Levels of Literary Meaning

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Intentionalism, it has been remarked, just won’t go away. The idea that the meaning of a literary work is determined by the intentions of its author remains appealing and deeply entrenched in most people’s thinking, in spite of ever new waves of resistance.

I do not wish to resume the discussion of the overall plausibility of intentionalism. Nor will I take a stand in the discussion of its different varieties, like actual and vs. hypothetical intentionalism. My interest lies in exploring the different ways in which intentions might determine literary meaning, and the different kinds of meaning that may be found in a literary work. It is my contention that proponents of intentionalism have been insufficiently attentive to the different levels of literary intention and meaning. While some do seem to acknowledge (at least some) such levels, they have not fully realized their significance. They have ignored the special problems that arise from the multiplicity of layers of intention in literary production, and so have come to put forth intentionalist theories that are at best incomplete and possibly incoherent.

I. Keeping to the Ground: Elementary Meaning

Though their views turn out, on closer inspection, to be more ambiguous, it is clear that intentionalist generally want to keep it simple. Intentionalism is bottom-up and atomist in spirit. It focuses on the meanings of words, sentences or single poetic lines, and, correspondingly, on simple, ground-floor speech acts and the immediate intentions of authors. The founder of contemporary intentionalism, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., defines his central notion of meaning – “verbal meaning” – as whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed … by means of those linguistic signs”. By itself, this would seem to apply to linguistic units of all kinds and sizes, from single words to multi-volume books. Yet it is obvious that Hirsch is primarily concerned with meaning at the scale of an individual sentence, or at least something like this. He speaks about brief word sequences (VI, p. 46), and of a “particular word sequence within [the] text” (VI, p. 47), and of words or syntactical patterns as “autonomous parts” that are not dependent on the wholes they belong to (VI, p. 77).

Though they never quite explicitly say so, it seems clear that intentionalist like Hirsch and Juhl take meaning in general to be determined by elementary and local meaning, i.e. the meaning of smaller linguistic units. They are atomists or molecularists as opposed to holists about meaning. Further evidence for this can be found in Hirsch and Juhl’s unanimous rejection of the idea that context determines meaning. They both insist that the context of an utterance at most constitutes evidence of what the utterance means (VI p. 47; I, p. 112).

Intentionalists focus on meaning that is elementary in another, but related, respect. They understand the meaning-determining acts as first-order – or “ground-floor” – speech acts. The decisive factor is taken to be the author’s immediate intentions, regardless of whether she is aware
of having them or not, or whether they concur with her more articulated long-range intentions. This is most strongly emphasized by Juhl, who accuses the critics of intentionalism of confusing the relevant kind of intention with such higher-order acts as reflection, foreseeing, premeditation or planning (I, pp. 33ff.). In a similar vein, Hirsch emphasizes that meanings may be unconscious, that is, having been produced without the author’s being aware of doing so (VI, pp. 51ff.). The general idea is that meaning-determining intentions usually exemplify what Searle has called intention in action, as opposed to prior intentions. The intention is realized in the very act of writing. The author, being for the most time absorbed in the process of writing, thinking about characters, plot and setting, perhaps occasionally about words, has no time for inspection of her own mental states or reflection on the meaning of her utterances; or if she has, then this will have no more influence on the meaning of the text she produces than subsequent discoveries or judgments made by scholars and critics.

II. Ascent to Higher Levels: The Impact of Authorial Metacognition

In spite of their preference for keeping it simple, intentionalists have been regularly concerned with higher levels of meaning. The tension is already visible in the standard formulation of intentionalism: It is the view that the meaning of a literary work is determined by the intention of its author. Yet most literary works are comprehensive and complex units of meaning; they seem to be on a quite different scale than single sentence-level utterances. Even if it is possible to maintain that a literary work as whole can still be conceived as an utterance, with a single, unitary utterance-meaning – which just might easily elude our grasp, due to its immense complexity – it must be admitted that the utterance category is thereby stretched so far that it covers large and substantial differences. It should suffice to point out the obvious fact that literary works are composed of utterances (and subsystems of utterances, like chapters, paragraphs and stanzas), and that this raises questions about the relationship – the possible dependencies or independencies – between the component utterances and the meaning of the whole.

Hirsch reveals the tension in his view when discussing the relationship between intention and accomplishment. He gives the example of a poet who intends in a four-line poem to convey a sense of desolation, but in fact only manages to convey to his readers a sense that the sea is wet or that twilight is approaching (VI, p. 12). This seems to be a clear example of a higher-order intention; yet Hirsch seems willing to accommodate it in the class of what he takes to be genuinely meaning-determining intentions. He does so even though he acknowledges the simultaneous presence of ground-floor speech acts – which have arguably been more successful, in conveying a sense that the sea is wet or that twilight is approaching. Apparently, in this case the ground-floor acts are not seen as constitutive of the meaning of the poem as such, only the meaning of the individual words and lines. Contrary to the bottom-up approach otherwise favoured by intentionalists (and not least by Hirsch himself), the meaning of the poem is thus not conceived as a function of such component
meanings. Rather the higher-order intention seems able to bypass the whole linguistic basis and
directly confer a higher-order meaning on the textual whole.

This is a surprising move, though not unreasonable. It is well motivated, inasmuch as it is
meaning of this higher-order kind – the general meaning of stanzas, poems, stories or novels, as
opposed to the ground-floor, and usually more straightforward meaning of words and sentences –
that is the typical object of literary interpretation and dispute. And it is still consistent with Hirsch’
general definition of verbal meaning – remember that it allows for the meaning of any sequence of
linguistic signs being determined by a corresponding intention, with no restrictions on type or size.
But it also shows that this definition is not only extremely broad, but also ambiguous, or at least
remarkably pluralist, in that it allows for the co-existence of different and even incompatible verbal
meanings. I may will to convey something by uttering “p”, and will to convey something by
uttering “q”. And then I may also will to convey something by uttering “p” and uttering “q”, a
higher-order intention that may or may not be successful, depending partly on whether it is
supported by my ground-floor utterances – but also, among other things, on whether the order in
which I combine the ground-floor utterances support it; organization of literary material arguably
also matters for literary meaning. So although formally consistent and independently plausible,
Hirsch’ accommodation of higher-order intention and meaning breaks with his bottom-up approach,
and possibly also with his insistence of the singularity of literary meaning. It seems to open up
towards a more pluralist and multi-level approach.

It might be thought that there is an inconsistency in the way Hirsch presents his example with
the unsuccessful poet. Is he not violating the second part of his definition, viz. that verbal meaning
must be something that can be conveyed by means of the linguistic signs in question, by allowing
that the poet may have meant something that his actual poem was not able to convey? But I take it
that Hirsch’ success condition only pertains to linguistic conventions, and thus operates exclusive at
the ground-floor level. If the poet had written something that a competent reader could not
understand (i.e. decipher), he would indeed have failed in producing a determinate verbal meaning.
But Hirsch do not seem to posit any similar conventions governing the production of poetry as such
(as opposed to meaningful language) and thus imposes no parallel constraints on higher-order
meaning. A writer must use the appropriate linguistic means for expressing her ground-floor
intentions; but she need not produce the appropriate ground-floor intentions, or use any particular
principles of structuring, in order to make her second-order intentions effective (i.e. meaning-
determining, as opposed to successful).

This is quite consistent, but not very plausible. Of course it is true that there are no codified,
detailed and widely shared rules of poetry comparable to linguistic conventions. Writing bad poetry
is different from being unable to communicate due to lack of linguistic competence. (Note,
however, that this lends further support to the view that literary meaning is different from, and not a
simple function of, linguistic meaning). Still, a case could be made for the opposite distinction – i.e.
for the claim that success conditions operate on the higher levels. Whereas a speaker may actually
mean something definite with her ground-floor utterance, despite her being, for lack of conformity to shared linguistic rules, pathetically unsuccessful (Humpty-Dumpty was right, after all!), it seems that one cannot create literary meaning merely by fiat. Arguably, my intention to write the Great Scandinavian Novel by itself does very little to bring into being an actual unit of meaning worthy of this predicate.

Further levels of literary intention have been explicitly recognized by intentionalists. It has been claimed that categorial intentions – intentions determining the kind of literary work, e.g. whether a text should be understood as a poem or a comedy – impose definite constraints on interpretation. But whereas Levinson does not consider categorial intentions to be genuinely meaning-determining – he apparently takes meaning and genre to be essentially unconnected – Hirsch, by contrast, claims the verbal meaning is genre-bound (VI, p. 78) and that the “intrinsic genre” of a work is determined by the author’s “controlling idea of the whole” (VI, p. 79). Livingston has likewise argued that categorial and semantic (i.e. ground-floor) intentions are frequently entangled, thus allowing that genre may influence work- and utterance meaning.

This does not necessarily go against the intentionalists’ preference for immediate intentions. Hirsch’ notion of a “controlling idea” is not that of an explicit plan, the outcome of prior deliberation or the like. Rather it is the notion of an intuitive adaptation of a set of genre-specific conventions. It is akin to the phenomenologists’ notion of “protention”, i.e. the aspect of time-consciousness that endows present experiences with a sense of what is to come, but which is itself “pre-reflective”, and thus essentially different from, acts of explicit anticipation.

Still, it is clear that with his notion of a genre-determining controlling intelligence, Hirsch has (again) accommodated a relatively higher-order authorial intention in his theory. (It should be born in mind that higher-order intentions can be implicit (or “unconscious”, in the somewhat unfortunate terminology of Hirsch), no less than can lower-order intentions). And while he does mostly keep to the atomist idea that the parts are autonomous and determine the whole (or, in his interpretation of the example with the unsuccessful poet, that both part and whole can count as autonomous units of meaning), he here seems to allow for a genuine downwards determination of meaning, and thus a top-down approach. The anticipated idea of the whole co-determines the verbal meaning of individual signs and sequences of signs. For the interpreter, attention to the whole (and the context) is only a heuristic tool. But from the perspective of the author, the sense of the whole does play a genuinely constitutive role.

Still other forms of higher-order or otherwise complex intentionality has been recognized as legitimate factors in the production of meaning. Hirsch allows that utterances can be genuinely ambiguous, i.e. have more than one meaning, provided each of the different meanings have been willed by the author, or that the author has deliberately left the precise meaning open (VI, p. 44ff.). Hegel may have intended his term Aufhebung to mean both “elevation” and “elimination”, and if he did so, that is what the term means. This is at least an example of a more complex kind of intention, even if remains on the ground-floor level (though one might question that: if an author intends that
an expression of hers shall have more than one meaning (and she not just happens to use the same term with two different meanings), then it seems that she is already gone metalinguistic and metacognitive. According to contemporary speech-act theory, we already have a case of a higher-order speech act when an author connects two sentences with a “but”, since she thereby says something about her utterance of the two sentences. So even intra-sentential features of texts can manifest higher-order intentionality. It does not take very much to get off the ground.

At any rate there are cases of clear, yet subtle differences in level to be found in the same vicinity. Irony, for example – which generally seems to support the intentionalist case, because it involves a meaning that obviously lies outside the text itself and is not determined by the linguistic conventions – is a complex act which involves both the production of a sentence with a recognizable literal meaning and a higher-order act in which the sentence meaning is negated or treated with reservation. And though it is common to warn against confusing mention and use, Davidson has pointed out that it can be convenient to both use and to mention the same expression by producing a single token of it. This practice is arguably widespread in literary writing, e.g. in the form of allusions that both refer to earlier occurrences of the same expression and use it anew. When Eliot wrote “Oed’ und leer das Meer” in line 42 of The Waste Land, he arguably intended both to make a reference to Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde and to add to the impression of a desolate atmosphere.

Intentionalists have not said much about metatext and metanarrative. But it appears to be a further relevant instance of higher-order intentionality and meaning. Consider the opening sentence of Book VI of Fielding’s Tom Jones: “In the last book we have been obliged to deal pretty much with the passion of love, and in our succeeding book shall forced to handle this subject still more largely”. As far as I can judge, Fielding (or the implied author, or the narrator, if you like) was in fact right about both Book V and Book VII. But he needn’t have been so. There may be a tension between text and meta-text; authors may fail to carry out their announced intentions, or they may more or less deliberately say something about other parts of their texts that does not match their ground-floor meaning.

A famous passage from T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets provides a perhaps more striking example:

That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory;
A periphrastic study in worn-out poetical fashion
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings.

One might reasonably contest this meta-literary assessment. Maybe the preceding lines were not in worn-out poetical-fashion (maybe they were not really symbolist, or maybe symbolism – presumably the target of the criticism – wasn’t so worn out when Eliot wrote the passage). Maybe they ought to have satisfied Eliot (or the implied author or lyrical I, if you prefer). Or maybe Eliot
wrote the passage not with the intention of voicing his preference for a more austere aesthetics, but rather with the intention of creating a dialectical contrast to a quasi-symbolist stance with which he still identified to some extent. At any rate, meta-textual passages like this apparently come close to being statements of authors about their work, which are routinely dismissed by intentionalists as been irrelevant to the work’s meaning (I, p. 6ff.); but being integral parts of the works themselves, they seem to add to their meaning, if not by influencing that of the ground-level utterances, then at least by introducing a parallel layer of meaning.

Finally, there are levels of putative meaning of a decidedly higher order. Literary interpretation is often directed at the overall character, the theme, idea or “moral” of a work. Even if claims that a particular work is all about love, or growing up, or alienation are more or less deliberate exaggerations – or at least tacitly presuppose that these themes are treated by means of a presentation of more specific subthemes and subject matters – there seems to be something to the notion that a literary work, or at least some such works, express a general idea or tendency, and that this an important part of the “meaning” which interpretation is expected to uncover. Roman Ingarden, who famously held that a literary artwork is constituted of different layers or strata – thus in effect positing different levels of literary meaning – also wished to accommodate strongly holistic or organic properties, like a not wholly conceptualizable “essential interconnection” (Wesenszusammenhang)17 or a “polyphone harmony of aesthetic qualities” (DLK, p. 396). While he took these qualities to be grounded in the lower strata and not simply superimposed on them, Ingarden did see them as the expression of a peculiar intentional activity on part of the author, as he generally saw “higher units of meaning” as the result of complex, combinatorial “subjective operations” (DLK, 98ff.). But it is hardly necessary to invoke the authority of Ingarden in order to drive home the point that literary works may harbour a very general or higher-order meaning that is not reducible to the meaning of their constituent parts.

I shall make no attempt to present any ordered or complete taxonomy of the many different levels of literary intention and meaning. I have merely been stressing the extent to which the writing of literature is a multi-layered affair, and pointed out that a work may harbour many kinds of – sometimes not even compatible – meanings, even when meaning is taken to be determined by the author’s intention.

III. The Reach and Limits of Authorial Intention

Intentionalism is often met with the objection that there is more meaning in a text than can plausibly be traced back to the author’s intentions. To this intentionalists have reacted by both narrowing and extending their notion of meaning. They have replied, self-assuredly, that some of the putative surplus meaning is not really there. More concessively, they have argued that it is not meaning in the relevant core sense (but e.g. rather what Hirsch calls significance, i.e. the relationship between the meaning of the text and something else (VI, p. 8), which may be a legitimate object of interpretation in a wider sense). On the other hand, they have insisted that parts of the alleged
surplus meaning may actually be anchored in authorial intention, albeit indirectly, and so not really surplus after all. Intentions may have greater powers, and a longer reach, than the critics of intentionalism assume. The links between apparently distal effects and authorial intentions can be established by different means. Hirsch uses his notion of intrinsic genre to secure such a long reach. Genre determines the implications of an utterance (VI, p. 89); in this way, an author may mean (even a lot) more than she literally says. Since she need not be explicitly aware of her choice of genre, she can also mean a lot more than she actually realizes. If only we can explain a any aspect of textual meaning as the outcome – however indirect – of something the author willingly did, then we are justified in viewing it as determined by her intention.

Juhl argues among similar lines when attempting to rebut an otherwise very appealing suggestion made by Graha Hough. Hough pointed to the ubiquity of what he calls achieved meaning: subtle, but literally significant details (assumptions, suggestions, rhythmic and auditory effects etc.) that an author did bring about, by writing as she did, but which she could not possibly have had in mind as such. Juhl retorted that while the effects were surely not something of which the author had been aware, they could still be said to be implied by her choice of words (I, 129ff.).

Such a notion of intentional implication is supported, at least to a certain degree, by work in the philosophy of action. It has been observed that I may do something voluntarily – and thus intentionally – without having explicitly decided to do so. My absent-minded brushing off chalk from my trousers during a lecture may still count as voluntary and thus as intentional. The same goes for my irritating my wife by insisting that we depart very early for holiday – a foreseen, but unwanted side-effect of what I takes to be otherwise desirable, all things considered. Maybe even some of the unforeseen effects of an action can be attributed to the agent. By using a term in a certain conventional sense, you supposedly commit yourself to mean by it whatever it means, i.e. to what is implied by it. If Grandma speaks about knowledge, and intends to use the term in its conventional sense (i.e. to employ the concept of knowledge), and if knowledge is justified true belief, then Grandma can be said to have said something about justified true belief, even though she does not know this implication herself.

But how far do implications reach? And, provided that they do reach quite far, should we say that authorial intention reaches equally far? There must be limits. I may intentionally do something without having planned it, without even consciously noticing my doing it, and without having intended do to so (i.e. not having willed it to happen, as in the case of intentionally produced, but unwanted side-effects.) But I cannot, even on the most permissive philosophical theories of action, do something intentionally without in any way knowing what I do. Grandma can only be attributed an opinion on justified true belief inasmuch as she can also be assumed to have at least an implicit grasp of the notion of knowledge. But while we may plausibly be said to have implicit semantic knowledge and to implicitly manifest it in our linguistic activities, our knowledge of the cumulative effects of our linguistic activities – and the full connotative meaning of our words – may be quite limited. And intentional action arguably cannot reach beyond the point where knowledge,
of even the most implicit kind, ends. There are unwilled, unrecognised consequences of my actions for which I cannot in any sense be held responsible. There are true descriptions of my behaviour that cannot count as descriptions of my intentional actions (e.g. creating a specific spatial distribution of chalk molecules).

It thus appears that Hough was right after all. Cumulative effects are produced by the intentional doings of the author, but need not be intended as such. And if such effects can be constitutive of literary meaning, we seem to have an example of intention-transcendent meaning, a kind of emergent meaning that is still rooted in and constrained by, but not reducible to, the content of authorial intentions.

Even if we were to adopt an extremely permissive position and merely require that the meanings in question can be traced back to (rather than actually covered by) authorial intentions, it seems that there would be a very significant difference between meaning that is willed more or less directly and meaning that is intended much more indirectly. Similar differences have been acknowledged by intentionalists in the theory of law, who, for example, distinguish between direct and oblique intention, as well as between specific and merely general intent (i.e. intending to kill someone, as opposed to intending to kill one’s husband).²¹

Now I think large parts of the practice of authors are driven by intentions that are both general and oblique – in fact more oblique than what is usually meant with this term in the theory of law, because they bring about consequences that were not even foreseen, partly because of their generality. Authors often write something in order to achieve an effect of a certain kind, but without knowing, perhaps not even wanting to determine in advance, what the specific effect will be.

Take for instance the phenomenon of “empty spaces” or “blanks” highlighted by reader-response theory. Some of these are created deliberately by the author, who will also have provided some guidelines as to how they should be filled in. Yet I do not think than an intentionalist must hold that there is a definite answer to a question like whether the Kid is killed by the Judge at the end of Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian – or, in any case, that the answer was completely determined by a specific intention of McCarthy’s.²² It makes sense to debate it, as evidence can be mounted for and perhaps also against the assumption that the Kid is killed. But it is quite likely that McCarthy deliberately wanted to leave this question open, that he intended to convey to readers a sense of inconclusive suspicion. Now of course the intentionalist can say that if this is so, then this is what the passage means, and an ever so well-founded guess that the Kid is in fact killed cannot count as a correct assessment of the work’s meaning. But it seems more appropriate to say that such a guess is in fact a hypothesis about the work’s meaning, inasmuch as it is about the implications of what is actually said in the text (which are universally acknowledge by intentionalists as a legitimate object of interpretation), even though in this case the author’s intentions fall short of completely determining the implications and thus the meaning of the passage. In any case, the use of empty spaces like this is clearly the expression of a higher-order intention, which may or may not
be consistent with the meaning of McCarthy’s ground-floor intentions, e.g. the ways in which he has described the Judge and his relationship to the Kid, the surrounding events etc.

The use of allusions or quotations is a further case in point. When quoting or alluding to passages from other works, the author may surely herself influence their meaning, implicitly or explicitly affirming, rejecting, correcting or adding to what was originally said by the author quoted or alluded to. When Orhan Pamuk quotes Stendhal – “We are about to speak of very ugly matters” – at the beginning of Snow, he thereby makes it mean something more than Stendhal intended it to mean. It comes to refer to a story about political tensions in modern Turkey, in effect making a part of its significance into a part of its actual meaning. But often the author does more than just appropriating a bit of text to serve as mean for expressing her own intentions. She also performs an act of meaning borrowing, intending a quoted passage to mean whatever it already meant or may mean, perhaps without having herself grasped this meaning completely.

In a recent discussion – and guarded defence – of intentionalism, Samuel Wheeler III considers the case of texts that have been incorporated into other authors’ texts, and suggests the following principles for assigning meaning to the different texts involved:

A given passage in itself means what its author intended. As a part of another author’s text it means what that other, later author intended … When texts are incorporated into other texts, and the authorial intention about the incorporated text differs from that of the incorporating text, the meaning of the incorporated text in itself is different from the meaning of the text as part of the larger text.

This is partly right, but too simplistic, or at least incomplete. It is correct that “Oed und Leer das Meer” means something “in itself”, which was by determined by Wagner’s original intention. It is also correct that it means something else as part of Eliot’s The Waste Land, in which it has become informed by Eliot’s intention. But what Wheeler does not take into account is that Eliot very likely also wanted the quote to retain some of its original meaning, some of which he may not himself have grasped completely at the moment of quotation. He might have intended it to mean something broadly Wagnerian or Tristan-like, to invoke a range of unspecified associations in the reader’s mind or the like. Hence it is not enough to distinguish the original from the new meaning; it must be taken into account that there can be an – intended or unintended – interplay between the two.

Authors not only adopt passages from other authors. Still more ubiquitous is the practice of incorporating existing texts of one’s own into a larger text. Writing usually involves rearrangement of sentences or sections. Such intra-authorial “borrowing” and adaptation is also a case in which higher-order – organizing – intentions – infuse the text with new meaning, but may themselves be conditioned by the ground-floor meaning of the more elementary parts.

There are, moreover, general artistic strategies that rely crucially on the reorganisation of existing material. Proust incorporated large parts of his unfinished novel Jean Santeuil into À la recherché du temps perdu. Wheeler’s diagnosis may seem roughly correct in this case – it is
Proust’s later self, the author of *À la recherche* ..., who must be considered the prime determinant of meaning. It may be thought that an incorporated text retains its original meaning as far, but only far, as it is supported by, or at least consistent with, the organizing intentions of the incorporator. But it is not always that easy. As already noted, there can be tensions between the higher-order intentions and the material at which they are directed; sometimes it may seem more natural to disregard them and read the material more on its own terms, i.e. keeping more closely to the original ground-floor intentions. Again the question arises about the reach and power of higher-order intentions, which need neither be appropriate nor themselves coherent.

More extreme examples of artistic strategies include the attempts of authors to suppress or divert the effects of their controlling intelligence, either cancelling authorial metacognition (in the case of automatic writing) or substituting it with some more or less random procedure. One might think of the cut-up technique employed by the Dadaists and William Burroughs, Arno Schmidt’s montage techniques (like the use of parallel columns in *Zettel’s Traum*) or the temporal constraints imposed by Knausgård on his own writing in order to suppress his tendency to self-criticism and eschew a narrative form that might obscure our experience of the world.26

These examples should also call attention to the fact that writing is a temporally extended process. Intentionalists generally – and rightly – distinguish an author’s subsequent judgments about the meaning of her text from her meaning-producing intentions, which they claim are those (and only those) that are operative in the very act of writing. But when does writing take place – just when is the author *in* the act? Though some have defended the existence of “retroactive” meaning-determination – arguing that earlier works can “prefigure” later ones and so be influenced by them,27 it seems most plausible to insist that an author is unable to alter the meaning of her work after its completion.28 Yet just when and how a work is completed is far from clear-cut. In fact it seems rather arbitrary, and depends, at least partially, on the higher-order intentions of the author. Part Two of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* is now standardly read as such – as the second part of a single comprehensive work – but was a sequel published ten years after the original novel. We might still be right in taking some of Cervantes’ later intentions to determine some of the meaning of Part One; and we might have to refrain from taking any of the intentions behind Conan Doyle’s *A Scandal in Bohemia* (1891) to determine any of the meaning in *The Sign of the Four* (1890). But examples like these do make the distinction between meaning-determining intentions and intentions that can merely serve as external evidence seem somewhat strained.

Part of what justifies Wheeler in giving priority to the intention of the “later author”, in cases of integration and compilation, is the assumption of a general “controlling intelligence” or “unifying authorial intention”.29 He is right in explicitly acknowledging the potential importance of authorial metacognition for intentionalist interpretation. Unifying intentions may help to bring some unity to otherwise disparate textual fragments. Maybe it should be given absolute priority as far as it is clearly articulated and actually specifies that the textual units should understood this or that way (though I think we should take not of the fact that such intentions can be more or less appropriate).
But even the most reflective, controlled and masterly planning of authors leave something open and "borrow" meaning more or less obliquely. Moreover, genuinely unifying intentions may be relatively rare. Texts are not seldom compiled more instinctively and unreflectively, in ways that achieve meanings rather than impose them on the material. Collective authorship may be seen as a paradigm of literary production, rather than an exotic, marginal case, in that it involves an interplay between productive, selective and framing intentions that need not be regulated by any overarching strategic intention. The role played by Ezra Pound in editing Eliot’s *The Waste Land* into its final form is just an especially vivid and well-known example; I suspect that many, if not most intra-authorial creative processes are not much different. As we have seen, authors themselves take measures to cancel out the effects of their own controlling intelligence. Inasmuch as a viable intentionalism must be psychologically realistic – and should not end up counting out too many texts that appear perfectly meaningful as being not really so – it be would overly restrictive to demand the presence of an effective, unifying authorial intention for a work to have meaning. Such an intention may not be there at all, it may be incomplete, or it may be deliberately set aside or overruled by a still more general and “central”, yet disunifying or *laissez-faire*, intention.

**IV. Prospects for a Multi-Level Intentionalism**

I have pointed out tensions and inconsistencies in prominent intentionalist views. I have argued that things may be less simple than intentionalists have often supposed. Some might indeed take my observations as further evidence for the popular view that intentionalism is a philosophical invention unable to cope with the diversity of actual literary practice. This is not my own diagnosis, however. I have not been arguing for any kind of postmodern promiscuity. Nothing I have said indicates that we should countenance a plethora of meanings, or allow for a wide variety of constitutive factors beyond author’s intentions, like readers’ reactions or historical circumstances. My point is rather that if we wish to keep to the overall idea of intentionalism, encapsulated in Hirsch’ broad notion of verbal meaning, we should also be prepared to accept a multitude of such meanings. But then we face the problem of how to adjudicate between different levels of meaning. Which levels count, and to what extent? How is the meaning of a work to be determined, if it comprises different layers of meaning that may not support, and can even contradict, each other?

There are three possible principled strategies to consider, none of which I find convincing. First, we might retreat to the ground floor, keeping more consistently to the thrust of the intentionalist movement, seeing literary meaning as a function of elementary, verbal meaning, and taking anything else to be no more relevant than subsequent authorial statements about the work. But this leaves us with an implausibly impoverished view of literary meaning. At least some, and probably many, higher-order intentions just do seem to play a significant role. It is not just that it is very difficult to draw a clear line between what is first- and what is higher-order. There is a also a clear sense in which whatever a poet intended to convey with, say, a stanza, can be said to be – at
least part of – what he meant by writing it, and so a co-determinant of its meaning. Most embarrassingly, a simple bottom-up view is an acute danger of sliding into sheer textualism, i.e. the view that meaning is constituted exclusively by features of the text (and that a literary work is simply a text); precisely the kind of view that intentionalist wish, emphatically, to distance themselves from. It would force us to ignore e.g. irony that cannot be read off directly from the text.

Secondly, we might opt for the opposite extreme and grant priority to the higher-order intentions. But this would seem to grant magical powers to authorial intention: the author would be able to produce very specific meanings simply, and achieve literary effects and qualities, simply by willing to do so, and this is obviously not the case. It just does seem to matter for literary meaning and interpretation whether higher-order intentions are realized or not, as well as how they are realized. An unsuccessfully realized intention to convey a sense of desolation clearly makes for a different poem than a completely realized one. Tolstoy couldn’t have made Anna Karenina into a cool, dispassionate, calculating character just by suddenly describing her as such at the end of Part Seven of his great novel. Moreover, some of the most plausible arguments for intentionalism turn on the observation that the meaning of individual words or phrases, which may be ambiguous considered by themselves, makes a difference to literary interpretation. It was in order to resolve such ambiguities that recourse was taken to intentions in the first place. Hence ground-floor meaning has to count as well.

Thirdly, in order to achieve a kind of compromise, we might impose stern success conditions or consistency requirements, only countenancing those meanings that are in accordance with, or mutually supportive of, each other. But this would again force us to leave out much of which otherwise seems clearly relevant to the interpretation of a literary text. Even the best of works harbour tensions between different layers, between literary means and ends, and this seems to be a fact about the works as such, not just an external circumstance. While I expressed reservation about the example of the unsuccessful poet, I find it hard to deny that failed intentions somehow add to, or influence, the meaning of the work, even if they do not dictate it. This is perhaps most obvious in cases where success is narrowly missed, where a cumulative effect is not quite, but almost realized. Indeed, one of the most interesting “meaning phenomena” in literature seem to be precisely the case where an intention to express something is discernable, but arguably falls short of perfect achievement. Counting out such cases would be exaggeratedly restrictive and deprive us of some of the more interesting notions of literary meaning.

In sum, I find it hard to count out as necessarily irrelevant almost any kind or level of authorial intention. Surely some kinds of intention may often have less or almost no impact. Very general intentions that turn out to have little connection to the actual writing practice or any actually achieved effect may be rightly negligible. My intention to write the Great Scandinavian Novel may be a case in point. Even if we should not always impose strict success conditions, but allow for a distinction between meaning and actual accomplishment, I suppose that the extent to which an intention is actually put to work, e.g. by determining more specific, lower-level intentions, does
influence how far it can be seen as meaning-constitutive. Moreover, some of the clues for how to adjudicate may themselves be taken from authorial intentions, as we may have both intra- and extra-textual evidence for what the author considered more or less important. But there are clear limits to how far this will provide any reliable guidance, not to say suffice to resolve all the questions about the interaction of different layers of meaning.

What, then, are we to do? The inevitable trade-off between bottom-up and top-down determinations cannot, I think, be resolved by appeal to any strict principles. It seems that we must seek an overall equilibrium, balancing all the relevant concerns. Hence I come to conclude, almost to my own surprise, that something like the traditional idea of the hermeneutic circle is indispensable. We must work back and forth among intentions of lover and higher order, assigning to them varying relative weights as we go along, striving for some kind of balance, coherence or overall appropriateness that cannot, however, be defined in advance or analysed in terms of more basic principles. This may seem surprising and almost heretical, inasmuch as intentionalists have wanted to see the hermeneutic circle as merely a heuristic device for narrowing in on a meaning that is predetermined (bottom-up). It moreover seems to clash with the robust realism about mental states that has been part and parcel of classical intentionalism.

On second thoughts, however, the conclusion does not seem that surprising after all. At least as soon as we turn to literary meaning of a sort just slightly more complicated than the most minimal kinds of local semantic meaning – and this, as I have shown, is clearly what everyone, including orthodox externalists, are after – some holistic effects do have to be countenanced, for example the sequential order of sentences, stanzas or sections. Moreover, even if one is attracted to an atomist or molecularist realism about mental states of a more basic kind, it is hard to deny that the ontology of more complex mental states, especially attitudes with complex, or just very general, content, may be less straightforward. Maybe my belief that the cat is on the mat is a simple and neatly localized mental state of mine, realized by a perspicuous set of factors. But ask me instead what I think about EU foreign policy or French 19th century literature. As a realist, I am inclined to think that there must be a definite answer to such questions (or to any of the many different, more specific and elaborate versions of these very broadly, if not elliptically, formulated questions). But we are here talking about highly complex mental states comprising a large number of more specific beliefs. How these beliefs add up to the complex states of which they are part is a very good question. Again, it is probably a matter of, inter alia, consistency and relevance and relative weight of the different elements, but there is hardly any remotely simple formula to be found. How, for example, should we balance my general, cliché-like views with my more specific judgements about individual French 19th century works?

We might still insist on there being a distinction, in principle, between the ontologically constitutive relations that determine the complex beliefs themselves, and the principles and processes of interpretation through which we arrive at our best guess about them. But something like the latter seems to be our only clue to how the former might look. Hermeneutics may be
nothing but a practically indispensable heuristics, but it also serves as a model for our ontology of complex mental states and, granted that multilevel intentionalism is correct, of the meaning of literary works.

Even so-called aesthetic arguments, which Juhl struggled to banish from interpretation (in effect a kind of *ad hominem*-argument, which appeals to the skills and creativity of certain authors to rule out interpretations that would make their works seem aesthetically inferior),\(^\text{33}\) may have a role to play in determining the meaning of a work. Maybe it is more appropriate to take into account the unsuccessful intentions of Goethe than those of a literary dilettante. Our knowledge that Goethe was generally capable of realizing even very ambitious literary intentions, and that he mastered a wide variety of genres and styles, not only makes his failings more interesting, but arguably makes them more relevant to our understanding of his work as such. Even if we do not impose strict success conditions on literary meaning, it seems that our meaning attributions are sensitive to the likelihood of success, as well as to the general quality of a writer or her work.

I am aware that such implications may seem too messy. It might be thought there is an easier way out. Why not simply give up the very notion of literary meaning? It should still be possible to maintain some basic intentionalist constraints on literary interpretation. Something like this has been suggested by Peter Lamarque, who insists on the importance of what Beardsley called “explication”, i.e. recovery of the verbal meaning of “relatively localized parts” of works,\(^\text{34}\) but takes it to be at most a necessary condition of successful interpretation, which may often be aimed at questions that are not primarily about meaning.\(^\text{35}\)

There is surely something to be said for such a view. Recognizing a multitude of levels of meaning does tend to deflate loftier notions of *the* meaning of a literary work. But I think that abandoning the notion of literary meaning makes things *too* easy. It ignores the fact that a literary work forms an “organic whole”,\(^\text{36}\) that aspects and layers are closely woven together. What I have described is not a multitude of completely distinct levels of meaning, among which we can simply pick and choose, but rather a tight network comprising not only of horizontal, but also of vertical relations between meanings and intentions. Drawing a clear line between explication and interpretation turns out to be extremely difficult. Moreover, it seems hard to give up the idea that interpretation aims at uncovering meaning of some sort. And while it may be different from verbal meaning of a narrow, ground-floor kind (as I have myself been keen to stress), it is surely not independent of it. In any case, even if we were to abandon the *term* “meaning”, we would, when confronted with an interpretative task, still be faced with the problem of adjudicating between different levels of intention.

Hence we will have to live with the complexity. But this is very much in the spirit of intentionalism. Though it may have been motivated by the need for a clear and objective norm of interpretation, and guided by the ideal of monism, i.e. the idea that there is only one correct interpretation, intentionalism was never supposed to make scholarly life easier. Quite to the contrary, it has been wedded to the – typically realist – assumption that the meaning of a work may
be practically unfathomable, because an author’s intention may be inscrutable due to our lack of sufficient evidence. Recognizing a multitude of levels of intention and their subtle interactions simply reinforces this point. It is not just that we have, at best, indirect and incomplete access to the intentions of authors. In addition, these intentions do themselves interact in complicated and sometimes almost intractable ways. This may be bad, inasmuch as it spells trouble for both theorizing and interpretation, but it is hardly bad news. It accords with both authorial and critical practice as we know it, which is widely concerned with intentions, but also with the intricate relations between such intentions and their distal and proximal effects and their constraining and enabling conditions. It even allows us to make sense of the suggestive, but otherwise irritatively vague idea of a “play of meaning” in literary texts. A multilevel intentionalism could be able not only to account for actual practice, but also to accommodate many of the ideas typical of other currents in literary theory, like philosophical hermeneutics, reader-response theory or even deconstruction. Even though this is not its main motivation, it is quite something.37

2 See Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., Intentions in the Experience of Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), for psychological evidence that both ordinary people and scholars are strongly disposed to experience written texts as expressions of authorial intentions
3 But see the essays collected in Gary Iseminger, Intention and Interpretation (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992)
4 E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Validity in Interpretation. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1967), p. 31; hereafter abbreviated VI
10 See also Peter Lamarque, The Philosophy of Literature (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 129
12 See Paisley Livingston, Art and Intention (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, Ch. 6
14 It is controversial whether irony should count as an indirect speech act. Searle (1979, 112f.) thinks not, because the speaker does not mean two things at the same time; the literal meaning of the sentence is not asserted at all (Expression and Meaning. Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979), pp. 112f.). Still, irony does, on all accounts, presuppose the production of a sentence with a meaning different from the intended one; hence ironic acts create “multiple layers of meaning” (see D. J. Amante, D. J. 1981. “The Theory of Ironic Speech Acts”, Poetics Today 2(2) (1981), pp. 77-96)
17 Roman Ingarden, Das literarische Kunstwerk. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1972 [1931]), p. 325; hereafter abbreviated DLK
22 See Peter J. Kitson, The Year’s Work in English Studies 78 (1997), p. 809
23 Orhan Pamuk, Snow (London: Faber & Faber, 2004)
24 The model for this comes from what is known, in the philosophy of language, as reference borrowing. A speaker may herself not be able to identify the referent of expression, but simply intend it to refer to whatever some other, assumedly more competent, speaker, uses it to refer to (e.g. by “gold” I mean whatever a competent metallurgist would take to be gold). See e.g. M. Devitt & K. Sterelny: Language and Reality, 2 ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), Ch. 3.4
25 Samuel Wheeler III, “Intentionalism and Texts with Too Many Authors” (Nonsite.org 6, 2012), p. 15; p.18
28 See Paisley Livingston, Art and Intention (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Ch. 4
29 Wheeler, ibid. p. 17
30 It is not uncommon to demand some kind of shared overall intention – see e.g. Livingston, ibid. Ch. 3, or Rebecca Kukla: “Author TBD”: Radical Collaboration in Contemporary Biomedical Research”. Philosophy of Science (2012), 79, 5, pp. 845-858. But I do not think that such idealized notions of ”joint authorship” cover most actual cases of collective authorship, which are less coordinated.
31 See e.g. John Maynard, Literary Intention, Literary Interpretation and Readers. (Peterborough: Broadview Press 2009)
32 As emphasized by Ingarden, DLK, pp. 152ff
33 I, pp. 116ff.
35 Peter Lamarque: ”Ten Theses of Literary Interpretation” (unpublished manuscript)
36 Ingarden, DLK p. 318
37 Thanks to [XXX] for helpful criticism and suggestions