

# LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION REVISITED

## A sceptical view on textual interpretation: Targeting Charles Williams's *The Greater Trumps*

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**[This is a draft version for the Internet, and may differ from the published article.]**

### 1 The source of meaning of a literary text

The continuous struggle between competing interpretations of a text is a common phenomenon to every reader of literature. Likewise, the continuous debate between competitive models of interpretative grounding is a common phenomenon to every literary scholar. The origin of both problems is the same: the reader of a text does not have direct access to its meaning—instead, the meaning can only be reached *through* the (signs of the) text. Moreover, whatever interpretative conclusions the reader reaches, there is no *objective* evidence to securely justify them. The validity of a given interpretation always remains debatable.

Various privileged sources for the meaning have been proposed. A common method is to rely on the (generalised) participants of the literary communication. The *author* is perhaps the most obvious source for the text's meaning. In everyday conversation we expect texts to have a specific "voice", i.e., every meaningful utterance to originate in a specific individual who *intends* to relay us that message. The message can have—and in everyday conversation often does have—directly realisable consequences for us. For example, if someone says "Open the window" to us, the opening of the window (or a reply that windows cannot be opened, etc.) validates our interpretation instantly and naturally. In Peirce's semiotic terms, the *ultimate*—and in this case is probably also *final*—interpretant is an *energetic* one: the interpretation does not remain "inside", it turns into public action.

Thus we normally tend to bypass the difficulties in the message-relaying

process. For instance, we tend to ignore that even if we most often concentrate rather on the meaning than the form of the utterance, we cannot *directly receive* the meaning. Meanings have to be parcelled in a physical body. After encountering such a body, we must first *interpret* it in order to reach the meaning it was intended to convey. The first step in any interpretation is thus interpreting the message, or *sign*, as a sign of something else. Even this primary interpretative step can fail, and in literary communication in particular, failings are probably much more common than in everyday life.

Hence, the author cannot be held to be the origin of the communication in the true sense of the word. The voice of the author, as far as our interpretations are concerned, is part of the meaning of the text—not outside it. The familiarity we share with most senders in everyday conversation just makes us underestimate the fact. In literary communication there might be a considerable spatiotemporal gap between the sender and the receivers. Further, everyday conversation should not probably even be thought of as the basic case of communication. Communication is a *social* activity in a very fundamental sense. It does not consist of pre-semiotic monads “crying out loud” their individual voices to anyone who might hear; it is more true to picture the voice, the message, to originate in the dyadic relationship between the addresser and the addressee. Therefore the intentions of the sender outside the literary communication do not hold any particular value for the message. What really counts is the linking between the sender, the message, and the receiver, each of these originating in the (and as the) process of communication.

Having dismissed the author, the next milestone in literary epistemology is the *reader*. Firstly, the same objections arise as in the case of the author: the reader should not be detached from the process literary communication. What constitutes the reader of a given text is the *reading*, the act of semiosis. Secondly, the real-world readers constitute a mixed lot: one can never be sure what conclusions they reach when reading a text and how do they reach them. No two readers are quite “alike”. They have different personal histories, different situations in which they read, different motives for reading; and in contrast to the author, nothing of this is inscribed in the text. The reader encounters the text, and doing so, *recontextualises* it, but the author is already part of the original context (“original” in the interpreted sense). The recipient of the communicative process is thus an even more problematic source than the author. Theories do exist which stress the reader’s expectations and the satisfying of them as the “ground” of the interpretation, but they can only be a partial solution to the problem.

But there are *three* participants in the communicative act, not two: besides the author and the reader, there is the text, the literary work of art. Interpretations “sanctioned by the text” seem to give us the last straw of hope. However, “textual evidence” is by no means an easy way out. More often than not scholars who refer to it wilfully forget how difficult it is to follow even the most obvious textual clues. In the following, I am trying to present the magnitude, if not the exact measure, of the problems using a couple of simplistic examples.

## 2 The semiotic-communicative viewpoint on literature

One of the most influential among the scholars to reject both the author and the reader as prejudiced source for textual interpretation has been the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco. My main concern here is not the *fact* of his stance but his *justification* of it. His whole theoretical stance is strongly semiotic, but semiotics, in the form it acquired by the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce, is strongly *against* the idea of read-off textual meanings. Thus I think it only fair to re-examine Eco’s claims against the background of a general semiotic theory.

Although Peirce formulated semiotics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it took a long while for the scientific community to catch on his thinking. First there was a time when scientific study of signs was just a few people’s dream; then, following the breakthrough of structuralism into the study of the arts after the Second World War, the new science was initially formulated according to the then-prevalent structuralist principles—that is, more as Saussure’s “sémiologie” than as Peirce’s “semeiotics”. Eco has been one of those scholars who have truly made more than their part in enhancing the knowledge of Peirce’s more original thinking in the wide field of semiotic disciplines; thus it is an even greater pity when he ends up in a theory on literary interpretation that clearly falls short of “Peircean standards”. Where Peirce stresses the *possible* interpretability of signs and clearly denounces the deterministic reading-out of inevitable meanings, Eco seeks for an interpretative certainty that is much more in debt to the structuralist legacy, the Saussurean double-sided sign, than to Peirce’s irreducibly dynamic conception of the sign interpretation or *semiosis*. In consequence, Eco’s conception of “text” is in internal conflict with his semiotic theoretical notions.

For example, the fundamental claim in Eco’s *The Role of the Reader* (1979) is that there are literary works whose interpretation is not free but “cooperatively generated by the addressee” (op. cit., 3). These works he calls “open texts”. From

what follows from his analysis of them, it can be deduced that the distinction between open texts and their opposite, the “closed” texts, is by and large reducible to the more classic—and basic—dichotomy in literary scholarship, namely the distinction between literary works of art and popular texts. The very name ‘open’ he has chosen to describe the “cooperatively interpreted texts” reflects this fact with its positive connotations; otherwise it would be hard to understand why he insists on calling “open” those very texts whose interpretation(s) he claims to form a textual enclosure. The distinction between open and closed texts means basically that some works, namely the literary works of art that have been, historically, of main interest to literary studies, could not be taken into account when the most radical conclusions are drawn from the general semiotic notion of *unlimited semiosis*. Actually Eco is here confusing the real interpretability of the sign to the *validity* of a given interpretation, which is quite a distinct matter.

A decade later, in *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), Eco seems to be widening the notion of openness to *all* messages—even though I doubt he really means to discard the dichotomy of open and closed texts, a distinction that now becomes more openly evaluative. In effect, Eco wants to restrain the interpretational freedom of the reader, or in more general terms, of the addressee of the message. This “interpretability constraint” is ultimately accomplished, or justified, through the age-old notion of *literal meaning*—the meaning or sense inherent in the signs; this is, in principle, also the *signifié* or “signified” part of the Saussurean sign. Eco seems, admittedly, quite aware of the problems presented by the (supposed) possibility of privileged textual interpretations. It would imply a simplistic model of interpretation where the addressee merely “reads out” the embedded *signifiés* from the linguistic and literary *signifiants* given, combines them, and from the simple, more or less sentence-length propositions the textual meaning or “macroproposition” is cumulated. Because of the nature of the Saussurean sign, this process is in effect automatic—or to be blunt, “magical”.

The kind of model of communication sketched (or caricatured) above poses extreme problems to the theory of semiotics. First of all, we have the implied Saussurean model of sign, where the *signifiés*—the senses, or meanings, of the material sign—are inseparably connected via a common code to their *signifiants*. Communication between the addresser (author) and the addressee (reader) would necessitate sharing the same code, and having the same code would not only ensure but in fact *determine* the inevitable outcome—a valid and true interpretation of the message. Given simple enough messages, like the artificial sentences that abound in linguistics, this may seem a reasonable position, but I

think no literary scholar would call any literary work “simple enough” as a text. In fact, Eco himself is famous for metaphorically comparing the task of the interpreter to that of a detective (eg. Eco 1983)! But if the signs are *bound to* open up to the addressee—somehow, by their nature *forced to* be interpreted in a predetermined way—where would we need a detective? Not even to find the “clues” or signs of the message, i. e., the material parts, *signifiants*, since these *have to* be public—open to anyone.

Eco is thus forced to break up the notion of code in parts. In his view, the code of a literary work is actually comprised of a multitude of codes and subcodes (Eco 1976, 142; Eco 1979, 6). The addressees can open up differing subsets of these, and thus, although never violating the more general “shared code condition”, still fall short of the final interpretation of the text. While this might seem a viable solution *methodologically*, it only succeeds in pushing the *theoretical* problems farther away. The very notion of ‘code’ in itself is extremely problematic: if communication is viewed as the coding of mental ideas to linguistic or literary signs and the subsequent *decoding* of these signs to corresponding mental ideas, we have to face the question of *how* the code can be shared between the addresser and the addressee in the first place—given it is not innate? It certainly cannot be transmitted in whole in the same channel as the messages it is used to code with.

Further, Eco’s communicative model clearly requires a reader but he is not prepared to break up the hermetic enclosure of (the structuralist model of) the text. Thus, he needs to enclose the reader *inside* the text: hence his famous concept of the “model reader”. Instead of a real human agent, we have a diluted textual strategy with no connections to the outside reality. Fortunately for the critic, Eco is quite frank about this:

To postulate the cooperation of the reader does not mean to pollute the structural analysis with extratextual elements. The reader as an active principal of interpretation is a part of the picture of the generative process of the text. (Eco 1979, 4.)

I must say that although I admit having focused only on Eco, and only on his works that are more than a decade old by now, it seems that literary semiotics is only beginning to integrate the very basic thoughts of Peirce to its methodology.

What I intend to do next is to give pieces of an essentially simple, even simplistic text-level analysis of a novel by Charles Williams, in the course of which I will try to show how the intratextual interpretation, even if it is allowed to *contain* the linguistic code, will turn out inadequate and lead us back to the extratextual

references—thus breaking up the hermetic enclosure of the structuralist thinking. I think literary studies require actual real-world readers making real-time decisions based on their actual experiences and “encyclopedic” knowledge; it cannot suffice to supplant the reader with some abstracted “textual strategies” in a meta-theoretical vacuum with no outlet.

### 3 Charles Williams and *The Greater Trumps*

Charles Williams is in many ways an ideal subject for testing out the limits of *textual* interpretation. Although his works of course have affinities to works of other writers of the same period and cultural sphere—and ultimately of other periods and cultures too—they nevertheless possess an individual character that sets them apart from the more mundane literary fiction and hence, present the reader with interpretational difficulties. Now, in Eco’s thinking, the text itself not only contains its own “correct” (or valid) interpretation—which derives ultimately from the Saussurean notion of double-sided sign—but the text also “builds up” a model reader that is capable of receiving that interpretation. What I am now challenging is the more or less implied idea that the model reader is *in* the text (or text-as-sign).

One might choose any one of Williams’s novels to illustrate the point. I picked *The Greater Trumps* (hence *GT*; 1932) which can justly be called a religious novel “filled with suspense, mystery, and supernatural conflict” as the back cover of the 1993 printing of the novel advertises. On the surface, *GT* is a story about a Tarot card pack with mystical powers. The pack was inherited by a man called Lothair Coningsby from a friend of his, and it is coveted by Coningsby’s future son-in-law, Henry Lee. The rest of the personae consist of Mr. Coningsby’s old-maid sister Sybil, his daughter (Henry’s fiancée) Nancy and son Ralph, Henry’s father Aaron, Aaron’s mad sister Joanna and Joanna’s protegee/protector, the slow-minded Stephen. Settings are sparse: Mr. Coningsby’s house and Aaron Lee’s house, where the Coningsbys spend their Christmas time for the first time during the events of the novel; only briefly are we shown outside settings near Aaron Lee’s house.

The essential elements of the deceptively simple story are brought before in the first couple of pages of the very first chapter of the novel, “The Legacy”: the Tarot pack, Mr. Coningsby’s family and their respective characters and relations to each other, their roles in the upcoming events. Next we are introduced with Henry Lee,

Nancy's fiancée, to whom the cards are shown because he is known to be interested in them—actually, there are several packs of cards, but the pivotal Tarot pack is described in a way that leaves the reader no doubt about its centrality. In the second chapter, “The Hermit”, we are introduced with Henry's father Aaron—who is the “Hermit” of the chapter's title—and shown also a brief glimpse of Joanna and Stephen. In the two initial chapters, then, we have most of the pieces on the board and everything is thus ready for the events to start moving.

The central tension is aroused between the Lees and Mr. Coningsby. The Lees, who are of Gipsy origin, desire to own the Tarot pack because of its mystical and potentially formidable powers but Mr. Coningsby is both unwilling and—because of the legacy's stipulations—unable to sell it to them. In order to be able to persuade Coningsby to sell, the Lees decide to invite the Coningsbys to Aaron's house for the Christmas. The rest of the story is located in Aaron Lee's country house where mystical things begin to happen.

Beneath the simple mystery story surface, *GT* tells a religious and mystical story that is located somewhere on the hazy borderline between the natural and supernatural worlds. Despite the overt references to supernatural conflict—which the writer of the back cover text has noticed and is willing to emphasise to the readers—, we ultimately find ourselves in a world where all conflicts, supernatural or otherwise, are resolved, or not only resolved but “phased out” as we are forced to find that no true evil even exists in it. To those who know something about Williams from his other novels, this a very familiar picture; but is this knowledge a *part* of the textual world or something outside it—even if necessary for a fuller understanding of the events and their significance? Despite Eco's insistence on the “rights” of the texts, I tend to lean on the latter solution.

#### **4 The evidential dilemma**

The essential question is, how do we, as readers, know what we know? How do we reach our conclusions, and how can we tell whether or not they are valid?

According to Eco, it seems that all the inherent elements in our interpretational solution reside *inside* the text—are textualised as it were—and the purpose of the reader is simply to follow the signs to their inevitable outcomes. I agree with Eco when it comes to the point of interpretation being sign-based; but signs *cannot* tell us anything apart their interpretants, and the interpretants are *not* part of the signs themselves. It follows that the reader cannot be reduced to a (intra)textual

strategy because all the clues, all the final referents of the textual signs, lead to the extratextual world. And since the extratextual world is not stable but constantly changing—just as are the readers—we can never be sure what are the specific conclusions arrived at. This leaves much room for the reader’s freedom. Yet, I am quite sure this doesn’t mean that the freedom is absolute, that it *should* be utilised to the maximum. just have to differentiate between the (real) reader’s possibilities and her *responsibilities* towards the text. The *validity* of the interpretation cannot be textualised either.

Now let us try and measure Eco’s “textual position”. If we accept the text as not only the primary but the sole source of our interpretational deductions, we have to weigh the different “voices” within it. This is by no means an easy accomplishment in itself, and I am not trying to argue that what follows is an exhausting discussion. I am mainly trying to point out some of the specific points of departure in the text where interpretative choices *have to* be met by the reader.

Of the different personae, Aunt Sybil is closest to the (implied) author’s voice. This is attested in many ways. Firstly, Sybil is the only person who, or whose opinions, are not described negatively in any occasion. She is both allowed to comment the actions of others and to anticipate their future actions. We also see much farther in her thoughts and her inner silent dialogues than in those of any other’s. Lastly, in spite of the sometimes menacing events, Sybil is the one character that never loses her calm and is allowed to soothe down the others. The last point is attested most strongly when Henry uses the Tarot cards to raise the snow storm to kill his would-be father-in-law, Mr. Coningsby, in the hope that he would thus, eventually, get hold of the cards. Nancy prevents him from finishing the act, but in doing so, she also causes some of the cards—the origin of the mystical powers—to be caught by the wind, which renders Henry unable to hold the storm. Henry becomes sure this leads to the end of the world: the power of the Tarots is now let loose and is without a controller. After all, the very same pack is described as having been used to sunk the Spanish armada (*GT*, 45)! But then we find Sybil soothing down Nancy:

[Sybil to Nancy:] “You couldn’t do anything at all unless you were let, could you? And if you were let stop it, then stopping it was the most perfect thing that could happen. [...]”

[...]

“[...] Do you suppose that storm can ever touch the Fool?” (*GT*, 138–9.)

As can be seen, there is a separate, governing level of action—or rather,

“inaction”—that only Sybil sees. On that level, everything that happens is bound to a common, all-embracing reason, and nothing can happen outside of that reason. This gives us an important (textual) clue about the text-internal world structure but does not specify it further; we might make learned guesses *knowing the author* and when and where he wrote, but in that case, the evidence is not textual any more. As a side effect, Sybil’s rhetorical strength during the cataclysmic events persuades us to rely on her judgement, and brings her closer to the author’s (absent) voice.

In addition, the previous citation introduced us with one of the Greater Trumps, the Fool. This is one of the situations where it does not seem to matter whether we know that the Tarot cards of the novel are a thing apart from the Tarot cards of extratextual reality; everything the reader needs to know can be gathered from the text of the novel itself. It does not even seem to matter whether we know of the *existence* of Tarots outside the novel; the following excerpt in the beginning of the novel seems to give us all the information we may need:

[Mr. Coningsby, citing his late friend’s description of the Tarot cards:] “ ‘Very early pack of Tarot cards. [...] The four suits are, as, usual, sceptres, swords, cups, and coins; the Greater Trumps are in the following order (numbered at the foot in Roman): (i) The Juggler, (ii) The Empress, (iii) The High Priestess, or Woman Pope——’ ”

[...]

“ ‘(iv) The Pope—or Hierophant, (v) The Emperor—or Ruler, (vi) The Chariot, (vii) The Lovers, (viii) The Hermit, (ix) Temperance, (x) Fortitude, (xi) Justice, (xii) The Wheel of Fortune, (xiii) The Hanged Man.’ ” (GT, 16.)

But the information given is sufficient only in the first approximation. In a closer look, the situation changes. We still have to know about playing cards *in general* if not about the Tarots in particular; or at least any knowledge about playing cards—which is necessarily gathered in and from the extratextual world—would make following the story not only easier, the textual motives less eccentric, but make it *possible*.

The main thing to know about the Tarot cards is not just the total number of cards in a pack, or the symbols of the four suits (the very concept of which would mean nothing to someone totally unfamiliar with playing cards in general), or the number of cards in each suit. The essential point is in stressing the *difference* between ordinary playing cards and the Tarots. To use a simplistic example, while the ordinary, or modern, pack of cards have four suits with thirteen cards each, the

Tarot pack has four suits<sup>1</sup> with *fourteen* cards each *plus* the ‘greater trumps’ listed in the above quotation. Even though it does not matter whether there are Tarot packs in the extratextual world, we still have to know a lot *before* the text can carry us further.

Actually, we should also note the ellipsis in the previous citation because it contains a rather interest reference in its own rights too. As Mr. Coningsby names the third trump card (“The High Priestess, or Woman Pope”), his daughter suddenly interrupts:

“The what?” Nancy exclaimed. “What! Pope Joan? [...]” (*GT*, 16.)

Does this interruption serve to remind us of the famous legend of the female pope<sup>2</sup>, or is it there just to introduce us a female pope in the intratextual world? I would say it does not really matter. Whether or not there is a woman pope in either world has very little to do with the Tarots, the characters, or the plot. Still, to appreciate the force of the interruption, we have to realise the extratextual concept of “pope” together with its all-male attributes. The Woman Pope card (whether of this particular pack or of any given pack) thus creates a tension between the Tarots and our knowledge of Catholicism, or Christianity in general. This is a minor point, admittedly, but telling.

However, as the point of the female pope is not carried further in the text and is not given much interpretative weight even where it comes up, we could just as well omit the *subject* of the interruption altogether and focus on the *form* of it—namely, that it is *Nancy* who interrupts her father, and in a short-sentenced, excitable manner at that. It may not really tell us anything about the cards, or the tale, or the textual world, but it does tell something *about Nancy* that we have to consider later on. Here is thus a genuine instance of a textual clue.

The intratextual nature of the Tarots is enhanced with the introduction of the Tarot figurines:

The top [of the table] was hidden, for it was covered by a plate of what looked like gold, marked very intricately with a pattern, or perhaps with two patterns, one of squares, and one of circles, so that they eyes, as with a chessboard, saw now one and now the other as predominant. Upon that plate of gold were a

<sup>1</sup> The suits differ, too, but marginally. The Tarots do not follow the dominant French scheme (with spades, clubs, diamonds, and hearts) but the Spanish-Italian or ‘Latin’ one (with sceptres, swords, cups, and coins). For further, see [http://www.wopc.co.uk/history/page\\_6.html](http://www.wopc.co.uk/history/page_6.html).

<sup>2</sup> See further: <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~pardos/PopeJoanHome.html>. This web document also refers to pope Joan’s appearing in the Tarots.

number of little figures, each about three inches high, also of gold, it seemed, very wonderfully wrought; so that the likeness to the chess-board was even more pronounced, for to any hasty spectator [...] the figures might have seemed like those in a game; only there were many of them, and they were all in movement. Gently and continuously they went, immingling, unresting—as if to some complicated measure, and as if their own volition. There must have been nearly a hundred of them, and from the golden plate upon which they went came a slight sound of music—more like an echo than a sound—sometimes quickening, sometimes slowing, to which the golden figures kept a duteous rhythm, or perhaps the faint sound itself was but their harmonized movement upon their field. (*GT*, 28.)

The figurines exist—at least as far as I know—only in the textual reality of *GT*; and *even if they were not*, the consequences for the literary, as apart from the possible mystical, or religious, interpretations would be marginal. To recapitulate: given the linguistic code, the text can most positively build upon itself; but there are always gaps that need to be filled in the extratextual world, the world of the real-world reader.

To illustrate the tension between the intratextual and extratextual world, consider the problem of Joanna. When she is briefly introduced to us in the second chapter, we are almost instantly told that she is “mad”:

[Henry:] “[...] By the way, do you ever see anything of Joanna?”

“I haven't seen her for months,” the old man [Aaron] answered, with a slight shudder. “She came here in the summer—I told you.”

“I know you did,” Henry said. “Is she still as mad as ever? Is she still crying out on the names of the old dead gods?” (*GT*, 32–3)

Even so, her madness does not prevent from the Lees having some kind of respect towards her:

“What could an old woman and an idiot boy do?” Henry asked.

“Call them an insane prophetess and a young obedient Samson,” Aaron answered. “I dream of her sometimes as if she belonged to *them*. If she thought the body of her child was found and formed and vivified...and if she knew of the cards, she might...A mad hierophant...a hieratic hate...” (*GT*, 33)

Thus, we find out that *the Lees* (or at least, Aaron) picture Joanna as a possibly powerful and certainly a dangerous person. Next we are told Joanna claims to be an Egyptian god Isis. If we accept Eco's theory, the textual signs have extratextual “literal” values that do not change and the surplus value they may have is

determined intratextually. So, each name that is not only a part of the intratextual world but belongs, if only in part, to some larger frame(s) in the extratextual reality, calling up that frame (or those frames) as part of the model reader's interpretation of the text. True, the frame of Egyptian mythology recurs in the text:

[Aaron:] “[...] [Joanna's] child was a seven-months' child, and it died. [...] But Joanna, when she heard that the child was dead, screamed once and her face changed, and the Tarot cards that she sought (as we have all done), and the myth of gods that she studied, and the child that should have been a lord of power and was instead a five-hours-old body of death—these tangled themselves in her brain for ever; and for fifty years she has sought the thing that she calls Osiris because it dies and Horus because it lives and at night little sweet names which only Stephen hears. [...]” (*GT*, 34)

[Joanna:] “[...] Who am I?”

[Stephen] answered in a voice entirely devoid of meaning, “A goddess are you.”

“What's the name of the goddess?” she shripped.

“Isis the Wanderer,” he said mechanically.

“What does Isis the Wanderer seek?”

“The flesh and the bones and the heart of the dead,” he answered [...]. (*GT*, 61.)

But Aaron, our informant in the first citation, is not pictured to the reader as an unerring witness: we do not have to follow his judgement. And whether or not we do, even he does not believe Joanna would truly *be* an Egyptian goddess—it is just that she herself believes she is. The conclusion is obvious: in addition to being mentally unstable, Joanna is clearly delusional. This conclusion is plausible enough given the extratextual prejudices of the reader who most probably (but not for certain!) thinks that Egyptian gods do not exist and have never really existed; *ergo* Joanna cannot be an Egyptian god whatever her claims. At this point, we do not find any tension between the extratextual prejudices and the explicitly given opinions of the characters in the text. All the voices lead us to a view where the internal and the external worldviews fuse.

But that picture is to change drastically shortly after. If we acknowledge Aunt Sybil to be a reliable witness, a voice closest to the inferred (model) author's voice, as elaborated above, we must also acknowledge Joanna—even though she is admittedly a “hag”, an “insane thing”, a “madwoman”—a larger-than-life status because we find *Sybil* confirming it. While Joanna's epithets remain the same in the text throughout, with no sign of any increasing positive affection, belief, or

even closeness, we have the following revelation:

“Aren’t you a stranger and a Christian rat?” the hag [Joanna] said. “How do you know the goddess when you meet her in Egypt?”

“Out of Egypt have I called my son,” Sybil said. “Could you search for the god and not belong to his house?”

“Worship me then, worship me!” the insane thing cried out. “Worship the divine Isis!”

“Ah, but I’ve sworn only to worship the god,” Sybil answered gently. (*GT*, 62.)

Now we *do* have a tension between differing views. First the text lulled us to accept our prejudices about Joanna unquestioningly while simultaneously enforcing us to accept Sybil as the author’s intratextual voice; then we are, all of a sudden, brought in the middle of a conflict in which we have to choose either Sybil’s or the others’ viewpoint on the question.

The decision we make has inevitable consequences on our textual interpretations, of course, but my real point is that the tension cannot be seen on the textual level *alone*. Its interpretative value, its real significance comes from the links *between* the intratextual and the extratextual realities. The text alone does not suffice, it simply cannot give us enough. Furthermore, the readers who stumbles in the middle of this conflict is not a mere textual strategy: even though they can be abstracted out of the actual reading situations (as in this discussion), they cannot be taken out of time and place *in toto*. We have to consider the context—the real, *extratextual* context—that extends beyond the limits of the linguistic signs of the novel.

Even the simplest, the most textualised elements in the literary work have repercussions in the outer world. Let us again examine the case of the Tarot cards, the overt theme of the novel. In the first part of the novel, when we are already given the first descriptions of the Tarot cards (and also of the Tarot figurines, although the Coningsbys have not yet seen them), we encounter Nancy trying to find out more about them in an encyclopedia. This is just the thing we might do ourselves, or would have done in an age before the Internet, in any case—and actually, it was the first thing I did myself when beginning this essay. We are not given the name of Nancy’s encyclopedia, and neither are we given the actual description of the Tarots in it. What we have is the bare statement:

[Nancy] had, in fact, examined the cards by herself, and re-read the entry in the catalogue, and looked up “Tarot” in the encyclopædia without being much

more advanced. (*GT*, 42.)

Should not we, then, as readers—as real, live, actual readers, not as abstract fabrications of textual strategies embedded in the pages of the novel—take this as a warning against the belief that any dictionary or encyclopedia could give us the relevant meaning of the “Tarot” in this case? Unfortunately, differing interpretations exist and can reasonably be defended. We have already been shown Nancy in her actions as well as in her mind, and thus we should know by now she is a far cry from an unerring Sherlock Holmes of detective fiction. She has hardly been presented to us as a model reader, or a model anything. Note that we are not actually told that the encyclopedia *did not contain* the required information: we are merely told Nancy did not feel enlightened by it. It is not the text in itself, nor the inferences we may draw from it, but the interplay between the text, our knowledge of it, and our knowledge of the world outside the text, that is the ultimate source of any interpretation.

In any case, whether or not we believe in the Tarots in general, we must be able to appreciate the uniqueness of the described pack. If Henry is taken, for the moment, to be a reliable witness—or at least a credible one—, his description leaves us no doubt about this:

[Henry:] “Now these cards are the root and origin of all cards, and no one knows where they came, for the tale is that they were first heard of among the gipsies in Spain in the thirteenth century. Some say they are older, and some even talk of Egypt, but that matters very little. It isn’t the time behind them, but the process in them, that’s important. There are many packs of Tarot cards, but the one original pack, which is this, has a secret behind it that I will show you on Christmas Eve. Because of that secret this pack, and this only, is a pack of great might.” (*GT*, 44.)

My last example will be the Fool, one of the great trumps. Although never expressed openly, we are given a hint of the connection between Aunt Sybil and this particular Tarot character:

[Henry:] “But you’re very difficult to know, aren’t you? You never seem to move.”

“Simeon Stylites?” she [aunt Sybil] asked. “Do I crouch on a tall pillar in the sky? What an inhuman picture!” (*GT*, 53.)

The dialogue reminds us of another unmoving figure already encountered—in the table of the Tarot figurines:

[...] [Aaron] pointed to the fool in the middle of the field.

It was still: it alone in the middle of all that curious dance did not move, though it stood as if poised for running; [...] (*GT*, 30.)

Thus, it comes as no great surprise when Aunt Sybil turns out to hold a special connection to the Fool: that is, she alone can see the Fool move.

“You’ll all think me frightfully silly, but I can’t see any figure in the middle.”

“Really, Sybil!” her brother said. “There!”

“But my dear, it isn’t there,” she said. “At least, so far as I can possibly see.”

[...]

She surveyed the table carefully. “Yes,” she said at last, “there—no, there—no—it’s moving so quickly I can hardly see it—there—ah, it’s gone again. Surely that’s it, dancing with the rest; it seems as if it were always arranging itself in some place which was empty for it.” (*GT*, 74.)

The Fool is quite clearly given a intratextual reference: we do not need to know anything about it in any other real or fictional Tarot pack. The connection between it and Sybil is also textual; and so on. But when asymptotically approaching the meaning of the text, the “message” in the older usage of the word, we are always ultimately driven out of the text which cannot hold the *dialogue* between the participants of the communication. We will also have to acknowledge that differing “final senses” are tenable, given differing contexts as the text can never include its context—at best, it can hint at it.

## 5 Conclusion: crossing the boundaries of the textual world

I have only scratched the surface of my subject. There is more to unravel in both Eco’s theory and in Williams’s novel. Nevertheless I hope that the few examples I have given succeed in sketching an outline, at least, of the inherent problems in theories based on intratextual (or “text-only”) interpretation alone. Communication should be seen as a process, not as an atemporal state. In fact, the main problem in most Western philosophy—and in consequence, in scientific thought—has always been the incomprehensible need to abstract time out of the picture. Without time, all that remains are abstract context-less entities; and without context, the text will have to suffice. The author, the readers, and the text are not the only possible sources for the meaning: there is and always will be the context, without which the text does not even possess its “text-ness”, or meaningfulness.

From what has been said it should be evident that firstly, I reject theories of literary meaning that have their basis on the author: the intentions of the writer do not have any special value for the communicative action. As this is the usual position of current academic practice, it could perhaps have been passed by in a footnote, but I wanted to stress my reasons for adopting this stance. Furthermore, the very same reasons are used—secondly—when rejecting theories where the basis of meaning lies on the reader. As I pointed out, writers and readers do not exist outside the literary communication *in the sense they should* if the relevant theories were to prevail. They might exist, and usually do exist, in the outside world as human individuals, but without the connection between them, the text, and the context, they don't participate in the semiotic-communicative process. The very word “participant” should reveal this.

Further, I reject Eco's view where the “rights” of the text are unduly emphasised. The author and the reader at least have some kind of existence outside communication, the text does not. After all, pieces of paper with traces of ink on them do not constitute a “text”—they merely *carry* the text. Likewise, neither air molecules nor the movement of the air molecules constitute “language”, even though air molecules can carry linguistic messages. What is called a “text” is in fact our *n*-th level interpretation of a physical event. It cannot *originate* a meaning because it is in itself a “meaning”, an interpretation *of* something *as* something else. There might even be differing interpretations of what *is* the text to be interpreted in the first place. We, as readers, can not even approach a message without the non-message, the “outside” of the message which is the context and the clue to the message and its meaning. This may seem like a trivial point, but I have found it necessary, even inevitable, to trace back my steps to the very basics of semiotic understanding in order to be able to advance to a more coherent notion of (“textual”) interpretation at all.

The basic problem in Eco's thinking lies in his absolute reliance on the linguistic code. It is a common error in current linguistic thinking in general. Most linguists and most linguistic theories assume, that given a specific *état de langue*, a “state of language”, the connections between signifiers and signifieds are *in principle* well-formed and stable. There is of course variation, and, further, the inevitable fact of linguistic change, but this is something “extra”, something to be explained separately after the basic system is—and is described as—established and functioning. Eco formulates this quite clearly:

I keep thinking that, within the boundaries of a given language, there is a literal

meaning of lexical items and that it is the one listed first by dictionaries as well as the one that Everyman would first define when requested to say what a given word means. [...] Any act of freedom on the part of the reader can come *after*, not *before*, the acceptance of that constraint. (Eco 1990, 5–6; emphasis in the original.)

This is what leads him to the notion of “the rights of the text” as separated from those of the participants of the literary communication. The text has a “right” to be interpreted as it was intended—not just by its author but by the act of communication in which and for which it was made.

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