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In Defence of Moderate Actual Intentionalism

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Abstract: The extent to which the artist's intentions are a relevant consideration in the interpretation of art has long been the subject of critical debate. First, I outline the various philosophical positions which have been established, specifically focusing on the debate between hypothetical intentionalism and moderate actual intentionalism. Then I look at some previous test cases which have, as yet, failed to demonstrate a decisive victory for either side. Finally, I offer two new test cases, one from the field of contemporary visual art and the other from literary theory. I argue that the former serves to debunk hypothetical intentionalism and the latter lends support to the moderate actual intentionalist position.

The extent to which the artist's intentions are a relevant consideration in the interpretation of art has long been the subject of critical debate. From the intentionalist camp two prominent positions have emerged: hypothetical intentionalism (HI) and moderate actual intentionalism (MAI). The prefix 'moderate' is added to distinguish it from the more radical position, absolute actual intentionalism. Absolute actual intentionalism claims that the actual intentions of the author are the only determining factor in the meaning of a work, whereas MAI claims that only successful intention is meaning-shaping. This is a subtly weaker claim. In contrast HI argues that our best-informed hypothesis of the artist's intentions is all that is required in the interpretation of artworks.

What appears to be a subtle and innocuous distinction has in fact given rise to impassioned debate. The reason for this is that both HI and MAI agree, broadly speaking, on the basic criteria and nature of interpretation. In most cases the methodologies that separate the two sides will not necessarily yield different interpretive results. However, the key debating point between the two concerns warranted hypothesis and truth.

I. THE CURRENT DEBATE

In the field of aesthetic philosophy there are many interpretive positions one might adopt. At one end of the spectrum we have the anti-intentionalism which came to prominence in the mid-twentieth century. Anti-intentionalists such as W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley do not accept that we should interpret a complex object formed of both the work and the intentions of the artist.¹ They argue that conventions are all that is necessary for the purposes of establishing work-meaning and so there is no reason to add an arbitrary component like the intentions of the artist in order to form an interpretation. This argument is predicated upon the idea that creative works are autonomous objects and ultimately interpretive claims made should be tested against the content of the work rather than any arbitrary external features. Several powerful objections may be levelled against anti-intentionalism, chiefly that it mischaracterises intentions as private inaccessible mental phenomena, unconnected with the work and that convention alone is not sufficient to establish work-meaning in many cases.² One of the reasons there is substantial debate in the field of interpretation is precisely because clear meanings do not always present themselves immediately in creative works. Appealing to conventional meaning or even word sequence meaning, the sort we obtain from dictionaries, rules of grammar and linguistic conventions, will not suffice for the purposes of interpretation because it fails to take identity-relevant contextual factors into consideration. Instances of irony are often cited to demonstrate this distinction because they depend, in part, on context.³ To the superficial reader an ironic comment and an unironic comment follow the same rules of grammar and linguistic conventions, however irony expresses an agent's meaning precisely by using language that normally signifies the opposite.

For those sympathetic to the anti-intentionalist cause, there is also the value-maximisation theory. This theory has its origins in anti-intentionalism but makes slightly different claims. The value-maximising theory claims that the primary goal of any interpretation is to maximise the value of the work. It is not always clear exactly what constitutes the optimal value of a work, but so long as the interpretation conforms to some relevant interpretive criteria and appears to be perceptive or revealing, then it could count as value-maximising. Value-maximisation allows for a plurality of possible interpretations to be acceptable simultaneously because there might be a number of interpretations that give us an insight into the value of the work. This position is more versatile than the anti-intentionalist position because it does not exclude contextual factors that might be relevant when forming an interpretation.

At the other end of the spectrum we have absolute actual intentionalism, which believes that the meaning of a work is identical to the utterer's meaning. Utterer's meaning refers to what was meant by the artist or author.⁴ Utterance meaning appreciates that a text requires interpretation because it has a kind of autonomy. Within the coordinates of this debate it is defined

as the meaning of a text used on a particular occasion. We are not trying to defer as quickly to what the person meant in literary interpretation as we are in conversation.⁵ As Beardsley has pointed out, a blue sculpture is not pink just because the artist says it is.⁶ This kind of statement made by an artist is known as ‘Humpty-Dumptyism’.⁷ Additionally, work-meaning cannot be identical to utterer’s meaning because an artist can ‘fail to convey’ certain meanings in their work.⁸

There is also extreme actual intentionalism. In the extreme version the meaning of a work is determined by the intentions of the artist except when these do not match the content of the work. In these cases, where the artist’s intentions are incompatible with the content of the work, then the work is rendered meaningless.⁹ However, the notion that works can be rendered meaningless is largely unsatisfactory as a means of explanation and so two more modest positions have emerged: hypothetical intentionalism (HI) and moderate actual intentionalism (MAI).

HI and MAI prefer to think of work-meaning in terms of utterance meaning. Whilst intuitively understanding an utterance requires consideration of the speaker’s intentions, the value-maximisation theory endorses the utterance model while denying that the intentions of the artist are necessarily relevant. In MAI the artist’s stated intentions are not conclusive as they are in absolute actual intentionalism. If the stated intentions appear to be disingenuous or are not supported by evidence in the work, then both HI and MAI will disregard them or say that the artist has failed to realise her intention in the work. Both camps also believe that the primary goal of interpretation is to establish what the artist intended to convey through her work. For the most part HI and MAI even agree on the appropriate methods and grounds for conjecture about these intentions. The social, cultural or historical context, the artist’s body of work and the genre are all on the table as well as publicly available knowledge about the artist that might be relevant. HI and MAI allow all of this information to be admissible in the interpretation of a work of art.

A crucial point separating HI from MAI is that the former will not allow private statements of intent made by the artist to count in the available body of evidence. The main reason for this is that HIs believe the work should be able to stand alone in so far as any meaning successfully conveyed should be recoverable by reference to the work itself rather than pronouncements of intent from the artist. HI’s dismissal of these semantic intentions is based on the implicit contract between the artist and the audience which says it is implausible to ask the interpreter to possess private information about the author. If someone writes a novel, it is too much to demand the reader to know personal things about the author in order to understand the work. As Jerrold Levinson says, works should not ‘require artists to explain’ what they mean.¹⁰ For HI, only a fully informed and educated guess at the artist’s intended meaning is necessary. In some variations of HI the audience projects these

intentions onto an implied figure, which acts as an intermediary between the work and the artist. The ‘implied figure’ is useful not least because it allows us to assign and discuss the beliefs, attitudes and values of the artist without referencing anything outside of the immediate content. The interpreter’s task is ‘to surmise what a hypothetical author could have intended the work to mean’.¹¹ Most HIs stress that the best warranted hypothesis about the artist’s intentions is the one that is most likely to be right given the structure of the work and the relevant context. In cases where there are two equally sound interpretations on offer HIs advocate for the interpretation which is most favourable in an artistic sense.¹²

The implied author is not the only mechanism by which we might understand HI. Levinson equivocates on this issue, but, in the end, argues for a different conception of HI. He says that whilst this may be characteristic of other HIs, it is not a fair reflection of his own beliefs. Levinson prefers that his hypotheses relate to the actual author in so far as they ‘attempt to arrive at what that author is most plausibly and charitably understood as meaning via the text he or she has produced and put forward as a literary work’.¹³

In contrast, MAIs do not omit any relevant evidence such as the artist’s pronouncements of intention, in attempting to establish the meaning of a work.¹⁴ Whilst in most cases HI and MAI yield the same interpretative results, this difference can sometimes lead to a disparity between the artist’s stated intentions and the hypothesis of an informed audience. In cases where such a disparity occurs, MAI will defend the interpretation consonant with the artist’s stated intentions. Exceptions to this are instances where we have reasons to believe that the artist’s stated intentions are insincere, unreliable or more generally not supported by the text.

Often, critics assume that a thorough study of the work’s content, the author’s biography, other works in the genre and any culturally relevant facts will allow them to arrive at the artist’s intentions without needing accompanied statements by the artist. However, as Noël Carroll has pointed out, whilst this is a prudent default position it should not be applied so stringently as to rule out relevant evidence, such as the pronouncement of artistic intention, should such evidence present itself. This evidence would undoubtedly be considered relevant to any complete interpretation and it does not violate any rules of good interpretive practice.¹⁵

Whilst both MAI and HI agree that utterance meaning is a good model for interpreting works of art, they don’t completely agree on what utterance meaning actually is. For MAI, utterance meaning is determined by the artist’s actual intentions as they are realised in the work.¹⁶ If the artist’s intentions fail then meaning is determined by convention and context instead. For HI the meaning of an utterance is the intended meaning attributed to the artist by an informed audience. HI says the primary meaning of a work is synonymous with the best-hypothesised intentions of the author given all the appropriate reader data.¹⁷ Additionally, there has been some debate about

whether artistic interpretation should remain methodologically distinct from utterance interpretation. Intentionalists on both sides of the divide generally agree that if, in ordinary conversation a speaker's utterance is unclear we may ask them to clarify what they meant. Whether or not we can be afforded the same luxury in relation to art is the point of departure. HI argues that clarification from the artist should not be sought because the artwork does not function like the utterance found in a conversation. Many proponents of MAI believe that the work of art operates like the conversational utterance.

According to MAI the meaning of a work is that which is intended by the artist and successfully conveyed. HIs usually object that 1) this requires success standards to be available which do not rely on intention-based criteria. These standards would allow us to establish objectively whether or not an utterer has succeeded in conveying their intentions. 2) They also object that moderate actual intentionalists such as Carroll face the accusation that it is difficult to attribute certain intentions, states of mind or motivations to the actual author with any real degree of certainty. The nature of art is such that the artist might be trying to portray a certain image of herself through her work, which need not necessarily be accurate. Instead, it would be prudent to confine our attributions to the implied figure constructed as an intermediary between the work and the audience.

In response to 1) both Gary Iseminger and Carroll set up success conditions for establishing the artist's actual intentions.¹⁸ They claim that the meaning of an artistic utterance is decided by the artist's actual intentions in cases where they are justifiably supported by the content of the work understood in the relevant context. In response to 2), Paul Taylor points out that recognising the presence of natural meaning renders this argument somewhat unconvincing.¹⁹ Since unconscious meaning and natural meaning present themselves in the work without the awareness of the artist, we are less likely to accept that the work is a completely artificial construction of an artist trying to portray a carefully crafted image to the public. In the case of natural meaning the artist does not intend to convey this kind of meaning and in the case of unconscious meaning the artist is unaware that certain factors have played a role in influencing her reasons for action. These 'uncensored' motivations and states of mind present themselves directly in the content of the work and when we interpret them as such we are engaging with the actual artist rather than the implied figure.²⁰

HI has its problems too. Levinson argues that the meaning of a work is our best-hypothesised intention having analysed all the information that might be relevant to an audience. It is not clear exactly from Levinson's writing what constitutes the appropriate information or indeed what constitutes the appropriate audience. In some places he suggests that the appropriately informed audience is an audience with the required knowledge to understand the content of the work. At other times he argues 'we may be guided in identifying an appropriate audience . . . by certain norms and conventions un-

derstood to define the sphere of literary production and reception'.²¹ This second definition implies that we can generally establish the kind of evidence that an appropriate audience might have at their disposal. This evidence would include the artist's oeuvre, the genre of the work, linguistic and artistic conventions of the culture, socio-political developments and other contextual features that might be relevant or would have had an impact on the artist at the time of composition.

Putting aside for a moment the circularity present in at least one of these definitions, it is interesting that each definition could potentially yield different interpretive results. In many cases it won't matter which definition you employ, but one could imagine cases where certain specialist knowledge was required to properly understand and interpret the work. Rather than outline every point of contention between the two sides, I will move on to examine some test cases that have been used in the debate.

II. PREVIOUS TEST CASES

In his book *Intention and Interpretation*, Iseminger examines the opening lines of a poem written by Gerard Manley Hopkins titled 'Henry Purcell'.²²

HAVE, fair fallen, O fair, fair have fallen, so dear
 To me, so arch-especial a spirit as heaves in Henry Purcell,
 An age is now since passed, since parted, with the reversal
 Of the outward sentence low lays him, listed to a heresy, here.

According to Iseminger there are two possible interpretations of this verse and both are legitimately attributable. He argues that if two are equally legitimate then the one that is consonant with the artist's intentions is the one that is true.²³ Referring to a letter Hopkins wrote, he argues that his use of 'fair fall' in the poem is an economical rephrasing of 'fair (fortune be) fall'. In the letter, Hopkins is clearly concerned that an alternate reading might be found. He writes,

One thing disquiets me: I meant 'fair fall' to mean fair (fortune be) fall; it has since struck me that perhaps 'fair' is an adjective proper and in the predicate and can only be used in cases like 'fair fall the day,' that is, may the day fall, turn out, fair. My line will yield a sense that way indeed, but I never meant it so.²⁴

Iseminger argues that this pronouncement from Hopkins is necessary to decide between two equally valid interpretations of the poem and proves that moderate actual intentionalism is superior. However, Levinson disagrees, arguing instead that a careful study of Hopkins's rather unique style, often employed in his poetic metre together with his well-documented admiration

for Purcell and a desire to remain logically consistent with the rest of the poem, makes this conclusion available to the audience without resorting to consultation of the poet's stated intentions.²⁵

Hans Maes has suggested a different kind of test case, drawing on examples from the abstract visual arts rather than literary works.²⁶ He offers examples of contemporary visual art, which he argues would yield different interpretive results when we include the direct pronouncements of intention by the artist. One of these is an installation by the Italian artist Benedetto Pietromarchi, which is part of the exhibition *Reconstruction #1* (2002). The work features two large light bulbs, lit and sat on platforms in the dungeons of Sudeley Castle. Interviews with the artist reveal that the piece of art is about childhood and the filaments, which burn bright within the bulbs, evoke specific memories for the artist.

Maes argues that we will reach a different interpretive conclusion if we do not consult the stated intentions of each artist. Therefore, according to Maes, the artist's remarks are decisive. Levinson's appropriate and informed audience would not have reached these conclusions using the publicly available evidence alone. We do not usually associate large light bulbs, sat on stone platforms in dungeons with childhood. Furthermore, there is nothing in his background, biography or information made public at the show to suggest that childhood had anything to do with the meaning behind Pietromarchi's installation.

In reply, Karen Gover argues that this example fails as a defining test case in defence of MAI because it is an example of utterer's meaning failing to be realised in the work.²⁷ Gover also says that this example fails because works of contemporary visual art cannot realistically be considered utterances. However, since she offers no alternative, I believe the responsibility still lies with Gover to show how contemporary visual art can be construed if not as an utterance.

Many more cases have been invoked in the field of literary theory from *The Turn of The Screw* by Henry James to works by William Blake such as *Jerusalem*.²⁸ However, still no decisive test case has been put forward for either position.

III. THE ART OF TOURETTE'S

Matt Sharp is a British artist who suffers from Tourette's syndrome. This neurodevelopmental disorder is characterised by both verbal and physical tics, which tend to worsen over time. Sharp's tics occasionally stop when he paints. His tics became so violent that on one occasion he was paralysed from the waist down and is now confined to a wheelchair. Some of his works are in a Post-Impressionist style while some are more abstract. At times he uses vivid colours to depict objects in life, but he often emphasises certain shapes while

distorting form for expressive effect. Other times he seems to take abstract forms and colours to convey an emotion or feeling. Below are two works by Sharp, titled *Two Faced* (fig.1) and *Three Boats* (fig.2).



(fig.1) Matt Sharp "Two Faced", Oil Pastel on Canvas, 2008



(fig.2) Matt Sharp "Three Boats", Acrylic Paint and sand, 2010

The earlier work depicts two faces beneath some rather aggressive black lines. There are various plausible interpretations immediately supported by contextual evidence. Knowing what we do about Sharp's disability, the tragic difficulties he faced in care and seeing other works of the same period executed much more fluently and with brighter colours, HI may well conclude that the lines are intentionally deployed and that the painting might be about the two sides of his personality.²⁹ Therefore, HI could interpret this as an attempt to highlight the darker side of his illness. HI might argue that this work represents a change in style and genre with a view to painting more concrete objects. Yet, the view that the artist is referring to his illness seems uncalled for. In a private conversation, Sharp pointed out that the scorched black lines in the earlier painting *Two Faced* were a result of his tics jerking the pastels around the canvas.³⁰ Whilst the effects of Tourette's can be intermittent or temporarily suppressed, there are occasions when Sharp's tics take over during his painting and drawing. This was one of those occasions, but we would not know this without the pronouncements of intent from the artist. Sharp had also recently taken an interest in Picasso, whose works he identified with and this was originally an attempt to pay homage to his style. This claim certainly seems to be supported by the content of the work, as the picture is reminiscent of Picasso's cubist portraits, particularly *The Weeping Woman*.

We would expect that with his illness, the tics would grow worse over time, therefore if the tics were causing the aggressive brush strokes they should appear more apparent and exaggerated in his later works. However, in the earlier work *Two Faced* these aggressive, abstract lines appear and in the later work *Three Boats* they do not. Studying the work together with the publicly available information and other works in the artist's oeuvre, would

surely yield the conclusion that the thick black lines are intentionally used for artistic effect. However, after speaking to the artist we find out that these black lines are accidental and a result of the physical tics from his Tourette's syndrome. At this point the interpretation of HI becomes problematic because we have no reason to believe that he was trying to convey some inner conflict to the audience. HI should not simply prefer their own interpretation if doing so would require interpreting unintentional features of the work as intentional while we have clear evidence to suggest they are not. For HI the meaning of a work is the intended meaning attributed to the artist by an informed audience, but excluding avowals of intent on the grounds that they are not publicly available means knowingly establishing an incorrect interpretation. Whilst it is true that both HI and MAI agree that a feature does not have to be intentionally created in order to have an intended effect, Sharp maintains that he did not intend the work to have this effect on his audience. He is adamant that he never intended for people to interpret this work as a piece about his illness and he regrets that people read this into his work.

One possible reply from HI might be that while the lines were accidental they were later intentionally sanctioned by the artist. Since Sharp decided to continue painting in spite of the lines caused by his tics, he has built the thick black lines into the work and sanctioned them in such a way that they have become an interpretable feature. Sherri Irvin has discussed this matter in her paper.

The artist's sanction may serve to fix the boundaries of his or her work, to determine whether a particular feature is relevant to the work's interpretation, [...] in some cases to determine whether it, qua artwork, has a particular feature or not.³¹

However, this reply gets HI no further forward because Irvin argues that sanctioning gives the artist a 'special authority' on these matters.³² The act of sanctioning might reinforce the idea that he is resilient and willing to persevere in spite of his Tourette's, but it does not legitimise the view that this work is about the two sides to his personality or the depression associated with his illness.

MAI is underpinned by the idea that intentions need to be successfully realised in the work in order for them to be accepted in an interpretation. This trait separates MAI from absolute intentionalism. In that sense, this case cannot be a defence of MAI because unintentional actions, such as tics caused by Tourette's syndrome, cannot function as a way to endorse an intentionalist theory of interpretation. However, what it demonstrates is that HI is not always adequately equipped to arrive at accurate interpretations. In cases such as these, the private avowals of intention are crucial to properly understanding the content of the work.³³

IV. A LITERARY TEST CASE

Published in 1961, Richard Yates's debut novel *Revolutionary Road* follows the lives of Frank and April Wheeler in 1950's suburban America. The Wheelers are depressed by their surroundings and desperate to break out of their suburban rut in search of a better life. Initially, the excitement and anticipation reignites their romance but when April conceives a third child and Frank is offered a promotion at work their plans begin to fall apart. Both conducting affairs, overwhelmed by the situation and suffering from existential crises, their marriage breaks down. In a failed attempt to perform an abortion on her child, April dies from blood loss and Frank is left distraught and guilt-ridden.

Since publication, Yates has been widely regarded as a critic of American post-war suburban life. When Vintage Publishing reissued the book, it chose to include in the blurb that the novel was an 'evocative portrayal of the opulent desolation of the American suburbs'.³⁴ Comparisons have been made with *The Great Gatsby*, partly because Yates was a fan of F. Scott Fitzgerald. These comparisons suggest that both books should be read as attacks on suburbia. Other critics such as Richard Price who described Yates as a 'master purveyor of the crushed suburban life' and Christopher Hitchens who praised his ability to 'anatomise the ills and woes of suburbia' have also drawn an anti-suburban interpretation of the book.³⁵ This classification may in part have to do with the cultural context surrounding the novel at the time of publication. Various other works such as Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* were revered as attacks on the social backdrop, where people battled against the system in search of purpose. In fact, when Yates initially submitted the book to Little, Brown and Company it was rejected for publication on the grounds that it 'imitated' Wilson's earlier work.³⁶

There are two possible interpretations, which seem wholly compatible with the text and its themes:

i) Whilst suburban life is what they perceive to be the obstacle holding them back from achieving their dreams, it is in fact Frank's own fear, cowardice and the fact that he is decidedly unremarkable that stops him from moving to Paris and starting afresh.

ii) Whilst it is true that the Wheelers are acting cowardly and seem to be blaming the suburbs for their own shortcomings, they have become 'institutionalised' by their socio-economic conditions and that conditioning is fundamentally responsible for their cowardice. The suburban culture that Yates seems to deride in his novel is in fact responsible for their failures and the freedom to which they felt so close was only ever an illusion. They had become like prisoners unable to liberate themselves.

In the absence of any direct pronouncements of intention from the author, the second interpretation seems preferable for at least two reasons:

1) Specific passages and content suggest that suburbia is responsible for institutionalising the Wheelers beyond their control. Like the character Brooks

in the film *Shawshank Redemption*, who cannot cope with the prospect of a world outside because he has been institutionalised by prison, the Wheelers have become institutionalised by suburban life.

Intelligent, thinking people could take things like this in their stride, just as they took the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs. Economic circumstances might force one to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep themselves from being contaminated.³⁷

‘Contaminated’ is an important word in this passage, as contamination suggests exposure to sickness or poison which might affect us in ways we cannot control. Yates seems to present Frank as this enlightened persona to make the point that even being wise to the power of suburban malaise is not always enough to liberate oneself from its grasp. As the book goes on there are suggestions that this infection is starting to spread without Frank realising. At one point Frank says, ‘Still, I don’t suppose one picture window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities.’³⁸ This quote seems deliberately dramatic as though it is a warning to the reader of a man who has underestimated the power of these seemingly innocuous details. One might sensibly conclude from this that Yates wants us to see how even clever men can be victims of circumstance, unable to properly fulfil their potential because of the social and economic pressures. Yates’s other characters are in keeping with this trend; trapped in ordinary lives they are desperate to escape.

Another continuity between Yates’s characters is their constant battle against the culture in which they find themselves. It is not necessarily war or the civil rights struggle that incites moral indignation for the characters, but rather a sense of conformity that they find difficult to come to terms with. On rare occasions Yates himself expresses political indignation, but this is not the same as the existential struggles of his characters. In his later work *Young Hearts Crying*, Yates comes as close to making a political statement as he does in any of his work when the characters find themselves discussing the Vietnam War. Davenport, who is a teacher in Kansas, and his wife Sarah are due to hold a party and they are dreading the hoards of anti-war protesters who usually turned up to these events. Terry Ryan, an old friend of Davenport attends the party on his way through to fight in Vietnam. Whilst he is there another guest named Grace asks him why he wants to kill people abroad. He plays down the remark respectfully and moves on with the conversation. The following day Davenport and Sarah drive Terry to the airport and *en route* he refers to Vietnam as the ‘war that nobody would ever understand’.³⁹ Later that day Grace’s husband rings Davenport to complain that Terry was unpleasant to Grace. This sequence of events is particularly interesting as Yates shows that the pernicious lies and attacks of Grace are not borne out of moral outrage but rather follow the trendy opposition to the Vietnam war at the time.⁴⁰ Yates’s own political statement comes through

in his insistence that we should not blame the soldier for war, a sentiment reiterated in the short story *Jody Rolled the Bones* and *A Special Providence*. Instead we should focus on the structures that govern our lives and inhibit individual freedom.

Returning to the text, this criticism of the suburban structures that control their lives seems to be reinforced when Mrs Givings brings her son John to the Wheeler's house for lunch. John is described in the book as insane, but actually he is a brutally honest character who condemns his mother's banal suburban lifestyle at the dinner table. The Wheelers feel uncomfortable with these comments because they recognise in their own lives many of the dull suburban traits John is criticising. John's characterisation of insanity could be interpreted ironically, as he is the only person able to see sense in an otherwise dull existence.

2) Biographical evidence at the time of writing would have influenced Yates's opinions and beliefs about themes such as marriage. It is well known that his fiction was largely autobiographical in nature. Indeed a lot of his work included true events from his life. In addition, we cannot help but draw timeline parallels between Yates's life and the lives of his characters. Yates was born in 1926, making him 17 in 1943, the same age as William Grove in *A Good School*. He was 29 in 1955, as was Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*. Finally he was 36 in 1962, the age of Emily Grimes in *The Easter Parade*.

Revolutionary Road was published in 1961 and Yates got divorced just two years before in 1959. This would definitely have had an impact on his writing about marriage. The very fact that confusion was caused in the interpretation of his writing on this subject is indicative of internal conflict with respect to his views on marriage.

There are various reasons to believe that *Revolutionary Road* is a political attack on the system, even the title of the work suggests this. Politically, Yates identified as a 'liberal' and in America liberalism is associated with the welfare-state policies from the New Deal and the Democratic administration of President Roosevelt.⁴¹ Libertarianism has since taken up the defence of laissez-faire capitalism and unlike in Britain, the term 'liberal' in the United States refers to Social Liberalism. In any case American liberal values are thought to generally support equality and liberty. These political values support the idea that freedom of the individual is of central importance. Indeed, Yates represents the socio-economic conditions of 1950s suburban America as restricting the Wheelers's individual liberties. Richard Yates was also the speechwriter for attorney general, Robert F. Kennedy who was a prominent member of the Democratic Party.

HI could easily have formed the opinion, as many critics did, that the book was an attack on marriage and suburban America in the 1950s. However, Yates was interviewed later and insisted that whilst the Wheelers blamed the suburbs for their problems, it was in fact their own shortcomings that were

to blame. In the case of Frank Wheeler, Yates never meant for us to identify with him as a character, but rather wanted us to realise that Frank was an unexceptional man, a hopeless romantic who was a victim of his own pride and arrogance.

In an interview Yates was asked why he ‘lambasted the suburbs’. Yates replied,

I didn’t mean to. The book was widely read as an anti-suburban novel, and that disappointed me. The Wheelers may have thought the suburbs were to blame for all their problems, but I meant it to be implicit in the text that that was their delusion.⁴²

As we have discussed, the book is also said to have been an attack on marriage:

[Interviewer]: You weren’t knocking marriage?

Oh, of course not. That’s another false interpretation too many people put on the book.⁴³

Yates blames Alfred Kazin, at least in part for this misinterpretation; however, Kazin was only doing what any astute reader would and attending to Yates’s commentary on marriage as it stands alone in the work. Furthermore, Kazin’s commentary was included on the cover of the final publication of the book so it would be quite reasonable or understandable for HI to believe that these views were in accordance with those of the author.

The content to which I have referred could and should be interpreted differently in light of Yates’s interview. Yates says that his intentions were not to attack suburban life or indeed the institution of marriage, but without his pronouncements of intent we would not necessarily draw this conclusion from the text, publicly available and relevant biographical information or other writings in his oeuvre. Yates’s commentary contextualises his work such that we can see that Frank’s character is motivated by, and grounded in, his vanity and a delusional stylised conception of himself as an anti-suburban intellectual. If we read the text in light of Yates’s interview we can clearly see that he was trying to show Frank’s inadequacies. For instance, when John quizzes him about his job at Knox Business Machines, he replies, ‘[I] sort of help sell them, I guess. I don’t really have much to do with the machines themselves; I work in the office. Actually it’s a sort of stupid job. I mean there’s nothing – you know, interesting about it, or anything’.⁴⁴ The inarticulate stumbling response and the explanation of his menial job should alert the reader to the fact that Frank is an unremarkable man. A man who commits adultery, who insults Norma Townsend by calling her a lesbian and is totally lacking in qualities such as courage or wisdom.

Provided that HI accepts the reasonable suggestion that we are not usually mistaken about our intentions and accepts that the claims made by the artist are sufficiently supported by the work, then it seems curious to argue that these claims are not a relevant consideration when interpreting their work.

HI does allow for pronouncements made by the artist to be admissible provided these pronouncements are publicly available. In reply, HI might claim this does not constitute publicly available information. However, HI does not always adequately distinguish between public and private information. According to Levinson, the relevant public context admissible should be construed as that which the artist wanted the audience to know about his intentions. He says if information that had been deliberately concealed later came to light it still does not constitute admissible information from public context.⁴⁵ However, Yates never tried to conceal anything about his intentions, indeed he thought his intentions were made clear in his writing. After all, his corroborating statements of intent published later are wholly compatible with an interpretation of his work. It seems curious for HI to hold on to their hypothesis when newly discovered evidence shows it to be patently false. Furthermore, in order for HI to hold onto the original anti-suburban interpretation, HI has to actively deny that the interpretation consonant with the author's pronouncements of intent is correct. This would seem a very curious position given that both interpretations seemed to be plausible prior to the statements of intent from the artist. In light of these pronouncements from Yates it becomes somewhat arbitrary to leave out some publicly available, yet epistemologically relevant evidence for HI's preferred interpretation.

On the other hand, HI might argue that now this interview has been published it is part of the publicly available body of information and so HI can logically reach the same conclusion as MAI. However, this creates a different problem. Hypothetically we can conceive of a case where a hypothetical intentionalist, *Person A*, has access to some private statements of intent made by the artist and those statements are not in the public domain and, were they to be admissible, would clearly change our perception of the work. *Person A* cannot include knowledge of those statements in an interpretation of the creative work. Later these statements are published or made public and now these statements are admissible for *Person A* to include in their body of epistemically relevant information. In both cases, *Person A* had access to the same information but their interpretation was different because, in the first instance, *Person A* would not allow herself to include the private statements made by the artist. In this case *Person A*'s decision to exclude information she already has at one juncture, but include it at another, seems arbitrary and irrational.

A final concern with this case study might lie with the distinction between semantic and categorial intentions. To quote Jerrold Levinson, 'an author's intention to mean something in or by a text T (a semantic intention) is one thing, while an author's intention that T be classified, taken, approached in some specific or general way (categorial intention) is quite another'.⁴⁶ This distinction is relevant because HIs tend to be more liberal when it comes to categorial intentions. HIs could also arguably allow much more room for direct authorial statements in interpreting the categorial intentions – that is

how the artist has intended the work to be taken as a whole. In fact, the interviews reveal that the intentions Yates had with regard to *Revolutionary Road* seem to be largely categorial, in the sense that they show how Yates thought the novel should be understood as a whole. If this is indeed the case, then HI might be able to give Yates's statements about his categorial intentions the kind of role I have argued is not within reach of HI.

However, the distinction between semantic intentions and categorial intentions is not so clear in this case. There are specific references in this same interview with Yates to his semantic intentions in the text. For instance, the interviewer suggests that the title is an attack on suburban life, to which Yates replies, 'I meant the title to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the fifties'.⁴⁷ This would be a case of mixed intention without two significantly distinct aims.⁴⁸ Here HI has to establish whether the semantic portion cancels out the intention and there does not seem to be a clear basis for making this decision. This would lead to an ambiguous interpretation of the novel, which would not be satisfactory for either camp, since HI would be conceding that the ambiguity was in some sense intentional and so the interpretations of HI and MAI would not converge.

When we are faced with a number of possible interpretations for a given work, the pronouncements of intention from the author are often a decisive factor in establishing which interpretation is legitimate. I believe that both the contemporary visual art of Matt Sharp and the novel *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates offer clear cases where the private statements of the artist are epistemically relevant to interpretation of their work. Deliberately excluding this information is arbitrary and will lead to faulty interpretations.

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NOTES

- ¹Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946.
- ²Wittgenstein 1967, and Hirsch 1967.
- ³Carroll 2000.
- ⁴Grice 1968.
- ⁵Levinson 1996, 183
- ⁶Beardsley 1958.
- ⁷David Davies 2004, 85.
- ⁸Carroll 2000, 79.
- ⁹Hirsch 1967.
- ¹⁰Levinson 1996, 208.
- ¹¹Stephen Davies 2006, 223.
- ¹²Maes 2010.
- ¹³Levinson 2017, 148.
- ¹⁴Richard Wollheim 1980, 185 argues

that criticism requires the retrieval of the creative process: 'The task of criticism is the reconstruction of the creative process, where the creative process must in term be thought of as something not stopping short of, but terminating on, the work of art itself. The creative process reconstructed, or retrieval complete, the work is then open to understanding.'

- ¹⁵Carroll 2002, 328.
- ¹⁶Maes 2010.
- ¹⁷Levinson 1996.
- ¹⁸Iseminger 1996, 319-326, and Carroll 2002.
- ¹⁹Taylor 2014.
- ²⁰Taylor 2014, 385.

- ²¹Levinson 1996, 183.
²²Iseminger 1992.
²³Iseminger 1992, 192.
²⁴Iseminger 1992, 78.
²⁵Levinson 1996.
²⁶Maes 2010.
²⁷Gover 2012, 169–181.
²⁸Iseminger 1996, 319–326.
²⁹George, Sarah. ‘Letherhead care home tells paralysed artist he can no longer paint because he might hurt himself’, Surrey Live (online) 18th October 2017. This article documents alleged abuse from Sharp’s carers and cites that he was no longer allowed to paint in the art room because it had a beam and the carers were concerned that he might hang himself from it if left unsupervised.
³⁰Sharp 2019.
³¹Irvin 2005, 315–316.
³²Irvin 2005, 316.
³³Taken from an unfinished transcription of the interview: [FH]: Why did you choose to keep the lines in rather than painting over them or starting again? [MS]: I kind of liked the effect, even though I didn’t mean to do it. It seemed to give the picture depth.
³⁴Yates 2007, ix.
³⁵Price 2008, and Hitchens 2008.
³⁶Bailey 2003, 178.
³⁷Yates 2007, 20.
³⁸Yates 2007, 29.
³⁹Yates 2007, 249.
⁴⁰Naparsteck 2011.
⁴¹Naparsteck 2011, 91.
⁴²Clark and Henry 2011, 208.
⁴³Clark and Henry 2011, 209.
⁴⁴Yates 2007, 187.
⁴⁵Levinson 2006.
⁴⁶Levinson 1992, 232.
⁴⁷Clark and Henry 2011, 208–209.
⁴⁸Livingston 1998, 842.

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