"Authors' Intentions, Literary Interpretation, and Literary Value"

Abstract

I discuss three theories regarding the interpretation of fictional literature: actual intentionalism (author's intentions constrain how their works are to be interpreted), hypothetical intentionalism (interpretations are justified as those most likely intended by a postulated author), and the value maximizing theory (interpretations presenting the work in the most favorable light are to be preferred). I claim that actual intentionalism cannot account for the appropriateness or legitimacy of some interpretations, or alternatively that it must be weakened to the point that the considerations raised by hypothetical intentionalists and value maximizers come into play. And I argue that hypothetical intentionalism either reduces to the value maximizing theory, which provides a more accurate and clearer expression of the position than does hypothetical intentionalism, or it mistakenly attributes to hypothesized intentions the kind of force that attaches only to actual intentions.

The practice of interpreting fictional literature is very varied. Some commentators interpret the work as a symptom of its author's psychology and values or use it primarily to illustrate theories first developed in other connections. Some playfully depart from or deconstruct the work. Some are interested in its place in the canon. Some regard authors as dead and the interpreter as free to complete the work as she chooses through the readings she offers. Some reflect on the body of interpretations the work has received and on the significance it has thereby come to hold for later audiences. Some aim to appreciate the author's work for its own sake, as a work of art.
Despite this variety, many Anglo-American analytic philosophers of art have focused their attention on only three theories concerning the interpretation of literary fictions: actual intentionalism, according to which the author's intentions, when successfully executed, determine—or constrain, at least—the proper interpretation of her work; hypothetical intentionalism, which holds that the interpreter is to surmise what a hypothetical author could have intended the work to mean; and the value maximizing theory (also known as conventionalism), which maintains that the piece is to be interpreted in ways that maximize its value as a work of literature.¹

These theories of interpretation share important common ground. They regard the object of interpretation as fictional literary works and they identify these as the works of their authors. In other words, they are committed to a contextualist ontology for literary works; those works take their identity from the circumstances of their creation, including facts of their authorship, of the literary conventions, styles, and genres, as well as the wider linguistic practices, of the time. (Advocates of these theories reject the view that literary works evolve in their identities after their creation and an alternative account according to which there are no works as such, only interpretations.) In interpreting a literary work, the critic should consider the words and sentences that comprise it not only with reference to the language used but also in terms of meanings they possessed at the time of writing, so that conventions, understandings, and traditions they presuppose as their background are appreciated, and so that, in general, they are appropriately situated in the wider discourse of their time of presentation. And these theories of interpretation agree about the goal of literary interpretation, which is to understand and appreciate the work as a piece of literature, usually in a complete rather than a partial fashion.

As a consequence of these shared commitments, these theories put to one side many of the interpretative practices listed above. Interpretations that consider the work's words and sentences as if they are bare, context-less word-strings or calligraphic patterns are interpretations not of the literary work but merely of its text or inscription. Ones that focus on meanings and associations the work's text takes on after its creation are similar. Meanwhile, interpretations that are partial or that are not directed to understanding and appreciating the work on its own terms are also not covered.
There are a number of ways in which this lack of inclusiveness could be justified; apart, that is, from arguing that literary practice is often fundamentally misguided and illegitimate in its targets and purposes. It could be argued that the interpretative approaches described by actual intentionalism, hypothetical intentionalism, and the maximizing theory are ones with a special importance in that they are fundamental to the production and consumption of literature as such. Their centrality might be a matter of history and convention, of understanding works in terms of the traditions and canons they emulate or challenge. Or they could be central in that we can make most sense of the practice of literature only if a concern with works as of their authors is regarded as primary. After all, if interpreters do not typically respect literary works as the creations of their historically situated authors, there is no reason why authors would develop and exercise the skills that make those literary works worth an audience's time and effort. In any case, even if they are not fundamental in either of the ways just suggested, nevertheless it is interesting to examine the relation between the theories based on these widely used interpretative approaches.

My concern in this paper is with the relations and tensions between the three theories under consideration. Literary critics pursue all three approaches by asking what was meant, what could have been meant (even where this differs from what was meant), and what ways of reading the work are valuable. But the philosophical proponents of these theories regard them as opposed. Actual intentionalists reject those interpretations that are not licensed by the author's intentions. Hypothetical intentionalists and value maximizers deny that interpretations should focus exclusively on meanings intended by authors. They differ in their accounts about the purpose of literary interpretation, however. Whereas value maximizers hold that interpretations are directed primarily to uncovering the work's merits, hypothetical intentionalists characterize this goal as subsidiary to that of exploring what the work could mean.

Most of the philosophers who debate the differences between these theories see actual intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism as the main contenders. My own preference, though, is for the value maximizing theory. I claim that actual intentionalism cannot account for the appropriateness or legitimacy of some interpretations, or alternatively that it must be weakened to the point that the considerations raised by
hypothetical intentionalists and value maximizers come into play. And I argue that hypothetical intentionalism either reduces to the value maximizing theory, which provides a more accurate and clearer expression of the position than does hypothetical intentionalism, or it mistakenly attributes to hypothesized intentions the kind of force that attaches only to actual intentions.

**Actual intentionalism**

On the face of it, actual intentionalism is the strongest contender for a theory of literary interpretation. Here is one reason commonly offered in support of it: the goal of communication is the exchange of information. Where utterances that are used in the service of communication might be interpreted in several ways, we try to isolate what the utterer meant or intended. Indeed, if she misspeaks, so that what she meant to say—the utterer's meaning—comes apart from what she said in fact—the utterance meaning—we are liable to become interested in both and in the difference between them precisely because the flow of communication has been interrupted.⁶ Where we desire to keep the conversation going, it is what the speaker meant, not what she said, that is of ultimate concern. It is plausible to regard artworks as communications from their authors. Indeed, leading actual intentionalists make the claim central. Noël Carroll goes so far as to describe literary artworks as conversations. As such, an author's intended meanings must trump ones he would disavow when it comes to the interpretation of his work.

The actual intentionalist maintains that we often appreciate the intentions of literary authors and that their literary works typically provide the best evidence of what those intentions are. To avoid the potential circularity that goes with arguing that the contents of such works are determined by their authors' intentions and that such intentions can be identified automatically on the basis of the works' intelligibility, the actual intentionalist must allow that authors sometimes fail to carry through their intentions successfully to the works they create and that this is sometimes detectable from inspection of those works.⁷

At this stage, advocates of actual intentionalism take one of two paths. One side maintains that interpretation should concern itself with what was intended, even if the
intention failed. It might even be held that the work still means what was intended, though this meaning cannot be detected in the work. By contrast with this extreme form of actual intentionalism, a more moderate version allows that, where the intention is not realized, the work does not mean what was intended and interpretation should focus on what the work means, if it means anything, rather than on what was unsuccessfully intended.

The moderate version of actual intentionalism is more plausible than the extreme one—and it is the moderate form on which I concentrate in what follows—but it is worth noting this: the extreme version of actual intentionalism remains faithful to the theme that the interpretation of literature is like the comprehension of ordinary linguistic communications. Just as, if we wish to continue the conversational thread when the utterer misspeaks we should attend to what she means rather than to what she says, so, according to the extreme actual intentionalists, the literary critic should cleave to what the author intended even where this was not successfully carried through to his work. By contrast, the moderate account already has retreated somewhat from the claimed parallels with ordinary communication.

We can ask: what counts as success when it comes to the author's attempt to realize her intentions as regards the meaning of the work she creates? Two standards can be considered. According to the first, she is successful if the intended meaning is the one most likely to secure uptake from the appropriate literary audience. The second view sets a lower measure: the author is successful if the work can be read in accord with the intended meaning, even if other meanings are as or more likely to be attributed to the work by the appropriate audience. Given the tougher standard, the audience cannot simply assume that the meaning most likely to secure uptake is the one the author intended. And by the weaker one, the author's success is not always obvious. These observations provoke the question: what is admissible from outside the work as evidence of what was meant in it?

Advocates of actual intentionalism tend to admit all sources of potential evidence, including private diaries, letters, and the like. Authorial intentions avowed in such places determine the work's meaning only if they coincide with what in the work is likely to
secure uptake or with some meaning the work can bear, depending on which standard for success is adopted. Either way, intentions about the work's meaning expressed in sources external to it must be checked against what is in the work. By contrast, hypothetical intentionalists and value maximizers are more inclined to insist that the work should be both autonomous and self-sustaining, with its meaning apparent within it, as it were. Usually they regard evidence from private sources, such as authors' diaries, as inadmissible. If it is necessary to appeal to such sources to discover what she intended, the author failed to convey her meaning to the work, they suggest.

Yet even the most emphatic opponents of actual intentionalism are forced to concede that some of a work's contents are determined by relations holding between its purely interior elements and matters lying beyond its boundaries. And those who distinguish the work from its text by reference to the circumstances under which the work was created along with the wider literary and cultural setting in which this occurred cannot prohibit on principled grounds consultation of external documents and sources in the development of literary interpretations. The issue, then, is not whether information from beyond the work can be brought to bear on its proper interpretation, but instead, where the line between admissible and inadmissible types of evidence is to be drawn. Actual intentionalists appeal to any sources indicative of the writer's wishes and intentions. The philosophical opponents of actual intentionalism tend to discount sources that were not in the public domain at the time of the work's creation.

As so far presented, actual intentionalism faces some challenges. I now consider these and how it might respond to them.

Objections to actual intentionalism entailing that all forms of linguistic communication fail can be rejected as self-refuting. This disposes of the kind of point undergraduates are liable to raise: that the intentions (and mental events) of others are in principle unknowable.\textsuperscript{11}

A second complaint is that actual intentionalism must accept that the work can be a bearer of secret meanings, which the objector thinks should be discounted in works of literature. Here is how the objection can be developed: there is the possibility that the author uses codes to communicate with a closed coterie of her friends or associates. They
know to combine every thousandth word to form a message that will be missed by the wider public. Since the hidden message is also intended, it should be recognized by the actual intentionalist as part of the work's meaning and, hence, as a proper target for interpretation. But this approach is too liberal. It treats as primary any and all communicative intentions the author has. It should attach importance only to those intentions of the author that can find expression through their meshing with or reacting demonstrably against established, wider practices of literary production and interpretation.

Most actual intentionalists simply bite this bullet. And in defense, they point out that the audience for literature is usually no less interested in hidden messages and meanings than in the work's plainer, more explicit contents.

I believe the objection has more force than this easy reply allows. I also think the actual intentionalist does have a response, though I am not aware of any actual intentionalist who employs it. The actual intentionalist could agree with the objector that private codes and meanings are to be disregarded in interpreting a work as literature, and he could deny that actual intentionalism commits its advocates to treating all of the author's intentions as regards his work's meaning as on a par. The actual intentionalist could accept that literary artworks belong to the public sphere and that only those communications addressed to the appropriate audience are the proper subject of interpretations.

Here is how the argument might be presented: suppose that the author of the state's constitution included in it a coded, private message intended only for her spouse, to the effect that all presidents should be impeached. That message surely would add interest to the document if knowledge of its inclusion became public, but this does not mean that the impeachment principle is enshrined in the constitution, along with the rules and rights explicitly stated there in the ordinary way. The private communication does not justify an interpretation of the constitution, qua foundational legal document, as requiring that presidents should be impeached. Something similar is true for literary works. They are to be approached and interpreted as works available to the art public, not exclusively to a narrow circle of the artist's acquaintances. Not all communications successfully
implemented within the work are equally apt objects for its interpretation as a work of literature.\textsuperscript{12}

With that said, the actual intentionalist can return to the offensive by observing that authors often do intend to send different messages to different sectors of their audience; for example, to warm the hearts of their enslaved compatriots even as they tell a story their oppressors can recognize only as a more general tale of historical injustice. This does not violate the prohibition against private codes, however. The enslaved compatriots have a richer appreciation of the work because they possess more of the relevant background understandings. The author's work can be multi-layered, with only some parts of the intended public possessing the specific knowledge of local circumstances and culturally relative symbols and behaviors to penetrate its depths.\textsuperscript{13}

The complaint that actual intentionalism allows for private codes or meanings that should be excluded from the realm of literary interpretation holds that, in the relevant respect, actual intentionalism is too broad in the range of interpretations it encompasses. A more common objection is that, in other, more frequent cases, actual intentionalism is too narrow in what it permits. When we have exhausted the meanings that authors successfully intended as regards their works' meanings, still many plausible, interesting, and apparently legitimate interpretations are not accounted for. By excluding unintended meanings, the actual intentionalist unduly restricts the literary interpreter.

This is not to say that actual intentionalism can countenance only one meaning for a literary work. There are a number of ways in which it can accept multiple or disjunctive interpretations. For instance, it is not uncommon that authors intend their works to be ambiguous or complex, and thereby to encourage a spread of interpretations some of which may conflict.

The objector persists: literary works appreciated and identified as the works of their authors can legitimately accommodate a wider range of interpretations than is countenanced by a theory that excludes all those meanings not explicitly intended by its author.

The actual intentionalist can make two responses. The first insists that these further interpretations should not be attempted, or anyway, should not be represented as being of
the literary work in question. This line is unattractive. It seems arbitrarily restrictive and it ignores the fact that, unlike ludic interpretations that may be of the work's text or inscription but are not of the work as authored, the ones being rejected here are respectful of the work, the circumstances of its production, and of what was explicitly intended and carried through to the work. They go on to explore the possibility of further meanings that were not explicitly considered by the author but that are compatible with what was, and they do so in the service of providing a deeper appreciation and richer valuation of the author's work.

The second option involves a weakening of actual intentionalism. Earlier I suggested that the moderate actual intentionalist can accept that a work is not always meaningless even if the author failed in (some of) his intentions. As a result, the moderate actual intentionalist can make room for meanings that are not explicitly intended and allow that these are legitimate targets for interpretation. After all, authors are often willing to receive such interpretations of their work, while admitting that they were not explicitly entertained at the time of writing. And authors often intend not just that their works mean this or that but also that those works be complex and multi-interpretable in ways that go beyond their own immediate conceptions of them.

This weakening of the position involves a shift, from holding that interpretation should concern itself only with what was intended to the view that interpretation can consider any meanings apparent in the work that are not disavowed by the author or that would not have been disavowed had he the chance to consider them, either at the time of writing or subsequently. The move is from a position holding that the author's intentions alone determine the content of the object of interpretation to one excluding only those possible meanings the author does or would reject as incompatible with his project. According to this view, authors' intentions are defeaters of interpreted meanings, not determiners of the meanings to be identified by interpretations.

Call this new version of the theory "weak actual intentionalism". There are two observations to make about weak actual intentionalism. Evidence about what the author might have excluded (had she had the chance to consider it) is far more contestable than is the usual kinds of evidence in favor of what was explicitly intended. As a result, the
epistemic security or warrant for interpretations is reduced along with the weakening of the theory. The second point is more important. Notice how much farther weak actual intentionalism has strayed from the model of ordinary communication with which we started. In ordinary conversation we do not consider all the meanings that can be put upon utterances except those that would likely be disavowed by the speaker. Our focus is more on utterer's meaning than on utterance meaning. The utterer's meaning is determined by her intentions; that is, by actual ones, not merely by counterfactually possible ones. Weak actual intentionalism shifts the focus of literary interpretation from the utterer to the utterance. Indeed, it concedes that the meanings to be interpreted include, as well as those explicitly and successfully intended, ones that are not considered by the author at all, so long as they would not be disavowed were the author to become aware of them. With long and complex works, or authors who rely more on inspiration and intuitive feel that on careful calculation, interpretation might be little concerned with what was actually intended.

It could be thought that weakening the parallel to be drawn between ordinary communications and literature is of no great moment if other arguments can be offered in favor of actual intentionalism. Before evaluating the move toward weak actual intentionalism, I consider some of these. They turn out to be easily accommodated or deflected by advocates of hypothetical intentionalism and value maximizing, so they fail to strengthen the case for actual intentionalism.

Some of an author's intentions seem to be essential to her work's identity and thereby central to the identification of the appropriate object of interpretation. For instance, she determines its category or genre and its title. Independently written texts that are otherwise identical might instance very different works if one is a comedy and the other a tragedy, or if one is in free verse and the other is a haiku, or if one is titled "Innocence Lost" and the other is called "Independence Gained". In addition, other of the author's intentions seem to determine elements of her work's content that are, in turn, implicated in its identity. Irony, allusion, and quotation are all essentially intentional. For example, I can quote someone only if they said what I utter, I know this, and I make a reference to their utterance in voicing the same words. To be credible as an account of the author's
work, an interpretation cannot be indifferent to the possible presence of irony, allusion, and quotation within it.

The opponent of actual intentionalism could challenge the claim that artists' intentions determine the categories of their works. Similarly for titles and the rest. More convincingly, she can concede that an artist's intentions settle crucial aspects of his work's identity while denying a correspondingly determinative role to his intentions as regards how his work is to be interpreted. This is the line taken by Levinson: "an author's intention to mean something in or by a text T (a semantic intention) is one thing, while an author's intention that T be classified, taken, approached in some specific or general way (a categorial intention) is quite another … Semantic intentions … do not determine meaning, but categorial intentions, such as concern a literature maker's basic conception of what is made, do in general determine how a text is to be conceptualized and approached on a fundamental level and thus indirectly affect what it will resultingly say or express". Insofar as the author's categorial intentions control the identity and contents of his work, they must be acknowledged by any interpreter whose goal is to interpret the work as authored. But once this object of interpretation has been accurately located, the author's further, semantic intentions, even if successfully realized, need not limit the search for plausible and superior alternative interpretations of what it could mean.

What of work features—representation, quotation, irony, allusion, allegory, and symbolism, to name the more obvious candidates—that appear to require of the author that she had the appropriate intentions? An actual intentionalists would suggest that the relevant intentions do affect the semantic contents of authors' works in ways that should constrain the proper interpretation of those works. The opponent of actual intentionalism has three options for countering this suggestion. A first is to argue that the relevant qualities do not in fact depend on intentions. I reject this line and accept that an utterance is ironic, for example, only if it is actually intended to be so by its speaker.

The remaining two approaches concede that the semantic features identified above must be analyzed intentionally. If the relevant qualities are vital to the work's identity, they are more categorial than semantic. It is plausible to argue, at least for some cases, that the difference between the allegorical and the straight story told in the same words
must amount to a difference in works, not to a difference in meanings that might be contained in a single work. Interpretations that ignore the intended allegory are not of the author's work as such and will be rejected by hypothetical intentionalists and value maximizers as well as by actual intentionalists.

Not all cases of quotation, allusion, and the like are of this identity-shaping pervasiveness, however, and for them the other tack is preferable. It suggests that, though actual intentionalists are correct in noting that authors' intentions determine the relevant features of their works, they are mistaken in suggesting this should inhibit the process of interpretation. If a work contains an allusion or quotation made by its author, still the interpreter can consider the plausibility and value of interpretations that ignore the reference. And if no quotation or allusion is intended, nevertheless, the interpreter can consider the plausibility and value of interpretations regarding the work as possessing an allusive or quotational character or appearance (consistent with the art-historical location in which it was produced). Doing so does not involve departing from the author's work, since it was accepted above that the qualities in question are not of an identity-transforming kind.

A final observation that could be offered in support of actual intentionalism draws attention to the widespread supposition that, where they are successfully carried through to the work, it is not sensible to deny the interpretative relevance of independent sources of the author's intentions. Once again however, opponents of actual intentionalism can accept the point without granting that it favors actual intentionalism. Even the most intransigent anti-intentionalists are not against consulting evidence of authorial intentions. Beardsley, for example insists only that authors' avowals of intentions should be tested against their works. In other words, he requires that such declarations are relevant to interpreters only if the intentions in question have been successful in shaping the work, and that point is conceded by moderate actual intentionalists. More generally, anti-intentionalists can accept that information about authors' intentions is almost always likely to be of relevance to the interpretation of their works. Because literature is often skillfully crafted to be complex and subtle, an author's pronouncements usually are indicative of worthwhile ways of approaching her works. Anti-intentionalists differ from actual intentionalists not by regarding authors' intentions as essentially irrelevant to the
process of interpretation but by holding that the author's endorsement of an interpretation does not give it a special authority and his disavowal of an interpretation does not ban it from consideration on its own merits.

The primary case for actual intentionalism rests on appeal to an analogy between quotidian examples of interpretation in communicative contexts and the presentation of fictional literary artworks by authors to their publics. That analogy comes under pressure when faced with interpretations that are respectful of the work as authored, yet which go beyond what the author intended and successfully conveyed to his work. If the moderate actual intentionalist digs in her heels, she must challenge the propriety of many interpretations that are concerned with seeking a way of understanding the work that is fully consistent with acknowledging it as the work of its author. And if, instead, actual intentionalism is weakened, so that it includes interpretations that target meanings that would not be disavowed by the author, though they were not intended as such, the theory buys credibility at the expense of its commitment to intentionalism. A central tenet of orthodox intentionalism is that interpretation should focus on utterer's meaning rather than utterance meaning. By denying to authors' explicit, successfully executed intentions a definitive role in establishing how their works are to be interpreted, weak actual intentionalism no longer merits the title of "intentionalism". Neither adherence to full-blooded intentionalism nor retreat to the more anemic version produces an acceptable result.

Though it does not ultimately succeed in keeping intentionalism afloat, the move to weak actual intentionalism is well motivated to the extent that it enfranchises a wider range of interpretations that target the work as of its author and aim to comprehend and appreciate it as literature, usually in a complete rather than a partial fashion. When an interpreter of this stamp goes beyond what was successfully intended by the work's author, she does so usually to seek a richer account or experience of the work. She explores readings that are compatible with the work as authored, unless there is evidence to suggest some of these would be rejected by the author. As well as including those meanings that were explicitly intended, this approach will lead her to consider what could have been meant by the work (whether intended or not) and what would maximize its interest and value.
Weak actual intentionalism is forced to allow that there is more to the interpretation of literary fiction than the search for intended meanings. And as has just been demonstrated, it should concede that hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizing theory provide a more appropriate characterization of the strategies and goals that drive some literary interpretations, since these are the theories claiming that interpretation is directed to what could have been meant by the work (whether intended or not) and to accounts of the work that maximize its interest and value. Now I turn to the discussion of these alternative theories.

Hypothetical Intentionalism

According to hypothetical intentionalism, the audience interprets the work on the basis of hypothesizing an author and the intentions he is most likely to have had as regards its meaning. Hypothetical intentionalists differ as to the purpose of this imaginative strategy for interpretation. As a consequence, they also disagree about what should be hypothesized and under what constraints. A hypothetical intentionalist of a postmodern persuasion might be concerned with cutting the work loose from its actual author and the particular art-historical location within which it was created. In this view, the audience need not reason on the basis of background assumptions that would have been held by the actual author's intended audience or more generally by the informed art public of the time of the work's creation. An alternative, more conservative approach calls on the audience to imagine an author much like the actual one—especially as regards her personality, knowledge, temperament, oeuvre, and art-historical location—and to approach the work in terms of the conventions and practices of the time and place of the work's genesis. An intermediate position holds in place the art-historical context in which the work was created, but does not require that the hypothetical author be like the actual one.21

The first view provides for a free approach to literary interpretation and thereby seeks a wide variety of differing, conflicting accounts of the object of interpretation. It must be doubtful that the resulting interpretations can be attributed to the author's work as such, however, because the object of interpretation is divorced from contextual features that are crucial to the identity of the actual author's work. That result may be of no concern to this
brand of hypothetical intentionalist, who is at pains to get away from the confines of the authored work, but it is relevant to my project here, which accepted at the outset that it is the nature of interpretation directed to works as of their authors that is at issue.

Both the intermediate and the conservative advocates of hypothetical intentionalism claim to respect the identity of the work as authored. Doing so limits both what can be imagined of the hypothetical author and the background on which the interpreter reasons to what was most likely meant by the hypothetical author. The concern is not with what was intended in fact, but with what might have been intended under the circumstances of the work's creation and presentation. In other words, these brands of hypothetical intentionalism do not distance the author's work from those contextual features that are responsible for its identity, but they do separate the work far enough from its actual author to accommodate a wider range of interpretations than actual intentionalism permits. Of course, these hypothetical intentionalists maintain that this wider set of interpretations target the work as authored and should be accepted as legitimate. Their approach to hypothetical intentionalism is the one on which I now concentrate.

It is important to be clear about the differences between hypothetical intentionalism and actual intentionalism, both of which involve hypothesizing about what was intended. Often, when we are trying to determine what a person meant by what she said, her words do not provide clear evidence of her intentions and we must speculate, therefore, about what was meant. For example, we infer what was meant on the assumption that this coheres rationally with, or is at least relevant to, what preceded, and so on. In this way, the interpretation made by an actual intentionalist may require her hypothesizing about the utterer's intentions. All her hypotheses are trumped, however, by direct, accurate information about the utterer's intentions, even if what was hypothesized is more plausible, given what was said, than what was actually intended. Suppose A says: "The Bible is the greatest novel ever written". B is puzzled by this and hypothesizes that A is making a joke with the point that the Bible is fictional. And let it be the case that the earlier conversation is consistent with this interpretation's being the most plausible on offer. Nevertheless, if A meant "book", rather than "novel", and misspoke or did not fully understand the meaning of "novel", B should abandon the interpretation under which A attempted a witticism if B's concern is to discover what A meant.
The hypothesizing entertained by the hypothetical intentionalist is not of the kind just described. In particular, her hypotheses are not trumped by knowledge of the actual author's intentions. The author whose intentions are hypothesized is himself hypothesized. He is a fiction. Even if the hypothetical author is closely based on the actual author, that the two are distinct is apparent from the fact that the hypothetical intentionalist does not stop hypothesizing when the actual author's intentions are revealed. This is because the point of his hypothesizing is not to uncover them. Instead, it is to consider the possibility of meanings the interest of which lies not in their accurately capturing what was actually meant but, instead, in what might have been meant by a hypothetical author, even where this is known to differ from what the actual author intended. Because many such hypotheses can be plausible, hypothetical intentionalism opens the work up to a range of rewarding interpretations, including ones not intended by the actual author, probably including ones he would disavow.

As just explained, the primary aim of literary interpretation, according to hypothetical intentionalism, is not to discover what the actual author meant but to arrive at the most plausible interpretation that is consistent with what can be hypothesized as intended by the imagined author. If the hypothesized author is like the actual one, what the interpreter hypothesizes usually matches what the actual author intended, provided she was successful in executing that intention. In this case, both the actual and hypothetical intentionalist agree on the work's interpretation. But this coincidence in interpretations is not inevitable. Where the best hypothesis about what could have been intended turns out to be different from what was actually intended, yet what was actually intended provides a possible but less plausible reading of the work, the hypothetical intentionalist rejects what was actually intended and adopts the other reading because it is the most convincing interpretation. By contrast, the actual intentionalist excludes the unintended interpretation because it was not explicitly intended and something else was both intended and carried through successfully to the work. Or, if the actual intentionalist holds to the theory's weak version, she rejects the artistically more plausible reading if she believes it was or would be disavowed by the actual author, while other readings were not or would not be.

The alleged advantage of hypothetical intentionalism is that it explains the legitimacy of interpretations that would be wrongly excluded by actual intentionalism. Nevertheless,
hypothetical intentionalism faces a number of objections. Before I consider them, though, I discuss hypothetical intentionalism's relation to the value maximizing theory. I contend that the positions are equivalent, except that the hypothetical intentionalist misrepresents the view by characterizing it as a distinctive form of intentionalism when it is not.

Hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizing theory

How does the hypothetical intentionalist adjudicate between competing interpretations? Levinson has this proposal:

Principally, a "best" attribution [of intention to the hypothesized author] is one that is epistemically best—that has the most likelihood of being correct, given the total evidence available to one in the position of ideal reader. But secondarily, a "best" attribution of intention to an author might involve, in accord with a principal of critical charity, choosing a construal that makes the work artistically better, where there is room for choice, so long as plausibly ascribed to the author given the full context of writing. In other words, if we can, in a given case, make the author out to have created a cleverer or more striking or more imaginative piece, without violating the image of his work as an artist that is underpinned by the total available textual and contextual evidence, we should perhaps do so.25

Levinson's appeal to value as a basis for discriminating between competing interpretations suggests a connection between hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizing theory, which is the view that interpretation is a matter of considering the meanings that can be put upon a work with the aim of maximizing its value. Yet the tone of the passage indicates that, for Levinson, value maximizing is secondary and subsidiary. What matters more is that the interpretation has the most likelihood of being correct, given the total evidence available to one in the position to be an ideal reader. Levinson clearly implies that an interpretation could satisfy this condition without being value maximizing. Value is considered later, if at all. Presumably, it comes into play as a tie-breaker. Where two competing interpretations are epistemically equally plausible, yet one makes the work out to be better than the other, the difference in the values they
attribute to the work then becomes relevant to favoring the one interpretation over the 
other.

Despite Levinson's presentation, I think hypothetical intentionalism must make the 
appeal to considerations of literary value foundational. This is because the assessment of 
epistemic plausibility, rather than being independent of issues of literary merit, crucially 
presupposes them. In consequence, hypothetical intentionalism cannot separate itself 
after all from the value maximizing theory.

When we make believe an author, besides her beliefs, attitudes, values, and intentions 
with respect to the meaning of what she writes, we must make up (or assume) her deeper 
motives and purposes. In doing this, we are guided by the enterprise in which we are 
engaged. Our goal is to interpret and appreciate a literary fiction as such. We pursue this 
goal because, often enough, we are rewarded for doing so. We succeed in discovering 
what is insightful, pleasing, affirming, amusing, diverting, and so forth, within the works 
we interpret. Sometimes what we encounter in literature can be profound and life-
transforming; it speaks to the human condition or to our particular circumstances in ways 
we respect and admire and, as well, that develop and mature us. The point is this: we 
approach literature as value-seekers, though this is not to say that we anticipate finding 
value inevitably, that we expect to find a single value realized in a single way, or that we 
always prefer what is cognitively, emotionally, or morally most rich, complex, and 
challenging over what is entertaining and engaging at a more accessible level.

Given all this, if we interpret literary works through a process of imagining an author 
and hypothesizing what she most likely intended her work to mean, we must assume of 
this postulated author that she intends to produce artistically worthwhile literature and 
that she has the skill to deliver what she intends. Indeed, the interpreter should attribute to 
the imagined author the intention to produce a piece with the highest degree of artistic 
value that can be sustained by the work that is the object of interpretation. Further 
hypothesizing proceeds on this basis. As a result, working out what interpretation has the 
most likelihood of being correct, to return to Levinson's criterion, involves consideration 
of the work's merits and demerits at the very outset. The assessment of literary value is 
not secondary, being introduced only when the plausibility of interpretations has been
established. It is already assumed in the process by which we assess the comparative epistemic plausibility of different interpretations. In other words, there cannot be a case in which two interpretations are equally plausible, yet one is superior in value to the other (supposing the ways in which they are valuable are commensurable). This cannot arise because, when any interpretation is superior to another and both are maximally consistent with what is manifestly in the work, it is always epistemically more plausible to hypothesize that the interpretation intended by the postulated author is the superior one. To assume anything less would involve proposing an author who rejects the enterprise that gives point to the critical examination of literary works by their audiences.

I have argued that hypothetical intentionalism advocates a mode of interpretation that is guided throughout by the goal of presenting the interpreted work in the light that makes it most valuable as literature, though this is not always made explicit, or even recognized, by many of its advocates. If I am right, hypothetical intentionalism is much closer to the value maximizing theory than is usually accepted. Like hypothetical intentionalism, the maximizing theory assumes that interpretations seek what is artistically valuable in the works they target and that, when it comes to adjudicating among work-compatible interpretations, those that make the work out to be artistically more meritorious as literature are to be preferred. How do the theories differ? I do not think they do so in their substance, but they are by no means similar in the ways they represent themselves.

The value maximizing theory supposes that the interpretation of literary works differs in its goals and strategies from the mode of interpretation applied to ordinary communications, because the focus for literature is on what the work could mean rather than on what was meant by it. The "once upon a time …" that explicitly or implicitly prefaces fictional works of literature signals that the interpretative game that is called for differs from the one most appropriate to "let me tell you what I think …". The value maximizing theory suggests that we regard artworks more as autonomous bearers of meaning than as personal, one-sided conversations. Accordingly, it emphasizes the role of linguistic and artistic conventions and practices in generating the work's possible meanings, as against the authorial intentions that may have motivated their use. In other words, it focuses on what the work could mean, given the socio-historical context in which it is produced, not on the author's intended meaning.
By contrast, hypothetical intentionalism is offered, not least in the title its advocates give it, as a form of intentionalism, even as it separates itself from actual intentionalism. And it describes its methods on the model of intentionalist interpretation. In the ordinary case in which we seek to discover what a speaker means, we often hypothesize about her intentions on the basis of evidence that is less than decisive. In doing so, we take into account the context of utterance, implicit conventions, the prior history of utterance, and so on. Hypothetical intentionalism apparently proceeds in the same fashion. And because of the comparative rarity of cases where what was actually intended is artistically inferior to what can be hypothesized, the difference between hypothetical intentionalism and actual intentionalism is not often made obvious. As a result, it seems reasonable for hypothetical intentionalism to claim that it is supported by the general considerations favoring intentionalism, while it avoids the specific disadvantages of actual intentionalism. But all this is misleading.

The aura of credibility hypothetical intentionalism garners to itself by aping intentionalism is undeserved. The fact is, hypothesized authors are not special kinds of authors, they are not authors at all. Moreover, specifying (as conservative hypothetical intentionalists do) that the postulated author should be imagined to have the real author's public persona and previous artistic output does not give the imagined author more actuality. And where hypothesizing is directed not at discovering actual intentions but at entertaining imaginary ones, those imaginary intentions are not just like ordinary ones; apart, that is, for being fictional. They are not intentions at all. None of what the hypothetical intentionalist imagines has the same nature or force as do the actual intentions of real speakers as regards what they mean by their utterances. Imagining what might have been meant by a hypothetical author is a strategy for discovering the meaning or meanings the work can support given the literary and linguistic conventions of the time in which it was made. It is not a method for divining a successfully intended meaning that is like the actual author's except for having been willed by someone who does not exist.

It is true that, in interpreting literature, we look for the kind of overall coherence that could express an artist's project. This provides no basis for preferring hypothetical intentionalism to the value maximizing theory, however, because the latter can accept that interpretations rightly recognizing overall coherence in the works they are of thereby
present those works in a better light than do more partial or disjointed alternatives, and therefore, are to be preferred.

For the reasons given, I regard hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizing theory as equivalent, despite the contrasting expositions they usually receive. If I am right, both theories should be subject to more or less the same objections.\textsuperscript{27} I consider those now.

**Objections to the value maximizing theory (and to hypothetical intentionalism).**

Earlier we considered the importance of authors' intentions in determining their works' titles and genres, along with features such as irony, allusion, and allegory, and the role that can be played by authorial intentions in directing the reader to worthwhile interpretations. As was observed then, these points can be accepted by hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizing theory without conceding ground to actual intentionalism. As possible sources of objection, these considerations fail.

One further objection holds that artworks call for understanding, not simply the appreciation of their artistic value.\textsuperscript{28} The maximizer deflects the worry. She accepts that the satisfaction we seek from art should go with critical awareness and understanding, not mindless titillation. She continues: to be judged fairly, however, the work must be seen in the best light that is consistent with preserving its identity, which is why interpretation should be guided by the maximizing strategy.

A further objection is predictable. Actual intentionalists respond to the charge that their view is too narrow in the range of interpretations it licenses by accusing hypothetical intentionalists and the value maximizers of being too liberal. A version of the criticism is voiced by Carroll\textsuperscript{29}: *Plan 9 from Outer Space* by the director of low budget, B-grade movies, Edward Wood, may be one of the most inept and slipshod films ever made. But if it were interpreted as a postmodern send-up of B-grade movies, it would be witty and brilliant. Actual intentionalism rules out this second interpretation, which misrepresents the film and Wood's failures and intentions. It is to the detriment of hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizing theory, Carroll maintains, that they
must favor the second interpretation because it makes the work out to be artistically superior to what Wood intended.

Value maximizers and hypothetical intentionalists can adopt whichever is the more appropriate of two strategies in considering alleged counterexamples of this kind. They can acknowledge the work-identifying status of the author's categorial intentions. Had Wood intended to make a postmodern satire, his work would have been of a different kind. Even if the work would then have been better, this interpretation is rejected by the value maximizer and hypothetical intentionalist, as well as by the actual intentionalist, because it does not respect the identity of the work that was actually created. Alternatively, value maximizers and hypothetical intentionalists can suggest that a close inspection of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* makes it more reasonable to see it as inept and careless than as cleverly constructed satire. The reading that makes the work artistically superior should not be favored unless it is at least as consistent as its main rivals are with the work's contents.

A new objection draws attention to the value maximizing theory's appeal to linguistic conventions as settling what the work means. To respect the identity of the work as of its author, the maximizer should ignore the many bizarre meanings that might be permitted and should focus on those that would be most likely recognized in the full context of the work at the time of the work's creation, as long as there are no defeaters indicating that these "default" meanings are not appropriate in the particular context in which the text was deployed. Once we give "default" meanings priority, however, there is little room for value maximizing, because then the work's meaning usually is clear and unambiguous.\(^30\)

Taken individually and according to the relevant conventions, it is true that there is often not much wriggle room over the meanings of the sentences that make up the work. And it is also true that, to be legitimate, an interpretation of the author's work must respect the plain meanings of the sentences that constitute that work, unless there are indications that these should be ignored. But literary interpretations focus on entire works and on the characters, actions, and events they contain. Such interpretations hinge on questions such as the following: is the marriage between Othello and Desdemona consummated, and if not, does this make Othello's jealousy more understandable and his
bad judgment more plausible? What does Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* tell us about the human condition? Does Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* reveal life as tragic or farcical? At this global level, there is considerable scope for interpretative complexity and flexibility.

Yet, if the interpreter is to seek among the readings made available by the work (taken in conjunction with the conventions of both language and literature) for only the interpretation that maximizes the work's value, it appears that the value maximizing theory is monistic rather than pluralistic. By contrast with conventionalism alone, which inevitably leads to a multiplicity of interpretations, the value maximizing theory appears to be naturally monistic because it looks to find a winner. Its obsession with merit licenses too few interpretations as legitimate.  

This initially plausible objection underestimates the richness of literature, however. Because there is often not a single maximal interpretation, the maximizing theory allows for the legitimacy of multiple, competing interpretations. Interpreters can start from different premises; for example, that Hamlet hesitates or that he acts decisively as he is made aware of relevant information. The interpreter will identify the work's key passages and moments and will configure the drama accordingly, depending on which of these initial ideas is adopted. As a result, what is valuable in the work will vary according to the presupposition the interpreter adopts. Even if only one interpretation matching each initial premise maximizes the work's value, a change of premise will likely lead to quite different interpretations some of which may present the work as no less valuable, though this value will result from a different combination and balance of virtues. And if the work is multi-dimensional and complex, there is often more than one way to develop worthwhile interpretations all based on the same interpretative presupposition, with no one of these clearly superior to the strongest of its rivals.

The best literary works provide fecund soil for interpretations. They can be highly and distinctively valuable when interpreted from different points of view, all of which respect the work as such, even as they bring it under contrasting aspects. The maximizing strategy is consistent with the pursuit of many alternate readings for a given work, with these being equally and perhaps incommensurably merit conferring, so long as the work itself is sufficiently deep or multi-dimensional to reward the effort. We value fictional
literary works not only for what emerges from insightful, sensitive interpretations but also for the variety of more or less equally worthwhile interpretations they can sustain. To acknowledge this more clearly, the value maximizing theory might be better dubbed the "value satisficing theory".

Closing Remarks

The versions of the three theories on which I have focused all accept that the object of interpretation is the work as authored in a particular art-historical setting and that interpretation is directed to understanding and appreciating this work on its own terms. That is one reason why it is useful to compare them. They disagree over the primary purpose served by interpretations of fictional literary works; over whether they aim to disclose what was meant, to consider what might have been meant, or to present the work in a manner that makes it most valuable as literature.

I have argued that actual intentionalism is mistaken in regarding literary interpretation as closely paralleling the interpretation of ordinary discourse. If it keeps its attention on what the author meant (utterer's meaning), it neglects literary interpretations that respect the work's identity and the goal of appreciating the work as such, yet which focus on what it could mean (utterance meaning) and the literary merit of this. Or if it is weakened, so that it considers all interpretations that would not be disavowed, it must concede that hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizing theory are on an equal footing with it. Moreover, it then departs both from intentionalism as this is normally understood and from the communication model of literary discourse. In addition, it fails to acknowledge interpretations that should be counted as legitimately of the work as authored.

I have argued that hypothetical intentionalism is not far from the value maximizing theory in that, from the beginning, it adjudicates between competing interpretations by reference to the merits they show in the work, given that it is always more plausible to hypothesize that the author intended to write a better rather than a worse work. It does trade in a misleading fashion, however, on the idea that hypothetical authors and intentions are shadowy counterparts of the real things, which they are not.
Two conclusions emerge: These three theories of the interpretation of literary fictions are not so starkly opposed as their proponents often make out. And the value maximizing (or, better, satisficing) theory is to be preferred because the alternatives are too narrow, or are misleadingly presented, or invoke value maximizing without acknowledging its centrality for the kinds of interpretations that have been discussed here.\textsuperscript{32}

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