Form, Function & Intention: Drafty Thoughts
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Suppose you are walking along the beach and, suddenly—behold!—sodden, white-haired gentleman, lately washed up. You prop him up, undertake a solicitious brush-off of sand and seaweed. He emits a stream of sound, which you hear as follows:

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

Come to think of it, he *looks* like Wordsworth too.

Another wave sneaks up on your small party; the patient is washed back out to sea where, against all expectation, he is clearly and unmistakably observed to *dissolve* entirely. But, presently, another wave deposits another gentleman—indistinguishable from the first—back on the same stretch of beach; who, after coughing up a mouthful of brine, declaims (or so it would seem):

> *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.*

What is the *point* of making the original Knapp and Michaels', "Against Theory" thought-experiment even more conspicuously absurd?

Readers familiar with debates in contemporary philosophy of mind will, perhaps, *recognize* the gentleman rolled round in the surf: Davidson's swampman, the philosopher's microstructural duplicate, formed in a swamp the same practical method—sheer, applied, cosmic coincidence—that has now formed (what shall we name him?) Swampsworth? Seaworth? Shoreman? Wordsbeach? Wordswater? Sandsworth? Sandman? Wetsworth? Wordswet? I don't like *any* of those, all of which seem to reproach me for my questionable taste in thought-experiments. Let's call him—it—'Smith'.

So: we are coordinating Knapp and Michaels' notorious Wordsworth-on-the-beach thought-experiment with Davidson's notorious swampman thought-experiment, with intent to make trouble for the former. Knapp and Michaels thesis, you recall, is that unless we posit an author for the 'poem' on their beach, it isn't a poem, indeed is not made of words. The lines "will merely seem to *resemble* words."

"What a text means and what its author intends it to mean are identical." You can only regard something as a poem by positing, at the very least, an *as-if* author (and that takes care of randomly-generated poems.)

How does the case of Smith make trouble for Knapp and Michaels? To a first approximation, like so: an entity (let's try to be neutral about this) is randomly (spontaneously) generated. In one case, a poem ('poem', if you like.) In the other, a poet (or 'poet'). A man (or 'man'). Knapp and Michaels think the crucial consideration, when it comes to classification, is presence or absence of intentional backing. (At least *as-if* intentions.) Ultimately, Knapp and Michaels' argument for this is that the identity-conditions of the words on the beach are a complex, clearly *normative* affair. And, supposedly, intentional backing is the only way to secure the right normative *shape* of the signifier, as it were.

How so? Suppose, on Knapp and Michaels' beach, instead of a perfect poem, 'A slubmer did my spirit seal." A mistake; orthographic slip from the sea. But this notion of a *mistake* carries us past the realm of cosmic coincidence—erosion and wave-action doing something very, very, very unlikely—into conceptual incoherence. Natural forces can never get anything wrong because they aren't *trying* to get anything *right*. To say a set of scratches was *supposed to be* some way posits an *intention*, a *plan*.

Brentano, the original modern theorist of intentionality, singles out the possibility of 'intentional inexistence' as the mark of the intentional. According to Brentano, the most crucial and essential property of the arrow of intentionality is that it can *miss*. The object one's thoughts *mean*—aim at—can fail to exist. The fact that the beach poem could miss (could contain an orthographic 'slip', while still being recognized *as* a poem) shows we are conceiving of the thing we are reading as backed by an intention.

This argument is, in fact, not explicitly advanced in the original "Against Theory" essay. (I think the presentation there is, in a few incidentals, inconsistent with it. But I won't argue that point.) But Michaels most definitely *does* advance this argument in *The Shape of the Signifier*. It seems to me the strongest argument available to defend the position he wants to hold, so this amounts to a shrewd pivot on his part. He talks about accidental shapes carved (eroded, if you want to be precise) in stone, on Mars; cases like idiosyncratic cursive—someone whose *a*'s all look like an *r*'s. Sticking with my own example, which works the same: there is obviously no way to define 'being an inscription of the word 'slumber'', formally, as a *shape* predicate; because, potentially, 'slubmer' might count. We look at the sand and say, 'that's 'slumber', but misspelled.' The only way to make sense of the fact that we are prepared to recognize severely (formally) *defective* word-tokens *as* word-tokens is by admitting intentionalism. Only intentionalism can account for the possibility of formal *defects*. That's the argument.

Michaels doesn't notice it (at least doesn't mention it), but there is an inadvertent illustration of the strength of this line in Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy". "Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artifact works that we infer the intention of an artificer." A few sentences later, the more emphatic phrase: "we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant." This claim about excuses covers cases of pudding and machinery, as well as poetry. (If not, the pudding and machinery analogies are very badly chosen. Since it is this point they are meant to illustration, or none at all.)

But this claim is obviously false. Suppose you confront a fallen pudding, or toaster that *would* toast, but for that frayed power cord. It would be absurd to say, 'I have no notion whatsoever what this ... *thing* ... is for.' The fact that you call it a fallen *pudding* registers your

awareness of what it was supposed to be *for*: eating. The fact that you take the defective toaster to someone who repairs *toasters* shows you know it is not just an unclassifiable *thing*. If someone hectored you that you have no 'excuse' diagnosing the toaster's fault as due to a frayed power cord, that would be, to put it mildly, bizarre.

What Wimsatt and Beardsley *mean* to say (what they *hope* they are saying) is that it doesn't make a fallen pudding taste better, just knowing it was *supposed* to taste better. In cooking, you don't get half-credit for *trying*. *Mutatis mutandis*, 'unrealized' intentions in poetry ought not to be submitted for credit. But this isn't *actually* what they say. What they say is absurd. Namely, since only intentionalism can explain how a defective token of an artifact type can be a token of that type; since intentionalism is a fallacy; therefore, regarding fallen puddings and faulty toasters as puddings and toasters is a fallacy.

Michaels' argument (perhaps it is Knapp and Michaels', but at least it is Michaels') is really *just* this argument Wimsatt and Beardsley advance on behalf of formalism, relabeled as a *reductio ad absurdum* on it, in light of its obviously absurd conclusion. (Which is a more plausible employment, surely.)

The trouble is: this rather interesting argument for intentionalism is not, ultimately, sound. What it misses is this: normativity, in the relevant sense, need not be a function of intentionality. It might be a function of *functionality*.

To see this, we turn to face Smith (the artist formerly known as 'swampman'). In "Knowing One's Own Mind", Davidson argues that swampman, the lightning bolt-induced *Doppelgänger*, will not have intentional states *at all*—beliefs, desires, so forth. This is so, according to Davidson, because externalism provides the correct account of mental content. (Let me put the point baldly, which will make it sound deeply implausible. That is unfortunate, and perhaps we will work to massage this negative impression at a later date.) Davidson thinks the content of our mental states—what our beliefs, desires, so forth, are *about*—is determined, largely, by the causal history of our interactions with our environments. Ergo: spontaneously-generated swampmen do not have beliefs and desires. They have no relevant causal histories.

This view is controversial—absurd, some would say (My personal opinion is that it could do with some toning down, although I think there is something to it.) But you can buy the

argument I am about to make, while regarding swampman as a silly sort of case, and/or while regarding Davidson's claims about swampman as absurd, or at least dubious. (I realize it may be hard to see how I can indulge so much absurdity, without getting tarred by it, if the absurdity *is* a problem. The reason is this. I am arguing against Knapp and Michaels and *they* are not in a position to object. It is possible to disagree with Davidson about swampman. But it is not possible for Knapp and Michaels to do so. Yet they cannot agree with him either. *That* will be the dilemma.)

Let's consider what would be analogous, in our Smith case, to orthographic defect, as in 'A slubmer did my spirit seal.' (Here we are leaving behind narrow concern with attribution of intentional states. But the form of the externalist argument will be, broadly, analogous to Davidson's. It might be better to start referring to the argument as Millikanesque: Ruth Millikan theorizes 'proper function', in an externalist way, and we are about to consider the general topic of function—biological function, specifically, which is her focus.)

If Smith is, indeed, a perfect, microstructural duplicate of, let's say, the elderly William Wordsworth, he has arms and legs, for reaching and walking; ears to hear, eyes to see. Wordsworth (hence Smith) had strong legs, for climbing the hills (he was hale), and for skating (he enjoyed it.) Does it make sense to suppose our spontaneously generated Smith is, likewise, well designed 'for skating'? He has obviously never had a thing to do with frozen lochs in his life, since he has never left this tiny stretch of beach his whole life. Worse, Wordsworth's eyesight was poor. He almost went blind. When he recovered, he could still only read for short, painful stretches. So our Smith, if he is 'supposed to be' a poet, suffers from a severe ophthalmic defect. His eyes don't work right *for* reading and writing. They don't do what they are *meant* to do.

Now, a compelling line to take about our Smith might be this: however absurd it is to suppose he could have been spontaneously generated from seawater, it is even *more* incoherent to suppose the sea built him *defectively*. Because, patently, the mindless sea cannot have *tried* to make a nice, English poet, and only managed to cobble together one with serious reading/writing difficulties—because the sea is not the sort of thing that can *try* to do anything; not unless you think it has a mind. Conceding this point, we retract our initial judgment that

Smith has eyes, ears, hands, legs, after all. Because these are all *normative* properties. There are things all such things are *supposed* to do. Since there is nothing Smith is *supposed* to do, it seems there is nothing his parts are supposed to do. It seems we must conclude Smith isn't *human*, let alone a *gentleman* (even though he is indistinguishable from one, down to his molecules).

Think about it. Smith isn't *really* old. He just *looks* it. (He is, by hypothesis, new.) Looking forward, there will be heuristic utility to treating this thing—him—medically, *as if* an old man; but it *isn't*. Not *really*.

Mutatis mutandis, those aren't legs, they just look like legs. The sounds that emit from that thing that looks like a mouth aren't words, they just sound like words. Now this is all very *repugnant*, even if not obviously wrong. 'If it looks like a duck, and walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it's a duck.' No one has ever thought to append a final clause: 'and if it wasn't spontaneously generated by lightning'. Such concern about origins seem *excessive*. Perhaps so. Still, the Smith case can still help us see something importantly limited about Knapp and Michaels' argument.

First, for what it's worth, Knapp and Michaels are in no position to object to our scenario on grounds of metaphysical absurdity. Furthermore, if it seems odd to say those things coming out of Smith's mouth aren't *really* words, it won't be odd for Knapp and Michaels to say so. I presume Knapp and Michaels will be happy to help themselves to a battery of broadly Davidsonian/Millikanesque arguments about swampman. In light of his origins, he isn't *really* a man, isn't *really* reciting a poem, so those aren't *really* words, so forth.

(But suppose they *don't* want to buy these arguments? Well, then: they must that admit a thing whose properties are essentially *normative* can conceivably, spontaneously emerge from the mindless sea. That is, you *can* have normativity without authorial intentions. That is, the major premise of their best argument is *false*. I assume they won't want to admit that.)

The trouble is: although these Davidsonian/Millikanesque 'externalist' arguments are probably obligatory, if Knapp and Michaels' want to hold onto their intentionalist position, these arguments aren't clearly *consistent* with intentionalism. How not? The question comes down to the nature of the normativity of judgments like 'this is a word', 'this is an eye', 'this is a poem', 'this is a poet'. In each case we are prepared to admit the existence of defective tokens.

Inaccurately-inscribed words, half-blind eyes, ill-written poems, ill-writing poets. But obviously only in *some* cases is this normativity a function of anyone *intending anything by* the tokens in question. Let us unpack this point.

It is, of course, a standard and familiar view—though there are creationists who deny it—that the difference between Smith and Wordsworth himself is, in some sense, a difference of degree, not kind. Wordsworth himself was, ultimately, a spontaneous creation of 'mindless' nature—albeit her spontaneity was dragged out over and across the beach of millions of years of evolution and natural selection.

Does it follow that believers in natural selection should avoid employing the normative language of functions? That is, if Smith doesn't have legs and arms, if the things coming out of his mouth aren't words; then, by parity of reasoning—parody of reasoning, perhaps I should say—none of *us* are using words either? None of us have arms and legs?

The eye is *supposed to* see, the hand *supposed to* grasp. Why is it appropriate for those who deny 'true' design in nature, in the sense of intelligence at work behind the creative scenes, to help themselves to teleological language? Being as uncontroversial as possible (it is not possible to avoid controversy hereabouts): the standard line is that this language is heuristically valuable. We treat organisms 'as if' they are designed 'for' survival and reproduction. This attitude is, broadly, explanatory and predictive. If pressed, we can say some substantive things about how and why treating organisms 'as if' they are designed *works*.

To be a bit more specific, we may advocate an account of biological function along the lines originally proposed by Larry Wright (in whose line the likes of Millikan reside.) A necessary (not sufficient) condition of the function of X being Z is: *X is there because it does Z.*

On this view, 'poems' and 'poets' that show up, due to fluke tides, erosion, freak lightning strikes, etc. – do not have the *function* of being poems or poets. Because the features of them that make them suitable for these ends do not explain *why* they are, i.e. *exist*. By contrast, the presence of arms and legs and eyes on an organism (one that is *not* spontaneously generated, but evolved through natural selection) is, to some degree, explained by the fact that these organs can do these things. Eyes are 'for' seeing because the ability to see has helped animals survive and reproduce. To make a long story short: it is the fact that eyes facilitate seeing that explains *why* I

am looking at an organism with eyes—*if* I am looking at the likes of a human being. *Not* if I am looking at Smith.

But what about other views of function? What about so-called 'Cummins functions': functions are not effects of X that explain why X is there; rather, they are effects which contribute to explanations of a larger system, of which X is a part? There are advantages and disadvantages to this style of account. We ignore it for now—shall come back to it later—because it is unavailable to Knapp and Michaels. Robert Cummins is, in effect, the Wimsatt and Beardsley of the function debate, but shrewder about puddings and toasters. On his view, the 'poem' on the beach will probably turn out to be a perfectly good poem. Even if there is a 'slubmer' in it, the explanation as to why that is really a token of 'slumber' is that the latter *would* contribute nicely to the overall system of the poem; hence it is reasonable to infer that is what it *is*. That the thing on the beach can coherently be conceived to be a poem, whether it has an author or not, is just what Knapp and Michaels are concerned to deny. They should favor a Wright-style account of function, if any.

Indeed, adopting a history-minded Wright-style account might seem to solve all problems. All the pieces are looking to fit. Knapp and Michaels can say that, just as it is necessary to regard the beach poem 'as if' it has an author, in order to see it as a poem at all, it is necessary to regard Mother Nature 'as if' she has made organisms 'for' survival and reproduction, in order to conceive of them as organisms at all. But the first thing one would have to say to this is that the soundness of the analogical extension is not self-evident. Biologists are fine with teleology talk, in practice. (They are a pragmatic lot; don't mind heuristic play in the handle.) But they would be hesitant, and rightly, to grant a claim about biological function *strictly* analogous to Knapp and Michaels' about meaning: namely, it is inconceivable that there could be *more* to biological function than 'what the author—Mother Nature—intended.' Biologists would hardly volunteer to pin themselves to *that*, even if they conceded (as well they might) that they probably can't completely drop teleology talk in practice. (It's just too handy.)

But there is an even more *serious* problem looming up. We have not yet gotten the organism/text analogy quite right, and when we do, it looks wrong indeed. In order to see words *as words*, it is necessary to posit someone who *meant something by them*. This is Knapp and

Michaels' intentionalism. The exact, biological analogy would be: in order to see a leg as a leg, eye as an eye, it is necessary to posit someone who meant something by them. But this is *obviously* not right. Legs and eyes are functional, but it would be very odd—certainly not obligatory—to treat them as necessarily *functioning as speech-acts*.

    Let's be very clear about what we are saying here: there is a distinctly *pre*-modern view of biology—of Nature—according to which we *are* supposed to read everything as a speech-act 'in the book of the world'. To quote Plunkett's famous poem: "I see his face in every flower/ The thunder and the singing of the birds/ Are but his voice—and carven by his power/ Rocks are his written words." By confronting us with flora and fauna (not to mention rocks, rain, snow and seas) God is *sending us some sort of message*. But this is not just a pre-Darwinian view but, shall we say, pre-Paleyan. In the opening paragraphs of *Natural Theology*, Paley advances his famous argument from design concerning the found watch, and what makes it *different* than the found stone.

> But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given—that, for anything I know, the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? ... For this reason, and for no other, viz,. that, when we come to inspect the watch we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are framed put together for a purpose .... This mechanism [the watch's] being observed... the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker .... who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.

    Let us grant for the sake of argument that it is, indeed, conceptually inevitable that we should regard a found watch as 'meant to tell the time'/'supposed to tell the time', i.e. it is inevitable that we will concede it has a *function* (whereas the stone just *is*.) Even so, it is hardly

inevitable that we need to regard the watch's appearance on the shore as, additionally, a concrete speech-act, i.e. an attempt by some agent to *tell us what time it is*. Paley does not think (it does not even occur to him to consider) that we are bound to conclude, from the watch's presence, not just that the watch is meant to tell time, but that someone must have *meant* to tell us the time, *by* depositing this watch in this spot.

Yes, the watch here *is* meant to tell time. No, no one *meant* to tell us the time *by* it, here. Probably it fell by accident. If the hands read, say, 3:10, the watch is 'telling' us it is 3:10; we needn't suppose, additionally, anyone intended or intends to tell us it is 3:10.

The case is even clearer if we switch out the watch for an artifact with a less communicative function. Suppose we find a screwdriver in the sand. Merely by seeing it *as* such, we register its function: driving screws. Also, if asked, we are prepared to presume it had a maker, although this needn't cross our mind. We will not, certainly *need* not, assume anyone left this screwdriver *as a message*. (Obviously if we have some special reason to suspect the kidnapped mechanic managed to let it fall, as he was being dragged away—knowing we would recognize it as his and hasten to his rescue—the case appears in a different light. But it is not plausible that a condition of recognizing anything *as* a screwdriver is thinking that someone meant anything *by it*, in a communicative sense.)

Applying these observations back to the case of Smith: there is clearly a non-trivial problem, trying to settle *in virtue of what* we can (or cannot) say of this, the world's strangest bit of beach flotsam, that it—he—has legs, arms, eyes. It is hard to say *in virtue of what* it—he—is speaking words, or just emitting noises *like* words. But the following is not a remotely plausible candidate: a condition of regarding Smith as a man, as a poet, speaking words, is thinking someone *meant something by Smith*. (Not that *he* must mean something *by* uttering any apparent poem. Rather, someone must mean something *by him*.)

The ultimately simple consideration I have been so elaborately working up to, concerning Smith, is just this: the fact that we are (or are not) prepared to regard his eyes *as eyes*, even though they are defective, is an intriguingly complex, normative affair. (As is the fact that we see 'slubmer' in the sand, and regard it as a defective inscription of 'slumber'.) It might seem our preparedness to render such normative judgment must be a function of *intentionality*. Defects

must be cases of an agent *aiming* (Latin: *intentio*) and missing. So judgments of defectiveness must be cases of thinking there is an agent intending something. But, on reflection, all that is really obvious is that this sort of normativity is a function of attributing *functionality*. It is not clear that attributing functions is, in turn, tantamount to, or presupposes, attribution of intention.

I expect Knapp and Michaels would want to respond as follows: all this is well and good—comparing and contrasting conditions of the possibility of normative judgments about organisms and artifacts. But the parts of the argument most relevant to their meaning-and-intention thesis are the least decisive. And the parts that are decisive are the least relevant. How so? The fact that biologists may find it impossible, in practice, not to talk about function teleologically may be an argument *in favor* of intentionalism. Literary interpreters stand to texts as biologists to organisms. This is, broadly, an *intentional* stance. (This is not self-evident, but not self-evidently wrong.) On the other hand, while it is certainly true that not all functions are semantic or communicative, nevertheless, texts *are* functional in those ways. From the fact that no one has to mean anything *by* Smith, in order for him to consist of arms and legs (etc.), it does not strictly follow that no one has to mean anything *by* a poem, in order for it to consist of nouns and verbs (etc.)

And *now* we are in a position to state my final point.

The opposition Knapp and Michaels draw between formalism and intentionalism is a *false* one. With regard to the question of whether those things on the beach are words, they split the vote strictly: either *word* must be a pure shape concept *or* a pure intention concept. But this is not obviously right. It might be a *function* concept. Take the concept *leg*. Being a leg is rather strongly correlated with being a particular shape (selected from a not-too-long menu of viable shapes), but *leg* is quite obviously not a shape concept; likewise, being a leg is rather closely associated with 'as if' intentionality: legs are *supposed to*, *meant to*, do certain things. But quite clearly *leg* is not a pure intention concept. It would be possible to have a world with legs, but no intentions (on the compound assumption that there is no God, and that some of the simpler, legged animals do not have much in the way of minds.)

What about the concept *word*? Now there is a temptation to say my final point would have gone down easier as a starting point. Are words functional artifacts? Well, *yes*. They aren't ornamental, so they are functional (even ornamentality is a limit case of function;) and they aren't organisms—don't grow on trees. Who would deny that words are, broadly but essentially, functional artifacts? No one, I suppose. Language is a tool. So word must be a function concept. Everyone knows that. Nevertheless, this trivial point can be lost track of. Searle loses track of it when he denies Knapp and Michaels' thesis on the grounds that, "in linguistics, philosophy, and logic ... words are standardly defined purely formally." Knapp and Michaels' lose track of it when they infer, just from the fact that Searle is wrong about that, that they must be right, after all: words can only be words if someone means something *by* them.

The reason for taking the long way round to this starting point—language is a tool—is that we want to make sure to grasp it right. It's slipperier that it looks, maybe not so blunt as it looks.

Let's take it from the top, getting it right this time (we hope): to see something *as* a word is to see it as something that is *for* something; *supposed to be* a certain way; *meant to do* something. Searle underplays this consideration, Knapp and Michaels overplay it.

[THIS IS REALLY THE START OF A FRESH CHAPTER. THE FOLLOWING IS INCOMPLETE AND MORE DRAFTY. BUT I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE INTERESTING, AS CONTAINING HINTS ABOUT HOW THE FIRST BIT IS TO BE CONTINUED.]

Let's isolate what is *wrong* with Searle's 'formalist' view of words by bringing out what is right about it. Consider the following, rather offhand observation from Ruth Millikan:

> We classify word tokens into types in several ways but never by reference to
> physical form (sound, shape) alone. For example, neither "the word 'seal'" nor
> "the English word 'seal'" unambiguously describes a unique language-device

type. Under any normal interpretations there are *several* English words "seal."
(72).

As unintended contributions to the "A slumber did my spirit seal" on-the-beach debate go, this wins some sort of prize for being on-target. Millikan is saying exactly what Knapp and Michaels would want a philosopher to say. How do we know this 'poem' isn't written in some odd dialect of English in which it is idiomatic to say 'I did a slumber', meaning *I went to sleep*. So: 'A slumber did my spirit seal,' means something like: *the sea-dwelling mammal who is my spirit animal* [no doubt this is some religious notion] *went to sleep.* One can make up crazy cases until everyone gets tired and goes home; nevertheless, they have a point. (Namely, to puncture the Achilles heel of all attempts to account for functions as Cummins-functions: any given system can be regarded in too many oddball ways. You can regard an edition of the complete works of Shakespeare as 'functioning' to exclude air molecules from a certain volume of space, by occupying it with paper. You can regard a leg as 'functioning' in just the same way: these objects systematically *do* have these effects.)

Nevertheless, Millikan is *wrong* that we never classify words in terms of shape. Typographers do it all the time. (Searle is wrong in that he doesn't seem to have been thinking of anything like typography. Nevertheless, he was accidentally right, in this restricted sense.) So far as a typographer is concerned, 'seal' is *one* word; the concept of this one word is pretty much a *shape* concept. Words are letters in sequence. Letters are defined by their shapes, so words are shapes. With one huge qualification: typography is a *normative* practice; yet its norms concern *shape* (rather than, say, sense.) To be sure, no typographer can give you a formal definition of what it is to be a token of the word 'slumber'. (Someone will just go and invent a new font and foil the definition.) Still, so far as the typographer is concerned, that word *is* an indefinitely expandable set of shapes. Typographers are true Wittgensteinians: what it is to be a word is to *look like* a word. We might call this the *lorem ipsum* concept of words—of text. If you don't happen to know, *lorem ipsum* is 'dummy', or placeholder text typographers are in the habit of pouring in, experimentally, to get the 'look' right. (It is also called 'greeking', presumably as in, 'it's all Greek to me,' even though actually it looks like Latin.) By hallowed tradition, dummy

text starts with '*lorem ipsum*'. In the original version (these days you can get all sorts of computer-generated variants) it run as follows:

> *Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.*

It doesn't *mean* anything. Is it text at all? Well, that's what it's *called* (sometimes, 'dummy text'.) Is 'lorem' a word? No. Yes. You have to call those bits *something*, if you want to talk about them. (It is amusing to consider that a typographer would say the poem on a beach must be text because—look—it's too many lines long to be header.)

Suppose, instead of "Slumber", the sea starts generating *lorem ipsum* text up and down the sand. I don't suppose we can resolve the "Against Theory" debate just by piling on this fresh absurdity. (If we tried to refute Knapp and Michaels by insisting 'lorem ipsum' is words, they would say it just *look like* words. Both sides would have a point.) But surely this much can be granted: it would be possible for a typographer, stumbling upon this 'text', to consider it *as* text, in a typographer's sense. Presumably this person would assume someone wrote it, that being the way of the world until now. But making that assumption is not a condition of the possibility of thinking about it *as* text.

Typography is funny business precisely *because* it is possible—even optimal—to bracket out the ultimate point: presumably, something semantic. It's sounder to judge the 'look' of dummy text, because you can't get caught up mistaking good or bad sense for nice or poor shape. (Just as it can be more accurate to proofread backwards. You don't unconsciously correct any 'slubmers' to 'slumbers', as the mind's reading eye is wont to do.) Come to think of it, what is the 'function' of the *shape* of the signifer, really? From *Thinking With Type*, by Ellen Lupton: "Although many books define the purpose of typography as enhancing the readability of the

written word, one of design's most humane functions is in actually, to help readers *avoid* reading." That is, nicely laid-out type lets the eye orient itself efficiently, in ways independent of—but, one hopes, not contrary to—whatever may be said. Titles look like titles, footnotes like footnotes. You don't need to read to tell what everything is.

To repeat: one can take *at least* a typographer's '*lorem ipsum*' view of whatever the sea has gotten up to, Wordsworth-wise. Perhaps—as with swampman, as with Smith—we will ultimately decide that, due its awesomely humble origins as plain sea-stuff, we should say those aren't 'really' letters. But this decision, however admirable, is optional. We *can* ask, instead, whether *this* typography (orthography, oceanography) has a Cummins-function, and performs it well, relative to the posited, normative goal of being *good type*. Does it do what it is *supposed to do*; and by that we will mean: is it good layout, by our lights? Clear, attractive printing, well-chosen typeface, nicely-spaced page elements. (Do you think the leading in that column is *too wide*?) Of course, there is a sharp, albeit superficial paradox in the very notion of graphic design-without-a-designer, and we admittedly have no good, Darwinian tale to tell here. Still, you *could* take up the 'typographical stance' to a text that you knew perfectly well had no designer. The predictably intentionalistic language you would, then, employ to discuss the case is, in essence, just *function* language—in a Cummins rather than Wright sense.

Now let's work up from the typographic to the semantic level. As the so-called Socrates of San Francisco, adman Philip Gossage puts it, wondering at the mystery ways of type-workers:

> It's not that they don't read the writing, *it's that they don't think of it as writing at all*, not when they are working. What do they think of it as? Who knows? Squiggles, a lot of little forms that they can push sideways or make fat or skinny, or write on the head of a pin, or blow up so big that nobody can read ….
>
> Back to what art directors see in an ad. Science does not tell us, so I have set out to explore the field myself.
>
> Since the problem is apparently that of words and the abstract or subjective ideas they represent, I have wondered first of all how they look to me. I don't

mean the appearance of the words or how it feels, or even what it means, but how the idea behind it looks—what shape it is.

What is the shape of the signified … in a *functional* sense?