

ROBERT STECKER

Intention and Interpretation

The argument for the intentional fallacy provoked one of the earliest debates about the nature of literary interpretation. Since then the topic of interpretation has become enormously complex, but the problem about the role of intention in literary interpretation has not gone away. Rather, the arguments for and against giving some role to the actual intentions of the authors of such works have become ever subtler.

To negotiate this complex terrain, it is helpful to distinguish three central questions: 1. What are the legitimate aims of literary interpretation (proper aim issue)? 2. Is there one correct, comprehensive interpretation of literary works or many equally acceptable interpretations (monism/pluralism issue)? 3. Is there such a thing as the meaning of a work and if so, in what does it consist (work-meaning issue)? Reference to intention can enter into answers to all these questions.

People interpret literary works with a variety of legitimate aims. Even if there is such a thing as the meaning of a work, discovering it would be only one of these goals. We should distinguish between ›does mean‹ and ›could mean‹ interpretations. Discovering work-meaning would be in the former category. One rationale for looking for what a work could mean is that there are many questions that remain unanswered by everything we know about. Further, many interpretations seek to find significance in works—features of works that make them especially *meaningful* to some individuals or groups. Identifying what an author intended to do in a work is also among the proper aims of literary interpretation, independently of whether this has anything to do with constituting work-meaning.

Monism and pluralism are not necessarily incompatible. Whether we should seek a single correct interpretation, or a multiplicity of acceptable but non-combinable interpretations for a given work depends on the aim with which we interpret. If our aim is to find significance in a work for a diverse audience, or to identify what *could be* motivating a character, there is every reason to expect a plurality of equally good interpretations. On the other hand, no matter how complex and even inconsistent an author's intentions are, there is a truth about what they are (whether or not it is accessible to us), and therefore monism is the right view relative to this interpretive aim.

A work is a use of language to say or do something. Since there are many different kinds of literary works, just what is being done will vary with form and genre. The meaning of novel is to be found in what it represents, expresses, alludes to, symbolizes, and implicitly asserts, and so on. When we interpret literary works, we never try to identify everything constitutive of the meaning of the work in the sense just identified. What some interpretations aim for is to identify aspects of this meaning: how various parts of a work might cohere together, how these parts contribute to a message a work conveys or a theme it explores, how a certain sequence of images expresses an attitude to a represented content, and so on.

If the meaning of a literary work is what its author represents, expresses, etc. in it, does this leave room for an intentionalist conception of work-meaning? While this rules out some versions of intentionalism, it leaves room for moderate intentionalism about work meaning which claims that whatever an author successfully intends to do in a work is part of the work-meaning.

I go on to consider three objections to moderate intentionalism about work meaning: that reference to intentions can be eliminated from an adequate account of work meaning; that while we may have to appeal to *some* intention to explicate work meaning, it need not be the actual author's intention; and finally the knowledge of intention dilemma. Either we can identify work-meaning without appealing to intention, in which case work-meaning is independent from intention, or we cannot, in which case we can never know whether intention is realized in the work because there will be no independent test for that. I show that all these objections can be answered.

Finally, I consider an alternative model of literary interpretation: the value maximizing view. On this view, literary interpretation has essentially one central aim: to enhance the aesthetic appreciation of literary works, or to maximize the aesthetic value of our experience of them. While this view does identify one aim of interpretation, I argue that there is *not* just one central aim with which literature is interpreted. There are several. We are interested in what an author both does and intends to communicate. What is perhaps special to the arts including literature is that we don't stop there, but seek further interpretations in the interest of deriving additional value from works. There is no good reason to foreclose on any of these projects or make one the preeminently literary project.

References

- Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, Detroit 1970.
- Stephen Davies, Author's Intentions, Literary Interpretations, and Literary Value, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 46 (2006), 223–247.
- Peter Lamarque, Objects of Interpretation, *Metaphilosophy* 31 (2000), 96–124.
- , Appreciation and Literary Interpretation, in: Michael Krausz (ed.), *Is there a Single Right Interpretation*, College Park, PA, 2002, 285–306.
- Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford 2005, 112–134.
- Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value*, College Park, PA, 1997.
- , *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech and the Law*, Oxford 2003
- , *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: An Introduction*, Lanham, MD, 2005.
- , Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defended, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006), 429–438.
- William K. Wimsatt/Monroe C. Beardsley, The Intentional Fallacy, *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946), 468–488.

Full-length article in: JLT 2/1 (2008), 35-50.

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Robert Stecker, Intention and Interpretation.

In: JLTonline (03.03.2009)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-000067

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-000067>