard shape, without appropriate intentionality. Borderline cases are those in which there is something peculiar and non-standard about one or the other or both.

Some examples (you could do this yourself, but I am seeding a few further points):

Above I mentioned that a move in chess can be regarded as a sentence. Reason: it is a symbolic act, and precisely functionally equivalent to a specifiable sentence that encodes specific and highly determinate propositional content. But we are reluctant to say a move is a sentence because it doesn't really look like one. It is highly non-standard, formally. So is a move in chess a sentence or not? I can't see that there is any reason to go either way, unless someone has a good reason to stipulate in or out. (Linguists might prefer not to have to deal with such cases, hence might find a way of ruling out chess moves as sentences. That would be fine.)

Suppose I am flying high above a river and I look down and say: it looks like God himself signed his name to the land; that is, if God were a doctor signing a prescription slip - just a squiggle, nothing remotely resembling actual letters. (Get it? There's a reason Wittgenstein said a book of philosophy could consist only of jokes. The joke hinges on the vagueness of criteria for wordhood. Hey, he didn't say funny jokes.)

The Nabokov case. If someone wants to pretend that there is a 'language' of animal tracks, it helps that they tend to appear in lines consisting of discrete, distinctively shaped scratches. It's a kind of natural pun on the sorts of things humans regard as writing. It looks like a word, and it 'means' something. We will want to say it isn't really a word, but if someone started to insist, the usage might take root. If we found a language in which the word for (what we call) words and the word for spoor were one and the same, we would understand.

Suppose I write out sentences in English, lightly encoded, so $A = B$; $B = C$; $C = D$... $Z = A$. 'The cat is on the mat' comes out: 'Uif dbu jt uif mbv'. Now is that written in English? Well, yes. Probably. Is it an English sentence: yes and no. Is 'uif' a word in English? One wouldn't say so. (Trying this in Scrabble will get you nowhere. But really any of these questions could be answered either way you please, if you have a special reason. The reason it is no-go in Scrabble is that it would obviously wreck the game.)

Obviously, formal definitions of words in terms of shape are complicated by the existence of strange fonts, and the possibility of creating indefinitely more strange fonts than the world has already got. You simply couldn't formally define a range of possibly acceptable fonts. You need the fact that they are intended to unify the set.

Now, epistemological twists. Consider the resemblance questions Michaels raises. Suppose I have a stick with a sharp bend in the middle. The bend is not sharp enough for it to look like a V, but if I put it in water, just right, it will look like a V to a human observer. So does it look like a V or doesn't it? Well, it seems to me there is no real problem with saying it doesn't, until such a time as we start doing a lot of semi-submerged writing; that is, until a very strong infusion of intentionality tips the weight of family resemblance the other way. Plus, if we got used to dealing with shapes intended to look like V's in water, those shapes would start to look to us like V's even out of water, because we would be attuned to their purpose.

Suppose there is **a stone formation that looks like Richard Nixon**. Or **a face on Mars**, instead of a lot of Wordsworth. In general, take any manifestation of **pareidolia**. Is there any reason to think that there is a problem saying these things really resemble what they seem to resemble? Notice I am returning to Knapp and Michaels' odd doubling of levels of resemblance in their original formulation of their conclusion: "They will merely seem to resemble words." Why not say they really resemble words? Well, we say seems to resemble because we want to cue our audience of our awareness that in these cases there is a distinctive cognitive contribution of our species. But many of our concepts may be - to pick another Martian example - grokking concepts, as **Steven Yablo calls them (PDF)**. (See **this Brian Weatherson post** for an introductory discussion of the notion. Brian is skeptical. It all makes sense to me.) There doesn't seem to be any need to signal in every case that we are applying a concept in a way only a human being would; presumably our audience knows we are human. (Again, you can tell stories where this isn't the case. But then our usage may change.)

These are all cases in which there is something odd about form - the shape of a signifier, if you like.

I'm looking for a Wittgenstein quote that pretty much says it all: 'One of the main criteria of something's being a word is: looking like a word.' Something like that. (Anyone have the reference?) Not the sole criterion; one of the criteria.

What about intentionality? Well, the mad lib case and Knapp and Michaels' and Fish's cases are borderline cases. I leave it to the interested reader to multiply them - all day long, if you like.

What is the moral of the story? It is twofold. First, the meaning of words like 'word' and 'sentence' is vague, in ordinary usage. Clear cases, borderline cases. Knapp and Michaels' original argument depends crucially on this not being the case. If the question of whether the scratches in the sand are words waits on an uncertain weighing of the relative importance of formal and intentional factors, they are refuted. This problem is compounded by their attempt to address Searle by treating his position as cartoon formalism:

If we need to know what language the author wrote in, we need to know what the author intended, and once we care about what the author intended the rules of the language are relevant only because they help us to figure out that intention. If, on the other hand, our appeal to the rules of the language is not a disguised intentionalism, if we are, like John Searle, more purely formalist - that is, indifferent to the question (by whom or by what?) of how the marks or noises we interpret were produced - then we treat them perforce as accidents and, once again, do not interpret them at all. This is the point of de Man's "radical" formalism: he sees that the only alternative to thinking of "Marion" as meaning whatever (more or less complicated thing) Rousseau meant by it is to think of it as meaning nothing - as a rock instead of a speech act. (p. 117-8)

Some of the mistakes here have been dealt with already. The question of whether you wish to interpret something does not depend on whether you see intention behind it; it depends on whether you find it interesting. The de Manian opposition is clearly false. You needn't think of my mad lib as meaning nothing, although it certainly lacks an author. Finally, Searle is patently not a 'pure formalist'. He sees the question of whether something is a word, or sentence, as one that requires us to consider both intentional and formal factors. The fact that he is willing to invoke the necessity of the Background gets him off any hook concerning pareidolic effects and such.

Knapp and Michaels simply never consider the obvious possibility of mixing criteria - intentionalist and formalist; let alone that there might be vague concepts. There is something oddly Derridean about this studied avoidance of (what seems to me) the only plausible position. But that is a subject for another post.

These reflections lead us on to the second line of defense Knapp and Michaels' have tried out. I will simply quote Searle's encapsulation and refutation of it, for starters:

Nor will it evade these inconsistencies to say that Knapp and Michaels are interested in the problems of literary theory only as an "attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general," and that they were not interested in these abstruse questions about language in general. This will not do for two reasons: First, they do in fact make claims about language in general and not just about literary texts. Indeed, they even criticize other authors - me, for example - who are not especially concerned with literary texts, and they use examples such as "My car ran out of gas" that have no special connection with literary texts. (p. 162)

This is Searle's response to a criticism of his paper that is raised **by Kieran Setiya** in Sean McCann's comment thread. Kieran, by the by, is a philosophy professor with a blog. I just discovered it. And he blogs about valvish sort of things. For example **this highly amusing review** of Eagleton's *After Theory*. (Into the blogroll with him.)

But he's still wrong about Searle. Setiya points out, basically, that Searle grants intentionalism as a literary critical strategy.

If Searle is right that the only alternative is speaker meaning, that this is a matter of the speaker/writer's intention, and that this identity is "trivial", then his conclusion is exactly the same as Knapp and Michaels'. All he's done is to iron out a wrinkle in their argument: their carelessness about sentence and speaker meaning. Searle's essay contains no "devastating blow" to their intentionalism about literary interpretation, and in fact defends it.

This is half right. I think Searle does end up in the same intentionalistic place (notwithstanding Michaels' late tendency to brand him an extreme formalist); but Searle also says that there are two different ways one might understand "text" - formally or as an intentional product. So he acknowledges that one could read while ignoring intention, however odd that would be, whereas Knapp and Michaels deny the possibility. (The difference between saying something would be odd and saying it would be impossible is rather large.) But more than that, he makes the point that Knapp and Michaels' stake their claim not on literary critical grounds but on general philosophy of language grounds.

So their point about the indistinguishability of sentence and speaker meaning is not some wrinkle. It is absolutely the whole cloth. Take that away, and there is quite literally nothing left to their view that couldn't be printed on a fortune cookie

fortune. Just: intentionalism seems plausible. (I suspect Setiya does not know this about Knapp and Michaels - no particular reason he should.)

This is a good point to note the only really serious unclarity in Knapp and Michaels' paper - namely, their usage of the word 'theory'. They are actually quite clear in declaring what they mean. But they might have helped their readers more by noting how their usage inevitably generates blurry double-vision, when crossed with ordinary usage, which has to be present as well. The first line of their paper: "By "theory" we mean a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general." This explains why their theoretical argument (what else to call it?) that textual meaning must be identical to author's meaning isn't a 'theory', in their sense: because it does not entail any practical, normative consequences. Their theory does not imply that anyone is right, or anything is wrong. So it is not a theory, in their sense.

An analogy: suppose someone said, "by biological 'theory' we mean any general account of biological processes that has practical effects on medical science, i.e. that implies that some doctors are right and some are wrong, or that pharmaceutical companies could be making better drugs, etc." Or suppose someone said, "by physical 'theory' we mean any general account of the material universe that helps us build better technology." These would be extremely odd usages because of how they would inevitably cross-cut the ordinary use of 'theory' to denote general explanatory accounts (spell it out how you like.) Ask a biologist whether he is doing biological theory and he may have to say: I don't know, because I don't know whether my general explanatory account of such-and-such life processes will imply norms for medical treatment.

Turning the point around, it is clear that an attempt to govern interpretation by an appeal to an account of interpretation in general needn't be at all theoretical, in anything like the ordinary sense. Suppose I say, 'you should accept my interpretation of "A slumber did my spirit seal," because I am always right about what poems mean.' Expressing this obstinate dogmatism would count as 'doing theory' because it attempts to govern interpretation with respect to a general account of interpretation. (Saying I am always right is quite general, you see.)

Getting back to the point that Knapp and Michaels can hardly retreat to the position that they are doing something narrowly literary critical, i.e. theoretical (in their sense), whereas Searle is dealing with philosophy of language in general: no, because Knapp and Michaels are "against theory" in their sense. They are doing it in Searle's sense. Searle's point is that they are doing it badly. Any philosophy of language that botches the elementary distinction between sentence and speaker meaning is bad.

This point would not be worth harping on if it did not have rather general consequences for 'theory' - as in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*.

There is something peculiar about the fact that Knapp and Michaels' "Against Theory" is included but no work by Searle or any other analytic philosopher of language (except Austin.) You might say it is due to the fact that analytic philosophers are pitifully unsophisticated hence unworthy of inclusion. I don't think this is really plausible. Anyway, the 'unsuitable style' argument does not fly because Knapp and Michaels' style is not distinguishable from that of someone like Searle. They offer general conceptual arguments, thought-experiments, etc. It is surely irrational to include them just because they are English professors (why should English professors automatically be better at philosophy than philosophers? Shouldn't there be at least an argument to this conclusion?) Anyway, there are lots of old philosophers in the *Norton*, just few contemporary ones from outside the continental tradition. Even though analytic philosophy has a massive and quite venerable tradition of theorizing about meaning and intention and so forth. Why are they ignored? (I don't mean in a sociological sense. I mean: what is the actual intellectual justification for the selection?)

The answer is that Knapp and Michaels are included because they are regarded as 'doing theory' in the sense that they officially declare impossible (complex irony). They are part of a tradition of having effects of a certain sort. (In this limiting case, the effect of declaring effect impossible; which may have a big effect.) Analytic philosophers may have vastly better and more rigorous and sophisticated theories of meaning and intention - no showing has been made to the contrary - but they haven't really wowed the literary critics. So they haven't had effects. So they don't 'do theory'. So they don't get in the *Norton*. A quote from Jonathan Culler, *Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*. This was written in 1982 and I quote at length because it really says a lot about 'theory' in the sense that we've been discussing it for two weeks:

Recently ... there has been increasing evidence that literary theory should be conceived differently [than as the elimination of methodological error, so as to facilitate valid interpretation]. Whatever their effects on interpretation, works of literary theory are closely and vitally related to other writings within a domain as yet unnamed but often called "theory" for short. This domain is not "literary theory," since many of its most interesting works do not explicitly address literature. It is not "philosophy" in the current sense of the term, since it includes Saussure, Marx, Freud, Erving Goffman, and Jacques Lacan, as well as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. It might be called "textual theory," if text is understood as "whatever is articulated by language," but the most convenient designation is simply the nickname "theory." The writings to which this term alludes do not find their justification in the improvement of interpretations, and they are a puzzling mixture. "Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay and Carlyle and Emerson," writes Richard Rorty, "a kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary

productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all of these mingled together in a new genre".

This new genre is certainly heterogeneous. Its individual works are tied to other distinctive activities and discourses: Gadamer to a particular strand of German philosophy, Goffman to empirical sociological research, Lacan to the practice of psychoanalysis. "Theory" is a genre because of the way its works function. The practitioners of particular disciplines complain that works claimed by the genre are studied outside the proper disciplinary matrix: students of theory read Freud without enquiring whether later psychological research may have disputed his formulations; they read Derrida without having mastered the philosophical tradition; they read Marx without studying alternative descriptions of political and economic situations. As instances of the genre of "theory", these works exceed the disciplinary framework within which they would normally be evaluated and which would help to identify their solid contributions to knowledge. To put it another way, what distinguishes the members of this genre is their ability to function not as demonstrations within the parameters of a discipline but as redescriptions that challenge disciplinary boundaries. The works we allude to as "theory" are those that have had the power to make strange the familiar and to make readers conceive of their own thinking, behavior, and institutions in new ways. Though they may rely on familiar techniques of demonstration and argument, their force comes - and this is what places them in the genre I am identifying - not from the accepted procedures of a particular discipline but from the persuasive novelty of their redescriptions. (pp. 8-9)

This is clearly the sense of 'theory' that is operative not just in Knapp and Michaels but in the *Norton*. (Note the connection with Michael Bérubé's **recent post**: it's all about the *ostranenie*.) There are all sorts of puzzles and peculiarities hereabouts. For example, 'persuasive novelty' has nothing essential to do with validity, soundness, truth, correctness, or intellectual quality; not necessarily; so there is no reason why good 'theory' should be intellectually good. But, of course, Knapp and Michaels, in arguing that 'theory is impossible', are in effect importing standards of intellectual quality. They clearly think it's important that their argument be a valid argument, in the philosophy of language and mind. And Culler would surely want to insist that intellectual quality is important. Theory isn't just saying strange things, however stupid, that bowl over the rubes.

Yet it's not clear how Culler can possibly build the quality requirement in, given his characterization. He writes a bit further on: "Literary theorists may be particularly receptive to new theoretical developments in other fields because

they lack the particular disciplinary commitments of workers in those fields" (p. 11). Now what can this possibly say? I think it must say that literary theorists are more easily bowled over by strangeness, and more likely to see the possibility of bowling over others. Their lack of disciplinary commitments can only mean they are less fastidious about intellectual quality control, in a standard 'truth and validity and evidence' sort of way. What else can he be saying? But why should that be a good thing? Culler won't want this, but it seems like a recipe for offering strange, bad arguments.

Which gets me back to Knapp and Michaels.

My points are starting to spread out. Let me try to focus. Consider again the case of biological 'theory' as everything that might have an effect on medical treatment. (Let's even grant that we are only concerned with good effects, although no one has quite made clear why we should only be concerned with those, given the definitions we are dealing with.) You can't possibly teach this 'theory' as a foundation for medical treatment. I don't see how you could teach it neat. Because to understand what you are teaching you would need to understand theory in the ordinary sense. That is, you would have to study biology. You need some general explanatory schemes. This is what makes 'theory' - in Knapp and Michaels' and Culler's sense - so peculiar. You need not have a high opinion of Searle and co., but you still can't possibly be interested in Knapp and Michaels essay without having an interest in a vast body of literature that, apparently, isn't being considered: philosophy of language. So it seems to me that including something like Knapp and Michaels' "Against Theory" in your anthology is not a stable position. Either you really aren't interested in philosophy of language, in which case why should you care about their argument concerning philosophy of language? Or you are interested in philosophy of language, in which case why aren't you studying philosophy of language much more extensively?

In the final version of **my Nabokov piece** I make more or less these points with respect to Fish and Hirsch and some others. I point out that there is a quite general tendency in a lot of literary critical theory to try to get a decisive angle on interpretative questions by proposing 'to answer a few general questions in philosophy of language', or something of the sort. Usually a lot of heavy-duty epistemological 'problematizing' is brought to bear. One of the papers in *The Literary Wittgenstein* - very good paper, by Martin Stone - puts this well with regard to Stanley Fish.

Fish says that he aspires to a "severe [theoretical] minimalism," and that "this parsimony of ambition distinguishes [his] from almost any other argument in theory." But "so much for parsimony," I feel inclined to say, when Fish nominates "interpretation" as a general condition of the possibility of a text's determinately meaning one thing rather than another. Such "interpretivism" (as I shall call it)

looks like nothing less than metaphysics in the classic sense: an attempt to lay bare the conditions of intelligibility of the world as a whole, of everything. The "implications [of the ubiquitous need for interpretation] are almost boundless" - Fish says - "for they extend to the very underpinnings of the universe." Are we really supposed to regard this as a bit of hard-won pragmatism, fashioned to combat other suspiciously metaphysical pictures of meaning? ... In Fish's argument ... "interpretation" begins to look like another name for - an occupant of the same explanatory place as - divinity: it is the terminus of all other explanations of meaning, the condition on which they depend. (p. 189, brackets in the original)

My choice of a theological doctrine - occasionalism - as a suitable analog for Fish's and Knapp and Michael's view was not accidental, you see. What Stone is marveling at is that Fish can call himself a theoretic minimalist while engaging in truly hair-raising theology-grade metaphysical speculations; which is certainly the case. But the answer is that Fish is using 'theory' in Knapp and Michaels' sense. His divinity is very *laissez faire*, not making normative demands. But interpretation is still, for Fish a Theory of Everything, even if this Theory of Everything is not a theory at all. Ah, puns.

The problem here, quite apart from needless confusion generated by odd usage, is that the Theory of Everything no offer is unsound philosophically (whatever its effects). Fish (and Knapp and Michaels) are too preoccupied with literary cases. They suffer from a one-sided diet of examples. In my Nabokov/chess piece I focus on chess notation - simple algebra. Here are sentences; the meaning of the sentences is completely determinate without any need to consult authorial intention. It may not be that English works the way chess notation does, or legal cases. But now we are arguing cases. Take Fish's complaints about theories of legal interpretation. He is attempting to prove that Scalia is wrong not by practical considerations about the law but by perfectly general arguments about philosophy of language. Fish and Knapp and Michaels deny the possibility that any language can possibly work the way chess notation plainly actually works. Actual implies possible. Game over.

The other point of picking chess notation is that a chess game is a beautiful, highly interpretable linguistic objection; in short, a poem. This is the burden of my dialogue. It is tempting to assume that poetic effects must be functions of linguistic complexity, or of intentions, but this clearly doesn't work for chess notation. It is hard to run down the list of formalist candidates, but it seems sufficient to note that chess notation has no rhetorical function. It does not aim to persuade, nor does it admit the possibility of figuration. (You can say it has the rhetorical function of clarity, if you think that removing misunderstanding is a rhetorical function, as Wayne Booth sometimes says. Chess notation is perspicuous and easy to read and learn. But this is not going to explain the interpretability of a chess game.) And obviously intention isn't the answer. The

meaning of chess is not a function of what any player intends, because players can miss things.

But aren't there all sorts of metaphysical and epistemological problems about how chess is even possible? Yes. But it hardly seems necessary to get into all that, now is it? We are just doing literary criticism here.

Part II

And now, let us return to my mad lib. The obvious suggestion, as noted, will be that even if there is no author, you must posit an 'as if' author. I don't think so. Let me start by adapting a term that I got (uncoincidentally) from a chess book: fantasy position. When you are trying to come up with a plan, you do not calculate aimlessly, hence endlessly. Nor do you attempt just to figure out what your opponent is thinking. What you do is look at your position and imagine some desirable position a few moves down the road - something not too far from where you are now, so it just might be possible to get there, although you don't yet know for sure. Then try to find some way to thread the needle of possibilities to ensure the realization of your dream. (Nightmare positions would be the opposite. Figure out the worst your opponent could do by mentally constructing a really bad situation not too far from what you've got, then see whether it is a real possibility.) Clear enough? And clear enough that undertaking this hermeneutic exercise is not going to be a matter of exploring sentence meaning or author meaning?

Isn't it plausible that something similar is not just possibly true of poetry, but actually true? Take our mad lib.

An ashtray did my spirit seal;
 I rode no human shoes;
 She seemed a vase that could not feel
 The tent of earthly news.
 No anthill has she now, no horse;
 She neither knits nor toasts.
 Rolled round in earth's bejeweléd course,
 With frogs, and blots, and ghosts.

How does one set about interpreting? Well, what about this? The first line suggests an anti-smoking message. How do we get that? Ashtrays are associated with cigarettes. Cigarettes kill. A spirit is a life force. If a thing that kills 'seals' a life force, then 'sealing' may here mean trap - kill. I don't need to posit any specific author behind the scenes to manage such a trivial set of associations. I'm just working with common knowledge about cancer risks plus a few connotations and a couple mild semantic stretches to, as it were, seal the deal. So now we have a preliminary 'fantasy position'. The significance of our poem will be minatory, in a surgeon generalish sort of general way. (It seems rather trite to write a poem to do the work of an anti-smoking campaign, but we

may have to settle for trite. Not all fantasies are wild.) Note that we do not have an interpretation yet, only a place we are trying to get to. "I rode no human shoes." Several possible images: really big shoe with someone in it riding, like a bumper car (no, too silly; and doesn't fit with the anti-smoking scheme, although if that doesn't work out we may go for silly and then a big silly car-shoe may work.) Someone gliding along elegantly, like they aren't even in their own shoes, i.e. aren't earth-bound. (Possible metaphoric line. File away for future reference.) Barefoot. (Possible.) Lying on your back but with your shoes still on. Bingo! In your coffin. Dead from smoking. (Our fantasy position is one step closer to reality.)

Are we reading an author's mind here? Are we positing an 'as if' author? I don't think so. We are trying to find a way to get from the formal semantic possibilities of a linguistic position to a certain significance - an anti-smoking message. Neither the starting point nor the end point is 'intentional' except in the wrong sort of senses (i.e. not authorial intentions, per our earlier distinctions.) Why should we only be able to get from the start to the end by passing through a hypothetical mind? Consider the shoes. We are toying not with some hypothetical authorial consciousness, in transforming the shoes and rotating them around an axis of shoe possibilities and associations and implications; we are toying with shoes themselves. Making them bigger, putting someone elegant in them. This is imagining situations, not someone's thoughts. (It's like designing a set.) Of course you can say that all we are doing is entertaining 'thoughts', not working with real props, like giant shoes. But we could just as well say 'propositions' as eliminate the psychologistic overtones. (Is there some sort of epistemological horror in a phrase like 'shoes themselves'. Am I implying some sort of impossible *ding an sich* intimacy? Nope. Don't get so worked up about philosophy. We're doing literary criticism here. If the shoe fits, wear it.)

Suppose our anti-smoking message doesn't pan out. We try a different tack. What line do you like? (In chess, sometimes there's one piece that looks good, so you make it the centerpiece of your fantasy.) I like: "The tent of earthly news." I am seeing a newspaper blowing along, momentarily tent-shaped with the fold as the top. I also like the vaguely Elizabethan overtones of 'tent'. It could be intent. What the news is trying to do or tell me. It could be 'tent' in the archaic sense of a probe for a wound or infection. That's what the news is like. Always poking into the bad stuff. Also, the idea of the 'tent of the earth' - wounds of the earth. Yep. That's the news all over. Am I hereby positing an author? No. I'm thinking about how the badness of the news could be a significant theme. I'm also using Elizabethan English. It is worth noting that Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* has lots of wounds and tents and some significant play on this. Am I therefore imagining that Shakespeare wrote this poem? No. His gambit inspired me to try variations. I might not have thought to try this line of interpretation if I hadn't read *Troilus and Cressida*. (If I copy someone else's opening in chess it isn't like I am imagining they they are playing my game. I am just taking good stuff where I find it.)

So it goes. It may not work out too well. I may not be able to offer a satisfactory, unified interpretation of the poem, for example. But that is not to say there is anything wrong with the general interpretative approach I just sketched. An author may not have a unified conception of a poem. It may be a bad poem, in which case no interpretation will be able to make much of interest out of it. (Some positions in chess just don't lend themselves to fulfilled fantasy. There isn't always a possible strong combination.)

What is my approach? What did I just describe myself doing, in interpreting? I start with something like sentence meaning and, possibly, a hint of a posit of an 'as if' author. (No need to deny that one way to try to organize one's thoughts is by thinking: why would anyone put these things together? But this posit is not strictly necessary.) I quickly move on to thinking about the things the lines of the poem conjure - shoes, vases, newspapers, wounds. I think about what those things imply, that is to say, what properties they have. I am not reasoning about language any more but modeling things themselves. I am also aiming at significance - that is, interest; thematic worthiness, nothing semantic or intentional. (You can say that nothing is valuable but intentionality makes it so. That's a possible theory. But the point still stands.) In terms of my earlier fourfold division of types of meaning: I am mostly concerned with 1, 3 and 4, though I wouldn't forbid myself a pinch of 'as if' 2, in a pinch. Knapp and Michaels say it is a necessary truth that I am concerned only with 2.

So Knapp and Michaels are wrong about the philosophy of language and wrong about the nature of practical literary criticism. I think that's enough for now.

