

## Interpretation and Evaluation

Noël Carroll

## Criticism and Interpretation

## Abstract

*In "Criticism and Interpretation", I will introduce several new arguments in favor of moderate actual intentionalism. Some of these will be based on a close reading of H.P. Grice's theory of meaning. Other arguments will be based on making a distinction between two questions about artistic meaning that are often conflated: the question of what constitutes or determines meaning versus the epistemological questions about the best ways of identifying that meaning. "Interpretation" will also discuss the relation of the interpretation of an artwork to its embodiment.*

"... there must, in grammar, be reasons for what you say, or be [a] point in your saying of something, if what you say is to be comprehensible. We can understand what the words mean apart from why you say them; but apart from understanding the point of your saying them we cannot understand what you mean"<sup>1</sup>.

## Introduction

Insofar as not all artworks involve meaning, broadly construed, not all artworks call for interpretation. However, where artworks invite interpretation, interpretation is a natural stage in the critical evaluation of an artwork<sup>2</sup>. That is, where the artwork is about something, isolating what it is about – that is, interpreting its meaning – is an unavoidable step in establishing whether the artist has done a good or a bad job articulating whatever the work is about with respect to the means at her disposal. To take a fanciful example, if an architectural structure is about projecting strength, as a fortress like the Pentagon is, then it would be a questionable artistic choice to construct it out of plywood. For, that would hardly project strength.

In short, where a work is about something, a critical evaluation of the work will strive to ascertain whether the artist has discovered a suitable or adequate set of forms with which to embody the meaning or content of the work. In

<sup>1</sup> S. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Oxford UP, 1979, p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> See N. Carroll, *On Criticism*, Routledge, London 2009.

order to perform this assessment, of course, one first needs to determine the meaning or the content at hand. And that is the task of interpretation.

For our purposes, interpretation involves not only saying what a work is about, but also pointing out how the work is designed to support that meaning<sup>3</sup>.

The meaning or content of an artwork can take various shapes. There are themes and theses. Roughly, the topic or topics of a work are its theme, as the wrath of Achilles is the theme of the *Iliad*. Where a work stakes out a perspective or position on its theme, we can say it has a thesis. The recent film *Lincoln* by Steven Spielberg is about the abolition of slavery; that is its theme. But it also advances a thesis or perspective about its theme; it is in favor of the abolition of slavery. In addition to their communication of themes and theses, artworks may also possess meaning in terms of exhibiting expressive properties like sadness, joy or gloom. The objects of interpretation then are at least themes, theses, and expressive properties. In order to evaluate works that traffic in these sorts of meanings, we must first interpret them before we go on to judge whether the artist has or has not found an appropriate way to articulate them – that is, ways that successfully will support, reinforce, or enhance the meaning of the work.

Given that so much art does involve meaning, interpretation is key to a great deal of art criticism. For that reason, philosophical questions about the nature of interpretation lie at the heart of a philosophy of criticism. And, indeed, debates about interpretation – under the rubric of the intentional fallacy – might be said to have inaugurated the emergence of the philosophy of criticism in the analytic tradition of aesthetics<sup>4</sup>.

In this essay, I would like to revisit that debate in the hope of suggesting how I think we should conceive of the project of interpreting a work of art.

### Alternative Views of Interpretation

Even if philosophers of art agree that the object of interpretation is the meaning of an artwork, conceived in terms of what it is about, there is a continuing debate about what determines that meaning and how we can (legitimately) come to know it. Some of the leading positions in this debate are: actual intentionalism, which comes in several variations – including radical intentionalism, more moderate forms of actual intentionalism, and hypothetical intentionalism, anti-intentionalism, and what we can call the value maximizing view of interpretation.

Historically, anti-intentionalism is probably the first position on interpretation to be worked out in the analytic tradition<sup>5</sup>. On this view, what determines the meaning of a poem is the words of the poem in terms of their dictionary meanings, grammar, the history of words (and literary genres), and conventionally established ways of dealing with figurative language such as metaphor. What this excludes, putatively, is reference to the intentions of the poet. On

<sup>3</sup> N.B.: By saying “how it is designed”, we leave open the question of whether it has succeeded or not.

<sup>4</sup> See W. K. Wimsatt, M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy”, in: *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, ed. A. Neill, A. Ridley, McGraw Hill, New York 1995.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

this view, the intention of the author is outside of the text, whereas in order to appreciate a poem, we should attend to what is on the page – the words and sentences in their conventional usage. This position appeals to readers' intuitions by arguing that the poet cannot make a word mean anything he wishes simply by intending it. Humpty-Dumpty cannot make "glory" mean "a nice knock-down argument" by fiat. That view would be an example of radical actual intentionalism. Anti-intentionalism emerges in stark opposition to radical actual intentionalism.

Although in ordinary discourse, we aim at discovering what our interlocutors intend or mean by their words, with respect to literature, the anti-intentionalist argues, our task is different. We aspire to learn what the text means. Insofar as a poem is a public affair, we aim at uncovering its public meaning, the meaning of the text in light primarily of the conventions of language.

The value maximizing view of interpretation shares many similarities with anti-intentionalism<sup>6</sup>. On this view, the aim of an artwork, such as a poem, is to afford aesthetic experience. Consequently, the best interpretation of a poem is the one that delivers the most rewarding aesthetic experience. Since the author's meaning might not support the richest aesthetic experience and, indeed, might even impede it, the interpretation of the poem need not be limited to the author's intention. What determines the meaning of the poem is whatever delivers the best experience of the poem to the reader. And there is no reason to imagine that the intended meaning guarantees that.

The value maximizing approach to interpretation is a reader-response theory. The meaning of the poem is established by the reader's response in pursuit of the best experience of the poem. Of course, this position may put various constraints on readerly interpretations. Some value maximizers will restrict the interpretive play of the reader to those respected by anti-intentionalists. That is, readerly interpretive play must be conducted within the bounds of the conventional meanings of words and sentences, the history of words (and literary genres, styles, etc.), and the protocols for managing figurative language. Of course, value-maximizers may permit even more latitude than this. What is common among value maximizers is their view that what determines the meaning of a poem is that which produces the best experience of the poem within certain specified constraints.

As already mentioned, those constraints can vary. For purposes of this essay, I will assume that the relevant value maximizers in this debate are somewhat conservative, agreeing with the anti-intentionalists about that which one is permitted to appeal in the pursuit of the meaning of the poem. I make this assumption because I intend to be dealing with the debate over interpretation from the perspective of analytic philosophers, and analytic philosophers tend to be conservative regarding the amount of interpretive play they find acceptable.

Both the value maximizers and the anti-intentionalist ground their understanding on views about the nature of the literary institution. They will admit

---

<sup>6</sup> See S. Davies, "Authors' Intentions, Literary Interpretation and Literary Value", in: *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 46, No. 3 (July, 2006), pp. 223-247.

that the interpretation of meaning in everyday affairs aims at discovering the intention of speakers. But they argue that matters are different with respect to literature, given the nature of that institution.

Actual intentionalists, on the other hand, question this presupposition. They see the interpretation of poems as on a continuum with the interpretation of the words and sentences of our conspecifics in daily discourse. Actual intentionalists, however, can be divided into different camps. Radical actual intentionalists claim that the meaning of the poem is whatever the poet claims she intended to be – supposedly irrespective of the rules of language, etc. Other intentionalists are more moderate. They maintain that the meaning of the poem is determined by the poet's intention where that intention coincides with what the poem can be alleged to mean given linguistic practices.

Hypothetical intentionalism, in contrast, parts company with even more moderate forms of actual intentionalism<sup>7</sup>. Hypothetical intentionalists frequently appear to agree with intentionalists that what an interpretation is amounts to a hypothesis about what the actual author intends, however, hypothetical intentionalists do not allow certain types of evidence to serve as a basis for that hypothesis. Specifically, they maintain that reference to an author's privately avowed intentions are interpretively inadmissible. That is, authorial statements about their intentions as found in private journals and diaries, or as disclosed in unpublished interviews with the authors, their friends, family, and/or their acquaintances are all out of bounds for the hypothetical intentionalists. Whereas the moderate forms of intentionalism will allow such evidence to play a role in interpretations, so long as those authorial intentions are consistent with the pertinent linguistic practices, the hypothetical intentionalism rejects this.

Rather than tracking the utterer's meaning with respect to the meaning of the poem, the hypothetical intentionalist claims to be aiming at the utterance meaning of the poem. Thus, the so-called utterance meaning of the poem as discovered by an ideal critic appears to determine the meaning of the poem. And like the anti-intentionalist and the value maximizer, the hypothetical intentionalist bases her position on the supposed nature of the literary institution.

### Joining the Debate

When considering these different theories of interpretation, it is useful to remember that each theory must answer two questions<sup>8</sup>. It must have a defensible answer to the constitutive question – the question of what determines the meaning of the poem. And it will also have an answer to the epistemological question of how we are to go about ascertaining that meaning, notably in terms of what evidence is legitimate and what is not. It is helpful to keep these two questions in mind when we review the strengths and weaknesses of the preceding views, although unfortunately this distinction is not always respected in the actual debate.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Levinson, *Contemplating Art*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 2006.

<sup>8</sup> S. Neale, "Implicit Meaning", in: *Meaning and Other Things: Essays on Stephen Schiffer*, ed. G. Ostertag, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, forthcoming.

Anti-intentionalism answers the constitutive question by maintaining that what fixes or determines the meaning of a poem involves the dictionary meaning of the words and sentences, the history of words (and literary genres), and the established procedures for managing figurative language, including metaphors. However, these resources cannot fix the meaning of a poem, since they underdetermine what the poem can mean. That is, appealing to only these factors may support multiple textual meanings rather than establishing its unique meaning. Conventional language usage is insufficient to answer the constitutive question, not to mention the problem with the proposed manner of dealing with figurative language (since there are no purely conventional ways of handling things like metaphors).

On the question of evidence, the anti-intentionalist bars reference to intentions because they are said to be remote from the poem. Intentions are in the head of the poet, whereas readers should be paying attention to what is on the page. Concern for authorial intention draws us away from what the poet has written. But this dichotomy and its supposed consequences are false. What is written on the page is our best evidence of what the poet intended. Concern for authorial intention does not draw us away from what the poet has written but rather asks readers to attend to it closely and deeply.

Anti-intentionalists will argue that the author's intentions are often unavailable. Who knows what Homer intended? We are not even sure who Homer was. But we can interpret his *Iliad*. Why think that things stand differently with authors who are temporally less distant? Do we ever truly understand another's mind? Thus, even here, the anti-intentionalist will often maintain that generally when we read a poem, the author's intentions are not ready to hand.

Of course, if what I wrote previously is correct, this worry is harmless, since as long as the poem is available to us, we do have access to what the author intended. Moreover, the concern about Homer seems exaggerated. In no other domain except literature does there seem to be much anxiety about discerning the intentions of historical agents. Historians feel confident in hypothesizing Xerxes's intentions, although we lack access to his diaries (if he had any). Why suppose that special alarms go off only when we are dealing with artworks?

Perhaps needless to say, one reason that historians are not anti-intentionalists is that they conceive of what they are doing as on a continuum with our ordinary practices of interpreting our conspecifics – an enterprise in which we typically succeed with amazing accuracy in identifying the intentions of others. It is true that sometimes we are mistaken and even deceived about the intentions of others. But more often than not, we are successful. Social life would be impossible otherwise. So why postulate that when it comes to literature, we suddenly must regard interpretation as playing by rules other than those that govern ordinary discourse and practices like history?

At this point, the anti-intentionalist is apt to claim that literature has special purposes that mandate that interpreting literature must differ from the way in which we interpret other forms of words and deeds. That is, literary interpretation allegedly abides by different rules than does ordinary interpretation. Of course,

this does not appear to be borne out empirically<sup>9</sup>. As many – and possibly even more – literary critics advert to authorial intentions or to hypotheses thereof as those who refrain<sup>10</sup>.

To this, the anti-intentionalist will respond that her claim is not meant descriptively but normatively, maintaining that it is a rule of the institution, given the purposes of literature, that literary interpretation ought to differ from other sorts of interpretation (which characteristically aim at discovering authorial intent). Here it is up to the anti-intentionalist to name those purposes. Unfortunately, most often they do not or, where they do, their candidates, like artistic autonomy, are as controversial as their position on authorial intention.

Maybe it will be argued that literature is for contemplation not communication. Yet this is an article of post-Kantian doxa that has never won the battle of ideas and that is especially ill-suited for literary forms like the novel. Indeed, I would conjecture that most contemporary art, whether esoteric or exoteric, is designed with primarily communicative intent.

The value maximizing position on interpretation can be yoked together with anti-intentionalism by arguing that the purpose of literature, which the bracketing authorial intention subserves, is to secure as rewarding an interpretative experience as possible. Here, interpretive play is the relevant form of contemplation. Insofar as constraining aesthetic experience to authorial intentions might block certain interpretive possibilities, value maximizers reject a principled commitment to identifying authorial intention.

Obviously, something like the value maximizing view of interpretation could not supply a general answer to the constitutive question. It is patently absurd to contend that the meaning of what I say is determined or fixed by what will grant listeners the most pleasure in interpreting what I've said. But since this view is absurd in everyday contexts of interpretation, we can demand of value maximizers to tell us why they suppose it obtains when it comes to poetry.

Undoubtedly, we are likely to hear once again about the special purposes of literature<sup>11</sup>. Here the special purposes have to do with abetting maximally rich interpretive experiences. However, even if this is *one* of the purposes of literature, it is hardly the only one. Moreover, it is far from clear that that some of the other purposes of literature do not place constraints on how much latitude our interpretive play may take.

One of the other purposes of literature, inarguably, is communication. This mandates a concern in the relevant cases for authorial intention, not only on the grounds of the nature of communication, but on moral grounds as well, since it is not only morally wrong to willfully misinterpret another's communication

---

<sup>9</sup> One consideration that at least *suggests* that the literary institution is not categorically anti-intentionalist is that misprints in literary works are typically corrected to coincide with what the author intended. Of course, if the misprint stands because that is what the poet desires (perhaps because she thinks it makes for a better [new] poem), that too is a matter of authorial intention.

<sup>10</sup> For example, in interpreting A.R. Ammons's poem „Mansion,“ M.H. Abrams appeals to information that Roger Gilbert culled from Ammons' papers. See: M.H. Abrams, „The Fourth Dimension of a Poem“, in: *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem and Other Essays*, W.W. Norton, New York 2012, p.27.

<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, some literary works are only for contemplation, but this too is a matter of intention.

or to ignore another's intention, but it is self-degrading to do so as well<sup>12</sup>. The rewards of interpretive play are all well and good, however, they should not be purchased at the cost of neglecting the other purposes of literature. Communication is one of those aims. Thus, the rewards of interpretive activity should be sought within the bounds of communication, which is tied to the communication of authorial meaning.

Like anti-intentionalism and the value maximizing approach, hypothetical intentionalism claims to be grounded in the special purposes of the literary institution. For the hypothetical intentionalist, the aim of interpretation is to produce a hypothesis about what the author intended his poem to mean. In pursuit of this aim, the hypothetical intentionalist allows the idealized interpreter access to not only the author's text, but also to any of her statements about the text, so long as it is published and in the public domain, along with information about the historical context of the work, artistic and otherwise as well as knowledge of the author's oeuvre. On the basis of this kind of evidence, the hypothetical intentionalist proposes a hypothesis about what the author intended to communicate.

The hypothetical intentionalist places extreme emphasis on the notion that literature is a *public* institution. This, she believes, evidentially commits the critic in the process of interpreting the work to only information available in the public sphere, precluding reference to the author's private papers, diaries, journals, letters, etc. as well as unpublished interviews with the author, her family, friends, and acquaintances.

In most cases, the interpretation of the author's intention that is reached operating under the epistemic constraints defended by the hypothetical intentionalist and the interpretation arrived at by supplementing that evidence with insider information garnered from private letters and interviews are likely to converge. Nevertheless, it is possible for the two interpretations to part company. Where that happens, the hypothetical intentionalist, unlike the actual intentionalist, argues that only the interpretation based on publicly available consideration is admissible, even if the meaning disclosed in private authorial communication is consistent with what is discernible in the artwork. Here, the hypothetical intentionalist may describe her commitment as favoring utterance meaning over utterer's meaning, ascribing the latter commitment to actual intentionalists.

The way in which the hypothetical intentionalist answers the constitutive question is open to several interpretations. She may simply maintain that the author's intention fixes or determines the meaning of the poem. In that case, the hypothetical intentionalist and the actual intentionalist are to that extent in agreement. They only disagree about what evidence is licit when it comes to interpreting the poem. The hypothetical intentionalist argues that it must be public. However, this rides on a distinction between what is public and what is private which will be very difficult to maintain in a non-arbitrary fashion, since what are the today's private letters, journals, manuscripts, and interviews are often published or made publicly available in library collections tomorrow.

---

<sup>12</sup> In order to confirm the wrongness of misconstruing another's words, consider the indignation you feel when you are the subject of a willful misinterpretation.

Of course, the hypothetical intentionalist may suggest that what fixes the meaning of the poem is not the author's intention, but rather the interpretation reached by an ideal reader armed with the fullest powers of reason and all the information available about the historical context of the poem, artistic and otherwise, all of the published material about the author's life and times, including things such as her memoirs, letters, etc. along with complete knowledge of her oeuvre and those of her peers.

However, it is questionable whether this can serve to determine or fix the meaning of the poem. Given the Duhem-Quine postulate concerning the under-determination of hypotheses by the evidence, our ideal readers are destined to come up with non-converging accounts of the meaning of the poem. That is, the evidence allowed by the hypothetical intentionalist will support different hypotheses from different ideal observers, thus providing no way to establish which one constitutes *the* meaning of the poem. One ideal reader, for example, may weigh the strength of her hypothesis in terms of its comprehensiveness, while another prizes specificity to a greater extent.

In contrast, the actual intentionalist has an answer to the question of the determinate meaning of the poem, namely the hypothesis which coincides with the actual intention of the author (where that is consistent with what is available in the text)<sup>13</sup>.

At present hypothetical intentionalism and a variant of actual intentionalism which I have come to call modest actual mentalism appear to be the leading theories being currently debated by analytic philosophers<sup>14</sup>. Modest actual mentalism contends that the meaning of a poem is determined by the actual intentions and underlying, though not necessarily conscious, assumptions of the poet. That is, modest actual mentalism holds that the cognitive or, more broadly, mental stock of the artist fixes the meaning of the work, so long as said intentions, assumptions, etc. are consistent with what is available in the text. To the extent that the hypothetical intentionalist takes these to be the object of his hypotheses, hypothetical intentionalism and modest actual mentalism agree on the question of what constitutes the meaning of the poem and the two camps only disagree about what comprises the acceptable bodies of evidence for producing the relevant hypothesis.

Hypothetical intentionalism and modest actual mentalism share a roughly Gricean conception of meaning according to which someone means *x* if he intends to induce the belief in *x* in his audience *and* he intends his audience to recognize this intention<sup>15</sup>. The hypothetical intentionalist worries that the actual intentionalism may result in off-the-wall interpretations where the author intends, for example, the inscription "black" to mean "white" in his poem.

<sup>13</sup> It might be thought that the hypothetical intentionalist can maintain that context determines the meaning of the text. But context is at most supplies evidence for an interpretation. It cannot fix the meaning of a poem since context underdetermines meaning. Rather it is only evidence of authorial intention.

<sup>14</sup> See N. Carroll, "Art Interpretation", in: *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 151 (2) 2011, pp. 117-135.

<sup>15</sup> P. Grice, "Meaning", in: *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 1987, p. 219. See also S. Neale, "Paul Grice's Philosophy of Language", in: *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 15 (1992), pp. 509-559.



Thus, the hypothetical intentionalist contends that only public available considerations, like the conventional meanings of words, can be consulted thereby blocking any and all private, off-the-way intentions of actual authors. And this, the hypothetical argues, shows the superiority of hypothetical intentionalism over every variety of actual intentionalism, including modest actual mentalism.

However *pace* hypothetical intentionalism, there is no need to erect the aforesaid constraint, since it is already built into the Gricean conception of meaning that the hypothetical intentionalist, and the modest actual mentalist endorses. For, a genuine intention requires some expectation of success. To intend to communicate, one must operate in a way that is apt to enable one's communicative intention to be realized and that entails that the speaker use words and sentences in ways that audiences will find intelligible, i.e., in ways the audience can recognize.

Of course, typically this involves using words and sentences conventionally. So, the modest actual mentalist responds to the hypothetical intentionalist's worries by noting that off-the-wall authorial intentions are already ruled out by what is required by the speaker's *genuine* intention to have the audience recognize his communicative intention. Hypothetical intentionalism has no special advantage when it comes to blocking off-the-wall authorial intentions<sup>16</sup>. That has already been taken care of by the Gricean account of what it is to mean something<sup>17</sup>.

### The Linguistic Fallacy

As astute readers have probably noticed, the preceding debate has been conducted exclusively in light of the written word, notably poetry. The reason I have framed it in this way is because this is how the issue was initially framed by Beardsley and Wimsatt in their article "The Intentional Fallacy", and the dialectic has proceeded, in large measure, in that fashion ever since. Thus, to enter the debate, I have had to engage it on its own terms, even though, as I will argue in this section, those terms are ill-advised. Indeed, I think that the attempt to model all art interpretation on the interpretation of the meaning of words and sentences is a fallacy, namely what I call the *Linguist Fallacy*.

Advancing anti-intentionalism with emphasis on linguistic meaning was immensely useful for its defenders inasmuch as it might have seemed intuitively

<sup>16</sup> A more technical way of putting this would be to say that the hypothetical intentionalist has no reason invoke utterance meaning, since utterer's meaning, construed in terms of Gricean intentions, already commits the utterer to abiding by the conventional meaning of words and sentences insofar as that is entailed by a genuine intention to have his communicative intention recognized by audiences. Indeed, the very notion of utterance meaning itself is redundant given what is required for an utterer to genuinely intend to communicate. Utterer's meaning is enough.

<sup>17</sup> This may leave the question of what the meaning of a poetic unit is when the author's intention is not supported by what is written. There are two alternative here. I can say that it doesn't mean anything or that it possesses whatever range of meanings the text allows. The former seems to me counterintuitive. So, I prefer the latter alternative. This, of course, concedes indeterminacy of meaning in these cases. Nevertheless, this amount of indeterminacy is less than what is found in the positions that are rival to modest actual mentalism.

plausible that language appears to have ways of fixing meaning without reference to intention, specifically through the conventional meanings of words as found in dictionaries. I, needless to repeat, do not accept the adequacy of this view. However, even if it were true, it would not support the most ambitious claims of the opponents of actual intentionalism.

For, the anti-intentionalists argue on the basis of the putative role of convention for fixing meaning in the language arts to the conclusion that anti-intentionalism obtains across the arts. That is, they generalize from what they claim about poetry to the non-linguistic arts, including the visual arts and music. But even if their contentions about poetry were completely true (a very controversial claim), the extrapolation from poetry to the nonlinguistic arts would be suspicious. For where literature in general and poetry in particular allow resort to dictionaries, the other arts don't. Most often pretending that they possess anything approximately like the meaning conventions recorded in dictionaries commits the Linguistic Fallacy.

In the 2012 movie adaptation of *Anna Karenina* by Joe Wright, much of the action of the story transpires on recognizably theatrical stage sets. Many of these scenes involve society events, such as a horse race. The audience is clearly intended to take note of this non-naturalistic handling of the relevant scenes. The viewer is invited, even nudged, to interpret the meaning of this *mise en scene*. Many commentators have surmised that, by means of this scenography, Wright intends to communicate something about the social milieu of the fiction, namely that it is one of rigidly prescribed roles that one must at least *appear* to follow. Why do we ascribe this meaning intention to Wright? Not on the basis of a cinematic dictionary that associates theater imagery with roles and appearances, but because that is the best explanation of what Wright might mean given Wright's other directorial choices.

Admittedly there is a history of using theatrical imagery to comment on society, ranging from Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* to Lars von Trier's *Dogville*. But this is not a fixed association as is the relation of a word to its referent, since theater imagery can also be used to communicate other themes, such as the ultimate artificiality of cinema, despite its usual claim to realism. With Wright's *Anna Karenina*, the audience must use the theater imagery as a metaphorical optic through which to filter the action. This is a matter of *abduction* that strongly contrasts with the way in which the audience *reads* Tolstoy's opening observation about unhappy families. We directly ask what the intention behind Wright's directorial choices might be because, even though there might be some precedents, there are no conventions we can invoke.

In the film *The Lives of Others*, the director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck drains bright colors out of many of the scenes, so that the overall impression one has of existence in the GDR is that it is drab – the pervasive institutional grayness signaling an impoverished mode of living. There is, needless to say, no fixed, conventional cinematic correlation that links an absence of bright colors and a presence of dull ones to a diminished quality of life. Rather we infer that this is Donnersmarck's intended point since it fits so well with his other directorial choices.

Likewise when in the motion picture *Zero Dark Thirty*, Kathryn Bigelow, relative to your average suspense film, protracts the process up to the assault on Bin Laden's compound, there is no book of fixed-associative correlations or syntactical rules that establishes what this strategy means. Rather, we infer that she intends to communicate some of the tediousness that such work involves, given the overall emphasis in the film on the hunt for Bin Laden as a sort of police procedural.

Nor, of course, are movies the only artform where meaning must be sought in intention since there are none of the sort of meaning conventions you find in dictionaries available for consultation. For example, in the prelude to *Das Rheingold*, Wagner goes for one hundred and thirty five measures before there is a key change. Why? There are no opera dictionaries that reveal what such a musical structure means. Instead we infer that Wagner intended to signal by this device the calm and untroubled nature of the Rhine at the beginning of the opera. That appears to be the best conjecture for the meaning of this orchestral choice in terms of its contrastive function in the context of the opera as a whole.

In dance, consider the Rose Adagio section of *The Sleeping Beauty*. As Aurora, the Sleeping Beauty, dances with the four suitors, she becomes progressively less physically dependent upon support, until finally she stand on one leg on pointe in an *arabesque en arrière* position, signaling that she now grown-up and independent. Here it is not the case that an *arabesque en arrière* carries any conventional associations. Rather we interpret the choice of this step in this way because it is the best hypothesis we can offer of what the actual choreographer intended to communicate about the princess at this point in the narrative.

Of course, what we have been arguing about motion pictures dance, and music pertains to the fine arts as well. In Picasso's *Mademoiselles d'Avignon*, which Picasso preferred to refer to as *My Brothel*, the prostitute on the extreme left with the gray face has a right leg that looks rather like rough-hewn blade – somewhat resembling a butcher's ax. There is no pictorial code to tell us what this "ax leg" means; instead we must ask what Picasso might have had in mind when making this authorial choice; was it that he intended it to insinuate brutishness and menace into the image.

Similarly, when George Grosz depicts Weimar plutocrats as porcine, with outsized, slobbering lips and bloated bodies, fat cigars stuffing their mouths, there is no decoding manual for reading these images. In fact, we do not literally read these images; we take the distortions in these figures to mirror what Grosz ostensibly finds essential in the appetitive, consuming social system – a.k.a. capitalism -- that these bankers and businessmen represent.

The point of all these examples so far is that even if it were true that dictionary-like conventions could entirely fix the meaning of poems (which I doubt), this model could not be generalized to all of the arts, since, to a very large extent, many of the other arts, like architecture and sculpture, as well as the ones canvassed already, lack those conventions. And even some of the arts that possess language, like theater, also have communicative elements, like set design, lighting, blocking, and so forth, that must be deciphered abductively rather than by anything like reading.

For the most part, creative choices in the nonlinguistic arts can only be comprehended by hypothesizing the intentions of the artists, since there is rarely anything approaching the meaning-conventions of the linguistic arts to consult. Indeed, inasmuch as the strategies we are talking about are *choices*, they need to be understood in terms of the intentions they aim to realize. We do not approach paintings, movies, music, etc. as we read a printed page. We interpret them as we interpret actions. We ask what the artist has done by making these choices which, in turn, must involve questions about what was intended by performing the pertinent communicative action.

Of course, even if literature in general and poetry in particular did determine part of their meanings by way of associative conventions, that would not be the whole story, even for the linguistic arts. For, many of the choices in literary works have nothing to do with conventions like dictionary meanings. The dictionary can give us a range of the meanings of William Burroughs's words when he wrote: "You can cut into *The Naked Lunch* at any intersection point". But no dictionary or handbook of literary tropes is going to tell you what this strategy portends. What does Burroughs's mean to communicate by instructing the reader that she may start reading the book wherever she wishes and continue on jumping randomly from one section to the other? To determine that, we have to speculate about Burroughs's intentions, and, if we are modest actual mentalists, we will also allow ourselves access to whatever evidence, public or private, that enables us to nail it.

Perhaps needless to say, with respect to literature, we don't have to resort to such experimental examples in order to make the case that interpreting literature involves more than tracking the meaning of words. Novels have characters and we may ask why an author has invested a given character with certain properties. What is Mann's point in making Septembrini so enthusiastic in *The Magic Mountain*. Indeed, even some of our interpretive questions about the linguistic choices in literature have nothing to do with what can be gleaned from a dictionary. For example, why are so many of Edgar Allen Poe's short stories written in the first person?

Moreover, this is true even of lyric poetry, the anti-intentionalist's preferred example. Recall the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 30*:

When to the sessions of sweet, silent thought  
I summon up remembrance of things past  
I sigh the lack of many a thing I thought.

No dictionary will tell you the expressive meaning of the emphatic alliteration on the letters; instead one needs to intuit the melancholic quality suggested by the subdued, hushed music of the word-sounds.

Although it is true that we do not have to go to the avant-garde in order to support our claim that much interpretation cannot even be remotely conceived to be modeled on the understanding of word in terms of their dictionary meanings, the practice of various avant-gardes, literary and otherwise, drives that point home very effectively. For, the genuine avant-garde proceeds by breaking with conventions, and, obviously, it is not the case that there are conventions

for breaking with conventions. That would be self-defeating, if not pragmatically self-refuting.

Typically, avant-garde artworks proceed by a kind of conversational implicature. They are presented in a context that indicates a commitment to public communication, but they go on to undermine customary protocols of communication in the relevant milieu, leaving us to infer how this breach could be relevant in context. With his *Brillo Box*, Warhol presented a facsimile of a carton of Proctor and Gamble's famous steel-wool cleansing pads. That is, he placed on the gallery floor what looked like it more appropriately belonged in a grocery store warehouse. In other words, he put a commodity in the space reserved for art. Assuming that he was making some point that was relevant within this artworld setting, one suspects that he meant to communicate the idea that art is a commodity.

This is the way in which a very great deal of avant-garde art communicates. It adopts a strategy that subverts expectations, but in a way that intends to say something relevant to its art historical circumstances. The audience figures out what the work means by attempting to grock what an informed participant in the discourses of the artworld could intend to get across by upending our presumptions in telling directions, such as inserting the simulacrum of a commodity, a commercial packing carton, into the network of the artworld at just that point where one would anticipate finding something discernibly different, something that looked like the kind of thing we antecedently identified as an artwork.

Likewise, in *4' 33'*, by presenting listeners with silence in the context of a concert situation, Cage prompts us to locate his intention in breaking with tradition. We presume that he is committed to communicating with us something relevant to musical practice but that cannot be discovered by invoking conventions. Alternatively, we have to attempt to divine what a composer as accomplished as Cage could intend to bring to our attention by framing silence. One interpretation, amply confirmed by Cage's writings, of course, is that the absence of music is not silence and in that noise there is much that is worthy of attention<sup>18</sup>.

The practice of the avant-garde brings out very dramatically a condition of much artistic communication. That it is not to be understood in terms of conventions but in terms of authorial intentions, for the simple reason, among other things, that, for the most part, most nonlinguistic art lacks the dictionary meaning conventions found in practices like poetry and even the linguistic artforms communicate through artistic choices that cannot be parsed like linguistic associations.

To suppose that the linguistic interpretation of literature in terms of the information available in dictionaries provides a model for all the arts is to commit the Linguistic Fallacy. Even if the conventional meaning approach determined the meaning of literary utterances, which, as we saw in the previous section

---

<sup>18</sup> See N. Carroll, "Cage and Philosophy", in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52, 1 (Winter, 1994), pp. 93-98.

is very controversial, there is no reason to believe that it could be extended to artforms that lack those dictionary-like meaning associations. Indeed, the convention, dictionary meaning model does not even suffice to guide the interpretation of every aspect of literature. Rather, it is more appropriate to approach artistic choices across the board as actions where intentions are relevant to the interpretation of what the artist has done. Where interpretation is pertinent, the artist has performed an action – a communicative action – which needs to be comprehended in terms of what the artist intended to do. Where the artist employs conventions in pursuit of her ends, this provides us with evidence of what she means. It does not determine what she means. Her intention does.