

Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning

Sherri Irvin

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Abstract

This article discusses the relationship (or lack thereof) between authors' intentions and the meaning of literary works. It considers the advantages and disadvantages of Extreme and Modest Actual Intentionalism, Conventionalism, and two versions of Hypothetical Intentionalism, and discusses the role that one's theoretical commitments about the robustness of linguistic conventions and the publicity of literary works should play in determining which view one accepts.

Introduction

Does a literary work mean just what its author intended it to mean? The short answer is, 'No.' Word meanings are constrained by linguistic conventions, and idiosyncratic intentions (whether the product of error or of stubbornness) can't simply make 'broccoli' mean 'cauliflower.'

However, the view that the author's intentions have an important role to play in fixing a work's meaning has been persistent. In this essay, I will assess the dominant views about the relationship (or lack thereof) between an author's intentions and the meaning of literary works, and discuss the role that one's commitments about the nature of literature and the robustness of linguistic conventions should play in determining which of these views one embraces.¹

Texts and Works

Most of this essay focuses on the relationship between the author's intentions and the meaning of literary works. However, a few words are in order about how something comes to be the literary work that it is in the first place.

If we construe a text as a string of characters, it is clear that a text is not yet rich enough to have a determinate meaning. A short string of characters may correspond to a word in more than one language; for instance, 'chair' means 'chair' in English, while in French it means 'flesh.' And even the same string of words in English may have a different meaning depending upon the era in which it was generated, since conventions related to word meaning shift over time. Moreover, it might be appropriate to understand the same string of English words differently, if on one occasion it is used to instantiate a political satire in prose and on the other a free verse poem.

For these reasons, it is appropriate to distinguish between mere texts and literary works: the same string of characters might potentially support more than one work. And whatever view one accepts about the role of authorial intentions in giving a particular literary work its *meaning*, one might accept a different view about the role of authorial intentions in making a text the literary work it is in the first place, or giving it its *identity*. So, for example, Levinson (1992/1996) holds that an author's actual semantic intentions do not fix the meaning of the work, but that the author's actual categorial intentions typically do determine the work's genre.

The views to be discussed below focus on the role (if any) of authorial intentions in fixing meaning, not on their role in determining such things as the language or genre of a work.

Meaning and Interpretation

This essay is primarily about meaning rather than about interpretation as a whole. Interpretation is a complex enterprise, and there is much disagreement about its appropriate aims and products. Some theorists (critical monists) hold that there can be at most one correct (or acceptable) attribution of meaning to a work, while others (critical pluralists) hold that multiple, even conflicting, meanings can acceptably be attributed to a work. Some critical pluralists (e.g., Stecker 2003) hold that the acceptability of diverse meanings is due, at least in part, to the fact that interpretation is not a single enterprise with one unified goal; instead, it can legitimately aim at a variety of different targets, which might include the meaning intended by the author, the meaning(s) careful and well-informed audiences attribute to the work, or the meanings projected onto the work by audiences engaged in virtually unconstrained interpretative play.

In what follows, I will not address the relative merits of critical monism and critical pluralism, or consider how broad and diverse the aims of interpretation should be. (Krausz 2002 is a good starting point for further reading on these issues.) I will assume that at least one of the appropriate aims of interpretation is to ascertain the meaning(s) of a work in a way that is responsive to the relevant evidence (where, as we shall see, it is controversial what counts as relevant evidence), and that attributions of meaning can be criticized when they conflict with or fail to account for that evidence. I am thus not concerned with the attribution of meaning on the basis of unconstrained interpretative play.

In this essay, I will pit a number of views about work meaning against each other, examining the degree to which they are able to account for central intuitions about meaning while avoiding pitfalls and withstanding objections. If, in the end, more than one of these views seems attractive, one response would be to hold, with Stecker, that meanings generated through more than one approach may acceptably be attributed to the work.

(Extreme) Actual Intentionalism

Actual Intentionalism (which we might call Extreme Actual Intentionalism, to distinguish it from a view to be discussed below) is the view I summarily rejected above, namely that the author's intention simply determines the meaning of the work. I will now take the time to reject it in greater detail, since the details of the debate may be instructive regarding the view we should eventually adopt. In his early work on interpretation, E. D. Hirsch suggested that 'meaning is an affair of consciousness and not of physical signs or things.' (Hirsch 1967, p. 23) Words, on this view, are simply evidence for meanings, not independent bearers of meaning in their own right; the intentions of an author are required to imbue them with meaning. A similar view has recently been defended in Irwin 1999.

Actual intentionalist approaches to interpretation have been accused of committing an 'intentional fallacy' (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946), on the grounds that they inappropriately seek evidence of the work's meaning outside the work itself. This criticism has sometimes been expressed by saying that intentionalism neglects the work itself in favor of close inspection of the author's biography. However, a true actual intentionalist is most unlikely to be guilty of this charge: as is now widely acknowledged, the best and most detailed evidence for an author's intentions with respect to work meaning is almost certain to be found in the work itself, and thus ascertaining the author's intentions will involve a very close inspection of the work.

However, there remain two central problems with the actual intentionalist account. First, it implies that, in an important sense, authors can never use words incorrectly: words always mean just what they are intended to mean. If an author confuses 'broccoli' and 'cauliflower,' and accidentally uses the word 'cauliflower' when she means to refer to the green vegetable *Brassica oleracea italica*, then this instance of 'cauliflower' simply means broccoli. The author cannot, in this case or any other, be said to have misspoken, in the sense of having failed to generate a work that means what she intends it to mean. This seems counterintuitive, to say the least. The problem generalizes to all instances of malapropism: according to actual intentionalism, 'righteous indignation' can come to mean 'righteous indignation' just because that is what the author intended it to mean. This reduces to meaninglessness the concept of malapropism, which depends on a divergence between intended meaning and utterance meaning. This is an undesirable result, since even speakers who are guilty of malapropism describe themselves as having erred once the problem is brought to their attention.

This objection reflects the intuition that generating a work with a particular meaning is, like pole vaulting, something one can fail at. Even if the vaulter's intention to surmount the bar is perfectly obvious, this does not

make the vault successful. Why should things be different with the act of creating a literary work with a particular meaning?

And now for the second problem: the actual intentionalist account threatens the publicity of literary meaning by making works susceptible of meanings that are both idiosyncratic and undetectable. If an author's intentions do not accord with the relevant linguistic conventions, it may be impossible even for a careful reader to detect what those intentions are; and if actual intentionalism is correct, this will render (some aspects of) the work's meaning inaccessible. Given that literary works are generally presented for the sake of public appreciation, it seems undesirable to suggest that certain aspects of their meaning have never been and never will be accessible even to careful and well-informed readers, and that assignments of meaning we have made with great confidence, based on our knowledge of conventional word meanings, may be incorrect, though no available evidence can reveal this to us.

To ward off this criticism, the actual intentionalist may note that intentions are not private mental events; instead, they are linked in systematic ways to behavior, and for this reason the nature of an author's intentions can be established by looking at the behavioral evidence. Unfortunately, the relationship between intentions and behavior is not tight enough, on any plausible account, to make it the case that intentions can always be detected on the basis of behavior. To have an intention is to be disposed to engage in certain behaviors if relevant circumstances obtain (or relevant defeating circumstances fail to obtain). To intend that 'cauliflower' mean broccoli is to be disposed, among other things, to give the answer 'green' if asked, 'What color is cauliflower?' But if no one ever makes such a query, the author may never engage in any behavior that distinguishes a broccoli-intention from a cauliflower-intention.

An intentionalist who is sensitive to the fact that an agent's intentions are not always revealed through the agent's actual behavior may attempt a different sort of reply. While it may be possible in certain cases for there to be an intention that is never revealed by the author's behavior, the resulting misunderstandings will never be very widespread or very serious. They will not be widespread, since the ability to generate a meaningful text in the first place requires an extensive mastery of the relevant linguistic conventions, and a general will to use words in accord with their conventional meanings. Moreover, literary works are complex, with many intratextual meaning relations; in the great majority of cases, an intention that diverges from linguistic convention will be revealed by considering different parts of the work in relation to one another. Any misunderstandings that remain after the work has been carefully studied will not be serious, since an intention that is not richly evident in a variety of ways through the work, and thus detectable by careful consideration of intratextual relationships, must be marginal to the work's meaning. After all, what difference could it make

whether a character is growing cauliflower or broccoli in the garden, if nothing ever arises within the work to reveal this?

The actual intentionalist is probably right to deny that misunderstandings that result from idiosyncratic intentions could be very widespread. But the claim that they will never be very serious is unjustified. The intentionalist's contention that important divergences between intention and convention will be revealed by careful consideration of all aspects of the work is most plausible in the case of long works such as novels and plays. In the case of a shorter literary work, such as a contemporary poem, the intratextual meaning relations may be so sparse that there is no reasonable expectation that anomalous word use will be revealed by consulting the rest of the work. Had William Carlos Williams, whether through obstinacy or through error, intended the meaning 'peaches' in using the word 'plums,' nothing else in *This is just to say* would have revealed this unconventional word use, but the meaning of the poem would be crucially different (on the actual intentionalist view). Even in the case of a novel, a detail that is mentioned only once may on occasion be pivotal to interpretation; and when this is the case, there may be nothing else in the work that reveals an anomaly in usage.

How serious one takes this problem to be will depend on one's level of commitment to the idea that literary works are public entities whose meanings ought to be in principle accessible to the diligent, well-informed reader. Those (e.g., Carroll 1992) who see literary works as occupying the same spectrum as ordinary conversation, rather than as part of a distinct communicative enterprise, tend to be relatively unconcerned about the epistemological limitations of intentionalist views. Others, moved by the 'nature of the practice of art itself' to think that 'the actual author must always intend ... that [the work's] meaning be borne in a sufficiently public fashion that he need not personally accompany it to explain the meaning he placed there' (Nathan 1992, p. 198), will think that even one who takes authors' intentions seriously should reject the idea that the meaning of a literary work could be epistemically inaccessible in the way that actual intentionalism implies.

Regardless of one's take on the epistemological issue, the initial problem, that actual intentionalism reduces the notion of authorial error to nonsense, seems to place actual intentionalism at odds with firm and widely held intuitions that do not depend on prior theoretical commitments about the nature of literary works.

Modest Actual Intentionalism

Modest Actual Intentionalism (see especially Carroll 2000) avoids many of the problems of Extreme Actual Intentionalism by acknowledging that linguistic conventions have an important role to play in fixing meaning. According to modest intentionalism, linguistic conventions often permit more than one meaning for a given work. When the author's intention coincides

with one of these conventional meanings, the author's intention fixes the work's meaning. In cases where the author intends a meaning that is not conventionally permitted, the modest intentionalist may say either that (MAI1) the affected portion of the work is meaningless or that (MAI2) in such cases, the work has the meaning(s) indicated by convention (and, if there is more than one such meaning, it is ambiguous) (Stecker 2003). Modest intentionalism acknowledges that the author's intention is not sufficient to imbue the work with a meaning it cannot conventionally support, but at the same time preserves the idea that the author of a work does have a degree of special authority with respect to its meaning.

Both versions of the theory have their difficulties. MAI1 leaves strange islands of meaninglessness in the midst of works that appear to be meaningful. So, if an author intended the meaning 'green' but wrote 'black' instead,² MAI1 would have us see 'black' as a string of nonsense letters. (Or perhaps we could see it as a color word, but one failing to specify a particular color.) On this view, we would be barred from invoking the linguistic conventions that clearly do specify a meaning for the string of letters 'black' in English. This seems an undesirable result, especially given that modest intentionalism admits that conventions have a legitimate role to play in fixing meaning. MAI1 also reintroduces, albeit with a more limited scope, an epistemological problem. It may sometimes be the case that although we have attributed what seems an uncontroversial meaning to the work through the application of linguistic conventions, we are seriously mistaken: although no evidence may be available to reveal this to us (for reasons described in the previous section), some aspect of the work is in fact meaningless.

MAI2 is in certain respects more attractive. On this approach, when the author's intended meaning is not consistent with some passage in the work, the passage need not be meaningless; instead, its meaning is fixed by the relevant linguistic conventions (unless it will not support any conventionally assigned meaning). How we should understand the implications of this view depends on how pervasive we take the phenomenon of ambiguity to be. How often is it the case that application of the linguistic conventions to a work leaves open multiple meanings, such that the author's intention is required to choose among them? Hirsch believed that without appeal to the author's intention, ambiguity is ubiquitous, since his notion of linguistic conventions was a very thin one: he suggests, for example, that the sentence 'My car ran out of gas' supports the interpretation 'My Pullman dashed from a cloud of argon.' (Hirsch 1967, p. 225) But we might hold, instead, that ambiguity will be relatively unusual, since (a) within a literary work, context tends to rule out most meaning alternatives and/or (b) linguistic conventions (perhaps combined with relevant and widely held background knowledge) are more robust than Hirsch believed, such that they typically indicate a salient or default meaning (and not just a bunch of strictly permissible meanings that are roughly on a par with one another). A more robust notion of linguistic conventions will seem attractive insofar as one tends to think that the appropriate interpretation of 'My car ran out of gas,'

in the absence of contextual defeaters, is 'My automobile's supply of gasoline was completely depleted.'³

If we take ambiguity to be pervasive, then on MAI2 the author's intention will have an important role to play in staving it off. But an objector may wonder, why should we allow that the author can wave away ambiguity by intentional fiat, rather than doing what a competent author is supposed to do: namely, change the work in such a way that multiple meanings are no longer conventionally permitted? Moreover, the epistemological problem seems to rear its head again: in cases where some passage admits of multiple meanings, there may be nothing in the work that tells us what the author intended. Finally, in cases where the author's intention is unconventional, the problem of excessive ambiguity may return – though such cases may be rather uncommon, since (for reasons discussed in the previous section) authors' intentions usually do coincide with meanings that are conventionally permitted.

If ambiguity is not very pervasive, then we have a truly modest intentionalism, on which there are few cases in which we must appeal to the author's intention to establish the work's meaning. On this construal of MAI2, there will rarely be more than one meaning permitted by convention; and the work will bear the unique conventionally permitted meaning whether the author intends it or not, since in cases where the author intends some other meaning MAI2 has the work revert back to the conventional meaning in any case.

On such a construal, MAI2 begins to look very similar to Conventionalism (to be discussed below), the view that the meaning of a literary work is fixed simply by considering the work in relation to the relevant linguistic conventions. (Kiefer 2005 makes a similar observation.) The only time that the author's intentions will play any role in fixing meaning, on this view, is in the unusual case where ambiguity persists after we have carefully studied the relevant information supplied by context and robust linguistic conventions. And this raises two questions. First, if the work allows for more than one meaning in such circumstances, why should we refrain from saying that the work simply is ambiguous? Why is it not possible to have unintended ambiguities, just as it is (according to MAI2) possible to have unintended conventionally determined meanings? Second, once we have seen that linguistic conventions can supply meanings even in cases where they do not correspond to the author's intention, why should we embrace a theory that proposes such an odd disjunction in how meaning is fixed? Perhaps we should prefer the more elegant approach offered by a theory suggesting that meaning is determined in a similar way in every instance.

Anti-intentionalism, or Conventionalism

In response to a number of the concerns raised above, Conventionalism assigns meaning without considering the author's semantic intentions,

whether actual or hypothetical.⁴ To know what a work means, on this view, we need only consider it in light of the relevant linguistic conventions (and perhaps some appropriate background knowledge about such things as the places and historical events mentioned in the work).⁵ Once it is admitted that linguistic conventions play a role in the determination of meaning, the conventionalist suggests, it should be admitted that conventions can do the whole job, and without incurring any of the difficulties of (extreme or modest) actual intentionalism.

We have already seen that by invoking a robust notion of linguistic convention, we can answer the Hirschian concern that linguistic conventions are not sufficient to fix determinate meanings in most cases. And in the unusual cases where ambiguity persists after robust linguistic conventions have been applied, the conventionalist may (a) simply say that the work is ambiguous, or (b) fix a determinate meaning by invoking something other than the author's intention: so, for example, the conventionalist might advocate choosing whichever meaning will imbue the work with the most aesthetic value. (S. Davies 1982)

The most compelling objections to conventionalism gravitate around the concern that forcing literary works into a one-size-fits-all mold is not appropriate. First of all, a work may be deployed within more than one linguistic community; and the robust linguistic conventions of these communities may differ or even conflict. In such a case, how are we to determine which conventions are applicable? Depending on how fragmented linguistic communities are taken to be, this concern may turn out to be quite serious: conventions may differ from one city or neighborhood to the next, such that different meanings are generated for the same work read by competent readers in Oklahoma City and in Wichita. The worry might be averted by downgrading to a thin notion of convention, such that the only rules that count as linguistic conventions are very widely shared; but, of course, this will reintroduce the problem of ubiquitous ambiguity, since thinly construed conventions often aren't sufficient to rule out all but one meaning. Another possibility would be to say that the relevant conventions are determined by the author's own linguistic community. But an author may belong to more than one linguistic community; and, in any case, this problem reintroduces an appeal to the author that conventionalism, especially in its more extreme versions, is designed to eschew. While hypothetical intentionalism and, to a lesser degree, modest actual intentionalism also rely on linguistic conventions to do part of the work of fixing meaning, and are thus susceptible to a similar worry, they can more comfortably employ the strategy of solving the problem by appeal to the author.

Second, it is unclear that the conventionalist can allow for the possibility of an author's using words in an idiosyncratic (or unconventional) way. Conventionalism seems to require that words and sentences bear meanings that are permitted by linguistic conventions (whether thinly or robustly construed). But it is not uncommon, in literary works, for an author to use a

word in an idiosyncratic way (that is, in a way not permitted by linguistic conventions on any construal) while also providing ample intratextual clues to the idiosyncratic meaning. An author may, it seems, coin a word or use a word with a meaning different from or in addition to its conventional meaning(s), as long as other aspects of the work (or aspects of the author's other works) provide evidence of this idiosyncratic usage. It is not clear that conventionalism can account for our tendency, in such cases, to see works as having meanings that are not conventionally permitted.⁶ Of course, it is through the application of linguistic conventions to a work that we uncover the evidence that a word is used unconventionally; but it is not clear that a full-blown conventionalism can justify using this evidence as the basis for generating a new, local rule, opposed to the relevant linguistic convention, that will allow us to assign the appropriate idiosyncratic meaning. Since brilliant idiosyncrasies of meaning are among the chief delights of some literary works, inability to account for them is a serious problem in a theory of literary meaning.⁷

Hypothetical Intentionalism

Concerns about idiosyncratic meaning point to a broader issue: literature is written by authors, not by generic sentence-generators cranking out texts in accord with linguistic conventions. To understand a work appropriately, perhaps we must see it as the product of an author: a particular human being in a certain socio-historical context, who writes with a certain style, tends to use words in certain ways, brings certain background knowledge and experiences to bear, and has written a body of works which may inform one another. Extreme actual intentionalism, of course, dealt well with these concerns about authorship, since the intentions relevant to fixing meaning were those of the actual historical personage who produced the work in question. Conventionalism, though, appears to jettison this sense of an author as a unified individual whose meanings may not be capturable by applying general conventions.⁸

Hypothetical Intentionalism (HI) attempts to bring together the strengths of intentionalism and conventionalism while avoiding their weaknesses. Though hypothetical intentionalism is often spoken of as though it were one theory, there are in fact two species. Actual Author HI (Levinson 1992/1996; Tolhurst 1979) suggests that the meaning of a work is determined by the best hypotheses that a careful, appropriately informed audience would form about the actual author's intentions. Postulated Author HI (Nehamas 1981, 1986, 1987; see also Booth 1961) suggests that the meaning of the work is determined by the intentions that a careful, appropriately informed audience would attribute to a postulated author who, while resembling the actual author in many respects, is also assumed to possess additional characteristics such as full competence in the language that allow the postulated author's intentions to account as fully as possible for the work's features.

Actual author HI and postulated author HI have a number of features in common.⁹ Both suggest that meaning is fixed not by anyone's actual intentions, but by attributions of authorial intention made by a competent audience. And the methods of attribution recommended by the two views coincide to a significant degree. Both agree that the work should be considered in light of the relevant linguistic conventions (probably robustly construed)¹⁰ and background knowledge, and that in forming hypotheses about the author's intentions with regard to a given work, it is appropriate to consult the author's other works, as well as public declarations about the works (though statements of intention contained within these declarations need not be taken as decisive). Consideration of publicly available biographical information about the author is also permitted by both views, though they (particularly actual author HI) will tend to eschew consultation of such things as private journals, on the grounds that statements made privately cannot determine the meaning of a public entity such as a literary work.

However, actual author HI and postulated author HI also diverge in important respects. The point of the method, according to actual author HI, is to form hypotheses, based on relevant, publicly available evidence, about what the real, historical person with a particular set of characteristics would most likely have meant in generating a given literary text in a particular context. Postulated author HI, on the other hand, is not concerned with the intentions of a real, historical person. Instead, the aim of postulated author HI is to construct an idealized author whose intentions are able to account as fully as possible for the work's features. The idealized author is fully competent in her use of language (or at least as competent as she can be, given aberrations found within the work) and is aware of all the meaning potential of the work she has generated and of its relationships to other works, historical events, and so forth. To the extent possible, postulated author HI explains all the features of the work in terms of the agency of this postulated author, not in terms of accident or error, even if our knowledge about the actual author makes accident or error more plausible as real-life explanations. Postulated author HI will, for example, allow us to identify an instance of allusion, on the grounds that the postulated author is fully aware of meaning relations among different works, even if the actual author did not intend it. For this reason, postulated author HI might be said to allow us to appreciate literary works more fully: it permits us to make sense of, and thus assign meaning to, features of the work that, in relation to the actual author's intentions, may have been purely accidental.

Hypothetical intentionalism, in both its forms, avoids the epistemological problems associated with extreme and modest actual intentionalism, since it holds meaning to be fixed by competent readers' best hypotheses or attributions of intention, which are in principle epistemically available. It also allows for the possibility that a work may bear an unconventional meaning, as long as the work and other publicly available information provide evidence of this meaning.

Both actual intentionalists and conventionalists have suggested that the distinctions between hypothetical intentionalism and their own views are arbitrary. Actual intentionalists suggest that actual author HI is arbitrary in prohibiting the consultation of the author's private communications; after all, if one is interested in forming reliable hypotheses about the actual author's intentions, why restrict access to some of the relevant evidence? Actual author HI appeals to a view that literary works have been released into the public domain, and their meanings are thus subject to publicity constraints; but actual intentionalists, who see literary communication as more closely analogous to ordinary conversation, find this publicity assumption unconvincing. (Carroll 1992) In a related vein, the actual intentionalist will point out that ordinarily, hypotheses are of interest only insofar as they track truth. Why, then, should we take the hypothesized intention rather than the actual intention to establish the meaning, when there is evidence to indicate that the two are different? This worry becomes especially acute when it is pointed out that insofar as the hypothesized and genuine intentions differ, the hypothesized intentions cannot have played any causal role in generating the work's features. This makes it especially hard to see how the hypothesized intentions could help to explain the work's features. (Carroll 2000)

Since postulated author HI's aim is explicitly to give a normative rather than causal explanation of the work's features, and since postulated author HI clearly does not aim to track the intentions of the actual author, it is less likely to draw this sort of fire from the actual intentionalist.¹¹ It is most vulnerable to challenges from conventionalists who suggest that postulated author HI is really just a sophisticated conventionalism. After all, the conventionalist might ask, what is it to assume that the author uses language competently but to hold that the meanings intended by the author are conventional ones, or at least that an examination of the text in light of the relevant conventions will reveal the intended meanings? Moreover, the conventionalist might say, a charitably construed conventionalism can allow that the author's personal history and other works affect which conventions are relevant, and thus affect the work's meaning. Although early conventionalist views eschewed all reference to the author, a sophisticated conventionalism need not do so.

The conventionalist may well be right to suggest that a conventionalism worthy of the name could converge on postulated author HI; but this is hardly a criticism of postulated author HI. Hypothetical intentionalism appropriately draws our attention to the fact that literary works are produced by authors, whose identities may legitimately affect meaning (partly by determining which linguistic conventions are relevant to a given work). Postulated author HI goes one step further, allowing us to see a given work as having all the meaning properties that a maximally competent author would have intended it to have, even if some of these clearly were not intended by the actual author. This move will be attractive to those who

believe that a literary work, once released to an audience, is an autonomous entity which can transcend boundaries imposed by the mind of the historical person who created it.

Conclusion

Extreme actual intentionalism is generally thought unattractive because it does not acknowledge that linguistic conventions play an important role in constraining work meaning. Modest actual intentionalism will be most attractive to those persuaded by the idea that literary communication and ordinary conversation lie on a continuum, and who are not bothered by the theoretical inelegance of a disjunctive view about how meaning is fixed. Depending on whether linguistic conventions are thinly or robustly construed, modest actual intentionalism will inherit some of the problems of extreme actual intentionalism or converge, to a significant degree, with conventionalism.

Conventionalism should be attractive to those persuaded that literary works are public entities, such that their meanings can be neither enhanced nor diminished by the aspirations or limitations of their authors. Hypothetical intentionalism preserves the idea of the publicity of literary works while allowing that the identity of the author, as a person with a certain life story and (possibly) a body of other works, may play a role in fixing a work's meaning. Postulated author hypothetical intentionalism may be equivalent to a sophisticated conventionalism that permits appeal to publicly accessible information about the author's life and works; this view, by allowing that a work has the meanings that would have been intended by a maximally competent author, may serve to enhance appreciation of literary works. In some instances, this will amount to giving a work 'credit' for meaning properties that it has by sheer accident – and some, notably those with actual intentionalist leanings, will complain that such credit is given where none is due.¹²

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Biography

Sherri Irvin received her Ph.D. from Princeton University and is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oklahoma. She specializes in interpretation and in the metaphysics and epistemology of visual artworks. She has published papers in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and the *British Journal of Aesthetics*.

¹ Due to space limitations and personal proclivities, this will be an examination of the logical space of the debate rather than its historical progression. I will present what I take to be the most compelling positions, regardless of whether they have been occupied in the same form by actual participants in the debate.

² This example is discussed in Carroll 2000 at p. 85.

³ One can, of course, imagine a context (perhaps within a science fiction novel) in which this default meaning would be defeated by contextual cues, such that 'gas' comes to mean 'argon' and so forth. This is what it means to say that the relevant conventions permit the sentence to have multiple meanings. But this does not imply that every utterance should be treated as though a meaning permissible given the presence of elaborate contextual defeaters is on a par with the default meaning that the text possesses in the absence of such defeaters.

⁴ However, as mentioned above, a conventionalist might allow that the author's actual categorial intentions have a role to play in fixing the *identity* of the work.

⁵ Linguistic conventions can operate at different levels in the determination of meaning: while some linguistic conventions simply specify word meanings, others might (in conjunction with background knowledge) determine that, within a particular context, a sentence must be seen as ironic, and thus as expressing the opposite of its conventionally-determined default sentence meaning.

⁶ While there is a convention allowing for explicitly stipulated unconventional meanings (as in a Humpty Dumpty-ish proposal to use 'glory' to mean 'a nice knock-down argument'), it is not clear that linguistic conventions can allow us to see a word as bearing an unconventional meaning simply because of consistent unconventional usage on the part of an author or literary character.

⁷ An anonymous reviewer has suggested that the conventions of literary interpretation might allow us to extract from the author's work (or oeuvre) a set of local linguistic rules that differ from ordinary linguistic conventions, and to apply these rules in establishing the work's meaning. If this is so, then a conventionalism that admits of both literary and linguistic conventions might be able to account for idiosyncrasies of meaning. As I discuss below, a version of conventionalism that allows for the postulation of author-bound linguistic rules appears to converge on a version of hypothetical intentionalism; and the resulting view is an attractive one.

⁸ Even a version of conventionalism that allows that the author's actual categorial intentions have a role to play in fixing the identity of the work must, by definition, deny that the author's (possibly idiosyncratic) actual semantic intentions can play a similar role in fixing the work's meaning.

⁹ Opinions differ about whether Levinson's view is in fact a version of actual author HI, or simply located somewhere along the spectrum of postulated author HI. There is textual evidence for both possibilities: Levinson explicitly says that his view is about hypothetical intentions attributed to the "historical author" (1996, p. 179), but later suggests that we should disregard evidence from the author's private journals and invokes the possibility of a distinction between "what Kafka the writer is communicating" and "what Kafka the person might oddly have been intending to mean" (1996, p. 186). In the spirit of exploring the logical space of the debate, I will discuss both actual author HI and postulated author HI despite the possibility that Levinson's view is best understood as invoking a postulated author who rather closely resembles, but is not identical with, the historical author. For what it's worth, in e-mail correspondence Levinson has indicated that he sees his view as a version of actual author HI.

¹⁰ As discussed above, Levinson's (1992/1996) version of actual author HI holds that the author's actual categorial intentions have a role to play in specifying such things as the genre to which the work belongs, which may help to determine which linguistic conventions are relevant to hypothesis formation.

¹¹ Of course, an actual intentionalist may find postulated author HI's explanatory project unattractive for other reasons, particularly insofar as it seems to assume a difference between literary and ordinary communication.

¹² I am grateful to Aaron Meskin, Martin Montminy and an anonymous reviewer for helpful feedback.