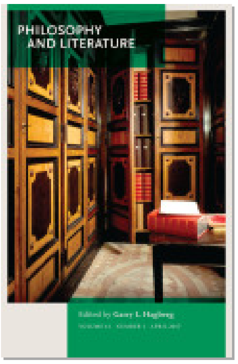
Levels of Literary Meaning

Søren Harnow Klausen



Philosophy and Literature, Volume 41, Number 1, April 2017, pp. 70-90 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2017.0005

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/663820

No institutional affiliation (17 Jan 2019 03:32 GMT)

Søren Harnow Klausen

LEVELS OF LITERARY MEANING

Abstract: I argue that intentionalist theories of meaning and interpretation, like those of Hirsch and Juhl, have been insufficiently attentive to the different levels of authorial intention that are operative in literary works. By countenancing intentions on different levels—ranging from simple semantic intentions, over the use of irony and allusion, to wide-ranging strategic decisions or attempts to express general ideas—and their complex interplay, intentionalism converges, at least in practice, on some of the rival approaches to interpretation. This paper provides a rationale for, and a sketch of, a multilevel intentionalism that is more sensitive to authorial and critical practice.

Intentionalism, it has been remarked, just won't go away.[1] 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,[2] 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 versus hypothetical intentionalism.[3] 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. I contend 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 put forth intentionalist theories that are at best incomplete and possibly incoherent.

Philosophy and Literature, 2017, 41: 70–90. © 2017 Johns Hopkins University Press.

I

Though their views turn out, on closer inspection, to be more ambiguous, intentionalists 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 "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."[4] By itself, this would seem to apply to linguistic units of all kinds and sizes, from single words to multivolume books. Yet obviously Hirsch is primarily concerned with meaning on the scale of an individual sentence, or at least something like this. He speaks about *brief* word sequences (*VI,* p. 46), 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, intentionalists like E. D. Hirsch Jr. and P. D. Juhl[5] apparently 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[6] as opposed to holists about meaning. Further evidence for their leanings can be found in Hirsch's 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. The immediacy 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, and planning (*I,* pp. 133–35). 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. 51–57). The general idea is that meaning-determining intentions usually exemplify what John Searle has called intentions in action, as opposed to prior intentions.[7] An intention is realized *in* the very act of writing. The author—who for the most part is absorbed in the process of writing, thinking about characters, plot, setting, and 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 intention will have no more influence on the meaning of the text she produces than subsequent discoveries or judgments made by scholars and critics.

II

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 are on a quite different scale from single, sentence-level utterances. Even if we maintain that a literary work as a whole can be conceived as an utterance, with a unitary utterance meaning—which just might easily elude our grasp, due to its immense complexity[8]—we must admit 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), which 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 favored 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 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—is the typical object of literary interpretation and dispute. And it is still consistent with Hirsch's 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 Hirsch's accommodation of higher-order intentions also shows that this definition is not only extremely broad but also ambiguous, or at least remarkably pluralist, in that it allows for the coexistence of different and even incompatible verbal meanings. I may mean to convey something by uttering "p," and mean to convey something by uttering "q." And then I may also mean 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 supports it; *organization* of literary material arguably also matters for literary meaning. So although formally consistent and independently plausible, Hirsch's accommodation of higher-order intention and meaning breaks with his bottom-up approach, and possibly also with his insistence on the singularity of literary meaning. It seems to open up toward a more pluralist and multilevel approach.

One might think that there *is* an inconsistency in Hirsch's presentation of his example citing the unsuccessful poet. Is he not violating the second part of his definition: 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's success only pertains to linguistic conventions, and thus operates exclusively at the ground-floor level. If the poet had written something that a competent reader could not understand or decipher, the poet would indeed have failed in producing a determinate verbal meaning. But Hirsch does 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 view is quite consistent, but not very plausible. Of course, rules of poetry are not comparable to linguistic conventions. Writing bad poetry is different from being unable to communicate due to lack of linguistic competence. (Note, however, that this observation 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—for the claim that success conditions operate on 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 by itself to write the Great Scandinavian Novel 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, such as whether a text should be understood as a poem or a comedy—impose definite constraints on interpretation.[9] But whereas Levinson does not consider categorial intentions to be genuinely *meaning determining*—he apparently takes meaning and genre to be essentially unconnected[10]—Hirsch, by contrast, claims the verbal meaning is bound by genre (*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 (ground-floor) intentions are frequently entangled, thus allowing that genre may influence work- and utterance meaning.[11]

This does not necessarily go against the intentionalists' preference for immediate intentions. Hirsch's 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"—the aspect of time consciousness that endows present experiences with a sense of what is to come—but which is itself "prereflective," and thus essentially different from acts of explicit anticipation.[12]

Still, with his notion of a genre-determining controlling intelligence, Hirsch clearly has (again) accommodated a relatively higher-order authorial intention in his theory. (Bear in mind that higher-order intentions can be *implicit*—or "unconscious," in Hirsch's somewhat unfortunate terminology—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 *downward* determination of meaning, and thus a top-down approach. The anticipated idea of the whole codetermines the verbal meaning of individual signs and sequences of signs (together with the more ground-floor intentions). 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 have been recognized as legitimate factors in the production of meaning. Hirsch allows that utterances can be genuinely ambiguous, provided each of the different meanings has been willed by the author, or that the author has deliberately left the precise meaning open (*VI*, pp. 44–51). Hegel may have intended his term *Aufhebung* to mean both "elevation" and "elimination," and if he did, that is what the term means. This is an example of a more complex kind of intention, even if it 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 does not use the same term with two different meanings, then it seems that she has 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.[13] So even intrasentential 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 solely by linguistic conventions—is a complex act that 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 reservations.[14] And though it is common to warn against confusing *mention* and *use,* Davidson has pointed out that we can conveniently both use *and* mention the same expression by producing a single token of it.[15] This practice is arguably widespread in literary writing, as in the form of allusions that both refer to earlier occurrences of the same expression *and* use it anew. When T. S. 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 they appear to be further relevant instances of higher-order intentionality and meaning. Consider the opening sentence of book 6 of Henry 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 be 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 books 5 and 7. But he might not have been. A tension may exist between text and metatext; authors may fail to carry out their announced intentions, or they may say something more or less deliberately about other parts of their texts that do not match their ground-floor meaning.

A famous passage from Eliot's *Four Quartets* provides a perhaps more striking example:

> That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
> A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
> Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
> With words and meanings.[16]

One might reasonably contest this metaliterary 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, metatextual passages like this apparently come close to being statements of authors about their work, which are routinely dismissed by intentionalists as being irrelevant to the work's meaning (*VI*, pp. 6–10); but being integral parts of the works themselves, the passages seem to add to the work's meanings, 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, theme, idea, or "moral" of a work. Claims that a particular work is all about love, or growing up, or alienation may be 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. Still, a notion bears credence that a literary work, or at least some such works, expresses a general idea or tendency, and that this is an important part of the "meaning" that 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 the part of the author, as he generally saw "higher units of meaning" as the result of complex, combinatorial "subjective operations" (*DLK*, pp. 98–110). But I need hardly invoke the authority of Ingarden in order to drive home the point that literary works may harbor 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 multilayered affair, and pointed out that a work may contain many kinds of—sometimes not even compatible—meanings, even when meaning is taken to be determined by the author's intention.

III

Intentionalism is often met with the objection that more meaning is 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 rather what Hirsch calls *significance*—the relationship between the meaning of the text and something else (*VI*, p. 8)—that 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 says. Since she need not be explicitly aware of her choice of genre, she can also mean a lot more than she realizes. If we can explain 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 along similar lines when attempting to rebut an otherwise very appealing suggestion made by Graham Hough.[18] Hough pointed to the ubiquity of what he calls *achieved meaning*: subtle but literarily 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. Juhl retorts that while the effects were surely not something of which the author had been *aware*, they could still be said to have been implied by her choice of words (*I*, pp. 129–35).

Such a notion of intentional implication is supported, at least to a certain degree, by work in the philosophy action.[19] I may do something voluntarily—and thus intentionally—without having explicitly decided to do so. My absent-minded action of brushing off chalk from my trousers during a lecture may still count as voluntary and thus as intentional. The same goes for the way I irritate my wife by insisting that we depart very early for holiday—a foreseen but unwanted side effect of what I take 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—to employ the concept of knowledge—and if knowledge is justified true belief, then Grandma can be said to have uttered something about justified true belief, even though she does not know this implication herself.

But how far do implications reach? And, provided that they 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 to do it—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.[20] 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, unrecognized consequences of my actions for which I cannot in any sense be held responsible. There are true descriptions of my behavior that cannot count as descriptions of my intentional actions (such as creating a specific spatial distribution of chalk molecules).

Apparently, then, Hough was right after all. Cumulative effects are produced by the intentional actions 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 be traced back to (rather than actually covered by) authorial intentions, a very significant difference would seem to exist 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 (such as intending to kill someone, as opposed to intending to kill one's husband).[21]

I think large parts of authorial practice are driven by intentions that are both general and oblique—*more* oblique in fact than what is usually meant by this term in the theory of law, because the intentions 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 that 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.

Of course, the intentionalist can say that if this is so, then this is what the passage means, and a well-founded guess that the Kid is in fact killed cannot count as a correct assessment of the work's meaning. But more appropriate, perhaps, is 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 intentionalists universally acknowledge 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, this use of an empty space 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—for example, the ways in which he has described the Judge and his relationship to the Kid.

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 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*,[23] he thereby makes the line mean something more than Stendhal intended it to mean. It comes to refer to a story about political tensions in modern Turkey, in effect turning some of its significance into a part of the quote's actual meaning. But often the author does more than just appropriate a bit of text to serve as a means 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.[24]

In a recent discussion—and guarded defense—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.[25]

This is partly right, but too simplistic, or at least incomplete. It is correct that "Oed' und leer das Meer" means something "in itself" that was determined by Wagner's original intention. It also 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 quotation to retain part of its original meaning, some of which he may not himself have grasped completely at the moment of citation. 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, perhaps. Hence it is not enough to distinguish the original from the new meaning; we must take into account that there can be an interplay—intended or unintended—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.

Moreover, general artistic strategies rely crucially on the reorganization 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: Proust's later self, the author of *À la recherché,* must be considered the prime determinant of meaning. I may think that an incorporated text retains its original meaning as far, but only as far, as it is supported by, or is at least consistent with, the organizing intentions of the incorporator. But it is not always that easy. As already noted, tensions can exist 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, keeping more closely to the original, ground-floor intentions. Again the question arises about the reach and power of higher-order intentions, which need be neither appropriate nor themselves coherent.

More extreme examples of artistic strategies include authors' attempts to suppress or divert the effects of their controlling intelligence, either canceling 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 *Zettels Traum*), or the temporal constraints imposed by Karl Ove Knausgård on his own writing in order to suppress his tendency toward 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? Only when the author is *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 2 of Cervantes's *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's later intentions to determine some of the meaning of part 1; 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 they should be given absolute priority as far as they are clearly articulated and actually specify that the textual units should be understood this or that way (though I think we should take notice of the fact that such intentions can be somewhat appropriate). But even the most reflective, controlled, and masterly authorial planning leaves something open and "borrows" meaning more or less obliquely. Moreover, genuinely unifying intentions may be relatively rare. Texts are often 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 interplay between productive, selective, and framing intentions that need not be regulated by any overarching strategic intention.[30]

The role Ezra Pound played 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 I have noted, 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 appears 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

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 take my observations as further evidence for the popular view that intentionalism is a philosophical invention that is unable to cope with the diversity of actual literary practice.[31] 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 an 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's 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, one another?

Three possible principled strategies can be considered, 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 do seem to play a significant role beyond the fact that drawing a clear line between what is first order and what is higher order is very difficult. There is 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 codeterminant of its meaning. Most embarrassing, a simple, bottom-up view is in acute danger of sliding into sheer textualism, 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 intentionalists wish, emphatically, to distance themselves from. It would force us to ignore such features as irony that cannot be read off directly from the text.

Second, we might opt for the opposite extreme and grant priority to higher-order intentions. But such a choice seems to grant magical powers to authorial intention: the author would be able to produce very specific meanings easily, and achieve literary effects and qualities, simply by willing to do so, and this is obviously not the case. It does seem to matter for literary meaning and interpretation whether, or how well, higher-order intentions 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 7 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. In order to resolve such ambiguities recourse was taken to intentions in the first place. Hence ground-floor meaning has to count as well.

Third, 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 what otherwise seems clearly relevant to the interpretation of a literary text. Even the best works harbor tensions between different layers, between literary means and ends, which seems to be a fact about the works as such, not just an external circumstance. Though I have expressed reservations 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 seems 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 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 do 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—say 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 extratextual 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 mention 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. We must seek an overall equilibrium, balancing all the relevant concerns. Hence I 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 lower 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 analyzed 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 closing in on a meaning that is predetermined (bottom-up). The search for an overall equilibrium, moreover, seems to clash with the robust realism about mental states that has been part and parcel of classical intentionalism.

On second thought, however, the conclusion does not seem that surprising after all. 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.[32] 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 mind, realized by a perspicuous set of factors. But ask me instead what I think about EU foreign policy or French nineteenth-century literature.

As a realist, I am inclined to think that a definite answer must exist 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 a remotely simple formula is hardly to be found. How, for example, should we balance my general, cliché-like views with my more specific judgments about individual French nineteenth-century works?

We might still insist on 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, may have a role to play in determining the meaning of a work. Some of them resemble ad hominem arguments, as they appeal to the skills and creativity of certain authors to rule out interpretations that would make their works seem aesthetically inferior.[33] We may find the unsuccessful intentions of Goethe more appropriate 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 also 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, our meaning attributions are sensitive to the *likelihood* of success, as well as to the general quality of a writer's work.

I am aware that such implications may seem too messy. One might think there is an easier way out. Why not simply give up the very notion of literary meaning? Maintaining some basic intentionalist constraints on literary interpretation should still be possible. Something like this has been suggested by Peter Lamarque, who insists on the importance of what Monroe Beardsley called "explication"—recovery of the verbal meaning of "relatively localized parts" of works,[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.[35]

Surely something is 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";[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 consisting 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, giving up the idea that interpretation aims at uncovering meaning of some sort is also hard. And while the meaning 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 have to live with the complexity. But doing so 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 (the idea that there is only one correct interpretation), intentionalism was never supposed to make scholarly life easier. 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 many levels of intention and their subtle interactions simply reinforces this point. The problem is not just that we have, at best, indirect and incomplete access to authors' intentions. 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 for intentionalism. 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 irritatingly vague, idea of a "play of meaning" in literary texts. A multilevel intentionalism is 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.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN DENMARK

Thanks to Paisley Livingston, Peter Lamarque, Catrin Misselhorn, R. Lanier Anderson, and Esben Nedenskov Petersen for helpful criticism and suggestions.

1. Denis Dutton, "Why Intentionalism Won't Go Away," in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy,* ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

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, ed., *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

4. E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 31; hereafter abbreviated *VI.*

5. P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); hereafter abbreviated *I.*

6. See Michael Devitt, *Coming to Our Senses: A Naturalistic Program for Semantic Localism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

7. John R. Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 79–111.

8. As suggested by Paisley Livingston, "Authorial Intention and the Varieties of Intentionalism," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature,* ed. Garry L. Hagberg and Walter Jost (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

9. See Jerrold Levinson, "Intention and Interpretation in Literature," in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

10. See also Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 129.

11. See Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917),* trans. J. B. Brough (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 1991).

12. See Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), chap. 6.

13. Yan Huang, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Pragmatics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 135.

14. It is controversial whether irony should count as an *indirect* speech act. Searle 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 (John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979], pp. 112–13). 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" (David J. Amante, "The Theory of Ironic Speech Acts," *Poetics Today* 2, no. 2 [1981]: 77–96).

15. Donald Davidson, "Quotation," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1979; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 79–92.

16. T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," part 2, lines 18–21, *Four Quartets,* in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

17. Roman Ingarden, *Das literarische Kunstwerk* (1931; repr., Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1972), p. 325; hereafter abbreviated *DLK* (my translation).

18. Graham Hough, "An Eighth Type of Ambiguity," in *On Literary Intention: Critical Essays*, ed. David Newton-De Molina (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), pp. 222–41.

19. See, for instance, Gilbert Harman, "Practical Reasoning," *Review of Metaphysics* 79 (1976): 431–63; Michael Bratman, *Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

20. See Johannes Roessler, "Agents' Knowledge," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, ed. Timothy O'Connor and Constantine Sandis (Oxford:Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 236.

21. See Gideon Yaffe, "Intention in Law," in O'Connor and Sandis, *Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, p. 340.

22. See Peter J. Kitson, ed., *The Year's Work in English Studies*, vol. 78 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), p. 809.

23. Orhan Pamuk, *Snow* (London: Faber and 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 an expression, but simply intend it to refer to whatever some other, assumedly more competent, speaker uses it to refer to. (For example, by "gold" I mean whatever a competent metallurgist would take to be gold.) See Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny, *Language and Reality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), chaps. 3 and 4.

25. Samuel Wheeler III, "Intentionalism and Texts with Too Many Authors," *Nonsite.org* 6 (2012): 15, 18.

26. Karl Ove Knausgård, interview with James Wood, *Paris Review* 211 (2014).

27. See Jerrold Levinson, "Work and Oeuvre," in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

28. See Livingston, *Art and Intention*, chap. 4.

29. Wheeler, "Intentionalism," p. 17.

30. It is not uncommon to demand some kind of shared overall intention—see, for example, Livingston, *Art and Intention*, chap. 3; and Rebecca Kukla, "'Author TBD': Radical Collaboration in Contemporary Biomedical Research," *Philosophy of Science* 79, no. 5 (2012): 845–58. 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, for example, John Maynard, *Literary Intention, Literary Interpretation, and Readers* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2009).

32. As emphasized by Ingarden in *DLK*, pp. 152–69.

33. *I*, pp. 116–28.

34. Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 130.

35. Peter Lamarque, "Ten Theses of Literary Interpretation" (unpublished paper, presented in Odense, Denmark, September 2015).

36. *DLK*, p. 318.