
Reed Way Dasenbrock. *Truth and Consequences: Intentions, Conventions, and the New Thematics*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001. 330p.

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Reed Way Dasenbrock not only took several years to write *Truth and Consequences: Intentions, Conventions, and the New Thematics*, but in writing the book he was already building on his long involvement with analytic philosophy and literary criticism, an involvement publicly announced at least as early as the publication in 1989 of a collection he edited titled *Redrawing the Lines: Analytic Philosophy, Deconstruction, and Literary Theory*. *Truth and Consequences* demonstrates that Dasenbrock has spent his time well. Like analytic philosophy itself, Dasenbrock argues carefully and meticulously, identifying in his own work and in others' the premises (spoken and unspoken), conclusions, and further implications of conventionalist and anti-intentionalist literary theory of the last twenty or so years. For those readers—students especially—who want to see the *logical* connections in that literary theory, Dasenbrock's study of recent treatment of personalism and truth may prove indispensable.

Though he focuses on analytic philosophy as a distinguishable body and voice of work in order to make his argument that “a deeper acquaintance with the central figures of analytic philosophy ... brings us to very different conclusions from those advocated by ... contemporary literary theory in general” (xiv), his arguments are quite capable of standing on their own without that “deeper acquaintance.” *Truth and Consequences* would not only be a much shorter book, but would surely as a consequence be easier to follow. In fact, those arguments rely much less on any kind of head count of who holds those views and who doesn't, be they philosopher or literary theorist, than they do their own internal integrity. Besides, his claim that analytic philosophy provides just as powerful a voice for intentionalism and truth as some have supposed it does *against* intentionalism and truth, simply is not the point, which is whether intentionalism and truth work in literary theory or not.

Dasenbrock does his best work in the book (though there is little in the book that isn't valuable) when he is laying out the actual arguments proposed for and against conventionalism and anti-intentionalism, and anti-conventionalism and intentionalism. The conclusions at which many have arrived—that there is no such thing as truth that isn't profoundly qualified (hamstrung, stillborn, *disqualified*) by context, and that an author relinquishes any prerogative *vis-à-vis* the meaning

of her text as soon as she writes it—are themselves straightforward in their meaning. What is not so obvious is why so many have in fact arrived at these conclusions, nor what exactly the implications are for literary theory and the teaching of literature.

Dasenbrock demonstrates well and fully the provenance of these conclusions *as conclusions of arguments*. He contends that those arguments are faulty. Many will, or will be able to, in turn find fault with *his* arguments, and/or with the way he constructs the arguments that he claims to see in the theoretical literature. But if they disagree by taking up an argument themselves, they implicitly accept the rules of argumentation—a game very different from other ways of putting forth one's opinions or attempting to change some current practice or theory. One rule of argumentation is that an argument must be valid if you are to arrive at any truth of the matter, irrespective of context. Dasenbrock demonstrates again and again how many who argue explicitly to deny it hold this notion of truth implicitly.

But there are many who reject the game altogether, who proceed then on pragmatic grounds: given our time and place, does the particular theory cash out as we want it to? Does it, for example, widen the circle of inclusion of the academic literary canon? Dasenbrock addresses this pragmatic stream of literary theory head on, and succeeds in bringing out salient features of the principles involved. His work here is valuable, but less carefully extended, and less convincing, than his more formal argumentative treatment of the issues. Nevertheless, on both counts, *Truth and Consequences* rewards close reading throughout, and deserves as careful a response from literary theorists of every sort. ✨