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Modest Actual Mentalism: Questions and Comments

The thoughts presented here are prompted by Noël Carroll's paper "Criticism and Interpretation."¹

In his paper, Carroll defends the position known as modest actual intentionalism, though he prefers the title "modest actual mentalism." Roughly, this is the view that the artist's intentions determine her work's meaning, and thereby how it should be interpreted, provided that the work can be understood in the fashion intended. A leading rival, known as hypothetical intentionalism, suggests instead that the interpreter should hypothesize what was most likely intended by an author imagined by the interpreter. In its most philosophically interesting variant, the imagined author should match the public persona of the actual author.² By contrast with these accounts, my preferred position is called the maximizing view.³ I think that, in interpreting a given artwork, interpreters should maximize its artistic value, but only insofar as this is consistent with respecting its identity as the artwork it is.

After some remarks about Carroll's treatment of anti-intentionalism and value maximizing, I raise some issues that should give pause to advocates of modest actual mentalism. Though I take Carroll's point that interpretation occurs across the arts,⁴ I will confine my attention to the interpretation of literature (including drama and poetry).

Carroll's treatment of the "intentional fallacy" is orthodox, but I think that orthodoxy deserves to be examined. The argument presented by Wimsatt and Beardsley is simple.⁵ If the author succeeded in his intentions the meaning was

1 N. Carroll, "Criticism and Interpretation," in: *Sztuka i Filozofia: Art and Philosophy*, 42 (2013), pp. 7-20.

2 J. Levinson, "Defending Hypothetical Intentionalism," in: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50 (2010), pp. 139-150. For critical discussion, see also R. Stecker and S. Davies, "The Hypothetical Intentionalist's Dilemma: A Reply to Levinson," in: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 50 (2010), pp. 307-312.

3 S. Davies, "Authors' Intentions, Literary Interpretation and Literary Value," in: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 46 (2006), pp. 223-247.

4 N. Carroll, *op. cit.*, in the discussion of what he labels the "linguistic fallacy".

5 W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in: *Sewanee Review*, 54 (1946), pp. 468-488.

conveyed to the text of the artwork and if he failed it was not. Either way, it is not necessary to consult evidence of authorial intention external to the work in finding out what meaning its text bears.

This argument contentiously assumes that the meaning of the work is hermetically sealed within it. But the point to note here is that the argument does *not* deny the relevance of all authorial intentions for work meaning. Those carried through to the text are crucial for work meaning. The argument rejects the relevance of *failed* intentions. In this respect the thesis is not clearly at odds with that of modest actual mentalism, which also allows for the possibility of authorial failure and discounts intended meanings that cannot be reconciled with the work's contents. And in ruling out the search for private intentions beyond the text, Wimsatt and Beardsley are not more anti-intentionalist than is Levinson's version of hypothetical intentionalism, which does the same. All in all, the stark contrast drawn between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism is over-exaggerated, I think.

In any case, though Carroll discusses value maximizing alongside anti-intentionalism, the version of the maximizing theory I endorse is no less in favor of seeking out and consulting authors' intentions than is Carroll's modest actual mentalism. Almost inevitably, the intentions of successful authors point to the readings that put the best light on their works. And knowledge of those intentions can lead us to find artistic merit where otherwise it might be overlooked. The difference between the theories consists in this: whereas Carroll thinks the search for work meaning is exhausted by reference to authorial intentions, I do not.

There is a reason why some versions of hypothetical intentionalism and value maximizing get confused with anti-intentionalism. If the hypothetical intentionalist imagines many different authors all very unlike the actual one, there is little limit on the range of interpretations that can be generated. Similarly, if all value maximizing readings are permitted, including ones that make a nonsense of the work as conceived by its author, then plainly value maximizing does not involve respect for authors' intentions.

Playful approaches to interpretation like these are commonplace, but neither Levinson's version of hypothetical intentionalism nor mine of value maximizing endorses this type of interpretative freedom. Carroll suggests that this is because of conservatism in the values held by analytic philosophers.⁶ I would diagnose the situation differently. Where the primary object of interpretation is the work as authored, the interpreter is constrained to acknowledge those of the author's intentions relevant to fixing her work's identity. These intentions may concern the work's title, genre, and style, for instance. Authorial intentions about meaning or significance might be by-passed in interpreting the work, but only where this does not betray the work's identity. Here it must be acknowledged that it might not always be obvious how one is to distinguish artists' "ontological" from "content" intentions. Allowing this need not be fatal to the theories of interpretation that are committed to seeking this distinction,

6 N. Carroll, *op. cit.*

however. Under all theories, the limits of what is acceptable by way of interpretive variation and difference are contested.

It is common for protagonists of competing philosophical theories of literary interpretation to claim that their account best matches actual critical practice. If by “critical practice” we mean what happens in university Departments of Literature, they are most likely wrong. The “reader response” approach advocated there to literary interpretation is freewheeling and creative, as critics read against the grain and deconstruct the texts they consider. And on the other hand, if we mean by “critical practice” an approach to interpretation that respects the identity of the author’s work and aims to characterize how its meaning is to be understood on its own terms, it is doubtful that any of the main philosophical theories of interpretation matches this better than the others. What the artist intended by way of her work’s meaning, what it is most reasonable to attribute by way of meaning to a hypothetical author who is like the actual author’s public persona, and what meaning best realizes the work’s artistic value – these three are likely to coincide much of the time.

There are other reasons why the competing theories will often agree in practice. Moderate actual mentalists quite rightly question general skepticism about our accessibility to the minds and intentions of other people and they quite rightly suggest that the work’s text usually provides the strongest evidence of what was intended, so that interpretation can proceed in the absence of independent evidence of authorial intent. But allowing these points, the fact is that modest actual mentalists usually proceed on the basis of inferences about what authorial intentions were most likely. This means that, where independent sources for the author’s intentions are unknown, it will be extremely unlikely that they will arrive at results different from those reached by hypothetical intentionalists. And similarly, since both modest actual mentalists and hypothetical intentionalists are bound to assume that the author intended the work to be better rather than worse in the absence of explicit evidence to the contrary, it will be extremely unlikely that they will arrive at results different from those reached by value maximizers.

Of course, there are cases that distinguish between the competing theories. For instance, the author insists on an intended meaning that seems to be manifestly inferior from an artistic point of view to one that the work seems to invite. Or the author insists on an intended meaning that one would not reasonably attribute to a hypothetical author who is relevantly like the actual one. But appeal to critical practice here is unlikely to be decisive. In the face of such examples, critical practice is typically no less divided than are the philosophers’ theories.

Here is one aspect of critical practice that challenges modest actual mentalism: an interpretation of the work is put to its author who accepts the interpretation

but denies having intended it (or even having considered it). In other words, the author licenses the legitimacy of an interpretation of her work that she had not intended.

We can imagine cases that fit this description that would not trouble the modest actual mentalist. For instance, perhaps the author intended the work to be ambiguous in a certain kind of way and the proposed interpretation provides one possible resolution to that ambiguity. We might consider the proposed interpretation as falling under the scope of the more general intention, even if the author did not articulate to herself details of the approaches to the ambiguity that would make sense of it.

I imagine more testing counterexample will be not uncommon, though. These will be ones in which the proposed interpretation was simply not intended, not even by implication, yet it is accepted by the author. What is more, the interpretation strikes us as true to the work and revealing of it.

One response that might tempt the actual intentionalist – the suggestion that the relevant intention was unconscious – should be resisted. It makes the account viciously circular and unfalsifiable. Talk of unconscious intentions makes sense only in special cases. In these, typically the author rejects or is uncomfortable accepting the proposed interpretation. Reference to unconscious intentions may be plausible where the theme of the interpretation was strongly involved in the author's life and she had reason to suppress her awareness of it, perhaps because it was deeply painful, say. In other words, giving legitimacy to talk of unconscious intentions might require showing that the proposed interpretation captures something the author might have been impelled to convey to the work despite her conscious rejection of it at the time. Later, she continues to reject it or accepts it only with unhappiness. The difficult case, as envisaged above, is not of this kind. Here, an appeal to unconscious intentions would be question-begging.

An alternative response on behalf of the modest actual mentalist would be to charge that authors are simply mistaken if they tolerate unintended interpretations of their works as acceptable. They are too casual in accepting a possible but unintended meaning as belonging to their work.

This response, apart from appearing to legislate arbitrarily in favor of the theory, has the smell of inconsistency. If authors' intentions determine their works' meanings in the first instance, why are we free to disregard their later proclamations about the meanings of those same works?

Professor Carroll regards literary artworks as vehicles for the communication of the author's thoughts, attitudes, and emotions and he leans heavily on the metaphor that the relation between author and interpreter is conversational.⁷ More accurately, it is implied that the author corresponds to the speaker and the interpreter corresponds to the listener in mid-conversation. Plainly, this

⁷ *Idem, On Criticism*, Routledge, London 2008.

metaphor has some appeal. And if we take it literally, the actual intentionalist wins the day. In actual conversations the listener is interested in the utterer's meaning, in what the speaker meant by what she said, with this settled ultimately by reference to her intended meaning.

There are some aspects of interpretational practice that undermine this metaphor, however. Some authors pointedly decline to commentate on their works. A notorious example was the playwright, Harold Pinter. And many more who do discuss their works do not do so in a proprietary manner. They offer their opinions as if contributing to a collective enterprise of interpretation, not as if those opinions are decisive in trumping the contrasting views of others.

So here is a simile I prefer: artworks are like children. How so? Children are created and shaped by their parents. But when they come out into public society, they are granted increasing degrees of autonomy. Most parents acknowledge and respect this, though many find it hard to relinquish directive governance over the lives of their children. And most parents do what they can to ease their offspring's gradual passage to complete independence. In the end, those progeny give meaning to their own existence through their relations with others. Special among these relationships, one hopes, is the tie to their parents, but this should include mutual forbearance rather than blame on the one side and control on the other. The relation between artists and artworks is similar, I claim. Artworks take on autonomy within a public artworld, though they retain an intimate relationship with their makers. In part, their meaning or significance is negotiated through interactions that are not exclusively with their creator but are also with a wider art public. Interpretation is not a one-sided conversation dominated by the artist but the product of a more genuinely multi-sided conversation between those who receive the artwork, perhaps including also the artist. This conversation often does not achieve consensus and, with good art, it may continue beyond the artist's death and in changed contexts that prompt the artwork's re-examination and re-interpretation.