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Reviewed Work: Truth and Consequences: Intentions, Conventions, and the New Thematics by Reed Way Dasenbrock

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am, in effect, proposing a subject for another book, a sequel to this fine if “loose” collection.

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Reed Way Dasenbrock. *Truth and Consequences: Intentions, Conventions, and the New Thematics*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. ix–xvii + 330 pages. \$25.00 paper.

There is much to applaud in Reed Dasenbrock’s latest attempt to engage both the Anglo-American and Continental philosophical traditions from the perspective of literary theory. Though I disagree with many specific arguments in *Truth and Consequences*, I’d like to make my overall recommendation clear at the outset: Rhetoricians should read this book. Why? Because it provides a good overview of several key theoretical topics important for contemporary rhetoric, for example, interpretation, context, convention, communication, and intention. Because it engages the arguments of various theories and practices informing the field of rhetoric today, from speech act theory and deconstruction to neopragmatism and cultural criticism. And because, in a lucid and forceful way, it brings to theoretical discussions in rhetorical studies the work of analytic philosophers, most prominently Donald Davidson, whose writings are relevant to but often neglected by those studies. Along with Thomas Kent’s *Paralogic Rhetoric* and Stephen Yarbrough’s *Beyond Rhetoric*, Dasenbrock’s *Truth and Consequences* performs a great service for rhetorical, literary, and cultural theory by so vigorously championing the significance of Davidson’s theories of action and meaning.

Conventionalist theory is Dasenbrock’s primary target throughout *Truth and Consequences*, and he sees such theory as constituting the dominant critical ideology of contemporary literary studies, which tends to ignore authorial intention in its theorizing about its practices. I don’t entirely agree with Dasenbrock’s assessment of the current theoretical scene and will in my conclusion suggest at least one area in which theories of intention are alive and well. But for now let me outline some of Dasenbrock’s objections to conventionalism. Early on he provides a useful definition of *conventions* as “arbitrary and contingent choices . . . routinized in the social practices of specific groups” (8). According to

Dasenbrock, conventionalist theory aims to explain all human action, including communicative acts, through an appeal to conventions, an explanation that leads to several unacceptable conclusions: Truth is constituted by the conventions of particular communities; truth is relative to such communities, thus there is no objective truth; because conventions exhaustively account for meaning and are specific to particular communities, there is no possibility of communication between radically different communities; and because a community's conventions are completely determinative, there can be no communal change through persuasion from outside the group, nor can there be any individual agency within the group. Dasenbrock objects to this poststructuralist conventionalism, which he sees supporting "the new thematics," a set of interpretive practices focused on race, gender, and sexuality. Dasenbrock goes on to define an intentionalist theory of meaning and an objectivist theory of truth as the solution to the undesirable consequences of conventionalist theory and its new thematics practitioners.

Throughout *Truth and Consequences*, there is much talk of incoherence and self-refutation directed at the theorists of conventionalism, including not only Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith but also philosophers ranging from Kuhn, Austin, and Searle to Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard. I find these immanent critiques of conventionalist theory rather unconvincing (no doubt because I am some kind of conventionalist), but since they play such a prominent role in Dasenbrock's argument, I should at least give my readers a sample. Seeing conventionalist theory as radically relativist in its denial of objective truth, Dasenbrock quotes Hilary Putnam's question: "If any point of view is as good as any other, then why isn't *the point of view that relativism is false* as good as any other?" (40). According to Putnam and Dasenbrock, any conventionalist theory claiming the contingency of truth is self-refuting because any such claim implies that at least one truth-claim—its own about truth—is not contingent but absolute. One of Dasenbrock's conventionalists, Stanley Fish, responds to such charges with a rhetorical explanation that Dasenbrock also quotes:

[S]ince what is being asserted is that assertions—about foundations or anything else—have to make their way against objections and counter-objections, anti-foundationalism [or conventionalist theory] can without contradiction include itself under its own scope and await the objections one might make to it; and so long as those objections are successfully met . . . anti-foundationalism can be asserted as absolutely true since (at least for the time being) there is no argument that holds the field against it. (183)

Rorty, another of Dasenbrock's conventionalists, makes a related rhetorical counterargument when he denies his views are radically relativistic but only look so

if one thinks that the lack of general, neutral, antecedently formulable criteria for choosing between alternative, equally coherent, webs of belief means that there can be no "rational" decision. Relativism seems a threat only to those who insist on quick fixes and knock-down arguments. . . . If one drops the idea that there is a common ground called "the evidence," one is still far from saying that one person's web is as good as another. One can still debate the issue [of, say, scientific naturalism versus religious antinaturalism] on all the old familiar grounds, bringing up once again all the hackneyed details, all the varied advantages and disadvantages of the two views. (*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Cambridge University Press, 1991; 66–67)

Now, I find Fish's and Rorty's responses quite persuasive, while Dasenbrock, I take it, does not.

I will let my readers judge this issue for themselves and move onto a related point. Dasenbrock also argues that it is self-contradictory for someone to oppose objectivist theories of truth and yet assert a particular proposition to be true. In contrast I believe that in asserting anything an anti-objectivist is simply making a truth-claim within his or her own set of beliefs and practices—some of which are shared with Dasenbrock, Fish, and Rorty, and others (concerning conventions, communities, and objectivity) that Dasenbrock does not share. This second subset—of theoretical beliefs that Dasenbrock calls "conventionalism"—does not deprive the anti-objectivist of all truth-talk but only of talk about "objective truth." That is, as an anti-objectivist I can use the word *truth*, but I don't have available to me a certain theoretical description (which some try to turn into a justification in specific instances) of that usage, a description that attributes to my truth-claims a noncontingent, transcendent, objective status.

In addition to this difference between our theoretical positions on "objective truth" (which, I should note, Dasenbrock only wants to use as a limit-concept), we also disagree over the necessary consequences he attributes to conventionalist theories. For example, he suggests that conventionalism leads to claims of incommensurability between communities, the erasure of individual agency, and the denial of individual or collective change. These are all charges that at least the neopragmatists on his list have addressed and, I believe, answered: Within any historical community, there are competing interpretive communities; any in-

dividual or collective web of beliefs contains heterogeneous, sometimes even contradictory elements; sets of desires, beliefs, and practices overlap with other sets, among individuals within a particular historical community and across different communities. In specific contexts this heterogeneity and overlap of shared practices (conventions) among humans does not guarantee, but does make possible, communication across different historical communities, the constitution of individual agency through singular intersections of differing sets of enabling conventions, and teaching and learning through acts of persuasion with resultant changes in individual and collective webs of belief.

Whatever our differences, I do find myself in strong agreement with Dasenbrock concerning his key theoretical point: the importance of intention for explaining communication. Here Dasenbrock's Davidsonian account has the most to offer rhetoricians. Everyone enters a communicative interaction with a "prior theory," that is, "a set of expectations about what the words the other uses mean." But since our prior theories don't completely match, revisions must take place. "Each side develops a 'passing theory,' a modification of the prior theory to fit the particular usages of the person one is talking to. Understanding takes place when the passing theories that interpreter and speaker develop in their interaction converge" (73). As Dasenbrock notes, Davidson "insists on intention as important for interpretation because the search for the intended meaning is what motivates the interpreter in the development of the passing theory" (171). Dasenbrock proposes a "negative or disconfirmationalist" role for intention in literary interpretation, meaning that the primary use for intentions is "to question or challenge or disprove hypotheses about meaning" (170). He contrasts his disconfirmationalist intentionalism to both "universal intentionalism," which holds that interpretation necessarily posits authorial intention for any text to be meaningful but that this view has no methodological consequences, and "positive intentionalism," which claims to provide methodological guidelines for finding authorial intention and establishing interpretive validity. Moreover, Dasenbrock sees all these intentionalisms as going against the grain of the dominant anti-intentionalist orthodoxy of contemporary literary study.

Fortunately, the state of theoretical discussion in the discipline is not quite as dire as Dasenbrock has it. There is a whole area of literary study that far from being anti-intentionalist, takes authorial intention positively as its central concept: textual scholarship and editorial theory. It is surprising that Dasenbrock does not comment on any of this discussion, especially since it cites some of the analytic philosophers he prizes. For example, a major article that set many of the terms for editorial theory debates over the last twenty-five years is G. Thomas Tanselle's "The Editorial Problem of Final Authorial Intention," (*Studies in Bibliography* 29 [1976]: 167–211), which adopts the definition of intention devel-

oped by Michael Hancher, a literary theorist using not only the work of Austin and Searle but also that of P. F. Strawson, H. P. Grice, and Quentin Skinner. For useful overviews of these and subsequent discussions in editorial theory, see D. C. Greetham's comprehensive *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction* (Garland, 1994). Attention to work in textual scholarship would go some way toward revising Dasenbrock's appraisal of the role of intention within contemporary literary study, but analogously attention to Dasenbrock's Davidsonian approach to intention and action would go some way toward usefully increasing the engagement of rhetorical studies with the analytic philosophical tradition.

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Gerri McNenny, ed. *Mainstreaming Basic Writers: Politics and Pedagogies of Access*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001. vii–xvii + 238 pages. \$24.50 paper.

As Marilyn Sternglass points out in her foreword, “This is the right time for this book.” Basic writing (BW) programs are being threatened with extinction or actually phased out across the country, perhaps most famously at City College of New York. Most of the threats come from college administrators or state legislators who choke off funding for BW programs, often with thinly veiled justifications about the unworthiness of basic writers to study at the college level in the first place. Basic writing is also being challenged from within by researchers, program administrators, and teachers who question the social purpose of basic writing, or its pedagogical assumptions, or its dubious effects on the skills and the psyches of basic writers, or all three. Ira Shor labeled basic writing “our apartheid” in the title of a notorious 1997 *Journal of Basic Writing* article and called for its abolition, concluding: “Farewell to educational apartheid; farewell to tests, programs and classes supporting inequality; farewell to the triumphant Harvard legacy now everywhere in place, constantly troubled, widely vulnerable, waiting for change” (101).

Gerri McNenny's worthy new collection explores one response to the problems, both external and internal, facing BW programs: “mainstreaming,” a general idea that may take different forms at different institutions, depending on lo-