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Noël Carroll's Modest Actual Mentalism

In his essay on "Criticism and Interpretation" Noël Carroll focuses on critical evaluation of artworks. He starts his paper with the following statement "insofar as not all artworks involve meaning, broadly construed, not all artworks call for interpretation."¹ For Carroll the meaning of an artwork can take the form of themes, thesis or expressive properties that can be interpreted, so it might be difficult to claim that not all artworks involve meaning. Even a conceptual artwork is about some theme or a pure music piece might have at least certain expressive property. In consequence, if for interpretation it is necessary a meaning and any artwork have some kind of meaning, it is possible to interpret it. However, the most important problem for Carroll is how is it possible to interpret that meaning. In order to solve this puzzle he proposes the modest actual intentionalism.

For Carroll critical evaluation of artworks depends on interpretation, which depends on meaning, and meaning is fixed by the actual intentions of the author. He discusses most of the recent approaches on interpretation, however, here I want only explore if Carroll successfully answers to the questions he asks to the proposals he refutes:

1. "The question of what determines the meaning of a poem."

2. "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."

Carroll uses a Gricean approach in order to defend the role the author has in determining the meaning of an artwork. Grice distinguishes what it is told from the way it is told, what is implicated in conversations from the way the hearer recognizes the speaker's intentions. Any Gricean approach used for the understanding artworks' meanings must explain how it is possible for the hearers to recognize the author's intentions if he does not communicate what he actually believes and sometimes what he says is far from being perspicuous. In addition, it is barely impossible to recognize the intention the author tries to transmit to the audience, since even if we know him, there might be some mental contents supporting his intentions that he may not even know.

Carroll might answer my reply saying that 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

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

with what is available in the text." Any artist has a mental stock that fixes the meaning of what he's doing. However, the only way we can only access to his intentions is through the category he chose for a specific artwork. That is, i.e., Homer might try to write a song, but instead he wrote a poem, *The Iliad*. He intentionally wrote a poem. His action does not give us any tool to interpret it as a poem, but only to read it as poem, not as a song. An art critic might interpret it according to certain artistic values, meanwhile a historian according to the relation its mythical content to the context of Ancient Greece. Therefore, intentions might only determine the categories of the artworks we must consider in order to perceive them.

For Carroll, "what is written in on the page is our best evidence of what the poet intended" and "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." Carroll thinks that even if he did not know what Homer intended when he wrote *The Iliad*, "as long as the poem is available to us, we do have access to what the author intended." Although we can more or less successfully predict the others' intentions in social life, because we have access to the context of enunciation, i.e. gestures or intonation, our interpretative practice is different when we read the poem.

The skills we have in conversational contexts help us to understand the literary text. However, those skills let us understand the content, not what the author intended. The work gives us information such as expressive properties, descriptions or certain intertextual contents that only gives us the relevant information we should interpret, in order to understand the text. The role played by descriptions, dialogues and the expressive use of language in *The Iliad* let the audience interpret the internal context of the poem, not the intentions behind Homer's utterances. Even a historian, after post-structuralism, might recognize that his interpretation of this poem is based on a narrative practice and a reconstruction of a history in which it is impossible to know what Homer intended, but only what his works might mean according to its own historical period.

It is not the same what an utterance means from what the speaker intended. If one of the purposes of literature is communication, what does literature communicate? Nowadays there are many researchers working on the way certain sounds or movements convey certain expressive properties, without our access to the intentions behind them. In poetry the phonetic structure is more important than in narrative literature in relation to the expression of certain emotions. There are people working on the way sound might be interpreted by the audience even if they don't know the author or even the language. The same has been done for facial expressions and now some people working on cognitive embodiment are starting to explore expression in bodily gestures. Therefore, it is possible to think that the audience is able to recognize that certain utterances express certain properties, such as sadness, even if they don't know who say it. To contend that the intention behind that utterance is to express sadness does not give us more information about it.

Modest actual mentalism neither answers the question of what determines the meaning of an artwork, nor the question of what it is a legitimate critical

evaluation. Abduction inferences of what would happen if the artist chose *y* instead of *x* will give an explanation on what might make different *Les Femmes d'Alger* if Picasso changed the representation of one of the prostitutes, not an explanation on what Picasso might be thinking. Furthermore, hypothesizing what the artist was thinking when he chose what he chose does not help us interpret the artwork, since we can always find a better explanation for our hypothesis. Does abduction is necessary for interpretation? Even though criticism always refers to the corpus created by an author, it uses many categories to interpret and judge. Even when critical evaluation consists in the following judgments it is difficult maintain the role of authorial intention in the interpretation:

1. An artwork would be better if the artist have made *Y* instead of *X*.
2. An artwork would be better if the some content might have been *Y* instead of *X*.

Both judgments focus on the performance done. The intention of the artist, being actual or hypothetical, does not make any difference in the evaluation. Critics have to offer reasons based on the artwork, that is, on what the artist did, not what he might be thinking when he did what he did. In ordinary circumstances I can judge the other's past action even if I do not know his intentions, if what I am judging is the action done. Arguing that some artwork "would be better if" according to the intention behind the artwork, must rely on the possibility that the author should have had another mental repertoire so he might intend to do something different. However, it is impossible to contend that the author might have another mental repertoire, since he might not even be conscious about it. Even if we have access to that content, the artwork would be a different one. For interpreting the artwork the critic only has the artwork and certain properties that can express certain meanings by themselves.