

The Conversation Argument for Actual Intentionalism

Abstract:

Proponents of actual intentionalism hold that an author's actual intentions should constrain the proper interpretation of his or her works. If, for example, we have good reason to think Proust intends his character Marcel to set out to write a *different* novel from *In Search of Lost Time* itself, then that is how we should interpret the text. After decades of being denigrated as the 'intentional fallacy', actual intentionalism has enjoyed a renaissance in philosophical aesthetics in recent years, thanks in large part to the image of the conversation that has been enlisted its favor: When we neglect the author's intended construal of the text and opt instead for some clever alternative interpretation of our own, we are depriving ourselves of the chance to engage in a conversation (in some metaphorical sense) with this author—and thus are losing the chance (again, in some metaphorical sense) to commune with another human being. In this paper I will raise doubts about whether this appeal to conversation actually helps the actual intentionalist's case. When we reflect on the essentially *interactive* nature of any conversation worthy of that name, we see that this conversation metaphor will not deliver the restrictive lesson of actual intentionalism. In fact, it militates against it.

I. Introduction

In his influential paper, 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', Noel Carroll uses the metaphor of the conversation as a way of understanding our engagement with works of art.¹ When we see this engagement as akin to a conversation, then we will have strong reason to try to discover what the author of the work in question actually meant to communicate. For in failing to do so, we fail really to engage with the author. (I will just stick with the term 'author' for now, but the point could be extended to the other arts as well.)² This point about

¹ 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', in his *Beyond Aesthetics*, (Cambridge, 2004). Carroll has continued to press this actual intentionalist line in various places, for example, his *On Criticism* (Routledge, 2009) and his 2010 Richard Wollheim Memorial Lecture entitled 'Art Interpretation' in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 51, No. 2, April 2011, p. 117-35.

² Alexander Nehamas distinguishes between 'the writer' (the historical person) and 'the author' (whom we postulate based on the text). Likewise he distinguishes between 'the text' and the product we end up with after interpreting a text—'the work'. I am sympathetic to this helpful set of distinctions. But since I am discussing Carroll's view in this paper, and since he does not distinguish authors from writers and works from texts, I have not either. See Nehamas, 'Writer, Text, Work, Author' in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Cascardi, (Johns Hopkins, 1987).

conversation underpins a version of authorial intentionalism, according to which an author's actual intentions should constrain the ways in which it is appropriate for his or her works to be interpreted. If Proust intended that the book his character Marcel sets out to write at the end of *In Search of Lost Time* is a different book from the one we have before us as readers, and we have good evidence of this intention of his, then an interpretation that would have it that Marcel sets out to write the *Recherche* itself would be inappropriate, regardless of the aesthetic arguments that can be marshaled in favor of such a reading.³ The latter proleptic interpretation, according to which the book we are reading is the one Marcel will eventually write, may well be aesthetically rich and interesting. But if it is not what Proust *himself* really intended, then we are, in Carroll's image, ignoring Proust, failing to engage him in a respectful way as a real conversation partner. And that, Carroll thinks, would be a serious shame.

The conversation argument has done much to rehabilitate authorial intentionalism, a view that would be treated as risibly reactionary in many literary circles, as an attractive

³ Joshua Landy defends this interpretation of *In Search of Lost Time* in his *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust* (Oxford, 2004), though not on actual intentionalist grounds.

position in anglophone aesthetics.⁴ But the central image of the conversation, I shall suggest in this paper, does not deliver the actual intentionalist the result he desires, whereby authorial intentions ought to act as a damper on the interpretations we can appropriately put forward. On the contrary, I will argue, if we think through the image of the conversation, the interactive nature of any good conversation suggests that this actual intentionalist limitation is seriously misguided. Once we require that we must take into account the intentions of our conversation partner if we are to have a conversation—as surely seems right—we must be careful not to make the further step to another and more dubious claim: The thought that this ‘conversational’ literary interpretation is a project whose final hermeneutical result should be not just informed, but *constrained* by these authorial intentions.⁵ Good conversations involve give-and-take: We see what we can make of a person’s ideas—how we can develop them, expand on them, and improve them. And to do that, we of course need

⁴ Carroll contrasts his preferred form of ‘modest’ actual intentionalism with an ‘extreme’ form of actual intentionalism which would hold that the correct interpretation of the work is fully determined by the author’s intentions. The modest actual intentionalist only takes seriously the author’s intentions, insofar as the final work produced, given conventions of literature and language, can support these intentions. ‘For,’ as Carroll writes, ‘the modest actual intentionalist acknowledges that authors may fail to realize their intentions; this occurs where authors produce texts that do not support their intentions. Where the author wrote “green,” but intended “black,” the modest actual intentionalist will not say that the text means “black,” since the intention must be borne out by the text produced. See ‘Interpretation and Intention: The Debate Between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism’, in his *Beyond Aesthetics*, p. 198. The charges I give here would apply both to the ‘extreme’ and to the more plausible ‘modest’ forms of actual intentionalism, since both would have it that, at least in the case when intentions are realized in the finished work, these should act as a strong constraint, ruling out interpretations inconsistent with the one intended by the author.

⁵ ‘Art, Intention, and Conversation’, p. 174.

to know what their real ideas were in the first place. But simply divining an interlocutor's intentions is not the end of a good conversation; it is only the beginning of one.

I begin by framing the conversation argument and explaining how it is supposed to pose an important challenge to those who would allow for readings that contravene the author's intentions. I then briefly rehearse and evaluate the main lines of attack that have been leveled against the conversation argument. I will be building on what I take to be the most promising of these criticisms. This objection to the intentionalist is the following: As the conversation argument seems to be construing the encounter between reader and author, it is too one-sided for the conversation metaphor to be appropriate. The so-called 'conversation' would seem in essence to be a monologue, with the author speaking and the reader listening.

The conversation image, I will argue, *can* escape from this charge of one-sidedness, but only if it portrays the encounter between author and reader in such a way that it is not a foregone conclusion—as it is with actual intentionalism—that the readers' own *independent* interpretive ideas are to be given no consideration whatsoever. In this vein, I suggest the possibility that the conversation metaphor might be preserved if we think of the encounter as akin to a meta-level discussion between author and reader about how the text is best to be read— a discussion in which *both* the interpretive opinions of author and reader remain open possibilities for how the text should be construed. Yet if the conversation argument escapes the critics' charges of one-sidedness, it will vitiate the actual intentionalist lesson it wants to have. If the reader has an equally good or better interpretation than the author's, it will be an open question whether the author's preferred construal should constrain the final interpretation to be given. Either way, appeal to *conversation* is not going to be helpful to the actual intentionalist cause.

II. Framing the Debate

Carroll, for his part, couches his key point not as a *semantic* claim about what a work of art really means and the relation that meaning bears to the actual intentions of its author.⁶ That semantic route would of course be one way to go, though in agreement with Carroll, I think that it is perhaps not the best tack.⁷ Talking about the ‘meaning’ of artworks invites the idea that the relevant ‘meanings’ can be fruitfully modeled by considering the semantics of some utterance, with the author being the utterer and the text being the record of the utterance. The question then becomes, how does the utterer’s intention bear on the meaning of this utterance? To what extent is that meaning determined by the utterer’s intention as opposed to just the conventional meaning of the words, perhaps coupled with the context of their utterance? As Carroll notes, even when it comes to the arts that are reliant on language (novels, poetry, spoken drama), the sort of meaning we are interested in as interpreters is rarely ‘meaning’ in this semantic sense, nor even something neatly parasitic on it. It is instead ‘meaning’ *as significance*: What are we to make of some character’s action (is it a sign of cowardice?), or of some plot development (is it foreshadowing?), or of some apparent symbol (is it pagan?), or of the narrator’s presumptive stance on the social and political affairs of the day (is she a defender of prevailing social mores? a closet revolutionary?).

⁶ See his discussion in ‘Art, Intention, and Conversation’, p. 166-7; *On Criticism*, p. 137ff.

⁷ Gary Iseminger, ‘Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism’ in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Autumn, 1996), p. 319-326. Iseminger, like Carroll, uses the image of the conversation, but, as I understand his approach, he is focused on using the conversation to buttress a semantic point about the meaning of the authorial utterance and the relation that meaning bears to the intentions of the utterer in a conversational setting (Cf., esp. 324-5). So too with Jukka Mikkonen, who also focuses on the semantics of utterance meaning, arguing for actual intentionalism in more limited contexts (particularly those where there is some cognitive or philosophical content the author is conveying). See his ‘Intentions and Interpretations: Philosophical Fiction as Conversation’ in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 7.

Again, even in the arts that are reliant on language, it is not likely that we would settle *these* questions of meaning-as-significance simply by answering questions about the semantics of the sentences in the novel, though that would be an important first step. Carroll is thus interested in a broader notion of authorial meaning.

And more importantly, even when it comes to this broader notion, Carroll rightly sees that the issue on the table is fundamentally a normative one: Why *should* we as readers take the author's intentions as a constraint about what an event in the novel should symbolize or what a character should represent? This, as I see it, ought to be the key issue between intentionalists and anti-intentionalists, and accordingly I will be focusing on Carroll's version of the argument here.⁸ Carroll casts the question as one of aesthetic 'policy': Carroll wants to make the case for a form of intentionalism which holds that, as a matter of interpretive policy, the author's actual intention should act as a strong constraint

⁸ In addition to the 'extreme' and 'modest' forms of authorial intentionalism we have distinguished, it is important to see that there are really two orthogonal claims to these previous two that go under the name of actual intentionalism in addition, one thesis broadly semantic, the other a position on a matter of interpretive policy. Let us call these *semantic* authorial intentionalism and *hortatory* authorial intentionalism respectively. Although Carroll holds what are in his terms 'modest' forms of both views, they are in principle separable: In order to argue for semantic authorial intentionalism when it comes to literary texts, one would be making a case about what the text *qua* utterance really means, and connecting this with the intentions of the author *qua* utterer. In 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', Carroll is, first and foremost, making a case for hortatory authorial intentionalism, which is a normative claim about interpretive policy. It is important to see that semantic authorial intentionalism on its own is normatively idle. It is just purporting to tell us what the text *qua* authorial utterance really means, to which the non-intentionalist can always ask: 'fine, suppose you are right, but why should I care about *that*, instead of just any interesting *non-intended* meaning that I can sensibly find in the text?' Carroll, with hortatory actual intentionalism, seeks to give an answer to this sort of non-intentionalist challenge by appealing to the value of conversation.

on our interpretations.⁹ Our interpretation should not diverge from the one the author intended (so long as the finished work can be seen as bearing out that intention).¹⁰ If Virginia Woolf didn't intend Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* to be a Christ figure, then we shouldn't interpret him as one.

Carroll's argument is presented with the person he calls the 'value-maximizing' theorist in mind as his central opponent.¹¹ Even if we have good reason to think the author intended a different reading than the one we have settled on, we shouldn't let this dissuade us, the maximizer thinks. We should go ahead and interpret the text in the most aesthetically appealing way we can. Carroll's conversation argument is designed to convince the value-maximizer to reign in the drive for aesthetic satisfaction by not opting for interpretations

⁹ Art, Intention, and Conversation', p. 170.

¹⁰ To say that it is a matter of art interpretive policy is to say that it generates requirements internal to a particular practice of art interpretation and appreciation. *Morality* doesn't forbid me to move my pawn as if it were a knight. I would just be flouting the norms internal to chess if I did so, doing something inappropriate or wrong given the practice I am engaged in. Unlike a game with fixed rules, though, the practice of art interpretation is an endeavor where we can normatively evaluate the goods in play and adjust the rules accordingly. Carroll's argument engages on this normative issue and seeks to establish that one of the goods, communion with another human being, should take precedence over other goods, such as the maximization of aesthetic satisfaction.

¹¹A nice presentation of this view can be found in Stephen Davies, 'Authors' Intentions, Literary Interpretation, and Literary Value', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (July 2006), p. 223-247. It is important to stress that one can reject actual intentionalism without accepting this Super-Size-Me emphasis on 'maximization' that Carroll attributes to his opponents. Indeed, one can reject actual intentionalism without putting any particular premium on the *aesthetic* goods to be gained by alternative construals. One might instead have political, moral, or cognitive goals in mind when contravening the author's intentions and reading the text 'against the grain'.

that contravene the actual intentions of the text's author. Carroll writes: 'A conversation that left us with only our own clever construals or educated guesses, no matter how aesthetically rich, would leave us with the sense that something was missing. That we had neither communicated nor communed'.¹² There is a vital good to be had in art interpretation that Carroll sees the value maximizer as neglecting.

Now for a few points of initial clarification: What do we mean by 'interpretations' here? I take it that Carroll has something like the following in mind: An interpretation is, at minimum, an attempt to make sense of the work's features—what the motives of a particular character are, whether a narrator is unreliable, whether some sequence is a dream or reality within the fiction, what some key feature is supposed to symbolize, what some reference alludes to, what philosophical worldview finds voice in the work, and so on.¹³ It bears pointing out, though, that Carroll cannot start off the philosophical inquiry by defining an interpretation as an attempt simply to determine an author's intentions, lest there be no common ground between him and his anti- or non-intentionalist opponents to argue over. Even the intentionalist should concede that the non-intentionalist in many cases is still *interpreting*; the intentionalist should just think that the non-intentionalist is often going about it in all the wrong way by not hewing to the actual intentionalist constraint.

Moreover, I take it that the notion of interpretation at issue must be broad enough to encompass not just what English professors and critics do when they write essays, but also what we do in chats with friends, or even just thinking about a given work in solitude and deciding what we make of it. Our interpretation, whether published or spoken or merely worked out in our own minds, is the understanding of work that we endorse (or that we at

¹² 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', p. 174.

¹³ A similar characterization is given in Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (Princeton, 2007), Ch. IV.

least think has *something* to be said for it, in the case where we are attracted to a few interpretations at once). Sometimes we need to chew things over to come to our interpretation. Sometimes we come up with an interpretation, however tentative and provisional, right away. Sometimes we change our minds about what we think. Sometimes we vacillate between interpretive possibilities, refusing to settle on one. Such is business of art interpretation. Much of this may seem too obvious to mention. But it's important to see that there is a common thing that intentionalists and anti-intentionalists, specialists and non-specialists, all can be seen to be doing in trying to make sense of artworks. It is the outcome of this activity—the interpretation—that Carroll wants to see constrained by attentiveness to authorial intentions.

Yet how, one might ask, can we be sure we have latched on to the author's actual intention? Maybe we cannot be sure. But this is not the main issue here. And in any event, one shouldn't—and here I agree with Carroll—exaggerate the epistemic difficulties about getting in touch with another person's intention. I am here going to need to put to the side the very complex and interesting issues about just what an intention is and how we as interpreters might have reliable epistemic access to the intention—particularly when it comes to the intentions of people long dead. But it bears noting that the idea that A's intentions are somehow *in principle* inaccessible to B (except by A's sincere expression of that intention in some highly reliable private diary or B's inference from A's behavior, say) presupposes a certain picture of intentions as private events wholly confined to the mind—a picture that is not beyond question. Now, many of course have this very natural view. Figuring out an author's intention is just, many people think, a matter of determining the plan in her mind at the time of creation—where that plan is thought to be a self-standing entity that causes the

resultant action.¹⁴ But, as Carroll points out, this is not the only view of intention going. On an alternative, neo-Wittgensteinian account, an intention is not a wholly private mental state completely divorced from the action with which it is connected. It is instead borne out in the finished action that is performed; in the case of a work of literature, it is manifest in the literary text produced.¹⁵ It is less mysterious how we might come in contact with an intention if one sees it as partly or wholly manifest in an action in this way. With this Wittgensteinian view, we of course trade the solution to one epistemic mystery with various other mysteries about the view itself. But, like Carroll, I don't take it upon myself to try to solve these complex issues in the philosophy of action and the philosophy of mind. So long as we proceed on the assumption that we sometimes have knowledge of or good evidence about authorial intentions, we can leave these matters for another occasion and consider how Carroll's argument might be challenged.

III. Scrutiny of the Conversation Argument Thus Far

Carroll's conversation argument has already met with skepticism and scrutiny from various angles. One general strategy animating these criticisms is to find points where the analogy between ordinary conversation and art interpretation breaks down. Let me now run through three versions of this family of criticisms.

One form of this objection we find in a joint paper of George Dickie's and Kent Wilson's, where they are defending Wimsatt and Beardsley's idea of the 'intentional fallacy' against the resurgence of authorial intentionalism. *Contra* Carroll, they note that in a real conversation one rarely attends to the intentions of one's interlocutor. One typically just

¹⁴ This appears to be the view of Wimsatt and Beardsley in their classic paper, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *Sewanee Review* Vol. 54 (1946): 468-488.

¹⁵ Colin Lyas, 'Wittgensteinian Intentions', in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger, (Temple, 1992).

attends to the meaning of what has been said. Only if there is some reason to believe that there has been a miscommunication does one make the focus of one's concern figuring out the intentions of one's conversation partner. Hence, art interpretation, if it is like conversation, is going to be parallel with an unusual (and perhaps defective) kind of conversation, one marked by misunderstanding and confusion.¹⁶

To this objection, Carroll replies that perplexity is characteristic of our interaction with works of art. Only the worst ones leave us with nothing to ponder.¹⁷ Carroll, it seems to me, might also add that it is only thanks to the background assumption—namely, that what is said is what is meant—that we attend in a conversation in the first instance just to what is said. Therefore, even if we do not focus on trying to uncover the intentions *per se*, their presence indirectly looms. Given these strong potential replies on Carroll's behalf, I don't think this is the right place to challenge his argument.

A second main objection is that sometimes in our engagement with artworks we are interested in goals *other* than conversing with the author. As Kent Wilson notes in a paper of his own, we might be interested more in the social history to be gleaned from Hardy's novels than in metaphorically conversing with Hardy the author.¹⁸ Wilson's objection is similar in spirit to the point made by the value-maximizer. Whereas the value-maximizer has aesthetic goals—she wants to come up with the most aesthetically-appealing reading of the text—Wilson's suggestion is that we might have cognitive goals to which conversation might

¹⁶ George Dickie and W. Kent Wilson, 'The Intentional Fallacy: Defending Beardsley' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer 1995), p. 233-50 (at 245-6).

¹⁷ Noel Carroll, 'The Intentional Fallacy: Defending Myself' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Summer 1997), p. 305-9.

¹⁸ W. Kent Wilson, 'Confessions of a Weak Anti-Intentionalist: Exposing Myself', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Summer 1997), p. 309-11.

legitimately take a back seat. The motivating idea behind both of these non-intentionalist views is that conversation *needn't* be our goal; different readers have different goals when they engage with works of art (even *qua* works of art, and not as paperweights or footrests or investments).¹⁹

One potential reply for Carroll would be to note that in order to extract the right social history from the novel, one has to be aware of Hardy's intentions in writing. As Carroll has argued (though not directly in reply to Wilson), even if one is interested in the 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' intentions are inescapable.²⁰ This reply is not going to be so persuasive for those who read the text from, say, a Marxist perspective. They will see Hardy's text as simply a cipher of the social world around him, and thus regard the determination of *his* particular intentions to be largely beside the point. Another possible reply on Carroll's behalf to this objection from Wilson is to emphasize the normative dimension of the argument he is making: it is seeking to show us why it *should* be our goal to care so much about conversation that we make the author's intentions a strong constraint on the interpretations we offer, so much so that it will reign in other goals we have. But how strong is the argument for this normative policy, in the face of other apparently legitimate goals we might have? Why care *so much* about conversation that we make it a thoroughgoing constraint on our other interpretive enterprises? I am going to bracket this question for now and return to the issue of differing goals again in Section VI. There we will ask to what extent conversation, and the focus on authorial intention it is thought to bring in tow, is something that *needs* to be our goal as interpreters. But before we get there, I want to suppose for the

¹⁹ Robert Stecker, 'Art Interpretation', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 52, p. 193-206; David Davies, *Aesthetics and Literature*, (Continuum, 2007), p. 95-96.

²⁰ Carroll suggests this line of argument in 'Anglo-American Aesthetics and Contemporary Criticism: Intention and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion' in his *Beyond Aesthetics*.

sake of argument that conversation *is* our primary goal and to ask what hermeneutical policy should follow if it is. For the majority of this paper, I will thus be trying to undermine the conversation argument for authorial intentionalism from within.

Yet in order for the supposition we are making to be plausible as a way of understanding our interactions with works of art, we will need to parry on Carroll's behalf a third sort of objection that is put to him—and this is the one most widely voiced by Carroll's opponents. It notes that the interaction we have with works of art is utterly one-dimensional. The artist (though her work) just speaks to us; we don't, except in odd cases, speak back to her.²¹ Thus, *conversation*, these critics of Carroll think, is not the right metaphor in characterizing the interaction we have with works of art.

Of course, these critics have a good point, depending on how literally one takes the conversation imagery. It is surely right that, except in certain performance art pieces and the like, we don't *literally converse* with the work's author, in such a way that she responds back to what we might say; in that respect, our encounters with art *are* very one-dimensional. In order for the metaphor of the conversation to be more apt then, we need to find a way of construing the encounter between author and reader that makes it *interactive enough* to warrant being thought of in conversational terms. Rather than following this third line of criticism in rejecting the appropriateness of the conversation metaphor root and branch, I propose in

²¹ Wilson, 'Confession of a Weak Anti-Intentionalist'; George Dickie, 'Intentions: Conversations and Art' in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January, 2006); Daniel Nathan, 'Art, Meaning, and Artist's Meaning' in Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics*, (Blackwell, 2006), p. 289-90; Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention*, (Oxford, 2005), p. 151.

the section to follow to see what we can make of the conversation image.²² There is, I think, a sensible and interesting way of extending the conversation metaphor to think of us, when acting as interpreters, as active enough participants in the encounter with a work's author for the interaction to be thought of as suitably conversation-like. I will explore in the section to follow how we might extend the image in this way. Yet, as I have alluded to already, the problem for the conversation argument is going to be this: *If* this interpretive interaction is construed in such a way as to escape the critics' objections to the one-sided character of the encounter, then the conversation metaphor will no longer have the actual intentionalist upshot it seeks.

IV. Good Conversations?

Let's think a bit about conversations and what is required, first, to have a conversation at all, and second, to have a good one. My mother complains that when she calls my grandmother, she is subjected to a barrage of what she—my mother, that is—calls “medical sagas.” On occasion, these depressing stories actually center on my grandmother herself, or on other people of immediate interest to my mother. But often these stories involve the health woes of my grandmother's casual acquaintances, her neighbors, these neighbors' casual acquaintances, and, at the nadir, sometimes even the house pets of these neighbors' casual acquaintances. Usually the stories go uninterrupted for half an hour, and then my mother says she has to go, and hangs up. Now, we might ask, are these *conversations*?

²² In this idea, I am (I think) in sympathy with a compressed suggestion made *en passant* in Wilson, ‘Confessions of a Weak Anti-Intentionalist,’ when he notes, in the concluding two lines of his paper, ‘A more plausible analogy with conversation would be one where the interpreter not only respects the *intensio operis*, in Eco's phrase, but also makes a contribution reflecting the knowledge brought to the interpretive task. That is what makes many conversations interesting. I doubt that art is different in this respect’, p. 311.

To my mind, *no*. Conversations would seem to require some degree of mutuality. Stories that are unilaterally conveyed to us, even good ones, are not conversations and certainly are not good *qua* conversations.

Carroll's critics are hitting on this point when they note that a monologue is not a conversation.²³ There needs to be some degree of mutuality, some back and forth between the participants for a conversation to happen. We thus arrive at what we might describe as the *mutuality condition* for conversation: In order to be a conversation, there needs to be some interchange between those involved. That is a low bar setting the point of entry for even being a conversation. Of course, in many conversations, such as those between the brilliant teacher and the fledgling student, there is a serious disparity in wisdom. But, as we usually say, when the teacher, infatuated with the sound of her own voice, is not open to the student's own ideas at all and starts talking *at* the student and not to or with her, it has ceased to be a good conversation (maybe isn't even one at all). For in order for it to be a conversation and not simply a monologic lecture, there needs to be not just talking back and forth, but at least *minimal openness* to the ideas of the other conversational participants. Let's call this the *openness condition*. A putative conversation in which the ideas of one of the participants do not matter is a degenerate conversation at best, and probably it is not a conversation at all.

I say all this about conversations in general to bring out what I see as a serious tension in the case for actual intentionalism. Carroll thinks of conversation as something very exalted—a kind of communion between human beings. Carroll even draws on the existentially-laden locution of Martin Buber, describing our relation to the author of the text as an 'I/Thou' relationship when we engage in the intentionalist hermeneutical program he champions. It withers into a mere 'I/It' relationship when we ignore the author by

²³ e.g., Wilson, 'Confessions of a Weak Anti-Intentionalist', p. 311.

discounting her intentions and reifying the text into a mere vehicle for our aesthetic satisfaction.²⁴

Yet when we look at the actual intentionalism that is supposed to be the outcome of the conversation argument, it is not in keeping with the Buber-esque sentiment that was supposed to motivate this intentionalism. For Carroll takes as the lesson of his argument that any reading that diverges from the one that the author intended is a reading that is hermeneutically inappropriate. But this constraint suggests that we as readers, to the extent that we are participants in this alleged conversation with the author, do not have independent interpretive opinions that are worth taking seriously. All that matters is the author's intention, which it is our task as readers faithfully to divine. Conversational mutuality and openness thus fall by the wayside. In what sort of perverted "conversation" is it a norm that no matter what person x says, it is not in principle worth taking seriously on its own account?

Matters are more odd than that, in fact: Doing otherwise as a reader—coming up with your own independent interpretive ideas that are at odds with the author's—amounts to failing to "respect" the author. (However admirable Carroll's own attitudes, this all seems as if it might, transposed to a different register, have come from the mouth of some reactionary 1950s husband: thinking independently is not the wife's prerogative; it is a sign of disrespect *toward the husband*). And even further, in coming up with our own interpretive ideas that we know to diverge from what the author intended, we are charged with failing to respect ourselves.²⁵ (According to what sort of doublethink is it the case that in exercising creative spontaneity instead of self-effacing docility, we are failing to respect ourselves?) The tables thus get insidiously and bizarrely turned: 'You the reader are the transgressor here, the

²⁴ 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', p. 175.

²⁵ 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', p. 175.

one failing to respect me the author and failing to respect yourself when you—God forbid—start thinking *independently*'. Our role as interpreters, and supposed conversational participants, is apparently to sit down, shut up, and *listen* to the author's monologue. *Our* ideas do not matter (unless, fortunately, we happen to have *his* ideas—the author's, that is). When we look to the constricting lesson Carroll takes from the conversation argument, the supposed 'conversation' turns out to be *All Thou and no I*.

If we are to keep the conversation image alive then, we need to account for the two features of conversation I mentioned. We need to account for the fact that the envisaged interaction between reader and author is not just a monologue. That is, we need to account for the mutuality of the encounter. And second, we need to account for the possibility that the reader *could* in principle have something to add to the discussion. That is, we need to account for the openness of the encounter. Because of the first consideration, we cannot take the metaphorical 'conversation' to consist in the author's utterance of the work to an audience. That would be a monologue. *If* this is how Carroll is envisaging the encounter—and it at times seems to be his idea—his critics are right in thinking that the conversation metaphor is inapt. Because of the second consideration, we need to bear in mind that however we try to make sense of the conversation metaphor, it cannot be a *fait accompli* from the start that the author's word is going to be the final word about what interpretations one can go with. Little could be more against the open spirit of a genuine conversation. What I'd now like to suggest is a possibility for how we might hang on to the idea of the conversation in a way that does it more justice.

My suggestion is this: We as readers should be seen as having a *meta-level* discussion with the author about how the text is best read. We, in being good interlocutors, will try to get a sense of what the author intended. This is what we imagine her 'saying' to us. But then we can think of ourselves saying, 'Well, what about this interpretation?' Now, the author of

course can't answer us back, commenting on the merits or interest of our reading, saying why she prefers her reading, and so on. But at least on this construal of the conversation metaphor, our voices, as it were, stand a chance to be heard, when it comes to the interpretation to be given. Our opinions can matter. On my construal of the image, we should of course be taking the author's intentions into account by at least being aware of what they are; ignoring these intentions entirely would amount to a failure to have the metaphorical conversation. But we needn't *stop* with these intentions, so as to make them a barrier to thinking about interpretive alternatives. We should be free to come up with other readings too. If we think one of these other interpretations is better, despite what the author herself intended, we can go with this reading.

Perhaps this is an ideal of conversation that betrays a philosopher's bias, but it seems to me that what I have just sketched is a *model* of a good conversation. It is the kind of conversation that involves communing with another person because that person has important opinions about subjects that really matter to us, whether about philosophy, or gourmet cooking, sports, or the interpretation of a work of literature. That person potentially has something to contribute and we potentially have something to contribute. Together, one hopes, we might get somewhere.²⁶ In the case of literary interpretation, we are looking for the best interpretation of the text. We wouldn't be conversing if we didn't take the author's opinions into account. Yet nor would we be conversing, in any serious sense, if we were always forced to efface our own opinions in favor of the author's.

What's distinctive about actual intentionalist aesthetic policy is that what the author intends acts as a constraint on the readings we can appropriately put forward. But this is precisely why actual intentionalists should not be appealing to conversations to support their

²⁶ This is not necessary for a good conversation; to give just one example, 'idle' chit-chat, especially between friends, can play a powerfully important role in a life.

case. So long as one retains this actual intentionalist commitment to the author's word being the final word, one cannot make sense of the mutuality and openness that are part of real conversations. But if one abandons this commitment that interpretations are to be constrained by authorial intention, then actual intentionalism will be gutted of its signal point. I will now establish this by turning to consider Carroll's central example of Ed Wood's film *Plan 9 From Outer Space*.

V. Misreading Ed Wood?

Carroll gives the memorable case of how one might go about interpreting a science fiction B-movie by Ed Wood—*Plan 9 From Outer Space*. As a matter of historical fact, Wood was working with a very low budget and cranking out films in record time. Sloppy editing cuts and thoroughly kitschy special effects abound. But one could, Carroll points out, interpret the film as somehow transgressive of cinema conventions. Indeed critics have tried, and Carroll cites the example of J. Hoberman. On the Hoberman reading, *Plan 9* would seem an interesting *avant-garde* film. But in interpreting it in this way, one would, Carroll thinks, be making a fool of oneself, taking the naked emperor to be clothed. The example is supposed to serve as a cautionary tale about ignoring an author's (or, in this case, a director's) intentions.

Yet what does this example show? In interpreting Wood's film as *avant garde, malgré lui*, so to speak, do I need to *mis*understand his intentions? Some interpreters, of course, may be deluded on this front. But suppose I acknowledge the obvious: that Wood's intention was in fact to put together a lowbrow science fiction flick and not to produce an *avant garde* masterpiece. Am I then prohibited from offering this interesting interpretation of his film with this understanding of his *real* intentions in the background? If Carroll's thought is that I am somehow going to be avoiding a genuine conversation and making a fool of myself to

boot, neither consequence seems correct: I can be fully aware that the spin that I—the *avant garde* interpreter—am putting on the film is *not* the one that Wood in fact meant.²⁷ Does Carroll, after all, think that someone as savvy and well-informed as Hoberman is confused about what *the man* Ed Wood really meant to do? Presumably not. Carroll's charge has rhetorical force in making Hoberman and others out to look silly. But the charge only has this force because Carroll is implicitly—and implausibly—attributing the strongly intentionalist model of interpretation to Hoberman and others, as if Hoberman, in giving this reading, is meaning to offer it *as what Wood himself intended*.

It is curious that this *Plan 9* example forms the centerpiece of Carroll's paper on the importance of conversation. After all, it seems likely that Ed Wood is just not that interesting of a person to talk to if one's goal is to have insight into a great artistic mind. For if once we do grasp his true intentions, our choices are either to roll our eyes, and maybe roll with laughter at his ineptitude, yawn with boredom, or contravene his intended construal of the film in order to make him interesting, we might do well to find more satisfying, engaging people to converse with. Since it is not clear, under these circumstances, why one would want to have a serious conversation with Ed Wood in the first place, it is difficult to think that the desire for genuine human conversation should be that powerful of a constraint on our strategies of interpretation. Missing a conversation with Fassbinder or Hans-Jürgen

²⁷ As an elaboration of his claim, Carroll points out that his argument rules out 'ahistorical' interpretations. He writes: 'That the artist lived in fifteenth-century Italy, for example, will constrain the attribution of his supposed intent to explore the themes of Greenbergian modernism in his canvases.' ('Art, Intention, and Conversation', p. 179). But, even if our ideal is one of conversation, does it follow that ahistorical *readings* are impermissible? Why can't we, in full awareness of what the artist actually intended, still interpret the work through the interesting, if anachronistic, modernist lens? Surely that needn't involve misunderstanding the artist's real intentions.

Syberberg might be bad; but it's hard to muster the same sort of worry about missing one with Ed Wood.

In any event, Carroll seems to assume that if I am to be in a conversation with Wood, then the interpretation that arises out of this metaphorical conversation must be one fully constrained by his intentions. Yet supposing we accept for argument's sake the premise that metaphorical conversation is a worthy goal to aim for, it does not follow that the interpretation we arrive at must be consistent with the author's (or director's) actual intentions. For in a real conversation, I can be *aware* of my interlocutor's intentions, and can nonetheless suggest a better, or a more interesting possibility. This inventive reading of Wood is rather like taking a dim idea from a not-very-talented person, and transforming it into a thought that is more interesting to think about and discuss. Kindly professors do this with undergraduates' thoughts all the time. Suppose during office hours a professor is considering how best to understand what the student was up to in his recent and incompetent essay. The paucity of good ideas may be painfully apparent to the professor. But she might, in conversation with the student, propose a new and more fruitful spin on the ideas from the essay, one better than the student had himself first intended. Surely this is not the best sort of conversation by any means. But it seems a perfectly acceptable conversational route under the circumstances (and the one most analogous to the Ed Wood case).

Now is this a matter of the professor interpreting the student's ideas in some non-intentionalist way? Is it an exercise in *deliberate misinterpretation*? Those ways of describing what's going on are inapt: They make it seem as though the whole point of the professor's new gloss on the ideas is to (mis)construe what the student was *intending* to say in the first place. Relative to *that* project, her interpretation of the ideas in the essay would be non-intentionalist or a deliberate misinterpretation. But it's question-begging to assume that the

divination of intention is the sole point of the conversational encounter with the student (or with Wood). Student and professor might instead be engaged in a meta-level conversation about how to interpret something the student has produced (an essay), so as to get something worthwhile out of it. The student had one construal. The professor has another (maybe a much better one). The goal of *this* conversation is not just to determine the student's *initial* intention, though that it an important starting point if the professor is to be in real dialogue with the student. It is instead to come up with a good interpretation of the ideas in the essay, even when that construal goes beyond what the student first meant.

The best conversations often involve that dynamic. We might extend the lesson, from B-movies and bad students to more serious works of art as well. Suppose Henry James did not intend for us to give a Marxist reading of 'In the Cage'. In bringing such a reading to bear on Henry James, it is just not clear, if we are keen on bringing the image of conversation to bear, that I should be seen as *avoiding* the metaphorical conversation with him rather than participating in any interactive one, where I also bring ideas to the table. Organic fluidity is a *happy outcome* of conversation between people. It is through this sort of conversational give-and-take, often between people from divergent perspectives, that good thoughts develop. Yet so long as the actual intentionalist remains committed to the interpretive constraint that a reading of a text cannot diverge from what its author intended, he cannot make sense of this fluidity and the capacity to *go beyond* what was first intended. The reader's voice is silenced. For the constraint rules out any *independent* opinion the reader might bring to the table as not worth taking seriously. A more sensible outgrowth of the conversation metaphor, I am suggesting, would be to enfranchise the reader to suggest interpretations (different, perhaps better interpretations) than the ones that the author first had in mind. That would be more truly conversational.

VI. Conversation and the Aims of Interpretation

But surely, one might ask, you don't want to give the student credit for ideas he didn't really have within his grasp? By the same token, surely you don't want to give Ed Wood credit for being interestingly transgressive when he didn't mean to? Indeed not in either case. But I think these questions illustrate another key respect in which Carroll's argument has gone awry. His slides back and forth freely between claims about interpretation and evaluation, as if the former is always in the service of the latter. He appears to be assuming a picture on which one's reason for engaging with a work of art is to arrive at a determination of its value, measured in terms of what the artist has accomplished.²⁸ And in order to determine its 'success' value, one needs to know what its author really intended, so that one can separate genuine artistic accomplishment (which is valuable) from mistaken attributions of accomplishment.²⁹ Carroll plays on our intuitions that it does not redound to Ed Wood's ingenuity that he created a work that can be interpreted in the way that Hoberman interprets Plan 9, if Wood didn't really mean to.

This is all well and good, so far as it goes. Carroll may be on to something important about the need to look to an author's intentions in assessing his or her works *as achievements*. Still, nothing follows as a matter of general interpretative policy. For contrary to the critical

²⁸ Carroll makes this view more explicit in his *On Criticism*: 'It is the argument of this book that the distinguishing feature of the pertinent form of criticism is evaluation. Of course, criticism, properly so called, is not merely a matter of evaluating an artwork—of giving it a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Critics are expected to supply reasons—indeed, good reasons—in support of their evaluations, p. 13.

²⁹ Carroll writes, '...before commending Ed Wood for transgressive, convention-busting avant-garde filmmaking, we need to reassure ourselves that that was what he intended. For, if he was aiming at something else, like making a classy Hollywood science fiction film such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, then commendation is hardly in order. If that was Wood's goal, then *Plan Nine from Outer Space* is patently a failure', *On Criticism*, p. 67.

model that Carroll adopts, only *sometimes* is it our aim to interpret works as a first step in assessing their artistic merits. Often the point of the interpretation is instead just, for example, to come up with an interesting and aesthetically-appealing reading, regardless of what the author intended, regardless of whether we are reading features ‘into’ the work that make it better than it was meant by its author to be. Carroll needs to persuade us that there is something inappropriate about taking anything other than evaluation of the artist’s accomplishment to be our main interpretive target. But this is a Herculean task. What could the argument against the legitimacy of other aims possibly be? Interpreting in such a way that we go beyond authorial intentions *seems* often to be a worthwhile enterprise for its own sake too. For interpretations, even when they diverge from the author’s intentions, can be aesthetically and intellectually stimulating for those who give them and those who read them.

At this point in the dialectic, Carroll cannot appeal to the centrality of determining what Ed Wood has really accomplished without begging the question. We need from him an argument for the priority of the *evaluation* of an artist’s accomplishment as the proper end of interpretation. So far as I can work out any argument whatsoever for the priority of this evaluative aim, Carroll’s position seems to be that this evaluative enterprise is the distinctive aim of artistic criticism, once we philosophically reconstruct that practice. Is this supposed to be a descriptive or a normative point? Suppose it is a descriptive point, trying simply to extract what is characteristic of our current interpretive practices. Unless one just defines criticism in a stipulative way, so as to make this trivially its aim, this assertion about its aim is manifestly false. Many are, as a matter of fact, interested in giving readings that pay no heed to what artists intended, because they are just keen to come up with a reading that is aesthetically-rich and interesting or perhaps with one that is resonant with some exegetical agenda of theirs (whether of a Marxist, Lacanian, feminist, queer theory stripe, etc.). Suppose instead, as I think is a more plausible way of making sense of Carroll’s approach,

that he is making a normative point about what the aim of art interpretation should be: why then think that this determination of value, and the attendant focus on authorial intentions, *should* be our aim? One does not want it simply to be an argument by implicit italics that this is the aim of *criticism*, and if we want to be engaged in *criticism*, we better have this as our aim. Perhaps one could make an appeal to “conversation” (read: monologue) again here. This, first of all, would be weird: Do we want to listen to other people talk, not for its own sake or because we want to make progress on some question of mutual concern, but because we want to *evaluate* what they say or their saying it? This is an imbalanced kind of encounter, most suited to those who are highly judgmental by temperament or profession. Maybe the arts are a special case where we *do* take this as our aim. But still, why should this be our main, or even worse, *sole legitimate* hermeneutical aim?

This pushes us back to the question of the extent to which conversation is an optional goal, the issue we postponed in Section III to which we can now return. Can we have other cognitive or aesthetic goals in engaging with artworks that might take precedence over the goal of conversation? I think we obviously can. No doubt understanding an author’s ideas is worthwhile for its own sake as well as serving as an aid in evaluating her artistic accomplishment. But there are many goods to be had, including the aesthetic satisfaction or intellectual stimulation involved in coming up with interesting readings, even when these diverge from those the artist intended. Conversation is one good among many. And it is not clear it is even always a good. Take the case where one of the author’s intended meanings is particularly repellent. (I feel this way about the purity of the blood and regeneration themes that Wagner was obsessed with late in his life and traces of which can be found in *Parsifal*, if we insist on sticking to Wagner’s own likely intentions in the way we interpret the work.) Why should we want to commune with Wagner, when it comes to these themes, save for out of historical or sociological interest? Conversation-as-communion does

not always seem to be an attractive goal, and I see little reason for thinking it should be an overriding goal. I simply don't see the justification for the exaggerated priority that Carroll assigns it, over all other apparently legitimate and valuable interpretive goals, as if people who interpret art in other ways (as Hoberman does) are somehow deeply in the wrong.

VII. Conclusion

Carroll presents this conversation metaphor to support a form of authorial intentionalism. His view, as he stresses in his paper, is not meant to be metaphysical or semantic. He is not interested in making a claim about the *nature* of literary works—that they are of their essence conversational, or that their *fundamental meaning* is what their author as a matter of fact intended to convey. Rather, what is at issue, he thinks, is normative—a matter of aesthetic policy. How are we best to read literary texts? What values are at stake in reading them in one way rather than another? Insofar as we value conversation, and the process of mutual respect that it enshrines, we should, so Carroll's argument goes, interpret texts so that we are constrained by what their creators intended. The image of the conversation of course has its limits. Given that we cannot literally communicate with most of the authors whose works we engage with, the sense of conversation is going to be quite attenuated. But working with this image of Carroll's, I have suggested that if we truly value conversation, actual intentionalism should not be our interpretive policy. Authorial intention should be a starting point, but not an end-point. For even the most interesting monologues are not good conversations.

Now maybe what Carroll really should want is a *monologue* argument for actual intentionalism. Our goal as interpreters just is to be careful not to misconstrue the meaning of the authorial monologue. There might be something to be said for a monologue argument, especially insofar as our aim is to determine what the author has accomplished in

the work produced. (Though, as I have just noted, that evaluative aim is itself an optional one.) If it does end up being a monologue argument, then Carroll would not run afoul of the considerations about mutuality and openness that we decided need to characterize conversations. The most important lesson of this paper, however, is that the actual intentionalist is not entitled to talk of *conversation*, while still getting to keep the restrictive lesson of actual intentionalism that the author's word is the final word. However well-meaning Carroll's own intentions in using the image, the actual intentionalist appeal to 'conversation' ultimately ends up being an ideological screen, misleading disenfranchised readers about the fact that with actual intentionalism, they are not permitted to have an independent interpretive voice that is considered worthy of being heard.