A Response to "Language Philosophy, Writing, and Reading: A Conversation with Donald Davidson"

REED WAY DASENBROCK

Anyone looking for a predominantly critical analysis of Donald Davidson's views on language or of their applicability to composition theory won't find such an analysis here. I think Davidson's work in philosophy of language and in interpretation theory is the most important scholarship being done in those fields today, and it has complex and multiple implications for the teaching and study of writing. Thomas Kent has done an excellent job of drawing out Davidson's views, and "Language Philosophy, Writing, and Reading" works well as an introduction to Davidson's work for those unfamiliar with it. I'd like to think that as composition theorists become more acquainted with Davidson's work, they will realize the relevance of it to their concerns and that Davidsonian scholarship in composition will become less isolated than it is now.

But, of course, for this to happen, it will take much more than proclaiming from the treetops that Davidson is right about everything. Of course, he isn't, and as one studies his writings in context, one realizes what a complex interplay exists between his work and that of others in the analytic tradition. Moreover, even if he were always right, that would leave completely open the question of what consequences or implications a Davidsonian position in philosophy would have for composition—the question of application, and the question I would like to focus on here.

The Question of Application
If we accept the general adequacy of Davidson's work in philosophy of language, what remains for us to do? A number of things, but most pressing among them is to develop a theory of writing. Surely, one of the things that should strike any reader of analytic philosophy is that its models of language-use are oral and its models of interpretation are based primarily on the interpretation of speech, not writing. I don't take this to be an insuperable obstacle or problem; after all, classical rhetoric began as the study of public speech, not writing, and that hasn't prevented its successful application to
writing over the millennia. But Jacques Derrida usefully reminds us that the choice of speaking as a model for the understanding of writing is not a choice without consequences, and his work should remind us to ask of any speech-based theory of language whether there are assumptions in the theory that work better for speech than for writing.

Derrida shows no sign of any acquaintance with Davidson's writings, but he uses the work of the analytic philosopher J.L. Austin as one of his central examples of a theory of language gone astray by its privileging of speech over writing. Austin's theories gave birth to a movement known as "speech-act theory," and it seems no accident that it was not called writing-act theory. Classic speech-act theory postulates "uptake" or a full understanding of the "conversational implicature" as essential to communication. That seems much less easy to posit as a norm for writing than for conversation. The reader may be much further away from the author in time, space and values than any audience, and there is obviously no way for the writer to reformulate the text if understanding isn't reached, no immediate feedback mechanism of the kind that face-to-face conversation is rich in. These are, of course, precisely the differences between speech and writing Derrida has in mind, and he emphasizes in his critique of Austin and Searle how quick such a speech-based model of communication, with what in Derrida's parlance we can call its assumptions of presence, breaks down in writing.

In my judgment (though I don't have the space to go into this issue in adequate detail here), speech-act theory, despite the richness of many of its concepts, does not and cannot meet Derrida's challenge. It does make assumptions which hamper its extension from speech into writing. In contrast, Davidson's work allows us to meet Derrida's challenge. Although most of his examples of communicative interaction may come from speech, his theory isn't speech-based in the way speech-act theory can be said to be. The key to Davidson's position can be found in the passage in the interview when he says to Kent, "Communication is always incomplete. It's not as though anybody ever gets anything right; it's a matter of degree." This is not an admission on Davidson's part that theories of communication don't work perfectly; this is the essence of his theory. If speech-act theory seems to envision a conversation between people who share an idiolect and therefore can grasp every nuance, Davidson's norm for communication is just the opposite: "It's not essential to linguistic communication that any two people who are talking to each other speak anything like the same language. . . . When I read papers in Europe, I'm constantly asked questions in German, French, and Spanish, and I answer them in English."

Davidson insists that understanding is possible in such a situation because we have the capability of developing a "passing theory" to make sense of the other. This is a model well suited to the reality of the world's communicative situation since most people live in multilingual societies; it is also—more to the point here—far more suitable to writing. An author's
understanding of what the words he or she uses means is never perfectly matched by a reader's, and, therefore, theories that posit such a shared understanding as necessary for communication aren't going to work for writing. But since Davidson doesn't have to assign a concurrence of what he calls "prior theories" for communication to take place, his models of communication won't break down in the same way speech-act theory does when applied to writing. What Davidson posits instead is a far more fluid world in which every communicative situation—some only slightly, others more radically—provokes in the interpreter a new passing theory, a provisional understanding (or heuristic assumption) of what the speaker or writer means by his or her words. Looking at this the other way around, no speaker or writer can ever be completely certain of how his or her words will be taken, and writers particularly need as rich an understanding as possible of the multiple ways their words may be understood. Writers need to remember as they write that "communication is always incomplete" and that the illusion of full understanding—full presence—is just that, an illusion.

There is another side to this which makes Davidson's ideas work better for the teaching of writing than many other theories. In emphasizing the mutability of our prior understanding, Davidson establishes creativity and innovation at the very heart of communication. It is not just that the interpreter's theory never matches the writer's and that we need to resign ourselves to this state of affairs; we can actively take advantage of it by challenging the reader's prior theory, by confronting and overturning received conventions. Davidson thus introduces a new twist to the long argument between those who emphasize a mastery of received usage ("current traditionalists" in the currently traditional jargon) and those who see such an emphasis as preventing the development of the individual's own voice. We attain our own voice, a Davidsonian approach to usage suggests, not by slavishly following nor by desperately avoiding received conventions, but by playing off against them. The more radical our departure from received conventions, the more we risk unintelligibility; but the more we respect and follow received usage, the more we risk boredom. And it is in writing that we can most thoroughly utilize the resources of language, risk unintelligibility but "get away with it" and successfully communicate, because we can give the reader more clues about the passing theory needed to decipher the writing.

How we do that is, of course, a very complex question, and not one Davidson has spent a lot of time on. As a philosopher of language, he is more interested in the fact that we can understand the anomalous and the unconventional than he is in detailing how we do this. Such a detailed understanding of understanding is in any case more properly the province of our discipline than his. However, I think Davidson's work in philosophy of language gives us a solid base for such an understanding, and his recent work in particular has suggested some of the directions a Davidsonian understand-
ing of writing might take. (I might note in passing that Davidson's uncollected work, the papers he has published after *Essays on Actions and Events* [1980] and *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* [1984], is an incredibly rich body of work; see my *Literary Theory after Davidson* for a partial bibliography.) For Kent, Davidson's idea of triangulation seems to be the most helpful pointer, and I would refer any reader intrigued by what Kent and Davidson say about triangulation in the interview to a forthcoming essay by Davidson, "Locating Literary Language," in which he spends some time thinking about the different forms triangulation takes in the interpretation of writing. And I think the remarks on triangulation and those on indexicals and deictic elements in writing in "Locating Literary Language" as well as in the interview are well worth the attention of scholars of writing. But we may not be reading Davidson to his (and our) best advantage if we read him looking primarily for particular ideas and concepts that we can use in building our own system. To reverse Lévi-Strauss' celebrated distinction, Davidson is an engineer, not a bricoleur. The relevant contrast here among analytic philosophers is again to Austin and Grice (and Wittgenstein, for that matter), whose work is continuously stimulating through an accretion of local insights even when the concepts may not add up to a coherent system. There are readers who will find this lack of system a virtue, as clearly at least (the later) Wittgenstein did, and such readers aren't going to find much to like in Davidson, I'm afraid, since he aims at precisely a systematic philosophy in a sense now widely challenged. He breaks with many of philosophy's traditional concepts but not with its traditional ambition. His aim is always to arrive at a systematic understanding of the field under investigation.

**Interpretation and Intention**

What I find to be most valuable in Davidson's recent work in philosophy of language is his emerging concentration on what it is that lies behind and drives the process of textual creation and interpretation: intentions. To interpret is to try to ascertain intentions. Since words themselves cannot declare their own meaning and since conventions do not successfully stabilize meaning, we as interpreters are always left with the question, "What do you mean by that?" Intention drives the process of interpretation not because there is any method for ascertaining intentions but because unless we consider the process to be one of ascertaining someone else's intentions, interpretation has no point. Only the effort to understand another (which is to understand another's intentions) draws us out of the prisonhouse of our own beliefs and prior theories and leads us to a new understanding or passing theory. If interpretation is intentionalist, so too is writing, as they are two sides of the same coin. To write is to write with the expectation and intention of being understood and having one's intentions understood.

This stress on writing as an intentional act is less likely to be news for scholars of rhetoric and composition—who have generally held onto an
intentionalist vision of language and writing—than to literary theorists—who have generally wanted to ban intentions in favor of a textuality without intentions. In this, of course, they have been indebted not just to Derrida but to the general anti-humanism and anti-individualism of French poststructuralist thought. That cast of mind is so broadly diffused that Davidson's insistence on intention may seem startling, and it certainly is to Kent, as their discussion of intention is one of the few moments in the interview when Kent steps out of his role of elucidator and questions Davidson's assumptions. This reluctance on Kent's part to accept Davidson's intentionalism is a significant moment, I think, because Kent's general reading of Davidson's work is to assimilate it to a considerable extent with other currents of contemporary thinking under such labels as anti-foundationalism and externalism. One of the subtexts in the interview I found fascinating is the way Kent kept providing such descriptions for Davidson's work, some but not all of which Davidson seemed willing to accept. For example, Davidson was perfectly willing to join Kent in criticizing "foundationalism," but he did not use the term anti-foundationalism to describe his own position. Davidson is too careful a thinker to use a term like anti-foundationalism, since anti-foundationalism is a self-contradictory notion of just the kind Davidson has exposed elsewhere. But Davidson was willing, in contrast, to accept Kent's label of externalism for his work in opposition to a Cartesian internalism.

I don't find externalism the contradiction in terms that anti-foundationalism is, but I must confess to a general suspicion of this kind of labelling. This is one of the places where I would differentiate my interpretation of Davidson's work from Kent's, and I don't think this is just a quibble over terminology. I understand his desire to make Davidson's work more intelligible by relating it to broader intellectual currents, but such an approach can also mute potentially important distinctions and differences. After all, a lot of different people get gathered under one tent in such rubrics. Kent's recent essay, "Externalism and the Production of Discourse," lists Nietzsche, Dewey, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Quine, Foucault, Lyotard, Rorty, Derrida, and Davidson as externalist philosophers (70), and I have to say that I find the differences among these thinkers at least as salient as any similarity suggested by the term externalism.

Richard Rorty is, of course, the foremost figure in America who has connected work in analytic philosophy with other intellectual currents, and one of the underlying themes in Rorty's recent work has been the emergence of Davidson as his central point of reference in analytic philosophy, indeed his central point of reference. Kent's use of labels such as anti-foundationalism and, more importantly, the general strategy of linking Davidson to varieties of "post" European thought is very much "school of Rorty." Having reservations about this way of approaching Davidson, I must confess to being surprised by Davidson's unwillingness in the interview to contest Rorty's
reading of his work. What emerges from this discussion is a sense of personal respect for Rorty rather than assent to his views, however, so I think the question remains open whether Rorty and Kent's assimilation of Davidson to broader currents in contemporary thought is fully adequate to the specificity of Davidson's work. In the interview, Davidson himself reports some resistance from Rorty concerning Davidson's insistence on the concept of truth, and I think I am right in perceiving resistance from Kent concerning Davidson's insistence on the concept of intention. Thus, Rorty, Kent and I agree on the importance of Davidson's work, but we position him differently in relation to other currents of contemporary thought, and, in accordance with this, we emphasize different tendencies in his work. Specifically, I am more apt than either Rorty or Kent to find in him a useful dissenter from some of the dominant tendencies they assimilate him to. Davidson's work, in my reading, often sharply challenges the orthodoxy of poststructuralism and is valuable for that challenge.

Now, as Davidson's own theories would tell us, there is no "fact of the matter" about this. A great deal depends on what kind of triangulation one is engaged in, or, as I would prefer to put it, on what are the relevant intentions of the interpreters. All of the disciplines in the humanities outside philosophy owe a good deal to Rorty because of his efforts in informing us about Davidson's work, even if we may go on to disagree with his interpretation of Davidson. The field of rhetoric and composition now owes a comparable debt to Thomas Kent for his efforts connecting Davidson to issues in composition. If rhetoric and composition is, as I hope, to engage in an extended conversation with the work of Donald Davidson (and, more generally, with the analytic tradition in philosophy), this interview is a good model of what we stand to gain from such a conversation.

New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, New Mexico

Works Cited


——. “Locating Literary Language.” Dasenbrock 298-311.