“THE READER IS RIGHT”: PRODUCTIVISM IN LITERARY INTERPRETATION

By

László Kőszeghy

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Supervisor: David Weberman

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Abstract

One of the major clash points in the debate around literary interpretation is whether the meaning of the literary work is pre-determined and is merely re-produced via interpretation or it is indeterminate and is produced by the reader. This thesis argues for the latter view holding that the reader not only necessarily but legitimately brings to bear on the work their own preconceptions. First, I show that the four most popular analytic theories of literary interpretation all subscribe to some form of re-productivism and even the most pluralistic-leaning versions of each potentially exlude valuable interpretations from the domain of legitimate readings. Then I argue for productivism by making the case for the legitimacy of preconceptions in literary interpretation. The legitimacy thesis is first supported by the showing that the re-productivist distinction between the work's non-relational – regarded as central or primary – and relational meanings lacks sufficient support. Then I argue for the incompleteness of the literary work which implies that the reader legitimately projects their preconceptions on to the work. This is done through appealing to the idea of the historicity of the literary work which holds that the work's relation to subsequent events and object can be a constitutive part of its meaning, and the idea that the literary work has gaps, that is, ambiguous or indeterminate parts which can pertain to its meaning.

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The reader is right per definition, even when they are not.

Péter Esterházy

Introduction

Literary texts invite several interpretations. At the same time, not every reading seems to be legitimate. In contemporary philosophy of literature, two basic patterns of thought are discernible regarding this multiplicity (Stecker 2003, 24–25; Knapp & Michaels 1982, 723). Some assume that the meaning of the work or the goal of interpretation is pre-determined and propose a standard of validity in order to be able disambiguate between legitimate and illegitimate readings along the lines of whether they correspond with the pre-determined meaning or aim or not. Others, however, embrace the idea of the indeterminacy of the meaning of the work, and argue for the legitimacy of multiplicity in literary interpretation. Thus, the tension between the two approaches arises from how strict interpretive theories should be: while theorists belonging to the first group are at risk of arbitrarily excluding valuable interpretations, those belonging to the second may be criticized for not providing clear guidelines as to how to secure the validity of readings.

The motivation for proponents of the first group – usually associated with Anglo-American analytic aesthetics – is that by holding that the meaning of the literary work is pre-determined, their theories can secure, and account for, the reproducibility and shareability thereof. These theorists aim to accurately locate and circumscribe the boundaries of meaning; in other words, great effort is put into delineating what belongs to the meaning of the literary work and what needs to be excluded from it. The reader, then, is expected to follow the prescribed interpretive aim in order to *reconstruct* or *discover* the meaning of the work. I will call this set of assumptions *re-productivism*.

The four most popular contemporary re-productivist theories of literary interpretation are actual intentionalism, anti-intentionalism, hypothetical intentionalism, and the value maximizer theory. For actual intentionalists, literary meaning is *author's* (or utterer's) meaning (cf. Carroll 1992, 1993, 1997; Iseminger 1996). This theory holds that the intentions of the author determine, or at least constrain, the

meaning of the work. The reader, in turn, is expected to reproduce the intentions of the author. In contrast to actual intentionalism, anti-intentionalism regards *textual* or words sequence meaning as the source of the correct meaning of the work (Beardsley 1958, 1982). The view calls for an "objective" reading of the text relying solely on "internal" evidences, regarding the literary work as autonomous from authorial intents (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946). A middle-ground position, hypothetical intentionalism, puts emphasis on *utterance* meaning produced in a historical and cultural context (Levinson 1992, 2006). It holds that what matters is not the actual authorial intent *per se* but the "best hypothesis" about authorial intention by a reader who is well-informed about the context of origin of the work. Finally, the value-maximizer theory defines the meaning of the literary work as that which makes it appear in the best light possible. In other words, the reader is expected to aim for the interpretation that maximizes appreciative experience of the work (Davies 2006).

Re-productivist theories differ in their account of what the securing force of meaning is and where it is to be located, i.e. what counts as legitimate evidence. This, in turn, might shed light on what method the reader should employ in interpretation. Finally, re-productivism can also be analyzed along the lines of how strong the proposed determining force securing the boundaries of literary meaning is held to be. Insofar as the given re-productivist theory holds that the reader's reconstruction of meaning yields a meaning that is identical to the pre-determined one, I will call it *strong* re-productivism. If the re-productivist subscribes to the weaker claim that the pre-determined meaning is unattainable, but it is still there and thus can function as a pre-fixed aim which the reader is to approximate as much as it is possible, then they qualify as a proponent of *moderate* re-productivism. Finally, the version of re-productivism which only prescribes fixed pre-given interpretive goals but concedes that they might yield more than one meaning, will henceforth be called *weak* re-productivism. Thus, in contrast to the first two versions which are monist with regards to meaning, weak re-productivism can be made compatible with a *weak* version of pluralism which admits to more than one possible meaning but holds that they need to be compatible with the pre-fixed goal. However, whether re-productivism holds the reader's role is to reproduce a pre-determined without (strong), or with the least possible amount of (moderate)

distortion, or to follow a pre-given interpretive goal (weak), they all place constraints on the possible avenues the interpreter might take.

The other branch of interpretive theories is borne out of the belief that these constraints are too tight. Proponents of this group subscribe to the basic assumption that the meaning of the literary work is indeterminate and is always partly *produced* by the historically, socially and culturally situated reader. I will call this other approach to literary interpretation *productivism*. A crucial point of divergence between re-productivism and productivism is in terms of their conception of the role of the reader in interpretation. On the productivist view, emphasis is put on the productive, not merely re-productive, contribution of reader as the literary work is not conceived of as a self-sufficient whole which could be clearly and distinctly separated from what does not belong to it. Thus, it is held that the work can only acquire its meaning through its relationalities, the most important of which is the reader whose projection of their preconceptions is needed for any kind of meaning to arise. In other words, interpretation is not regarded as an act of reconstruction or discovery but as – at least potentially – constitutive of the work's meaning.

The present thesis argues for the productivist approach to literary interpretation. In what follows, I will first show that interpretation as reproduction of meaning carries the risk of being too narrow, ending up dismissing intriguing and legitimate interpretations. Then, I will shed light on the fact that not only does the main tenets of the re-productivist theory lack sufficient support, but they also have to face strong arguments for productivism. I will argue for the productivist view of literary interpretation which holds that *the reader not only necessarily but legitimately projects their preconceptions into the literary text, thereby producing meaning.*

I restrict my thesis to the domain of literature and remain neutral as to whether my version of interpretation holds in other areas as well. Literature, of course, has more than one sense. The broad conception encompasses all written works. In contrast to this generic definition, there is the more restrictive notion which conceives of literature as a form of art (understood, again, not in the broad sense of techne, but in the narrower, post 18th-century sense of art) encompassing such creative works such as

poetry, drama, or prose fiction. The restrictive notion can be applied descriptively, as a classificatory term, to denote written works that belong to the above-mentioned genres, or in an evaluative sense implying an aesthetic standard for works to be considered literature. I will use the term in the restrictive sense, but, as much as possible, merely in a descriptive sense without evaluative connotations. Although these distinctions may still not completely clarify the term, it will suffice for this paper.

In Chapter 1, I enumerate the above-mentioned re-productive theories of literary interpretation highlighting the main arguments supporting them and analyzing the different versions thereof. I will show that even the most liberal versions of all above-mentioned re-productive theories – which in certain cases quality as *moderate* re-productivism, in others, as *weak* re-productivism – significantly downplay the role of the reader in interpretation thereby potentially excluding valuable readings.

In Chapter 2, I make the case for the productivity of interpretation, the main thesis of this paper. First, I show that the re-productivist needs to concede that one's historical and cultural situatedness can never be fully escaped and that some preconceptions are not only necessary but legitimate part of interpretation. Then I show that the meaning-significance distinction through which the re-productivist could dismiss the idea that in interpretation, literary texts can be legitimately applied to the reader's present situation ends up being viscously circular. In the last section of the chapter, I argue for the incompleteness of the literary work. This is a positive argument for productivism since if the work is incomplete, then its meaning is not pre-determined, and the projection of pre-conceptions is not merely necessary but also legitimate to enable one to derive any kind of meaning out of it. I support the incompleteness thesis by two arguments: first, the notion of the historicity of the literary work which holds that the work's relation to subsequent events and object can pertain to its meaning. Second, the idea that the literary work has gaps, i.e. ambiguous or indeterminate parts which can pertain to its meaning.

By claiming that the reader's situatedness and all the contingencies that thereby arise are necessarily a constitutive part of interpretation, productivism paves the path toward moderate pluralism which holds that many, even if not all, meanings are legitimate, even if they cannot be reconciled. At the end of this thesis, I shall address the main worry about this implication: that it would eventually lead to not only a moderate but an "anything goes" type of relativism.

1. Re-Productivism, or Fighting Indeterminacy

In this chapter, I enumerate the most popular contemporary re-productivist theories of interpretation in analytic aesthetics: actual intentionalism, anti-intentionalism, hypothetical intentionalism and the value maximizer theory. Re-productivist theories aim to fight "the amorphous fire of indeterminacy" (Hirsch 1992, 15) by *either* circumscribing a pre-determined meaning which should be identically reproduced (strong re-productivism) or approximated as much as possible (moderate re-productivism), *or* only pinpointing a fixed interpretive goal (weak re-productivism). Each re-productivist theory gives an account of literary meaning and, in certain cases, delineates a set of valid evidence or even prescribes a valid method through which meaning can be reproduced. This way, determinacy of the meaning of the literary work is hoped to be secured.

I will differentiate between the different versions of each theory, shed light on their assumptions, and unpack the arguments deployed in their support. I will raise doubts as to the conclusiveness of these arguments as well as the feasibility of the respective re-productivist projects, i.e. whether the boundaries between what is considered as constitutive part of the work's meaning can clearly be drawn. Most importantly, I will show that even the most liberal versions of said theories end up *unduly* restricting the role of the reader in interpretation.

1.1 An Act of Will – Actual Intentionalism

Perhaps the most straightforward answer to the question of the meaning of literary works is the theory called actual intentionalism (AcI) which holds that literary meaning is author's/utterer's meaning, i.e. it depends on the intentions of the author. AcI subscribes to an *originalist* ontology of the literary work which holds that the identity of the work of art is fixed at the time of its creation, thus implying re-productivism, and ruling out the possibility that the meaning of the

artwork changes whenever the author changes their mind.[1] For the actual intentionalist, while the primary evidence for authorial intention is the work itself, evidence can also come from external, even non-public sources such as diaries and letters of the author.

The main argument for AcI is called the Conversation Argument which holds that there is an analogy between interpretation in ordinary conversations and literary interpretation (cf. Carroll 1992, 1997, 2013; Iseminger 1996; Stock 2017, 2). Everyday conversations, in turn, are modelled after the Gricean picture thereof, which holds that the aim of the hearer is to discern the speaker's actual intentions. In other words, the meaning of the utterance is ultimately reduced to utterer's meaning. The analogy is supported by the claim that we have conversational interests in literature as well: we want to "understand what another human being is saying to us" (Carroll 1992, 118). Thus, AcI is a re-productivist theory since one's aim in interpreting literature is, using E. D. Hirsch's (1992, 17) formulation, "a reconstruction of the author's aims and attitudes".

However, this model of everyday conversations faces strong objections. First, there is the worry that, by attributing exclusive authority to the speaker/author in determining meaning, it silences the hearer/reader. Interpretation ends up being rather a *monologue* lacking a "back-and-forth" structure which would be necessary for a conversation of equals (cf. Wilson 1997, 311; Weberman 1999; Huddleston 2012). Second, one might argue that this picture implies a rather impoverished notion of conversation: even if we accept that knowing the interlocutor's intentions is a necessary condition of conversation, it might not be sufficient. It is possible to imagine a situation where it is obvious what one's interlocutor intended to say, but the topic being explored or the way they talk is so boring that the interaction does not qualify as a real

[1] Stephen Davies (2006, 224) calls this view the "contextualist" ontology of the work of literature. However, this name is somewhat misleading because it refers only to the *original* context. By subscribing to originalism, AcI evades the kind of criticism about the changeability of authorial intentions which, for example, John Dewey raises: "[i]t is absurd to ask what an artist 'really' meant by his product; he himself would find different meanings in it at different days and hours and in different stages of his own development" (1980, 113).

conversation. Third, one might argue that in the normal course of events, linguistic conventions are sufficient to determine utterance meaning. In other words, in everyday conversations, we do not look for intentions – only in the exceptional cases when the utterance is a conversational mistake or is ambiguous (Dickie–Wilson 1995; Dickie 2006; cf. also Carroll 1997). Nevertheless, for the purposes of argument, I will assume for now that the model of model of everyday conversations assumed by the Conversation Argument is correct.

There are two main versions of actual intentionalism: extreme and modest. Extreme actual intentionalism (EAcI) stays all the way committed to analogy with the Gricean view of conversations, and holds that the meaning of the literary work and the intentions of the author are always identical (Knapp–Michaels 1992, 51; cf. also Hirsch 1992). However, this version suffers from a "bad reputation" (Stock 2017, 13) stemming from strong anti-intentionalist intuition pumps. First, one might point out that EAcI leads to an unintuitive "Humpty-Dumptyism" (Beardsley 1982, 19) because it entails that the meaning of a literary work is identical to the author's intention *even if* the work cannot support it. EAI can also be criticized on the grounds that, if there is no other evidence of authorial intention than the text itself, the theory ends up in circularity (cf. Carroll, 1992, 99–100; Davies 2006, 227).

To avoid these problems, "sophisticated" intentionalists convert to a moderate version of actual intentionalism (MAcI) which avoids the problem of "Humpty-Dumptyism" by accepting that the author *does not always* have the final word regarding the meaning of the work (Carroll 2013, 325–326). Thereby, the link with Gricean everyday conversations is somewhat weakened: authorial intentions do not automatically trump other interpretations (cf. Davies 2006, 227–228). This is because, conceding that it is possible that the author fails in carrying out their intentions and fixing the work's meaning, MAcI holds that only those authorial intentions are relevant to interpretation which are "supportable by what is written" (Carroll 2013, 325). On this view, if the author is unsuccessful in realizing his intentions, the meaning

of the work is fixed by public conventions of language and/or the context of origin (Carroll 1992, 98–100).

Now, MAcI still faces the question of who gets to decide when authorial intentions are successfully realized. The moderate actual intentionalist's answer is that however difficult it might be to determine whether authorial intentions have been successfully realized, intentionalist aims are not jeopardized. This is because MAcI holds that authorial intentions do not necessarily fully determine, merely "constrain" (Carroll 1992, 124; 1993, 245) the correct interpretations of literary works – even in cases where authorial intentions are unsuccessful. To illustrate what is meant by "constraint", Noël Carroll (1993) argues that the reader first needs to know whether the author intended his work to be taken seriously or sarcastically since a reading which identifies the work as, for example, racist or sexist "would be undercut" if it turned out that the author actually wanted to be sarcastic and shed light on how destructive certain prejudices can be. In other words, it is claimed that not only can MAcI accommodate and be in "fruitful co-existence" with – mostly politically motivated – critical readings that go against or contradict the intended meaning but intentionalism is also "is presupposed by such criticism" (Carroll 1993, 251).

However, at this point, the proponent of MAcI must choose between two implications of their theory, none of which seems satisfactory. They can subscribe to the counter-intuitive claim that readings which find a work racist or sexist even if the author intended it to be a sarcastic or ironic are always illegitimate.[2] Or, MAcI can concede that the reader – putting more emphasis on the fact that the work represents, gives voice to and thus perpetuates certain structures and habits rather than on the playful gesture of irony/sarcasm – might legitimately interpret even a sarcastically intended work as racist or sexist. In this case, what is meant by "constraint" by

[2] Or, the other way around, readings which find a work politically progressive even if the author intended it to be sexist (supposing sexism is not progression) are always illegitimate.

authorial intentions – or, in the formulation of a recent defender of the view, "working with" them (Jannotta 2014) – needs further elaboration. To what extent can authorial intentions "constrain" meaning in the above-mentioned case? It seems that unless MAcI's proponents clarify what is meant by "constraint" or "working with" actual intentions, even the more flexible version of actual intentionalist theory risks excluding valuable readings from the realm of correct or legitimate interpretations.

1.2 Objective Criticism – Anti-intentionalism

Dissatisfied that intentionalist literary interpretation "leads away" (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946, 479) from the literary texts themselves, anti-intentionalism (AnI) aims to downplay the importance of authorial intentions in the correct interpretation of a literary work. Anti-intentionalists, echoing the T. S. Eliot's "objective criticism" (2014, 458–465) and the literary movement called New Criticism,[3] regard the literary work as an autonomous "aesthetic object" (Beardsley 1958, 29) whose meaning is to be understood on the model of *textual* or *word sequence* meaning. In other words, it is claimed that literary meaning is determined by public conventions and usage of language and literature alone (Beardsley 1958, 1982).

Let me start with the strong version of AnI which holds that the author's intentions are *never* relevant to the interpretation of the literary work. One motivation for this position could be the view that intentions, being private mental events (Beardsley 1958, 17) of the authors are, strictly speaking, inaccessible for the reader. This, however, might not be enough: the intentionalist has three options to reply. First, they can contest the inaccessibility claim by placing intentions within the literary work and claiming that an authorial intention is not a private mental event

[3] New Critics heavily build upon the ideals of objectivity, detachment, and impersonality as put forth by T. S. Eliot in his writings on literature. Eliot saw criticism as first and foremost a problem of "order": to reach "true judgement", the critic needs to "discipline his personal prejudices" (2014, 458–459). Accordingly, for Eliot, interpretation "is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all"; in other words, the critic should provide the reader with "facts" (2014, 465).

but a "purposive structure" which is present in the work, thus the interpreter need not be lead away from the text (cf. Carroll 1992, 101).[4] However, the anti-intentionalist can simply accept this claim and reply that the intentionalist still has not shown the either the legitimacy of any "external" or "private" evidence regarding the meaning of the work or, assuming that the author's intentions were successfully realized, the need to "talk intentionalistically" (Beardsley 1958, 29), i.e. using the vocabulary of intentionalism.

The second, more persuasive, reply the intentionalist can come up with is simply accepting the inaccessibility of authorial intentions. It can be pointed out that the argument from the inaccessibility of intentions as mental events does not help the cause of AnI because an anti-intentionalist, holding that there is no need for "consulting the oracle" (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946, 487), would have say that even if we could read other minds perfectly well, the author, on principle, is not the "final court of appeal" (Beardsley 1958, 21). Furthermore, the intentionalist may change their position from strong to moderate re-productivism and point out that inaccessibility does not undercut the view that the aim of interpretation is the grasping of the actual authorial intent, even if it is an unattainable goal.[5] Finally, the intentionalist can simply deny the inaccessibility claim via a *reductio ad absurdum:* if intentions as private mental states are inaccessible, then they are so in everyday conversations as well which, given the above-mentioned Gricean view of ordinary conversations, would entail the counter-intuitive

[4] *Pace* Carroll, I do not believe that arguments for or against intentionalism would turn on where one locates authorial intentions if their *function* of securing the determinacy of meaning remains that same (cf. Michel Foucault's [1980] notion of "author-function"). No wonder Carroll can employ his "neo-Wittgensteinian" concept of authorial intentions – which holds that intention is the "purposive structure" present in the work itself and then later use wording that implies the mental state view without jeopardizing the coherence of his position (cf. 1992, 101; 1997, 308; pointed out by: Dickie 2006, 75–77): whether one takes intentions to be outside – and sometimes but not always, evidenced in – the work of art or literally inside the work of art, intentions function as a fixed center of the work determining its meaning. Using Derrida's jargon, such a center "can be either inside or outside, can also indifferently be called the origin or end" as long as it functions as an unchanging, "absolutely present" point attributed to the text to which meaning is to be traced back (1978, 279–280).

[5] This is the thinking behind Friedrich Schleiermacher's romantic and Wilhelm Dilthey's historicist re-productivism: even if the subjective dimension is private beyond help, the reader should take on the "infinite task" of re-producing the origin of the utterance (cf. Schleiermacher 1998, 23; Dilthey 1972, 243).

view that all forms of linguistic communication ultimately fail. So, intentionalists pose the following question: if we can (sometimes) understand each other in everyday conversations, what would make literary works different in this respect (cf. Carroll 1992, 118; 2013, 329)?

The ontological difference between everyday use of language and literature is precisely what is at the core of the second line of argument for strong AnI, called the Ontological Argument. Monroe Beardsley (1982) argues that the *distinctive nature of literature* lies in the fact that it is not an ordinary utterance understood as a performance of an illocutionary/speech act, but, rather, a representation thereof. This is because, so the argument goes, these linguistic acts are performed by *fictional* characters or implied authors that are ontologically distinct from the actual author and only exist in the text the meaning of which is to be understood according to linguistic conventions (*Ibid.*).

However, there are several problems with this view as well. As pointed out by Carroll (1992, 105–112), if AnI hinges on the binary distinction between performance and representation, then it leads to the sweeping generalization that all literary works are fictional representations of speech acts by implied authors. Even if it is so, and no literary work can be interpreted as an illocutionary act of an actual authors, there seem to be degrees of fictionality, and AnI does not tell us anything about how to differentiate between them. Moreover, I agree with Carroll who argues that even if literature is fictional, being merely a representation of an illocutionary act, it is not enough to recourse to linguistic conventions to determine its meaning: even if one accepts that it is a fictional character speaking, not the actual author, one still needs to view it more "broadly", in light of the "overall design of the work", which, again, drives us to questions about authorial intentions (*Ibid.*).

In reply to these objections, strong anti-intentionalists can change their position to weak anti-intentionalism which holds that the author's intentions *do not always* "constrain" (as "determine" [EAcI] proved to be too strong a claim in the previous subsection) the

interpretation of the literary work (cf. Wilson 1997). Let me set aside for now, for the sake of argument, the above-mentioned issue about the obscurity surrounding the notion of "constraint". Even if we can establish that in some cases authorial intentions are irrelevant, can linguistic conventions alone *ever* determine meaning?

According to the famous manifesto of AnI, *The Intentional Fallacy* (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946), it is possible to distinguish between three types of evidence relating to the meaning of a literary work: "internal" evidence which is regarded as part of the literary work and is publicly and interpersonally accessible; "intermediate" evidence which is about "the character of the author" and "his use of a word, and the associations which the word had for him", including the "history of words"; and "external" evidence which is available only from private sources such letters or diaries (cf. 1946, 477–478; Beardsley 1982, 18–21). The reader's aim should be to excavate the meaning *from the text* by focusing solely on the inherent properties of the text, i.e. prioritize internal and, in some cases, intermediate evidence. However, even William K. Wimsatt and Beardsley admit that different types of evidence "shade into one another so subtly that it is not always easy to draw a line" between them (1946, 478).

In other words, AnI struggles with the tension resulting from the maintaining a clear distinction between what is part of the "aesthetic object" and what is outside it. For instance, linguistic conventions and the meaning of words seem to change over the course of history: if changing linguistic conventions belong to intermediate evidence, then how much intermediate evidence is legitimate in "objective" interpretation without jeopardizing the assumed determinacy of meaning? Moreover, conventions often do not determine meaning at a given time either: in the case of "X met Y at the bank" – an often cited example in the debate (cf. Stecker 2003, 8) – how do I know which sense of "bank" is meant merely by appealing to linguistic conventions? Finally, to what extent are connotations, for example, anachronistic ones, legitimate? If the anti-intentionalist is too open-minded about connotations (as Beardsley is "[a]ll connotations that

can be found to fit are to be attributed to the poem: it means all it *can* mean, so to speak" [1982, 144, emphasis in the original]), then its anti-pluralist commitment to the determinacy of meaning (*Ibid.*, 478–489, 515–518) is undercut, so it seems that these two commitments end up making it incoherent.

One way to clear up this tension and the obscurity surrounding the dividing lines between different types of evidence is to make AnI compatible with the originalist ontology of the literary work (Davies 2005). Stephen Davies proposes to solve the problem by conceding that although stemming from an anti-externalist view of the literary work of art ("external" in the sense mentioned above), AnI must admit that some external factors of the literary work's context of origin are responsible for its "objective" and "internal" internal properties (2005, 180–181). However, this more context-friendly version of AnI, as I will show in the next subsection, is hardly discernible from another re-productivist theory of interpretation: hypothetical intentionalism.

1.3 A Golden Mean? – Hypothetical Intentionalism

Hypothetical intentionalism (HI) holds that the meaning of the literary work is determined by the "best hypothesis" of a *contextually informed* reader about authorial intention, not the authorial intention *per se*. As such, HI can be considered as a middle-ground position between actual intentionalism and anti-intentionalism. Just like AcI, and *pace* AnI, it views the work of literature not as a *word sequence* but an *utterance* "produced in a public context by a historically and culturally situated author" (Levinson 2006, 302). However, in the same vein as AnI, it maintains that the author does have the last word on the meaning of the work.

The conservative version of HI subscribes to the originalist ontology of the literary work *and* holds that the reader should hypothesize about the *actual* author (Levinson 1992, 2006, 2010, 140–141; for the following typology, cf. Davies 2006, 237). It is, thus, rather close to actual

intentionalism.[6] So much so that the "stalemate" (Iseminger 1996, 323) between the two theories is only broken by MAcI's commitment to the Conversation Argument: in the – rather rare – case where the best, contextually-informed, hypothesis about authorial intention differs from the *actual* intention/author's meaning, the hypothetical intentionalist sticks with the former.

A more liberal, "intermediate" version of HI also subscribes to originalism but does not call for a hypothesis about the actual author, merely a hypothetical one (cf. Nathan 1982). Leaving aside the question of where historical context begins and the author's biography end – especially in cases where the author had a big historico-political impact – the difficulty of separating anti-intentionalism and intermediate HI still looms.[7] Since both theories reject authorial intentions as a meaning-determining force the difference is to be found in the extent to which they regard context as relevant besides public conventions of language and literature. If anti-intentionalism is taken as having subscribed to originalism (Davies 2005), then, as far as I can see, the only difference is at the level of word choice: a hardcore anti-intentionalist, following their methodological premise, consciously refrains from the vocabulary of "intentionalistic criticism" (Beardsley 1982, 26).

Both conservative and intermediate HI subscribe to originalism, and thus qualify as re-productive theories as the reader is asked to minimize the role of their historical situatedness in interpretation by regarding everything that has happened since the creation of the work as irrelevant to its meaning. No wonder that the most important assumption of HI is that the audience should be "in the position of ideal reader" (Levinson 1992, 224). In early formulations of HI, the "ideal" reader was defined as "intended audience" (cf. Tolhurst 1979; quoted by

[6] No wonder that Carroll, a proponent MAcI, sometimes talks using the vocabulary – "best hypothesis" – of HI (1992, 120, 124; 1997, 306, 308).
[7] It is revealing that Davies (2006, 237) labels Nathan's position (1992) moderate hypothetical intentionalism, while Levinson (1992, 221) calls it anti-intentionalism.

Levinson 1992), which, as has been pointed out (Nathan 1982; quoted by Levinson 1992) is eventually a recourse to authorial intentions. To avoid this, proponents of HI change "intended" audience to "appropriate" audience consisting of "rational judgers" understands the work "properly" (Levinson 1992, 227–228). Since thinking in terms of an "ideal" or an "appropriate" reader who comes up with the "proper" reading seems dangerously close to simply begging the question, the proponent of HI needs to spell out what they mean by these notions. Jerrold

Levinson argues that the assumptions required from the "appropriate reader" can be deduced from the literary and linguistic conventions of the context of origin, the literary tradition that the literary work in question is part of, the writer's "public identity" and other works in their oeuvre (*Ibid.*). This formulation of the "appropriate" reader, however, assumes that once the above-mentioned conditions are met, further differences are negligible. This is either because, by fulfilling the requirements of HI, the work's pre-determined meaning comes more and more to the fore (moderate re-productivism). Or, the proponent of HI can admit that even if "appropriate" readers arrive at different interpretations, the goal of interpretation remains fixed (weak re-productivism). In other words, even if there are "two or more informed hypotheses frameable as to authorial intent that are explanatorily and aesthetically optimal" (Levinson 2006, 303), it is assumed that the difference between them is not such that it would endanger the project of subsuming all interpretations under the "totality" (*Ibid.*) of the utterance meaning of the work conceived on the model of HI. This is the assumption – weak pluralism – on which weak re-productivist theories hinge. Productivism, as I will show, needs to establish moderate pluralism which admits that it is possible that there is no "totality" which would encompass all legitimate readings.

1.4 Charity in Criticism – The Value-Maximizer Theory

The last contemporary analytic theory of literary interpretation surveyed here, the value maximizer theory (VMT), holds that the meaning of the literary work is yielded by the interpretation which maximizes its aesthetic merits as a work of literature. The VMT is an anti-intentionalist theory insofar as it is emphasized that the reader might have other interests in interpretation besides conversational ones advocated by intentionalists. The proponent of the VMT, in turn, places importance on our *aesthetic* interests in engaging with literary artworks.

The *moderate* version of the VMT subscribes to the originalist ontology of the literary work, presumably in order to evade the criticism that it anachronistically renders every piece of literature a great work. Moderate VMT is admittedly almost "equivalent" (Davies 2006, 240) to conservative HI, claiming that the latter mistakenly differentiates between an interpretation which is *epistemically* best – the one that an "ideal" reader would hypothesize to be "correct" (Levinson 1992, 224–225) – and one which is *aesthetically* best. Stephen Davies (2006, 241) maintains that this distinction cannot be made because when we assess epistemic plausibility, we already take into account aesthetic merits: given the principle of critical charity, it is always more likely that an author intended an aesthetically better work of literature. Note that actual intentionalists also makes this distinction between epistemically best – the difference is that they mean the author's *actual* intentions not "the best hypothesis" thereof (Jannotta 2014)[8]– and aesthetically best readings.

So, can "epistemic" and "aesthetic" aims in interpretation be separated? *If* epistemic means the aim of getting to know the author's intentions (AcI) or the best hypothesis thereof (HI) and

[8] Although Carroll does not use the term "epistemic" when describing conversational interest, he uses the vocabulary of epistemology: he talks about the "disposition to *understand* what another human being is saying to us" as well as "a desire to *know* what the artist intends" (1992, 118, 122, my emphasis). It is, thus, no wonder that in Jannotta (2014), who is defending Carroll's Conversation Argument, this distinction boils down to one between "epistemic" and "aesthetic" interests.

aesthetic means aiming for maximum aesthetic satisfaction, then it seems it is possible that the two do not always coincide. It is possible that the author's interpretation is the one which is aesthetically best as well, but this does not establish that we could not differentiate between the two. Even if we stick to the originalist ontology of the literary work to which both conservative HI and moderate VMT subscribe, it is easy to imagine, for instance, a teenager writing their first love poem which one can interpret as ironic and parodistic of the genre of romantic love poems and derive more aesthetic pleasure out of it than reading it, as it had been most plausibly – and actually – intended, as the most serious love poem of the century. Whether one should accept that – either hypothetical or actual – intentionalist aims are to be equated with one's "epistemic" interests in interpretation is another matter: the labelling is problematic as it rests on the questionable Kantian assumption that aesthetic experience is devoid of knowledge and implies that knowledge is to be found only in intentionalist readings.[9] Nevertheless, assuming that one accepts these labels, the two are in fact separable.

If the distinction between "aesthetic" and "epistemic" aims can be made, then moderate VMT can be further broken down into two versions: a *weak* and a *strong* formulation depending on whether it holds that one *could choose* to disregard either actual or hypothesized authorial intent and interpret the work so as to maximize aesthetic value, or whether it is claimed that any form of intentionalism *always* limits aesthetic satisfaction. The strong version significantly limits the playing field of the interpreter and needs to defend the counterintuitive claim that the author's own interpretation is never legitimate. The strong version's proponent – in the same vein as Davies (2006, 245) – might claim that their theory is weak pluralistic-leaning because interpreters might arrive at different readings that they take to be aesthetically best, it is still a

[9] Further on, this implied hierarchy between epistemic and aesthetic can be boiled down to the all-too familiar hierarchy between signifier and signified, sensible and intelligible. Moreover, do readings that aim to maximize aesthetic satisfaction, or, for that matter, any reading that do not aim to re-produce the author's (either hypothesized or actual) intentions necessarily lack a cognitive dimension? I believe that not even a full-blooded intentionalist would go as far as to claim that these readings are not in the business of producing some form of knowledge.

(weak) re-productivist picture in the sense that it prescribes a pre-fixed goal for the reader. The weak version is more liberal as it conceives of intentionalist (epistemic) and value-maximizer (aesthetic) readings as disjuncts, but it would still have to defend its originalist restrictions.

Radical VMT, on the other hand, allows the reader to bypass the context of origin in the pursuit of aesthetic appreciation. This version can also have a weak and a strong formulation in the above-mentioned sense. The strong version, even without the originalist framework, faces similar objections as the strong moderate version. Weak radical VMT, however, at least on the face of it, seems to be a remarkably liberal theory of interpretation: it enables the reader to choose to follow some form of intentionalism or to maximize aesthetic satisfaction without being constrained by the original context.

This theory, however, relies on a false dichotomy as it presupposes that there are no other options to "choose" from: it's either the author's (actual or hypothesized) meaning or the one that shows the work in an aesthetically best light. What happens when the interpreter does not accept any form of intentionalist account of literary meaning, *and* their preconceptions are not such that they would allow for maximizing the value of the work? This raises doubts as to whether all critical or deconstructive, readings should be regarded as *ab ovo* less legitimate than praising and affirmatory ones. In other words, weak radical VMT qualifies as a weak re-productivist theory significantly narrowing down the playing field of interpretation because even if it allows for some role for the reader's preconceptions in interpretation, it still asks the interpreter to follow pre-fixed goals and *reproduce* either an intentionalist or the "aesthetically best" reading. On its mission to determine literary meaning, even radical weak VMT sacrifices too much of its pluralism on the altar of "critical charity", thereby potentially excluding valuable interpretations.

*

Having investigated the four most popular analytic theories of literary interpretation, the upshot so far is that even the most liberal versions thereof are committed to re-productivism and thus constrain the role of the reader by limiting the set of background assumptions that they can legitimately employ in interpretation. AcI asks the reader to re-produce the author's intentions, AnI to be "prejudice free" and "objective", HI conceives of an "ideal" or "appropriate" reader, and the VMT requires the interpreter to be always "charitable".

In all re-productive theories, the determinacy of meaning is secured – even if a given version of the theory admits that it might allow for more than one reading – through the commitment to pre-fixed interpretive goals. However, even if one accepts the feasibility of these interpretive goals and thus grant that they can be attained and clearly delineated, the problem of prioritizing one interpretive goal over the others and thus potentially excluding valuable interpretations persists, let alone the question of whether other goals can also be legitimate.

In the next chapter, I will challenge re-productive theories by unpacking and defending the arguments for the productivity of interpretation.

2. The Productivity Thesis

The version of productivism I defend in this chapter holds that the meaning of the literary work is indeterminate, and the reader not only necessarily but *legitimately* projects the pre-conceptions which stem from their historico-cultural situatedness into the work.

In the first subsection I argue that even the re-productivist should admit that one's historico-cultural situatedness can never be fully transcended and that some preconceptions are not only necessary but legitimate part of interpretation.

In the second subsection, I will argue that to some extent, application, understood as bringing to bear on the work's meaning one's own preconceptions arising from one's situatedness, is a necessary part of literary interpretation. I will show that the meaning-significance distinction through which the re-productivist could dismiss the idea of application and the pluralism of interpretive aims ultimately begs the question. This leads to a questioning of monism in interpretive aims and, in turn, the even more basic assumption that the interpreter always needs to have pre-fixed interpretive aims.

In the last subsection, I offer positive arguments for productivism by arguing for the incompleteness of the literary work. If the work is incomplete, then its meaning is not pre-determined and the projection of pre-conceptions is not merely necessary but also legitimate to enable one to derive any kind of meaning out of it. In order to underpin the incompleteness thesis, I will rely on two ideas. First, the notion of the historicity of the literary work which holds that the work's relation to subsequent events and object can pertain to its meaning. Second, the idea that the literary work has gaps, i.e. ambiguous or indeterminate parts which can pertain to its meaning.

2.1 The Inescapability and Legitimacy of the Reader's Situatedness

The proponent of productivism can start making their case by putting emphasis on the inescapability of the pre-conceptions and prejudices of the interpreting subject which, arising from their historical/linguistic/social/gender situatedness, are particular and contingent. Thus, the productivist could hold that every reading is productive in the sense that the reader projects their preconceptions which arise from their situatedness and thus produces new meanings.

However, although AcI, AnI, HI, and VMT all aim to downplay the constitutive role of the situatedness of the reader, these theories can accommodate the inescapability thesis since even if true, it does not entail that the critic cannot at least try to minimize their preconceptions and prejudices. In other words, the challenge posed by the inescapability thesis can be met by the re-productivist changing their position to – at least – *moderate* re-productivism. A proponent of AcI might say that the reader should do their best to be able to reproduce the author's intentions without distortions even if it is an "infinite task" (cf. Dilthey 1972, 243; Schleiermacher 1998, 23). In a similar manner, the anti-intentionalist might admit that their imperative according to which it is crucially important "not to read something into a poem" (Beardsley 1982, 26) is extremely difficult to go by, but at least one should try. The hypothetical intentionalist, likewise, might say that a full reconstruction of the original context as perceived by the "appropriate audience" is almost impossible, but that should at least provide the reader with a direction as to how to proceed with interpretation. Finally, the value maximizer may insist that even if one finds a given work mediocre, they are to try to embrace an interpretation which casts the best light on it.

This way, the pre-fixed goal of interpretation of each respective theory is enough to guarantee the determinacy of meaning and thus the reproducibility and, at least to some extent, shareability thereof. In other words, the re-productivist can reply that the unattainability of a

goal does not imply that the goal as such is not valid and fixed and should be abandoned, and insist that the reader should solely focus on the pre-fixed goal of interpretation – however difficult a task it may be. The productivist, however, has already achieved that the focus from the very strong claim about the identity of meaning (strong re-productivism) is shifted toward pre-fixed interpretive goals (moderate and weak productivism).

The productivist, then, needs to argue for the legitimacy of prejudices and pre-conceptions. First, they may point out, following the Heideggerian-Gadamerian tradition of philosophical hermeneutics (cf. Heidegger 1962, 192–195; Gadamer 2013, 278–318) that prejudice is not to be understood in the negative or pejorative sense of distorting or false judgment stemming from ignorance, but merely as assumptions and beliefs that the interpreter holds. From this it follows that the bringing into play of prejudices and preconceptions is not a limitation to understanding but a precondition thereof: thinking needs concepts belonging to a conceptual scheme, and, ultimately, language.

Thus, it seems that the re-productivist needs to grant the productivist that prejudices and preconceptions – understood in the above-mentioned, broad sense – are necessary for interpretation. Nevertheless, re-productivists can point out that there are legitimate and illegitimate preconceptions: the reader needs to discard their prejudices and preconceptions in lieu of the appropriate ones prescribed by the respective re-productivist theory – even if completely leaving behind all of the reader's contingent prejudices might be impossible. This way, by employing the right conceptual scheme, the difference between the pre-fixed goal (author's meaning, textual meaning, utterance meaning, aesthetically best reading) and the reader's interpretation can still be minimized.

2.2 Application vs. The Meaning-Significance Divide

At this point, the productivist, having already established that prejudices are necessary for interpretation, needs to argue that the dividing line between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices is not necessarily determined by pre-fixed aims in interpretation. In other words, the productivist must make the case that one does not necessarily need to discard or change their own prejudices and preconceptions so that they align with the pre-scribed aim of the given re-productive theory.

This can be done through an appeal to the idea that to some extent application is always legitimately part of interpretation and not a subsequent activity. By application, a term I borrow from Gadamer (2013, 318–322), I mean bringing to bear on the work one's pre-conceptions by applying it to one's own present situation, that is, asking the question of what the work means to the interpreter. Application is necessary because the interpreter cannot understand something which is completely alien to them: the otherness of the text has to be, using Gadamerian jargon, "fused" with the reader's "horizon" for any kind of meaning to arise. Even if there are degrees of application, and throughout the interpretive process, the interpreter might change their preconceptions and prejudices and get "closer" to the otherness of the text, some degree of application needs to remain as long as the literary work means anything to the interpreter. Since application can vary and change as it is contingent upon the relationalities arising from the reader's situatedness, if application is legitimately part of meaning, then meaning is also becomes variable and indeterminate.

It seems that the re-productivist needs to block the application thesis in order to safeguard the determinacy of meaning. This can be done by making a distinction between meaning and significance: the former being fixed and, the latter being a relationship between the "unchanging pole" of work meaning and the reader, a set of ideas, a context etc. (Hirsch 1967, 8; Stecker

2003, 58–60, 124–125). Notice that this distinction was originally employed by proponents of AcI, but it captures the thinking behind any re-productive theory as all of them aim to reduce the constitutive role that contingent relationalities might have on the meaning of the literary work in order to secure its determinacy. If this distinction holds, application only concerns significance and leaves the real meaning of the work untouched.

There are, however, two problems with this move.

2.2.1 The "Capaciousness" of Meaning

The first problem with the meaning/significance distinction is that if we accept the distinction for the sake of argument, it ends up being counterintuitively rigid. This is because a sharp distinction would imply that the reader can never associate to, or bring to bear on the work, their own life experience, can never identify with a character or an implied speaker without diverging from *the* meaning of the work. Hirsch himself, who first put forth the distinction, concedes in a later paper that "[i]f you think of your beloved in reading Shakespeare's sonnet, while I think of mine, that does not make the meaning of the sonnet different for us" (1984, 210). He admits that he was wrong to consider all applications as lying "outside the boundaries of meaning" since the work's meaning "embraces many, many exemplifications" *insofar as* these qualify as "true extensions" thereof (*Ibid.*).

However, unless the re-productivist spells out what exactly belongs to the "true extension" of meaning, how "capacious" this new notion of meaning which "tolerates" certain applications has become, the matter remains vague. One possibility is that the "capaciousness" view echoes the recurring idea in weak and moderate re-productivist theories of interpretation that even if there are slight differences between interpretations due to the reader's relating the text to their contingent situation, these stem from the fact that they make different parts of the work salient, but that does not make them incompatible, and as long as the goal of interpretation remains the

same, these meanings can be subsumed under the "totality" of *the* work meaning (cf. Levinson 2006, 303). However, on this view, it seems that application is allowed only for those whose preconceptions already align with the pre-given interpretive goals. What if through application, the reader's meaning contradicts the one prescribed by the re-productivist theory in question? What if the reader not only thinks of their own "love", but, by applying the love poem to their own situation, questions the very conception of love implied in the work?

So far re-productivists have admitted that certain preconceptions are necessary for interpretation, and that it might be legitimate for the reader to apply the literary work to their present situation – without, however, giving up their claim to the exclusive validity of their preferred interpretive goal. In other words, so far it has been assumed by the re-productivist that preconceptions and prejudices are not as pervasive as to disrupt the "true" meaning of the work and that they can be easily discarded in favour of appropriate ones that allow the reader to pursue the given interpretive goal. The question is whether pre-conceptions are, in fact, so easy to get rid of that one can always consciously choose the right interpretive goal beforehand. Thus, it is now time for the productivist to question both the assumption of monism regarding interpretive aims and, in turn, the belief that one should always set out to interpret a work with a pre-fixed interpretive goal in mind.

Let me start by flipping the legitimacy question of applications around: if one's application-imbued interpretation of a literary work contradicts the meaning that would be assigned to it according to one's preferred re-productivist interpretive goal, then does the meaning which arises from one's re-productivist commitment to an interpretive goal always legitimately override the meaning which arises from applying the work to one's own experience? May it be possible that application can, in fact, determine the interpretive direction/goal, and it is not always the other way around?

In the case of a novel which is full of sexism but is intended to be an ironic representation of sexist behaviour, one's feminist views may nevertheless lead to an interpretation contradicting the one – admittedly – intended, thus preventing the reader from attributing any relevance to authorial intentions as to the meaning of the work. This may be because the reader applies the work to their own situation: having been the subject of sexual harassment, they are less receptive to the kind of irony in question. Even if the reader is otherwise sympathetic to AcI, it is doubtful that would they consider their own reading as a misconstrual of what the work *does* mean which is determined by the author's meaning.

The interpretive aims of AnI are no less vulnerable to being overridden by one's preconceptions. Although the anti-intentionalist believes that the literary work's meaning is completely separated from the author's psychology and biographical background, even a thoroughgoing advocate of said theory might simply be unable to interpret the above-mentioned novel the same way after it turns out that the author had committed several sexual assaults. In this case, the anti-intentionalist doctrine of clearly separating the actual biographical author from the fictional construct inferred from the work by the reader – the "implied author" (Booth 1983, 70–71) – collapses. Or, if AnI subscribes to originalism, and is more liberal with regards to external evidence, then, as we have seen in Chapter 1, it merges into HI.

The hypothetical intentionalist, after all, is a fully contextualist anti-intentionalist with an intentionalistic vocabulary. Let us assume that the sexual assaults which have been brought to light happened after writing the novel. Then the hypothetical intentionalist, being committed to an originalist ontology of the literary work, would have to say that the meaning of the work remains intact – even if their experience of re-reading the work proves otherwise. Or they might accept that these crimes have shed new light on the personality of the author, that is, the biographical context deemed as relevant or pertaining to the original context. However, this might be a slippery slope for the hypothetical intentionalist: if subsequent events can change

our understanding of the work's context of origin, then it means that – contrary to the theory's assumption – the original context cannot serve as a stable ground for determinacy of meaning. I will come back to the problem of meaning changing over the course of history shortly.

Finally, the value maximizer theory, while seemingly allowing the reader to bring into play "different premises" (Davies 2006, 245) in interpretation, significantly narrows down the acceptable pre-conceptions because only those are deemed acceptable which allow for a eulogy of the given work. Sticking with the feminism example, what if the otherwise value maximizer reader cannot help but deem Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* "misogynistic garbage" (Tammy Bruce in Cohen 1991) because of the sexualized violence against women which it portrays, instead of championing the novel as a clever elucidation of how capitalism leads to narcissism and the objectification of others (Williams 2016)? The claim that each reader has a unique point of view due to their situatedness which might jeopardize the project of following a pre-set interpretive goal – which, in turn, would secure the determinacy of meaning – is just as scandalous for the value maximizer as it is for the other three re-productive theories.

All four examples show that even if we understand the term "meaning" from the meaning-significance distinction in the "capacious" view thereof, some applications which, at least on the face of it, seem legitimate are excluded from the "true extension" of the meaning of the work. Even if the reader meets the requirements of said pre-productivist theories and thus is authorially, contextually well-informed, and a competent user of the language, and sets out to interpret the work as having subscribed to one the re-productivist theories, they might be unconvinced as to why they should discard the meaning which arises from their own reading experience and embrace the one pre-scribed by the respective re-productivist theory.

In the above-mentioned cases, the reason why the reader demurred to follow the interpretive goal with which they set out to understand the work is that they interpreted the work to be

representing something which unsettles them politically or makes them feel unsafe.[10] Both re-productivists and productivists can agree that whether the reader feels threatened by an ideology represented in a given literary work depends on their situatedness and the preconceptions arising from that. What they disagree about is whether one's experience can be a constitutive part of the meaning of the work. So, the question is whether re-productivism can convince the reader that their experience of reading does not pertain to the true meaning of the work and thus that they need to discard their political commitments in order to discover the true meaning of the work. If so, even the "capacious" view implies that application is only available for some readers – others have little chance making the alleged pre-fixed meaning of the work their own.

At this point, the re-productivist needs to bite the bullet and accept the claim that some readers' application is off-limits because they digress from the pre-fixed goal of interpretation, even if the work, viewed from a certain perspective, seem to support the reading in question. If the meaning-significance distinction holds, re-productivists can insist that the work's meaning is determinate and remains unchanged by its different readings and thus claim that if the reader's application-imbued interpretation of the work does not stay within the boundaries of the "true extension" of meaning, then they should aim at discovering meaning *per se* – without, as much as it is possible, bringing to bear on the object the relationalities stemming from one's own pre-commitments. However, the problem of spelling out what exactly belongs to the "true extension" of meaning and justifying monism with regards to interpretive aims remains.

[10] The idea that the audience's safety is constitutive to the identity and meaning of the perceived object might be familiar from the 18th-century literature on aesthetic experience, especially that of the sublime. Edmund Burke wrote on the effect of the sublime thusly: "[it] always produces delight when it does not press too close" (1990, 42); according to Kant, "it is impossible to take delight in terror that is seriously entertained" (2007, 91) We may enjoy the sublimity of a raging storm only if we feel safe. *Mutatis mutandis*, one could state the same about of the literary text as well: if we feel that a work of literature may be threatening to us, the "aesthetic distance" which endowed it with the ontological status of being a fictional representation disappears. This distance, unlike Kantian disinterestedness, is far from being free of conceptual baggage: it is precisely the result of our-preconceptions at play. Feeling safe, thus, is a matter of situatedness.

2.2.2 The Legitimacy of Interpretive Aims

So far, I have shown that if the re-productivist, in order to avoid being too rigid, accepts that application is part of meaning, then they need to limit their claim to merely some applications, which, in turns, brings us back to the original meaning-significance distinction. The meaning-significance divide rests on the assumption that the literary work's properties arising from its relationalities – e.g. to the reader's own context or to subsequent events and interpretations – do not pertain to its meaning. Hence, the productivist needs to show that the distinction simply does not hold.

This leads to the second problem with the meaning-significance: the productivist is not provided with independent reasons to accept the distinction. Equating the interpretive aim of one's preferred re-productive theory with *the* meaning of the work is not a persuasive argument. The distinction between meaning and significance, just like in the case of the often cited re-productivist distinctions between what the work *does mean* and what a work *could mean* (cf. Levinson 2006, 275; Stecker 2003, 37–38, 58–60, 72–73), between the "fundamental" and "ludic" meaning of the work (Levinson 1992, 223, 242), or between readings that "respect" the work and those that do not (Davies 2006, 246; Carroll 1992, 199), simply bestow privilege upon the former term of these binaries and lacks an independent argument for the alleged hierarchy and thus ends up being question-begging.

Some re-productive theorists admit that other interpretive goals might be worth pursuing. However, if they also subscribe to said distinctions – between meaning/significance, does mean/could mean, fundamental/ludic meaning etc. – then those interpretations which belong to the latter of these binaries are rendered *second order meanings*.[11] This is because these

[11] For example, Levinson's argument (1992, 223) that "ludic meaning" which is "constrained by only the loosest requirements of plausibility, intelligibility, or interest" is unworthy of serious consideration because it cannot provide the reader with the "fundamental" meaning, again, ends up being viscously circular. His take on "ludic interpretation" is an especially telling example of how re-productivist theories end up treating other interpretive

distinctions all rely on the assumption that the work has a central/fundamental meaning, and that central meaning is circumscribed by their preferred re-productivist theory of interpretation.

Even if one accepts the individual arguments for each respective re-productivist theory introduced – and criticized – in Chapter 1 (Conversation Argument, Ontological Argument, The Argument from Contextual Determinacy, The Argument from Aesthetic Interests), it is not clear that the stronger claim about the exclusive validity thereof necessarily follows. In other words, even if these arguments manage to establish legitimate interpretive goals, they do not seem to establish the monist thesis regarding interpretive aims which holds that only one aim is legitimate.

Clearly there are many interpretive questions that readers are interested in: what did the author intend their work to mean?/what were the author's unconscious motivation in writing the work?/what is the most aesthetically enriching reading of the work?/how does the work reflect the author's sociopolitical position? etc. The monist view regarding interpretive aims would imply that interpretive practice is varied not because there are many equally legitimate questions an interpreter might have in mind, *each bearing relevance in different interpretive contexts*, but rather due to the fact that most interpreters tend to miss the right goal to follow. This also assumes that, in fact, there is a universal context where only one question should always be of primary interest to everyone. In the next subsection, I show that not only does this view lead to a counterintuitive picture interpretation which excludes, or at least downgrades, many intriguing interpretations, but it is also plainly wrong.

aims as second best: "I regard ludic interpretation […] as potentially an exciting and rewarding exercise in its own right, and a harmless one – as long as it does not displace the primary project of discerning fundamental […] literary meaning" (1992, 242). Due to deeply shared re-productivist assumptions about the determinacy of meaning, the lack of an independent argument for the alleged distinguished status of re-productivism is often seen as justified: in his critique of HI, Gary Iseminger (1996, 321) agrees with Levinson that it is "appropriate" to dismiss "pretty much out of hand" the interpretive play that would allow for a multiplicity of meanings.

If the exclusively privileged status of the given re-productivist aim of interpretation does not hold, then, the first step the productivist can take is broadening the scope of legitimate interpretive aims. This means regarding as equally legitimate not merely all originalist or even all re-productivist aims,[12] but also critical, political, psychoanalytic readings, or any interpretation in the context of an overarching theoretical background (feminism, post-colonialism, Marxism etc.). This move would dispute monism regarding interpretive aims which is enough to undercut even weak productivism. However, the generic re-productivist picture of interpretation which holds that interpretation means having pre-fixed interpretive goals which, in turn, secure the determinacy of meaning should also be disputed. In addition to expanding the list of legitimate interpretive aims, productivism needs to offer positive arguments to challenge the idea of re-productivism that the interpreter *always* needs pre-fixed interpretive aims.

2.3 The Incompleteness of the Literary Work

The re-productivist has already accepted that interpretation requires the projection of preconceptions on the reader's part. However, what the re-productivist subscribed to is merely the trivial claim that a conceptual scheme is needed to access the work, in the sense that one needs a key – the right set of pre-conceptions – to open a treasure chest. Thus, this statement is perfectly compatible not only with the claim that there are always pre-fixed interpretive goals, but also with the moderate re-productivist idea of the work having a pre-fixed meaning which the reader should re-produce.

The productivist, in turn, needs to establish a stronger claim: that the work cannot exist independently of our concepts as an already given self-sufficient object. On this view, the work

[12] Davies, for example, argues that theories which share the assumption of originalism are "central" and of a "special importance" because they are "fundamental to the production and consumption of literature as such" (2006, 223–225). This argument, again, is not made on independent grounds.

is incomplete and thus necessarily needs the reader's contribution to be meaningful, that is, to have any meaning. If this view is true, it is a positive argument for productivism which undercuts the re-productivist claims for the "fundamentality" of the meaning that their respective theory yields because it entails that re-productivists also *produce* or *create* meanings instead of *discovering* it. The re-productivist, of course, could still claim that one can complete the literary work so that it aligns with their conception of meaning. However, the stronger claim that one should *always* complete the work so that it has the same meaning prescribed by a re-productivist theory seems to lose its normative force without the availability of the claim that this interpretive action is a re-production of something pre-existing; what remains are merely *possible* interpretive aims. In other words, the step from claiming that pre-conceptions are necessary for the accessibility of the meaning of the work to establishing that they are needed for the existence thereof is decisive as it endows a much wider range of preconceptions with legitimacy, and, more importantly, undercuts the re-productivist idea of discovering meaning.

2.3.1 Historicity

One way to argue for the incompleteness of the literary work is to show that the meaning of a work can change over the course of history. In emphasizing that both the literary work and the interpreter's necessarily belong to the history, in the sense that the work cannot be separated from subsequent events and the reader necessarily employs in interpretation preconceptions which are contingent upon their particular historico-cultural situatedness, I rely on Gadamer's main insights in his magnum opus *Truth and Method*, (2013) and apply them on the re-productivist theories in question to shed light on the tension between re-productivist commitments. I have already hinted at this problem when discussing the tension between originalist commitments – stating that the meaning of the literary work does not change after its creation – and the effect that the relationalities between the work and subsequent events in the author's biography could have on the meaning of the work (see Chapter 2.2.1). I will address

this tension here in more detail and point out that the historicity thesis is a crucial support for productivism which undercuts all re-productivist theories, not merely those which subscribe to originalism. This is because if one accepts that subsequent, historically emerging objects, concepts and events can have a constitutive effect on the meaning of the work, and that claim that these objects, concepts, or events can sometimes bring about radically new interpretations from new perspectives, then the work's meaning remains indeterminate.

Let me start with the historicity of the medium of literature: language. Both the re-productivist and the productivist would agree that language is in constant change even if there might be some difference in their respective views on what the motivating forces are for semantic change. There is probably no disputing the fact that saying that "I am gay" means something different today to what it had meant in the 19th century. The historicity of language is apparent in the changing of linguistic conventions, word meanings and their connotations. Words also get forgotten, or, on the contrary, become fashionable. They can be embraced and "contaminated" by, for example, political propaganda, or become offensive slurs only to be re-appropriated by the group that had previously been targeted by them (e.g. "queer").

The historicity of language and the abundance of meaning it brings about is precisely the reason why, as I have already shown (Ch. 1.2), the version of AnI which does not subscribe to originalism cannot live up to its re-productivist commitment concerning the determinacy of meaning. If the only determining forces of meaning the reader can appeal to are linguistic conventions, word meanings and connotations and anachronistic readings are regarded as legitimate, then it is hopeless to delineate what belongs to the work's meaning which, in turn, remains indeterminate. Not only does non-originalist AnI not allow for circumscribing a pre-determined meaning to be re-produced (moderate re-productivism), but the pre-fixed goal alone (weak re-productivism) does not seem to be able to serve as a determining force either.

The other re-productive theory surveyed in Chapter 1 which does not subscribe to originalism is strong radical VMT (cf. Ch. 1.4). However, even if the theory, not being constrained by originalistic commitments, allows for "anachronistic" readings, it does provide a strict guideline for interpretation as the view prescribes that the "best" interpretation is that which maximizes the work's aesthetic worth. So, what if the "anachronistic" reading and the one which maximizes value are not reconcilable in a single meaning? For suppose there is a poem which is full of slurs which, at the time of its publication, were not regarded as particularly derogatory but rather humorous. These slurs, in turn, are essential building blocks of the poetic devices employed. In other words, the intricate structure of the work which makes it aesthetically satisfying depends on these slurs. Now, since the publication of the poem, the objectifying and dehumanizing beliefs behind the slurs have been much reflected upon. For the reader whose historical position enables them to interpret the poem with the background knowledge about the assumptions at work behind the slurs, the work's socio-political implications become salient. So much so that it might prevent the reader from deriving aesthetic satisfaction from the poem. As I have already shown (cf. Ch. 2.2.2.), I doubt that the VMT can offer a non-question begging argument as to why the reader should accept and stick with the reading which maximizes the work's aesthetic merits instead of their own.

Suppose that in response to this criticism, the above-described versions of AnI and VMT are taken to subscribe to originalism. It seems that originalism might provide AnI with enough meaning-determining force and the VMT with a further reason to support the value-maximizing reading. If the work's meaning if fixed at the time of its creation, then the proponent of AnI can claim that although the meaning of words changes throughout history, the reader should look at linguistic and semantic conventions of the given period. In a similar manner, the value maximizer might claim that the reason needed to convince the reader to accept the VMT's interpretive aim lies in the theory's commitment to originalism.

Thus, it seems that in the debate around the historicity of the literary work, the real clash point between re-productivist and the productivist is whether originalism as a meaning-determining force holds. If a given re-productivist theory subscribes to originalism, then, as we have seen, it must hold that nothing which happens after the work has been published bears any relevance as to its meaning. It is clear that the meaning of the literary work depends on its position in the tradition and history of literature, of forms and techniques etc. It is less clear why relations lose their relevance as to the meaning of the work when they concern events and objects that have come into being after the work.

Several questions arise. Can subsequent events be separated from the meaning of the context of origin? For instance, can the author's subsequent life be clearly and distinctly separated from the author's actual intention (AcI)/relevant context of origin (HI)? If a writer writes a crime fiction book and commits the exact same crime which was narrated in the novel not long after its publication, then it appears that this act does not leave the meaning of the work unchanged. It is widely assumed that the work's meaning depends on whether the work is taken as an illocutionary or speech act of the actual author or as a representation of an illocutionary act by an implied author (cf. Ch. 1.2). If so, then it seems that the crimes committed would change our understanding of the meaning of the work since the reader may justifiably interpret the work as an illocutionary act of the actual author, rather that of a merely fictional implied author; or, if we allow for degrees, then as being much closer to the former.

This leads to the anti-originalist idea that the identity of the work and thus its meaning is in constant change due to consequent interpretations – which Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics calls the work's "history of effect" (2013, 310–312) – becoming inseparable from it. The idea might seem counter-intuitive at first, but I will show that originalism leads to counterintuitive claims which remain so at second glance as well. The originalist would have to claim that, for instance, Goethe's famous interpretation of *Hamlet* in *Wilhelm Meister's*

Apprenticeship is not a constitutive part of the meaning of the play – supposing that it does not match perfectly with the meaning actually (AcI) or hypothetically (conservative HI) intended. To make matters more precise, let me take examples when new interpretations of the work employ concepts that did not exist at the time of the work's creation. Does a Freudian reading of Hamlet have nothing to do with *the* meaning thereof? Or does an interpretation which sees Denis Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* as an early example of postmodern exploitation of metalepsis not pertain to its "true" meaning? The problem, again, is that the non-contemporary reader cannot simply discard the preconceptions which arise from having read subsequent works of interpretation – it is rather difficult to force oneself, for instance, to forget the basic insights of psychoanalysis. So, are non-contemporary readers always in a disadvantaged interpretive position?

To this, a possible reply on the originalist's part is to claim that our continual re-interpretation of the context and origin and the literary work is but *progress* toward a fixed goal: with hindsight, we are gaining a *better* understanding of the same, unchanging original meaning.[13] It seems that this position falls into the other extreme: it endows the current contemporary reader's interpretation with privileged legitimacy as it is the one that has progressed the farthest to reaching the pre-fixed goal. First, it rests on the strong assumption – which Gadamer would call "naïve historicism" (2013, xxxi, cf. 307) – that present contemporariness always means superior knowledge and a conscious reflection from a vantage point, outside of history, as it were, from where all the interpretive possibilities become available. More importantly, however, the idea of gaining an ever better understanding of the same pre-determined meaning assumes the counter-intuitive idea that *the "original" meaning itself already contained all of*

[13] This view seems to echo the notion of "understanding better than the author" which was a widespread formula from at least the 18th century, in both romantic and historicist hermeneutics. It is already present in Kant (1998, 395–396, B370), in Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenaeum Fragments* (Schlegel 1991, 81 [401]; cf. also Bollnow 1979), and in Schleiermacher (1998, 23). For Dilthey, "understanding better" becomes the foundational method of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and "the ultimate goal of the hermeneutic process" (1972, 244).

its possible readings which arise from the emergence of new entities which bear interpretive relevance to it.[14] Moreover, there is the problem of whether new interpretations are always compatible enough to be viewed as part of a continuous cumulative progress toward a better and better understanding – echoing the above-mentioned issue of subsuming all interpretations under one totality. Again, the idea that there is such an all-encompassing universal perspective seems to be undermined by the fact that even two well-informed and competent contemporary readers, or for that matter, one and the same reader at different times, might arrive at conflicting views about the meaning of the work (see 2.2.1).

The upshot is that it seems that the meaning-constitutive relational properties of the work are not restricted to those which arise from its relations to things before the work's coming into being but also encompass events which happened as well objects and concepts which came into existence, after the creation of the work. If this is true, then the indeterminacy of history (of literature, of concepts, of humankind) entails the indeterminacy of the meaning of the literary work.

2.3.2 Mind the Gap

Now I turn to unpacking the other argument supporting the incompleteness claim: the idea that the literary work has gaps. I borrow this term from Wolfgang Iser (1972) who uses it to describe the experience of reading and the productive role of the reader's imagination in interpretation. In what follows, I will map out the what this metaphor can be taken to mean and then show how a certain conception thereof may yield a positive argument for productivism.

[14] One can, of course, legitimately make sense of the idea of understanding "better", for example, when one reads a book in the context of its "history of effect" and the literary history which followed it – e.g. Tristram Shandy as a proto-postmodern novel – but only insofar as one admits that it is not "better" in the sense of approximating a pre-fixed goal and thus that the meaning of the work can thereby change.

Gaps can be taken as ambiguous parts of the work. This can still mean several things. Ambiguity can be understood as arising solely from the inadequacy of the reader. On this view, the meaning of the work is not, in fact, ambiguous at all. The otherwise determinate meaning of the work merely *seems* ambiguous in its relation to the reader because, for instance, they are not well informed about the author's biography/the context of origin or because they lack the required command or competency of the language. Ambiguity thus taken is, of course, wholly compatible with re-productivism.

Nevertheless, it seems plausible to go one step further and claim that even to competent readers, the literary work has gaps in the sense that it has *inherently* ambiguous parts. A good example is a flash-forward in a story where the work provides no clue as to what happened during the intermediary period. The re-productivist, then, might try to show that this ambiguity *can still be tackled* by careful adherence to the pre-fixed interpretive goal. On this view, gaps are merely "difficult passages" (Schleiermacher 1998, 5[15]) where although the proposed re-productivist determining force (actual intention, linguistic conventions, hypothetical intention/original context, value-maximizing aims/aesthetic interests) might be the weakest, it still fulfills its role of securing determinacy. Call it weak ambiguity. Suppose that the gender of a character who is a fierce boss in the story is not explicitly mentioned in an 18th-century work. What gender should be attributed to the character to achieve the most aesthetically satisfying reading? The originalist commitments of the reader arising from subscribing to certain interpretive goals might drive them to believe it is a man since at the time of the work's publication it was not common for women to occupy such leading roles and manifest such assertive and confident behaviour.

[15] A good example for weak ambiguity is Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. He saw interpretation as the reproduction of an authorially determined meaning but also took seriously the challenge of pervasive ambiguity which the interpreter must tackle by pointing out that a "strict" method of interpretation "assumes that misunderstanding results as a matter of course" (1998, 5, 21–22).

However, I have already shown in the previous chapter (2.3.1) that in light of the historicity thesis, originalism suffers from tensions which lead to it having counteractive implications. And, even if it is supposed, for the sake of argument, that originalism holds, it is possible that a work has indeterminate parts which cannot be disambiguated by appealing to an originalist meaning-determining force. This I will call *moderate* ambiguity. For it might be the case that, based on evidence recognized as valid by the respective re-productivist theories, the actual or hypothesized authorial intentions show that some blank spaces were *intentionally left as such.* Moreover, when in a novel, an important character's past is left in mystery (let alone the fact that "no tale can ever be told in its entirety" [Iser 1972, 284]), or in the case of classic ballads whose characteristic feature is that they are being laden with obscurity, even an "appropriate" or "ideal" reader with originalist commitments is left in limbo as to how to fill these gaps.

Even if the ambiguity of certain parts of the literary work cannot be resolved by appealing to the proposed re-productivist determining forces, there are a few possible replies available to the re-productivist. One is to insist that the work has a "fundamental" determinate part which can be clearly separated from the ambiguous parts, and the determinate parts do place limits on how the gaps could be filled (apparently, this is Iser's notion of a "gap"; cf. 1972, 281). Call this view *conservative* moderate ambiguity. These limits, in turn, secure the determinacy of the meaning of the work because they ensure that the way the gaps are filled is compatible with the "fundamental" meaning of the work. However, just like in the case of the historicity argument, this claim rests on the questionable assumption that all the possible ways of filling these gaps can be determined by the respective re-productivist meaning-determining force.

To avoid this criticism, the re-productivist may admit that their preferred meaning-determining force does not delineate all the possible ways in which gaps can be filed. This can be done by changing their position to the *radical* moderate view of ambiguity conceding that there are indeterminate parts of the work, the meaning of which cannot be constrained by resorting to

either of the meaning-determining forces proposed by re-productivist (hence the *radical* label). Nevertheless, the re-productivist – while conceding that there are some inherently indeterminate parts of the work where the reader not only necessarily but legitimately brings their own pre-conceptions into play – can at the same time point out, again, that the determinacy of the work's "fundamental" meaning remains untouched (hence the *moderate* label). This is because the re-productivist might hold that these ultimately indeterminate gaps are peripheral parts of the otherwise determinate overarching scheme. On this view, filling these gaps is no more than a "playful" or "exciting" (Levinson 1992, 242) exercise which leaves the fundamentals unchanged, and, in turn, the difference between interpretations that might arise out of filling indeterminate gaps in different ways is so minimal that it can be overlooked.

Another way to accept both the radical indeterminacy of certain parts of the work *and* safeguard the determinacy of the meaning of the work is to hold that these issues become important only when the work is being performed on stage, or adapted as a movie; in other words, when the interpreter is forced to fill in gaps with concrete solutions. Accordingly, the problem of gaps concerns those literary genres which are usually performed, not those which are silently read. On this view, when the work of literature is merely silently read, the reader might legitimately skim over the "gappy" parts since they do not endanger the central meaning of the work. This view relies on a distinction, borrowed from the philosophy of music, between "critical" and "performative" interpretation, between trying to figure out what a work means and how to enact it (cf. Levinson 1996; Stecker 79–81). However, this distinction rests on the assumption that one can leave gaps indeterminate without undercutting the determinacy of the literary work. If this is so, then it follows that gaps do not pertain to the work's real/true/essential meaning.

Ultimately, all replies to different versions and formulations of moderate ambiguity lead back to the opposition between fundamental or central meaning and a "second class" meaning and,

in turn, to my criticism with regards to the arbitrariness of, and the lack of independent justification for, these distinctions (see Ch. 2.2.2).

However, at this point two arguments become available for the productivist who wishes to pursue the gap thesis. Besides the problem of the level of ambiguity of the work's indeterminate parts – whether one should conceive of conservative or radical moderate ambiguity – there is the issue of the meaning-constitutive relation between part and the whole as well as the difficulties involved in *locating gaps.*

The re-productivist has already conceded that some parts of the work are indeterminate. They wished to banish these indeterminate parts to the periphery of the meaning of the work, thus safeguarding "central" meaning. However, they should concede that the indeterminate parts *are indeed parts* of the work. At this point, the productivist can appeal to the classic Schleiermacherian formulation of the hermeneutic circle, according to which when interpreting texts, the part is endowed with meaning in relation to the whole and vice versa (1998, 24, 27). If one takes seriously the implications of the hermeneutic circle, then these gaps and the difference in meaning they bring about cannot easily be overlooked. If some parts of the work are indeterminate and these parts are constitutive parts of the meaning of the whole work, then, at least to some extent, the meaning of the work becomes indeterminate.

Furthermore, where the gaps are within a given work can also depend on the reader. This is because pre-conceptions determine the horizon of possibilities as to how the reader can fill in gaps and thus where indeterminacy might be discerned. Not every gap is as self-evident as, for instance, the above-mentioned example of prolepsis: new questions along with new possibilities of filling in gaps arise from different perspectives. For example, since the author cannot approach his own text from every possible perspective and with the variety of pre-conceptions that their readers will, they can easily be unaware of all the gaps in the work. So, since gaps are identified through having different pre-conceptions, one interpreter might point out gaps where

another one did not identify any. Some of these, the productivist must concede, are merely weak ambiguities that can be resolved through re-productivist meaning determining forces. Others, however, can qualify as moderate ambiguities such as the above-mentioned examples where meaning may not be determinable based solely on the proposed re-productivist meaning-determining forces.

At this point, the problem is not merely whether the proposed determining force has an answer to every question that might arise throughout interpretation but whether it covers or addresses every question that might arise during interpretation to begin with. Thus, the argument from the hermeneutic circle gains a new momentum if it supported by the claim that gaps cannot be determinately located in the text. If indeterminate parts are not merely at the periphery of the work but can be pervasive, then it seems even more difficult to deny their meaning-constitutive relationalities to other parts of the work.

Even if the productivist holds that the meaning of the literary work is indeterminate, they can agree that some works are more ambiguous and thus indeterminate than others. For instance, following Umberto Eco's terminology (1989, 4; cf. also Iser's distinction between traditional and modern text: 1972, 285), one might differentiate between a wider and a narrower notion of incompleteness or openness. The former regards openness as an inescapable but lamentable feature of interpretation; the latter – Eco's examples are Valéry, Mallarmé, Kafka, and Joyce – celebrates the abundance of possible interpretations, embracing difference in the readers' responses, instead of trying to minimize it.

However, so as not to end up in re-productivism again, it is important to add that, for reasons discussed earlier, indeterminacy can only partly be the result of the re-productivist meaning-determining forces. Instead, indeterminacy arises from ever-changing contexts and interrelations that are at play between the work and the reader, or a given "interpretive community" (cf. Fish 1980, 14–15) sharing, for instance, the same interpretive strategy, notion

of literature, and literary canon. In other words, the distinction between ambiguous and unambiguous parts of the work is not fixed either. This means that even the seemingly circumscribed ambiguity (the "wider" notion of openness) might change into the narrow sense of openness given a different context with different pre-conceptions.

The upshot is that the gap argument makes a strong case against the determinacy of meaning implied in re-productivist theories because – instead of trying to shed light on how unrealistic or arbitrary the pre-determined meaning or the fixed interpretive aim identified by a given re-productive theory is – it points out that the determining forces embraced by re-productive theories of interpretation are not, in fact, determinate enough. Therefore, readers have no other option than to bring to bear their own preconception on to the literary work.

The historicity argument and the gap argument establish that the literary work is incomplete and thus its meaning is indeterminate. In other words, for the work to have any meaning, the culturally-historically contingent reader needs to complete it. On this view, the projection of one's own pre-conceptions is not reading something "into" the work – it is merely reading.

Concluding Remarks

This thesis argued for the productivist view of literary interpretation which holds that the reader not only necessarily but legitimately brings to bear on to the literary work their own preconceptions.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the four most popular analytic theories of literary interpretation. I shed light on their common assumption that meaning (strong re-productivism) or the interpretive aim (weak re-productivism) is pre-determined. I concluded that even the most pluralistic-leaning versions of each are committed to some form of re-productivism and thus potentially unduly constrain the interpretive role of the reader by limiting the set of pre-conceptions that they can legitimately employ in interpretation.

In Chapter 2, I made the case for the productivist view of literary interpretation holding that the preconceptions which stem from the reader's historico-cultural situatedness are not merely inevitably but also legitimately employed in the interpretation of literary works. First, I showed that even the re-productivist would have to admit that totally escaping one's situatedness is impossible; moreover, the re-productivist would also have to accept that even their own re-productivist theories of interpretation require pre-conceptions from the reader's part, even if they draw a strict line between legitimate and illegitimate ones.

Then I put forth the idea of application as a necessary part of interpretation according to which the reader applies the work's meaning to one's own present situation, asking the question of what the work means to the interpreter. I showed that the intuitive idea of application poses problems for the re-productivist project. If the re-productivist accepts the idea of application, then they face the problem of how to delineate legitimate applications from illegitimate applications. If the re-productivist sticks with the idea that meaning and application are clearly

and distinctly separable, then, as I have shown, they fail to defend the distinction in a non-question begging way. I pointed out that if the meaning-significance distinction does not hold, then basic re-productivist tenets, monism regarding meaning (strong and moderate re-productivism) and interpretive aims (weak re-productivism) lack independent support.

In the last subsection of Chapter 2, I argued for the incompleteness of the literary work. The incompleteness thesis is a positive argument for productivism since if the work does not constitute a self-sufficient whole and has no absolute self-identity, the projection of pre-commitments is not merely necessary but also legitimate to enable one to derive any kind of meaning out of it.

To establish the incompleteness thesis, I appealed to the idea of historicity of the literary work, i.e. the work's properties which arise form its relations to subsequent events in history and literary history are constitutive parts of it. I used a *reductio ad absurdum* argument to show how in certain cases it seems more than plausible that events which happened after the work's coming into being can pertain to its meaning.

The other argument for the incompleteness thesis comes from the fact that the literary work has gaps, i.e. ambiguous or indeterminate parts. I pointed out that even if the re-productivist insist that these gaps do not pertain to the central meaning of the work, they have to accept that gaps are part of the work, and, if the re-productivist accepts the intuitive claim that parts determine the meaning of the whole and vice versa, then the work's meaning is indeterminate and the productivity thesis is established. Finally, I argued that gaps cannot be clearly located thereby giving a final thrust to the idea of the pervasiveness of ambiguity.

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I started this thesis with an epigraph by the famous Hungarian writer Péter Esterházy. The quotation contains two important ideas. “The reader is right per definition” because, as I have shown, the meaning of the literary work is not pre-determined but arises through a reading of work whereby the reader brings to bear on the work their own pre-conceptions. However, the latter half of the sentence “even when they are not” is just as important as it concedes that not every interpretation is legitimate. Just because one legitimately brings into play their preconceptions, it does not necessarily follow that their interpretation is also legitimate. The paradox, of course, arises from the equivocal usage of the term “legitimate”, or, in the original, of being “right”, which, as I take it, symbolizes the difficulty in clearly separating legitimacy from illegitimacy.

However difficult the task of separating the wheat from the chaff may be, the re-productivist worry that if one allows the reader a constitutive role in the production of meaning, then interpretation ends up being “anything goes” relativism is, I believe, unjustified. The productivist would also agree that there is a difference between legitimate pre-conceptions and blind or irrational prejudices. However, productivism not only is more flexible with the differentiating between the two, but, more importantly, is always *open* to re-interpreting the boundaries.

Moreover, although on the productivist view, a literary work may be exposed to flux of history and have gaps and ruptures, it does not mean that the work is empty. The pluralistic picture of interpretation implied in productivism claims that there is no such thing as fundamental meaning, that many interpretive aims are legitimate, but it does not have to go all the way to assert that there is nothing to cling onto. Besides the reader’s own preconceptions, there are the meaning-determining forces that re-productivist rightly identified, or even further ones – more political or subversive ones – regarded as legitimate by productivism. It is ultimately up to the reader’s – sometimes more, sometimes less conscious – decision which one to appeal to.

Finally, the incompleteness thesis and the moderate pluralism it entails might, at least from a re-productivist's perspective, carry the risk of merely perpetuating one's assumptions by conceiving of the literary work as showing to everyone what they already believe or what they want to see. However, the re-productivist quest of separating legitimate and illegitimate readings is, in fact, best carried out by the productivism. If literature is, *to some extent*, a mirror which reveals our pre-conceptions for us, then this might help us re-evaluate our assumptions and lead to self-knowledge even if one can never become wholly conscious of all their assumptions. If, in the spirit of Gadamerian conception of hermeneutics, the openness of the work is accompanied by openness on the reader's part, then the shareability of meaning, one of the main motivating forces behind the re-productivist picture, is not only not jeopardized by productivism but, rather, it is precisely what enables it. This, however, is the subject of another paper.

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