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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Ambiguity in Literature:
Recovering the Life of Reading**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of
English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Eden Unger Bowditch

Under the supervision of
Dr. William Melaney

May 2013

The American University in Cairo

Ambiguity in Literature: Recovering the Life of Reading

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contends that ambiguity in meaning performs an essential role in the reader's response to literature. Ambiguity is not simply an incidental or marginal feature of literary texts but relates in basic ways to the reader's experience of literature. It is the still point around which a literary text revolves. In examining the function of ambiguity in literary texts, I will show how ambiguity both defines a text as literary and allows it to live and grow through time. The notion of a text is meaningless apart from the reading of it, and, ambiguity, in the unchanging presence of the words, allows for the meaning of the text to evolve with every reading of it. Discussions of Aristotle, Saint Augustine, and Wolfgang Iser bring together the historical and modern understanding of literary texts. Through the examples of Sophocles's drama, *Oedipus the King*, T. S. Eliot's poem, *Burnt Norton* in *Four Quartets* and Henry James's short novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, I demonstrate how the reading of a text allows literature to become an evolving experience into which the reader breathes life, so that literature can unfold as an unending history of meanings.

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Chapter I. Support for the Theory:

Aristotle, Augustine and Iser

The idea that ambiguity is an important part of literature is not new. Throughout history, stories have been told and retold, discussed and changed. Enduring folklore, oral tales and myths, became texts and then became the seeds of early literary works. Aristotle makes a distinction between “proposition” and “poetry” in his work, *De Interpretatione*. When a statement can be assigned meaning through affirmation or denial, it is considered a “proposition.”¹ If we are not discussing propositions in which ambiguity is inapplicable, then, according to Aristotle, we are discussing “the study of rhetoric or of poetry.”² Considering this approach to literature, we can assume that interpretation and ambiguity were both important to him. Aristotle’s *Poetics* explains the difference between history and poetry in terms of what has already happened as opposed to what may happen:

It is clear from what has been said, that the function of the poet is not to say what has happened, but to say the kind of thing that may happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. The historian and the poet are not distinguished by their use of verse or prose; it would be possible to turn the works of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a history in verse as much as in prose. The distinction is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that may happen.³

What can we say of the comparison between what happened and what may happen?⁴ While Aristotle contends that the past has been written and is exclusive of interpretation, we can

¹ Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, in *The Organon: The Works of Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 33.

² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics* (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), p. 16.

⁴ There can also be “what may have happened” in terms of both nonfiction and historical fiction, but since Aristotle thinks of history and poetry as being fairly different, we will not discuss this possibility here.

reconsider this when looking into works of literary historians who extract moments and embellish events to create a poetic moment. However, unless these moments tell a story outside of the facts given (i.e. imply more than dates, acts, and names), they are limited to affirmation or denial and excluded from interpretive engagement on the part of the reader. When the story given offers supposition of motive, of emotions or the element of tragedy, elements, according to Aristotle's notion of poetry, of what might have happened otherwise, the historic text can be considered "more literary" than texts that lack elements of ambiguity.

While plots, traditional myths, folktales, as well as history, contained a core immutable story, Aristotle contends that a great work of literature—specifically, a tragedy—takes this core and makes it unique through the interpretation and execution of the poet. By invoking the power of interpretation, we find that we are invoking the possibility of ambiguity. Aristotle helps us see that if we are given a strict outline of what happened, we would not be invited to bring the piece of literature into our own sphere of interpretation; we would not ask ourselves how it makes us feel, how we interpret the story, how we make it our own. Aristotle's account of literary imitation, mimesis, allows for ambiguity. He does not condemn imitation as Plato does, but considers it to be part of the dramatic experience. We may learn of historic facts through chronologies, but stories and allegories provide the poet with a unique creative space. Unlike history, poetry is not confined to what has happened but transports the reader into the realm of the possible. However, literature also allows for a confluence. While Aristotle denies that form alone can allow history to be poetic, and that meter and verse do not a poem make; by creating stories around historic events, we can evoke historical poetry and, in this way, history can

exist in poetry as poetry can exist in historical literature. It is language, as well as how words are presented, that creates the ambiguity upon which literature relies.

Augustine also extols the virtue of ambiguity in language. Like Aristotle, Augustine makes a distinction between history and poetry. However, he does so in terms of how one can learn. Words have power. Language has the power to impress and influence by allowing the words to move the reader. Aristotle expresses the need for action to create the dramatic effect of tragedy. In his definition of tragedy, he goes so far as to say, “Tragedy is not an imitation of persons but of actions and of life . . . the imitation of character is not the purpose of what the agents do; character is included along with and on account of the actions.”⁵ Augustine’s discussion of language and words reflects these very sentiments. Augustine notes that obscurity can diminish the text’s impact, whereas stories told through allegory allow the reader to discover meaning.⁶ Augustine notes the importance of paying attention to metaphor and “to take care not to interpret a figurative expression literally” when it can be learned by allegory.⁷ Figurative readings allow the reader to relate to the text, to derive both pleasure and understanding from it. Such cases provide more room for interpretation, so that ambiguity gives the text a greater impact than it would have if it were presented in direct prose. In this sense, we can suggest that a narrative told from the point of view of a young soldier might give us a more deeply felt and—in some sense—true understanding of a battle scene than reading about the dates, names, and places where such a battle took place. It is not simply that we need truth and accuracy in literature (as

⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁶ See Augustine, *De Dialectica* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1994).

⁷ Saint Augustine. *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 72. Later Augustine notes, however, that one must be wary of accepting expressions as figurative when there may be a motive for rejecting the literal interpretation. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

we might argue that historians require them) but that a story can give us more by allowing us to experience the text in ways that go beyond a purely literal understanding. With senses excited by the movement of the text, the reader is brought into the story, sometimes as a kind of participant.

Augustine notes that boredom is lessened by the inclusion of ambiguity in passages used for teaching. He notes, too, that interpretations can be different from one another and still can be considered where “[n]either interpretation is contrary to the faith.”⁸ Poetic renditions of fable and myth, as well as biblical allegory, find their way into the canon of literature. Allegorical tales draw the reader in and demand the reader to be an active participant. We do not ask the reader to be drawn into a list of dates but we do expect engagement when we tell stories of events or present moral decisions through allegory. Allegory is, by its nature, ambiguous because it works through metaphor. A story tells a story that signifies another story. When the reader can understand how the metaphor relates to her own life (as well as understand the codes within the metaphor), she is engaged in both the ambiguity and meaning of the text.

For Augustine, we are obligated to pay attention to the idea that a thing brings something else to mind. It is in this signifying that we derive meaning. A thing can be taken on its own, not merely as something that signifies. In terms of significance, the physical thing is less important than the sign, since the thing as such is of limited meaning and acquires more meaning when it can be viewed as a sign. A footprint may signify an animal having passed by, but the footprint itself is significant in both that it is something and that

⁸ Ibid., p. 71

it represents the animal passing. Words work in this way, too, for both Augustine and Aristotle.

However, for Augustine, the word has quality as a thing, in and of itself. We learn words and those words come to signify. By signifying, we now see other things (or another thing) in relation to that word. If, according to Augustine, we derive significance from the thing, there is a process in which we must develop understanding of the code or sign. If the word is the object in itself and also becomes the sign, we are faced with a paradox. But if, as Augustine claims, things have different uses, we can consider collections of words to function in much the same way. We experience words and form impressions of them once we come to understand them. Like the traveler who is distracted by the journey and does not arrive at his destination, the reader must connect with the text and arrive at his destination of understanding. However, as every pilgrim travels towards salvation, each reader brings a set of emotions and intellectual impressions to the reading and will find herself within a journey through the literary text.

The word has the power to evoke a thing. Yet the meaning of the word is not the limit of its power. The aesthetic of the word—a sound, a tone, a word in a foreign language sung by a choir—can always move the listener. If this is the case, we must understand words and their significance, but what we bring from our own experience allows us to understand, and thus interpret, those words in terms of what and how they signify.⁹ When we read, we experience, but we bring who we are with us into that experience. We find within the text our own meaning using the tools and signs that we understand. The literary

⁹ Even if we are to admit like Berkeley that everything is not merely a sign and discuss words and language as thing-like, we can say that, whatever the thing, each reader or thinker has his own impression of the thing and therefore the meaning of the stone in the context of the text can vary, even slightly, with each interpretation.

text gives us the freedom to discover the meaning within it as we use those tools. For Augustine, giving the student a chance to have the tools to derive meaning is the aim of education. Augustine says that “the teacher who teaches the actual alphabet has the intention of enabling others to read, too.”¹⁰ The different ways of relating to the same text allow the reading of the text to become an individual event.

But what is this individual event? Wolfgang Iser says of the reading experience that “as we read, we react to what we ourselves have produced.”¹¹ This can indicate both what we have brought with us to the text—in other words, what impressions we have developed for the words that we read—and how those things come into play in interpretation. As individuals, we bring with us a personal history that allows the text to be interpreted in delimited ways. When readers arrive at a literary text, they bring with them the sum of their experiences. A text will offer a new experience from which the reader will then derive meaning and offer interpretation. There is a relationship between the reader and the text that is active in both directions.

It follows that we cannot derive an absolute truth from a literary text. One demonstration of this is in the temporal nature of reading, which concerns how a text unfolds in time. According to Iser, the temporal nature of reading is indicated in the “moving viewpoint,” which shows us how the time and text unfold as we read it, or how a text that is revisited can be read during a different time:

Every articulate reading moment entails a switch of perspective, and this constitutes an inseparable combination of differentiated perspectives, foreshortened memories, present modifications, and future expectations. Thus, in the time-flow of the reading process, past and future continually converge in the present moment, and the synthesizing operations of the

¹⁰ Augustine, *op. cit.*, pp. 6- 7.

¹¹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 128.

wandering viewpoint enable the text to pass through the reader's mind as an ever-expanding network of connections.¹²

This does not imply that the reader is getting closer to an ultimate truth, but that impressions change as we move through a text just as impressions of a house change as we move through the rooms. With every visit to those rooms we get a different impression, how one leads to another, how they look together and how they look, once revisited.

Yes, there is a house, as there is a text. There are things within the text that are present, have always been present, and always will be present, within every reading, every era, every impression. But meaning and object are not the same.¹³ Signs and images are also not the same. We are ambiguous beings who live and grow by our understanding of the world around us. This does not imply that we were wrong and now are right, if impressions change. It simply means that we are always coming to understand things differently, or adding to the understanding we once had. As readers, we approach a text with the ability to grow in our understanding. If a text does not offer this room for growing, we tend to feel that it is only reporting information, not creating literature.

Without the presence of ambiguity, the reader would be confined to following a code that allows for very little variation. This is not to deny that code and signs are a part of understanding, and, in addition, allow us to map our journey through the text. The map or code may tell us the lay of the land, but what it *means* is not the same thing. In literary texts, once the code is understood, the reader experiences a gestalt and can become engaged with the text on a creative level. Once engaged, the limitations of traditional

¹²Iser, op. cit., p.115

¹³Iser's break with New Criticism includes his opinion that the text is not merely an object but must be seen in terms of the opening and discovery of the text. The reader is a traveler through the text. The text is thus more of a place than a thing.

mimesis are overcome and the reader acquires the tools to establish a personal relationship to the text. This is how a reader journeys through or opens up a text.

We must note, at this point, that the literary text does not provide the reader with an impression of the world, but a world unto itself. When we read, we enter into that world and, like a traveler, come to impressions, beliefs, feelings and reactions to that place. A literary text (even creative nonfiction) is not reality and by reality we are addressing the physical world we inhabit outside of the text. It uses a system, codes and words, and allows them to interact, but the text is not to be defined exclusively in terms of them. It is a different place. Iser explains how the text is neither reality nor is it mere unreality in the sense of being an evasion of the real: "Herein lies the unique relationship between the literary text and 'reality,' in the form of thought systems or models of reality. The text does not copy these, and it does not deviate from them either" ¹⁴

As readers, we do not experience all literary texts in the same way. We do not find the topography equally intriguing, impressive or emotive. It is vital that we have the capacity to read the text and that the text can give us an understanding of the world in which we are situated. For Iser, the aesthetic is magical and the reader must be able to participate in that magic. Iser discusses different readers and how they approach literary texts. Just as a text must maintain its world—that is, it must not demand that characters act in wholly unanticipated ways, which would break the narrative flow and force the reader from the world of the text back into the world outside the text—the reader must have certain credentials. Interpretations must not be capricious in the sense of being based on subjective arbitrariness, as opposed to what presents itself in the textual world. But this

¹⁴ Wolfgang Iser, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

does not mean that only an “intended reader” is capable of participating in a text. A text written hundreds of years ago cannot have a modern reader as its intended reader. While an author is likely to have had an intended reader, discovering who that is does not allow for an evolving text that continues to have meaning. Iser reminds us that “generations later, [we can] can still grasp the meaning (perhaps we should say *a* meaning) of the text,” apart from the fact that the intended reader is no longer present.¹⁵

So what do we mean by reader? We might begin by assuming that every text can have a real reader and an ideal reader. However, once we begin to define the reader in this way, we veer away from the relationship between the individual and the text. It would seem that the ideal reader would be equal to the author, if the author can read from an ideal standpoint. If the author himself can be an ideal reader, we would have to assume, then, that she has a single relationship to what has been written, and that this relationship can be considered ideal. But if this is not the case, and the author, too, reinvents or recodes when she revisits her own text, then the reader must also be able to do this. Then the reader—who is implicitly related to the text—can be said to be someone who reads, rereads, reinterprets and relives a text. It is at this point that the opposition between the ideal reader and the real reader ceases to be helpful.

What Iser calls the “implied reader” is linked to the phenomenon of a text that can change in time. It does not allow the reader to be constructed as completely separate from the text but as implicit to the text. At the same time, the implied reader opens a kind of history because it takes into account the way that a text can be changed through readings that are not identical to an “original” reading in time. For Iser, the implied reader is

¹⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

connected to the text by means of content and the concept “provides a link between all the historical and individual actualizations of the text and make them accessible to analysis.”¹⁶ For Iser, the concept of implied reader is a “transcendental model” and “denotes the role of the reader, which is definable in terms of textual structure and structured acts.”¹⁷ Iser explains that “the reader is situated in such a position that he can assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him.”¹⁸ The reader must find meaning in the world the text provides that is not contained either in the real world or within the world created by another reading.

We know that a reader must be able to read and understand the language of a text. The reader must be able to participate as an active member in the world of the text. What we have seen here is that when a text is approached, the reader is like a traveler embarking on a journey. Without the traveler, the text remains an object, a thing unobserved and inexperienced. It is in the interaction with the reader that a text becomes meaningful. A text must allow room for the traveler to experience it; doors of the text must be open or allow the reader to open the text. This space, this room, and the capacity to be opened, provide the place where ambiguity lies. It is here that the text comes alive.

¹⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Chapter II. Ambiguity in Drama:

Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*

The myth of Oedipus is ancient and intriguing. The story of a man who inadvertently kills his own father and marries his own mother, having been fated to do so and told this by a reliable source, cannot help but generate curiosity. Nonetheless C. S. Lewis invites us to assess this beginning cautiously: “We see that a good story can be written on this plot, but the abstract is not a good enough story.”¹⁹ We must conclude that it is Sophocles' *telling* of the myth that has made it an adequate beginning. Is the dramatist's own interpretation of this myth what forms and then drives the play? To answer this question, we need to better understand what the story—as woven around the myth—means to the reader.

When speaking of literature, Aristotle gives passing attention to comedy but focuses primarily on tragedy. Tragedy is true literature and must by its very nature be complex and intriguing. For Aristotle, no literary work embodies tragedy more perfectly than does Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. It is as if Aristotle based his definition of tragedy upon the Oedipus myth. But what did Aristotle read into the myth that moved him so strongly? Was it simply that Oedipus fit into what he considered to be the essence of tragedy, or was he giving meaning to the literary work, as a reader, that allowed him to better understand the nature of tragedy? How can we, as readers, develop an understanding of the ancient text?

Let us first consider how a tragedy is written around the story of a myth. Jonathan Culler notes that in myths we often discover a “binary opposition whose function is to

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 49.

express a thematic contrast,” such as angel and devil, light and dark, males and female.²⁰He furthers develops the point that in literature we know how to interpret myths on the basis of cultural references, linguistic codes, as well as other myths by way of comparison, in order to discern meaning. Culler maintains: “The analyst must discover both structure and meaning.”²¹He goes into some detail and discusses the workings of myths and their possible similarity to other stories, perhaps with slight variations. However, what if a story written around a myth uses language that promotes ambiguity in such a way that different interpretations and translations offer very different perspectives on the same story?

Culler argues further that Lévi-Strauss’s conception of myth, which acknowledges these basic precepts, is inadequate for the purpose of reading literature. The anthropologist maintains that fundamental binary oppositions (i.e., the implied oppositions of cultural familiars) underlie familiar myths. All human beings use these myths to build structures of understanding. But Culler also explains that Lévi-Strauss tries to show how “myths from various cultures go together,” which means that they can be compared apart from the contexts in which they are at home. Culler rejects this methodology and addresses how literary meaning emerges in a different way. For Culler, we might look at how “assertions about meaning are not reducible to statements about the reactions of individuals, and literature provides a useful analogy.”²² For literature, Culler explains that “texts have meaning for those who know how to read them,” and we investigate how these texts engage the mind of the reader on an experiential level. Readers dwell in communities where the institution of literature provides a basis for approaching texts consciously as

²⁰ Jonathan Culler, *Structural Poetics* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1975), p. 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 58

imaginative constructions. Moreover, we can read *Oedipus the King* without being privy to the historical context and still be moved by the story itself. Culler helps us see that a fictive understanding of myth was already present in the mind of the Greek theatergoer. Just as Sophocles has responded on a creative level as a writer to enlarge the myth, the theatergoer is given a living text and experiences the play in a new manner, that is to say, in a way that goes beyond what would have been possible for the ancient Greek theatergoer. The drama itself contains the building blocks for a new interpretation.

The reader or audience of drama is given several levels of presentation from which to draw inferences. In the case of *Oedipus the King*, there are the essential myths around which Sophocles constructed his story. The dramatic presentation itself is an interpretation of Sophocles, and this in turn allows for interpretation on the side of the viewer. While the myth as such tells a story, we find a man who (1) kills his father, (2) marries his mother and (3) blinds himself as self-punishment after having committed these transgressions. With these few words, the story may have grown in one of many directions. As readers, we begin to ask questions and, from there, draw conclusions. We may consider the man a lunatic or monster if he did these things intentionally. We may consider him a victim, if he was cheated or tricked into doing them. We may consider him a saint, if he did them with disregard for his own well-being to save a city.

Depending on the way that the myth is presented, the audience may lean one way or another. We can consider the tragedy in terms of different ideas and the tragic hero in terms of different attributes. For example, we can see *hamartia*—sometimes translated as “flaw” or “weakness”—as a way to describe the protagonist’s character. It may give us clues as to how to read the protagonist’s actions symbolically. The tragic flaw also gives the hero

a sense of humanity, without which his character would be unsympathetic to the reader who would not be able to identify with him or her. To both overcome and fall victim to *hamartia* makes the tragic hero come alive, struggle, and appeal to the reader. Hence, rather than see the protagonist's imperfections in negative terms as a sign of unforgivable moral flaws, the reader can envision them in terms of a broader narrative through which the main character achieves a degree of self-knowledge that the drama brings to light.

It is not difficult to read the various adaptations of the Electra myth in terms of variations in the sense that Culler—and Lévi-Strauss, according to Culler—describes. Three presentations of this myth give us three characters that derive from the myth in three different ways.²³ Aeschylus must find moral significance in the actions of Orestes and Electra. Sophocles tells of a vengeance after years of torment. For Euripides, Electra's lot is to be the wife of a kind peasant, who plays a role in the slaying of her mother. Each Electra is different and each author presents his version of the myth. But what of a single story, a single version, from which we derive variety of meaning? Perhaps the traditional tale is merely the starting-point for the efforts to create meaning that largely depends on what each dramatist assumes to lie at the heart of the myth itself. We may consider him a saint, if he did them with disregard for his own well-being to save a city.²⁴

Sophocles creates a world of ambiguity around the myth of Oedipus. We can say that Sophocles is guilty of what is considered by Aristotle to be *homonumia* ("lexical

²³ We might call these stories, "The Gospels of Electra," as the biblical gospels present different versions of Jesus's life.

²⁴ Ferguson notes that representation is "structurally intrinsic" when exhibiting art. A broken piece of the Berlin wall lacks aesthetic import when it is found on the street, but it becomes an artistic statement when it is found in a museum. A myth may be of limited cultural value, whereas the dramatist assigns it a new meaning in writing the play. For details on art and representation, see Bruce Ferguson, "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense", *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996). pp. 175-188.

ambiguity”). But we must also say that he is a master of the capacity to use it. What evokes the contradictions and duality of human nature emerges as ambiguity within the language employed. In *Paul's True Rhetoric: Ambiguity, Cunning, and Deception in Greece and Rome*, Mark Givens notes that tragedy, above all other genres of literature, uses “double entendre” and takes advantage of the “contradictions in the language” endemic to ancient Greek: “The dramatist plays on this to transmit his vision of a world divided against itself and rent with contradictions.”²⁵ The story of Oedipus is built upon layers of ambiguity. Blame and guilt, fate and folly, are brought into question and cast in shades of grey. We can say, too, that the story of Oedipus encompasses tragedy without ambiguity. A man who kills his father and marries his mother can only be seen as repellent. However, as we investigate the story itself and dig deeper into the text, we as readers experience a variety of impressions that elicit different reactions. The ambiguous language used to elicit reaction drives us to interpret—and reinterpret—the piece, even though it is based on a familiar myth. Knowing the story of Oedipus does not take away from the *catharsis* experienced by the *anagnorisis* of Oedipus. And what is discovered or recognized by the audience?

We will briefly focus on two examples of ambiguity as it pertains to language as well as the double meaning derived from the context to which the writing refers. First, the title of the play, *Oedipus the King*, also denotes the tragic hero, and thus offers an excellent example of how different meanings form a more comprehensive expression of the man. Second, the blind seer is not only a character but also an oxymoron that gives us insight into the conflicts of Oedipus. We can consider aspects of language and how Sophocles nurtures it in these two examples from the play itself. The text, in neither case, gives us

²⁵ Mark Givens, *Paul's True Rhetoric: Ambiguity, Cunning, and Deception in Greece and Rome* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), p.45

univocal meaning, but we can discover deeper meaning by understanding the different meanings presented.

The name “Oedipus” itself contains its own ambiguity. Most often, we find the definition of Oedipus to be the following: *Oidipous* (“swollen foot”) combines forms of the words *oideo* (“to swell”) and *pous* (“foot”). This is not a surprise because Oedipus was abandoned, his feet pierced and bound, leaving him with a permanently awkward gait. This gives us the physical impression of the man—the surviving child who was clearly meant to die; the brave strong man who is a hero in spite of his crippling wounds. In addition, Sophocles offers us a clue since we learn in time that the king’s son fell victim to the same fate as baby Oedipus. Oedipus is warned earlier by Tiresias of a “deadly footed, double striking curse” (line 418), and this we take to be a hint of the murder/incest curse.²⁶ We can see as well that “deadly footed” refers back to the riddle of the Sphinx. Tiresias reminds Oedipus, “But it is in riddle answering you are strongest?” When Oedipus answered the riddle of the Sphinx, he was the strongest—destined to be king, not having fallen yet victim to his fate. Puzzles and riddles are also his strength and that to which he is drawn. But Tiresias, the seer, knows that Oedipus is drawn to a puzzle and the seer knows that no puzzle could ever be as meaningful as the puzzle that confronts him. The “deadly footed, double striking curse” may imply more than his crimes but also the man who committed them. Ironically, it refers to the respondent—Oedipus the man, standing on his two feet, not the child on four or the old man on three. Oedipus will commit two crimes before he realizes his fate as a man.

²⁶ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.28.

Beyond this, however, there are other components to the meaning behind these words. The verb *oida* means “to know” or “to see” and also can be considered the root meaning of Oedipus. If there is the possibility of meaning in these words, it must be honoured. It must also co-exist with other translations and therefore cannot be self-contradictory. We can establish that Oedipus implies “swollen foot” but also “to know” and “to see,” without falling into contradiction. These are all elements of his character and important to the meaning of the play: we can find meaning in each definition, even though they are not the same. We must allow for the inclusion of both or all meanings in order to more deeply penetrate the drama’s overall meaning.

Jean-Pierre Vernant considers how the meaning of a single word, and the way that characters interpret it, can lend to the ambiguity inherent in texts. In his discussion of Antigone and Creon as names, he notes an underlying ambiguity and then claims that “the semantic field of *nomos* is sufficiently extended to cover, among others, both of these meanings.”²⁷ As *seeing* is an element in the name Oedipus, the character of the blind seer becomes all the more portentous. In *Oedipus the King*, the idea of the blind seer goes beyond Tiresias, the blind prophet. During the course of the action, Oedipus does not simply become the blind seer but is constantly in transition from being unaware of his true origins to becoming fully cognizant of what he has done on the basis of his complete itinerary. He moves from a kind of sighted blindness to a personal knowledge that does not require the use of his eyes at all.

²⁷ Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of *Oedipus Rex*,” *New Literary History* 9/ 3 (1978), p. 475.

In the opening scene of the play, Oedipus begs for Apollo's news to be "too bright for us," underscoring his intense desire to learn the truth.²⁸ The priest, however, had just listed the ills Oedipus can see: "you see our company around the altar; you see our ages . . . you yourself have seen our cities reeling like a wreck . . ." ²⁹ Later, Oedipus himself says that no one has seen the guilty man. At this point in the drama, Oedipus "sees" these things, or believes he does. But he is blind to what he is seeing. He does not know the meaning of anything he sees, and thus from the start he is the blind seer.

The role of seeing is evident throughout the speech that Tiresias delivers to Oedipus in order to warn him of an impending catastrophe. At first, Tiresias alludes to Oedipus's temper and claims that his reluctant listener's problem is an unwillingness to face what is inside him. Irony becomes strongly evident when the reference to "eyes" is shown to only imperfectly help us understand the metaphor of seeing: "You have your eyes but see not where you are."³⁰ Oedipus has taunted blind Tiresias. Now Tiresias turns to Oedipus and offers the same. What Oedipus now must decide is whether he is willing to look or not. Against his will, Tiresias is pushed into speaking. He proclaims: "I will tell you nothing."³¹ In a sense, this is true: he cannot directly address the problem at hand. His mode of address is indirect, that is to say, ambiguous. However, Tiresias feels compelled to speak and resorts to a literalism that will become intelligible to us only in time: "blindness for sight."³² But Oedipus is demanding the truth and has decided to open his eyes, if there is truth to be seen.

²⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, op cit., p 13

²⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 28

³¹ Ibid., p. 24

³² Ibid., p. 30

Even at this early moment, Oedipus is aware that there is something he can “see” that casts light on his past and perhaps even on his future. He sees his own guilt. Every step has led him to this confrontation with the blind prophet. He knows that even at the crossroads where he met Laius, he might have gone a different way, but his choice, his swift temper, his fatal flaw, led him to the door of his destiny. He now begins to “see” his own *hamartia*, which is his temper, or perhaps his blindness. He sees that he has contributed to the events that have led to his incestuous murderer. But ironically, this knowledge is precisely what ultimately blinds him.

We cannot suppose that Sophocles was unaware of the power of his language. What he provides his audience provides ample room to discover and unfold various elements in the story. We are witness to his fierce irony: Oedipus tries to escape his fate and, by opposing it, enacts it; Oedipus is the blind seer who does not see until he is blind; myriad plays on words reveal ambiguity in his use of language. As an audience that might experience the play only at second hand, we rely on a translation for the meaning of words, but we still have room within those words to come up with interpretations of our own. Any production will present the interpretation of the director and the actors as well; however, even then, we can find our own space to interpret the performance and the presentation. While our sense of guilt and fate may not be that of an audience in ancient Greece, as readers or audience members, we feel the horror of Oedipus and his terrible discovery. We can imagine the trauma of Oedipus with our modern frame of mind. Yet, can we take the play further? Can we take it beyond what Sophocles’s audience might have considered the most plausible interpretation and find within the story possible interpretations that are outside the scope of the traditional?

In an early essay, "Hamlet and His Problem," T.S. Eliot points to an earlier propriety of the Hamlet story and notes, "instead of treating the whole action of the play as due to Shakespeare's design, we perceive his *Hamlet* to be superposed upon much cruder material which persists even in the final form."³³ While arguing that the portrayal of Hamlet is not psychologically convincing, he clarifies the difference between the evolution of the story and its core "myth" by stating that in "the earlier play the motive was a revenge-motive simply."³⁴ Revenge against a usurper is something that we already find in the myth of Oedipus. It is interesting to see that both Hamlet and Oedipus are the sons of mothers who turned away from the truth and are corrupted through association with men of circumstance who possess unclear rights to the throne (Claudius and Creon). However, Oedipus is the murderer of the king and he is the one he seeks. Could either myth or core story have led to other possible versions? Of course we can imagine a host of possible scenarios in which different events occur around the elemental core. But the Oedipus story, as developed by Sophocles, provides varied interpretations, which allow us to consider how different stories might be derived from a single text.

We can fall into the belief that there is an unambiguous reading of a literary text that then provides the model for what comes later on. True, Oedipus cannot avoid or escape his place in a narrative history. Wanting nothing to do with the desire to sleep with his mother, Oedipus now must be attached to a fate that includes this terrible act. But the nature of his guilt remains a question. Tradition allows us to ask if he is a good man, even if he is *guilty* of his polluting acts. But in what sense is Oedipus guilty? We are given hearsay, the testimony by an old man, a prophet, and the words of Oedipus himself. His act of

³³T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," *The Sacred Wood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 82.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83

violence was not directed at King Laius, and although he killed the King, his action would have a different meaning if it was directed at someone he took to be his father.

In *Sophocles' Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction*, Frederick Ahl contends that no Athenian court would have accepted a conviction based on hearsay, especially one that was based on the testimony of the accused. We know from the outset that the people of Thebes seek a cure for the plague. They are looking for what caused the problem, and thus a solution. But if Oedipus is the polluter and is guilty of all that he faces, Ahl proceeds to ask: "Will the plague that besets the city end with Oedipus' self-conviction and self-punishment?"³⁵ As readers of the subsequent plays, we can affirm the negative because Thebes must endure many years of fratricide and tyranny after Oedipus is gone. Just as Oedipus's answer to the Sphinx does not cleanse the city, his own self-sacrifice does not cleanse it either. Does this imply his innocence?

Creon, whom Oedipus distrusts, is the messenger with news of the Oracle and returns with "a laurel crown, which invests him with importance superior to that of the others on stage."³⁶ Creon becomes, according to Ahl, "interpreter as well as reporter" when Oedipus asks how he is to react to the words of the Oracle. But we know from tribulations in *Antigone* that Creon's protestations against wanting to be king are false. Oedipus accuses, and then retracts, his accusation of Creon. Vernant comments: "The equivocation in the words of Oedipus corresponds to the ambiguous status which is conferred on him in the

³⁵ Frederick Ahl, *Sophocles' Oedipus, Evidence and Self-Conviction* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1991), p.49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

play and on which the whole tragedy is constructed.”³⁷ Was Oedipus right about Creon, or was his ambiguous attitude towards Creon essential to the meaning of the drama?

In the end, the question of truth is not as important as what the play means on multiple levels. Can we demand a single truth from a world and a mythic series of events? The story of Oedipus as it is dramatized by Sophocles encourages us to develop myriad interpretations as we experience it. A modern reader’s response to *Oedipus the King* will be quite different from that of the Greek spectators who would have witnessed the first performance of the play. However, the engaged reader can put into play a kind of understanding that stems from circumstances peculiar to a later period but also in tune with the text as the product of time and history. Thus, reading is a forward-looking activity that allows us to transform the text into something that is uniquely our own. Without limiting reception to a purely subjective understanding, the reader is able to approach the text in an attentive and rigorous manner that also gives new life to the text itself.

³⁷ Jean-Pierre Vernant, op. cit., p. 477.

Chapter III. Time and Ambiguity in Poetry:

Eliot's *Burnt Norton*

The hand that places pen to paper sets forth a new world. The reader steps into the world set in motion by the author. What can the reader understand of this world? A total understanding of the world in which we live is an absurd notion, but does an author ever demand total understanding? Some common understanding of the world seems to be presupposed by most writers. Nonetheless, the world experienced by the reader includes ambiguity. The reader's experience with a particular text offers a new perspective, even if the reader is the author of the work. T.S. Eliot's *Burnt Norton*, the first poem in *Four Quartets*, provides the temporal occasion for understanding time, the place of the reader in time and how time moves in cycles but never returns.

When we discuss a literary work, we discuss a world created by the author. Suggestions that the reader must understand every aspect of this world oppose the idea that our understanding is always limited. Literary understanding can involve the meaning of all the different references and nuances in the language particular to a given author, who uses history, myths and the intertext in various ways. Yet an understanding of the world, even a global understanding of it, does not necessarily provide the reader with the ability to derive meaning from the text as such. Some literary works offer more in every line than most readers are able to reference. Others create their own philosophy, which is contained in a text that the reader can engage in a focused manner.

T. S. Eliot's *Burnt Norton* both provides deeply committed intertextual conversation and a philosophy that nourishes the idea of ambiguity in time. The mandate of the poem

offers the reader a notion of time that contains the cycle and the still point, the movement towards goals and a sense of what remains motionless within time and also beyond it. The reader steps into the poem's paradoxes and becomes a part of that very ambiguity. Opening the text and discovering meaning, the reader is invited to participate in the drama that "Burnt Norton" enacts when it provides a record of the writer's journey through time and experience.

In support of Eliot's own suggestion of how allusions are potentially limitless, George Wright notes that "the number of characters who, directly or by immediately understood allusion, make their way into his poems is phenomenal. Because of the peculiar allusive structure of his verse, it is difficult to draw a line between who is and who is not actually *in* his poems."³⁸ Of course, if we were to carefully read and consider every word and reference in this poem, we would not necessarily move closer to personal understanding. Hugh Kenner underscores the impersonal nature of Eliot's work but does not deny the importance of personality: "The man holding the pen does not bare his soul, but on the other hand we feel no compulsion to posit or pry into some persona. The motifs of the poem simply declare themselves We never know quite where we are in the poem, but all possible relevant experiences are congruent."³⁹ We may *feel* the personal nature of Eliot's words, but whether the 'I' is the narrator or the author, at any given moment, remains ambiguous. This leads to the question of the past, the did-not-happen past, and the story of a past that exists only in the poem. It is not clear that the reader is provided with anything more than a fictional basis for proceeding: "The rose garden itself

³⁸George T. Wright, "Eliot: The Transformation of a Personality", *The Poet in the Poem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p. 60.

³⁹Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* (London: Methuen & Co, 1965), pp. 252-253.

may only be a mirage,” but its effect persists into the present and beyond, playing a role in the pattern of time.⁴⁰

While exploring the poem by section in terms of time, we will look into how Eliot provides more than a literary map for the reader, but offers a glimpse into a private or simply poetic world, filled with references that inform almost every word. As we enter the poet’s world through the portal of *Burnt Norton*, we first must consider not only how we enter, but also what it means to do so. Hence, in the opening of the poem, we are given a map of both cyclical time and the eternal present. This is the “still point” around which the poem circles.

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable. (I lines 1-5)

We must first examine Eliot’s notion of time in terms of the reader about to enter the experience of the poem. As we begin to read, we enter the immediate. We become part of an experience insofar as we can affirm its immediacy. But once we have moved away from the experience, even in the moment after we have done so, we are lost to its immediacy. What F. H. Bradley calls “immediate experience” lies outside of reflection and presents itself to us before conclusions can be drawn about it.

The immediate can only happen while the experience is in process. Our experience unfolds in a diachronic manner as we move through it. We are at the same time separated from the synchronic moment and unable to exist within that moment again. Once we leave it, then “If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable.” Time’s ambiguous nature

⁴⁰ William Melaney, “T. S. Eliot’s Poetics of Self: Reopening *Four Quartets*”, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 22 (2002), p. 153

allows for the present to constantly become both the past and the future. We are always, however, in a present that is intangible and evanescent. We exist and experience time in the constantly shifting and nonexistent present (since it is always becoming something else, that is, past and future) that is forever out of our reach, and thus, in some sense, “unredeemable.”

Time itself is said to be unredeemable because we can only look back and can barely consider the future: we are situated in the ephemeral present and are unable to recapture the experience of the present once it has passed. We cannot *redeem* any moment, once gone. In addition to the experienced past, we have the past that did not happen, “the passage which we did not take/Towards the door we never opened” (I lines 12-13) that affects us as well. Harry Blamires notes that “Actual past and might-have-been past both lead to the same conclusive present. And they both bear witness (‘point’) to the same purpose (‘end’) which is always with us (‘present’).”⁴¹ We experience the not-having-done something and the having-done-something; both move us and stay with us as we journey through experience. Not having done something is still an act that can influence our lives.

In addition, the past is not unchangeable if, as Eliot says, “time future contained in time past” allows for what will come to change the nature of what has come before. This occurs once we are no longer caught up in the immediate but transcend experience and acquire an understanding of it. But the past can remain ambiguous to the degree that its significance is not restricted to what has already occurred. It is a paradox of time to say that the past, which has happened, is changeable. But the past often changes in how we see it and in what it means to us. F. H. Bradley contends: “We in short have experience in which

⁴¹ Harry Blamires, *Word Unheard: A Guide through Eliot's Four Quartets*. London: Methuen, 1969), p. 7.

there is no distinction between my awareness and that of which it is aware.”⁴² The present and the changeable, yet unreachable, past, create the paradox of being and non-being. We consider that electrons exist, but we can only suppose where and how since they exist in a different way than we exist. They are unobservable and we cannot point to them, but we know that they are there. This strange aporia is the gap in which we both exist and continue to depart without departing.

We look back and perceive what is not immediate but we affect it “. . . for the roses/Had the look of flowers that are looked at” (I lines 28-29). As with Eliot’s time, once observed, it is changed. Time as a single moment is forever changed once gone, even though we can remember, imagine, consider and draw conclusions about it; it has changed from what it was when we initially experienced it:

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present. (I lines 45-46)

However, all moments of time are always present. This establishes that, while moments are continuously gone, all moments are continuous:

To look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty. (I lines 33-39)

When we look at the pool, we see the empty pool of the present, and when we see the pool “filled with water out of sunlight,” it is once again empty. But Eliot describes the tension between these two moments as one of mutual dissolution. The emptiness that seems to

⁴² F.H. Bradley, “On Our Knowledge of Immediate Experience”, *Essays on Truth and Reality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), p. 159.

adhere to direct experience is disrupted by the flow of time: "It is as if the poetry itself enforces a limit to the way that a basically cognitive intuition might arrest the flow of time in a closed system."⁴³

Perhaps, as finite creatures with no memory of our beginnings, who are unable to fully understand our final goal, we are related to a world that has always existed with us. But we are deceived by various perceptions since we are indeed finite. The past, too, seems available in our memory and not utterly intangible, but we cannot re-enter it. In this sense, Eliot warns of the "thrush" and its duplicity:

Through the first gate,
Into our first world, shall we follow
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.
There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure (I lines 20-24)

The deception of the thrush taunts the reader with the claim that one can redeem time through simple recall, whereas Eliot shows us that this cannot be so.⁴⁴ Once the reader learns that the deception of the thrush leads merely to the vanishing of those early guests, he can never again read those lines without knowing that the poetic narrative carries along with it the possibility of loss, the end of something that once seemed entirely permanent. The experience of the "first world," the innocence of the first reading, is forever changed. This means that, as we look back, we see what we felt differently. When we step into this

⁴³ William Melaney, "T. S. Eliot's Poetics of Self: Reopening *Four Quartets*", *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 22 (2002), p. 151.

⁴⁴ In Robert Browning's poem, "Home-Thoughts from Abroad", the thrush is the harbinger of time's unrelenting movement away from the immediate moment. The thrush flaunts his ability to defy that lost return to the moment in the lines, "That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,/ Lest you should think he never could recapture/ The first fine careless rapture!" It is the deception of the thrush that taunts with the claim that one can redeem "[t]he "first fine careless rapture" when, as Eliot shows us, the past cannot be reclaimed in this manner.

“first gate,” we enter an experience that seems to be original, but the loss that is enacted in these lines is perhaps only indirectly suggested.⁴⁵

Next we step into the dance. It is the dance that describes the unmoving movement, the aporetic moment in which we find ourselves as we experience the poetic world: “At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;/Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,/But neither arrest nor movement” (II lines 16-18) The absolute moment, the “still point of the turning world,” is at the center of past and future. The dance is that which exists but cannot be touched, seen, or spoken of without changing it into something it is not. “Except for the point, the still point,/There would be no dance, and there is only the dance./I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where” (II lines 20-22). The dance is the electron that is the essence, in a sense, of all there is.

But once it is said, “*there* we have been,” we are no longer there, and it will no longer be the same place once we are able to speak of having been. “Time past and time future/Allow but a little consciousness./To be conscious is not to be in time” (II lines 36-38). Being conscious is creating observation. Once observed, the experience and the dancer become the electron in the line of a photon of light that is changed by the photon's presence. Eliot tells us that the experience is not understanding—thoughtful, deep, contemplative, while “to be conscious is not to be in time”; moreover, only because we have experienced “the moment in the rose-garden” or “the arbour where the rain beat” or “the draughty church at smokefall,” can they “be remembered” (II lines 38-42). The memory of

⁴⁵ I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge Eliot's religious beliefs and how we can approach the “first gate” in terms of a “first world,” and the poem's garden references become allusions to the departure from Eden. The idea of the “first” relates to this experiential moment. I believe that, while these two versions of the “first” are different, they add two levels to our reading—a literal and a figurative—that enhances our understanding of the poem.

the experience is not the experience itself, but “involved with past and future.” Paul Ricoeur considers that we cannot understand ourselves except in relation to the world, but we can only begin to understand what has happened once we have left the experiential moment to consider what we have done and how we have done it.⁴⁶ It is the before and after of the moment that gives us our understanding of it.

When Eliot speaks of language itself in the final section of the poem, he begins to discuss words in terms of music, which might have allowed him to introduce the theme of the unchanging, but in this case points to the condition of mortality itself:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. (V lines 1-3)

Literature—and poetry, in particular—is not something to solve but to experience. Eliot notes in his early essay, “Hamlet and His Problems,” that “for ‘interpretation’ the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical facts which the reader is not assumed to know.”⁴⁷ But this appears to be giving ‘historical facts’ an intrinsic power that may not be necessary to the experience of the text. However, if we look at literature in terms of historical facts, we might try to relate the language of the text to the biography of the author. Does Eliot in *Burnt Norton* suggest that the language of the poet allows the reader to respond in a more personal manner to this historical dimension ?

In his Oxford lectures on poetry, A. C. Bradley states that “we may say that an actual poem is the succession of experiences—sounds, images, thoughts, emotions—through

⁴⁶ In *Time and Narrative* (1983), Ricoeur discusses the temporal world that exists in all narrative works and that indicates “the temporal character of the human experience.”

⁴⁷ T. S. Eliot, “Hamlet and His Problems”, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.81.

which we pass when we are reading as poetically as we can.”⁴⁸ The experience “differs with every reader and every time of reading: a poem exists in innumerable degrees.”⁴⁹ And this experience, this individual event limited exclusively to the one engaging in a relationship with the poem, “is worth having on its own account, has an intrinsic value.”⁵⁰ Bradley allows for cultural worth and external value, but the poem, in and of itself, has its own poetic value. If this is true, then whatever we learn about the poem will change our experience of the poem. It may influence how we engage or change our reception when we discover details that form the basis for a more informed reading. But our journey through the poem remains our own, whether we are reading it for the first time, the one hundredth time, or if the poem is born of our own mind and hand. Whoever or whenever we are, when we reach the end, we are no longer in the poem: “The reader is encouraged to participate in a movement . . . but the movement itself, rather than the imagined end, is the theme of the journey.”⁵¹

While we are reading, the poem is the world around us. We receive and interpret what will become the substance of our thought and reflection. This experience, however, speaks the unspeakable. It is in the gap, in this ambiguous moment, that we find our own interpretation of the pattern that Eliot provides. In this moment, we change the nature of the poem as we change the past by revisiting it in our memories and our thoughts. Eliot mentions “the door we never opened/ Into the rose-garden,” and we intuit a moment from the speaker’s life without knowing everything about his childhood (I lines 12-13). We intuit

⁴⁸A.C. Bradley, “Poetry for Poetry’s Sake”, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1909), p. 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8

⁵¹ William Melaney, “T. S. Eliot’s Poetics of Self: Reopening *Four Quartets*”, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 22 (2002), p. 159

the “still point in the turning world,” the present which is always the present; and in that present, we feel what is yet to come and also what we have left behind. We renegotiate meaning as the present appears to us in new ways. To use Eliot’s terms, ambiguity is inherent in the synchronic moment that helps define and redefine the diachronic whole.

Whenever a text is read, it is given the breath of life. The moment we read a text is the living moment. The poem itself lays out a map of synchronic moments that, once we read, become part of the cycle that includes our own past experience. What we are given are elements of the “still point” within the changing past and uncertain future. It is through this point that the reader experiences the poem and is engaged in the “dance.” Once we finish reading, we have left the dance behind and the poem becomes part of the turning, living memory. When we read the poem again, however, we find that we are once again in the dance, but this is a new dance. It changes the nature of the first reading because now we re-interpret. The last reading or dance becomes, like the rose garden, “remembered, involved with past and future” (II line 42). The experience, like the dance, exists only in being in it. Once it is over and remembered, it becomes part of a construct of past and remembered past and the impression of what it was like to be the dancer.

The end comes inevitably whenever we read. But when we re-enter the world of the poem we have left, we enter as a different reader since we arrive, even moments later, carrying a different set of experiences into the poem. These experiences may even be limited to the memory that we have been, apart from the world of the poem. This can only suggest that even the author, having written the poem, must also experience a sense of re-entry, while bringing new experiences into the text. In this case, the visiting author becomes the reader once the poem is in the world. Eliot could not revisit *Burnt Norton* as

the dancer that he was when we wrote the poem. He brings new experiences into his reading and finds new meaning in the words that he has written. In "Reading as Construction," Todorov contends that "two accounts of the same text will never be identical. How do we explain this diversity? By the fact that these accounts describe, not the universe of the book itself, but this universe as it is transformed by the psyche of each individual reader."⁵² If this is the case, we must consider that the author is included in this psychic transformation. Wright contends: "For every poet we sense a range of persons who represent in part the poet's view of human life."⁵³ But the poet is an evolving person whose views cannot remain stagnant and unaffected by the world in which he lives. We know that Eliot, throughout his writing life, was on a spiritual journey. Beyond his faith and transformation, the fact that he experienced the dancing pen and the experiential paper will change how he returns to them once there is the poem that is the fruit of their union.

In conclusion, we have seen how *Burnt Norton* contains various meanings that motivate the reader to embark on a journey that unfolds in time. The reader is invited to enter into the world of the poem, which includes scenes remembered, the dancer and the dance, moments of stillness and moments of change. But the author is not free of having a temporal role. The author could become another visitor to the world of his poem, adding and changing his impressions and interpretations with each new reading. What means something today is affected by what it once meant and affects what it will one day mean to the reader, and also to the author. But, while one contains the other, they are not and

⁵²Tzvetan Todorov, "Reading as Construction", *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 71.

⁵³ George T. Wright, "Eliot: The Transformation of a Personality", *The Poet in the Poem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p. 60.

cannot be the same. In this sense, the text evolves with the reader and the author evolves with the text.

Chapter IV. Narrative Prose:

James's *Turn of the Screw*

Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* provides an excellent example of how ambiguity serves diverse functions in modern prose. Naomi Schor notes that the fact that the main characters in this important novella "are perpetually, indeed obsessively, involved in interpretive ventures should come as no surprise to even the most casual reader of James's fictions and prefaces."⁵⁴ There are arguments regarding this work of literature that have been repeated since its publication. A question tends to recur in the earliest and even more recent criticism: Is this a ghost story or a psychological thriller? While the argument between ghost and madness has informed the traditional discussion of the James tale, the question of evil casts a larger shadow over this complex narrative. The novel can be seen as a tale of obsession, innocence and, at their crossroads, the deadly consequences of blind devotion, jealousy and obsessive acts. Who, in fact, does the haunting? Is it the governess who haunts as much as any real or imagined ghosts? The language of the story suggests an intentional ambiguity and one that promotes and provokes such an analysis, whether or not intended by the author.

James himself is said to have claimed that he wanted *The Turn of the Screw* to be a ghost story. But the claim's ambiguity has led to questions regarding what he meant. In his dissertation, Edward Parkinson notes that James uses the word "psychical" in his explanation of the story. The word can be interpreted as meaning something in the mind, or something "extraordinary" or "extrasensory." Parkinson goes on to note that "[t]he situation is further complicated by the fact that both Henry James and his brother William

⁵⁴ Naomi Schor, "Fiction as Interpretation", *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 170

had a lifelong interest in both mental illness and paranormal phenomena,” which furthers the ambiguous nature of James’s claim.⁵⁵

Myriad interpretations exist to make a work of literature evolve and grow through time and experience. The potential for meaning exists in the text itself, possibly but not necessarily as independent of its creator. In *The Turn of the Screw*, there is a larger question, more compelling and complex, than the matter of whether or not the ghosts are real. We can revisit the story and ask: Where does evil lie? We learn from the novella that something terrible that occurs becomes worse if it happens to a child: “If the child gives in effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to *two* children—?”⁵⁶ But James never says that what has happened to *these* two children is that *they* have witnessed a ghost and that *this* is the horror perpetrated upon them. James only states that, in the first story, “Griffin’s ghost, or whatever it was” first appeared to the boy in the other story.⁵⁷ The ghost “or whatever it was” implies that the “turn of the screw” is the terror imposed upon a child. The “turn” however, does not require the terror to be a ghost, only something horrible that happens to the child, or, with another turn, two children.

We have two first-person narrators, the friend of Douglas and the governess. Douglas describes the letter written “in the most beautiful hand”⁵⁸ of the governess who he finds to be “the most agreeable woman in her position,” “worthy of any whatever,” “awfully clever and nice.”⁵⁹ He admits they took “strolls and talks in the garden” and that he “liked her extremely and am glad to this day to think she liked me, too.” In so many words, we

⁵⁵ Edward Parkinson, *Turn of the Screw: A History of its Critical Interpretations 1898-1979* (St. Louis: St. Louis University, 1991), p. 3.

⁵⁶ Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1954), p. 7

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

have come to see the governess through the eyes of Douglas, the young college student, who has clearly become enamored with her. We must then take that into account in considering the reliability of his impression. He qualifies his descriptions with "I've ever known" and "she struck me as," so that it is only through his eyes that we see her.⁶⁰ Douglas goes so far as to implore his truthfulness by expressing that "I was sure; I could see," but such excessive assurances often raise suspicions of his reliability as a witness.

Douglas places himself in close proximity to the governess, in her confidence, as he tells his audience that she "never told anyone" the tale that she has told him. We see suspicion in the other characters. The narrator claims, "Oh yes; don't grin."⁶¹ But the audience calls into question the veracity of such statements. It would seem that being charmed, or being in love, is not the best state for giving reliable testimony. The narrator does not accuse but only suggests that the story is Douglas's biased opinion. And yet, the gathered friends do not accuse *Douglas* of being in love with the governess. Instead, the first narrator's statement is, "I see. She was in love."⁶² The narrator accuses *the governess* of being in love, though not with whom, and Douglas reacts as if this possibility did not apply to him: "Yes, she was in love. That is, she had been." The expression "had been" implies that there was love prior to the experience in which she candidly revealed the story. If this is the case, her testimony would be biased and we must question it, just as we must question Douglas's impression of the governess. Mrs. Griffin notes, "Well, if I don't know who she was in love with, I know who *he* was," so that the question of *who* was the focus of the governess's love. "'The story *won't* tell,' said Douglas; 'not in any literal, vulgar

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶² Ibid., p. 9.

way.”⁶³ What we are to gather, then, is that the story will not disclose who the governess loved, “not in any literal, vulgar way,” which can be taken to mean that disclosures will not be presented openly.

Douglas then goes on to lay out clues in his prologue to the story the governess tells. The house was “vast and imposing.” The uncle of the children, according to Douglas, was “such a figure as had never risen, save in a dream or an old novel, before a fluttered, anxious girl out of a Hampshire vicarage.”⁶⁴ As the “anxious girl” meets the dreamlike uncle in his large house, Victorian sensibilities are evident once the governess seems to have fallen victim to the romantic fantasies of the contemporary novel. The man who was “gallant and splendid” was, in addition, “handsome and bold and pleasant.”⁶⁵ His “town residence” was “filled with the spoils of travel and the trophies of the chase.” The governess describes him as “a lone man without the right sort of experience or a grain of patience.”⁶⁶ Not wanting to be bothered, he gives the governess a mandate—to care for the children in her own way. He wants no contact with the children and, by association, with her as she goes to care for them. But the uncle is not heartless. He takes care to leave the children “with the best people he could find to look after them.”⁶⁷ The mandate then includes total control of the children’s care, since “the young lady who should go down as governess would be in supreme authority.”⁶⁸ It follows that the mandate is both to care for the children and to protect the handsome gentleman from them.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

This girl, who we are told, has never been anywhere; she is “young, untried, nervous,” but also swept away by this man of the world, while having complete control over the children.⁶⁹ We learn, too, that she will be responsible for Flora, the little girl, and, on holidays, Miles, the little boy. The former governess was “first a young lady who had ‘done for them quite beautifully—she was a most respectable person—till her death”⁷⁰ So the governess knows she is but a replacement for someone who had been a supreme authoritarian. After the death of this woman, we also discover that Miles had to be sent away—“young as he was to be sent,” so that the uncle notes the boy’s immaturity, perhaps foreshadowing his difficulty at school, that will be interpreted by the governess in a manner that evades his family background as a formative influence upon him.

Finally, in the closing of the prologue, we are given cause to interpret the “seduction” of the young governess. While we are warned that nothing shall be stated openly, the narrator posits, “The moral of which was of course the seduction exercised by the splendid young man. She succumbed to it.”⁷¹ And, while this is not denied, Douglas confirms only that, “She saw him only twice.”⁷² Evoking images of the romantic novel, the taking of the governess’s hand constitutes the seduction and reward. The uncle revealed that others had been “afraid” to take on this, but she was not afraid: “She promised to do this burdened, delighted, he held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded.”⁷³ In the rapture of naïve virginal infatuation, she is set to take “supreme authority” according to the wish of the handsome uncle. If she cannot achieve this,

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁷² Ibid., p. 13.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 14.

conversely, it would mean failure. Already “rewarded,” she has no option but to fulfill her duty.

As we enter into the governess’s tale, we proceed armed with a distrust for the enamored witness, the motives behind the impression provided by that witness, and the understanding that a very inexperienced girl is setting forth to become “supreme authority” over two children and an estate. In her infatuation with the gentleman, she has projected an infatuation onto the little girl: “She was the most beautiful child I had ever seen,” she claims.⁷⁴ James gives us the hyperbolic nature of the governess’s “flights”; she is the church mouse, the vicar’s daughter, who falls into an almost religious rapture, seeing the “radiant image,” the “angelic beauty,” the “placid heavenly eyes,” of little Flora, “so beatific.”⁷⁵ But however “beatific” the little girl may be, the governess asks of the little boy, “And the little boy—does he look like her? Is he too so very remarkable?”⁷⁶ It is as if she is already attempting to attribute the “angelic” qualities to the boy, or eager to do so. She admits the “flights” to reflect her comments, after she is told by Mrs. Grose, “You *will* be carried away by the little gentleman!”; the governess says, ‘I’m rather easily carried away. I was carried away in London!’⁷⁷ Her quality of being “easily carried away” and having been “carried away in London” by the uncle conveys the sense of her flightiness. She admits to feeling “the fancy of our being almost as lost as a handful of passengers in a great drifting ship” of which she was “at the helm.” This “fancy” would not instill confidence in passengers. James language invites questions with almost every declaration of his characters.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 15

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 16

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 17

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 17.

After a great flourish, the governess opens the letter and is full of distress and tells Mrs. Grose that “the child’s dismissed his school.” The locution is not *the school has dismissed the child* or *the child has been dismissed from school*. The boy was so young “to be sent,” as we learned, so perhaps the “little gentleman” could no longer endure being there. It is the governess who says that he “dismissed his school” and that he would not be returning. Mrs. Grose cannot read, so we must accept the interpretation of the “dismissal” from the governess. There is no indication, other than the governess’s conclusion, that it was for ill behavior that Miles is sent away. The governess explains to Mrs. Grose, who asks what was said, ““They go into no particulars. They simply express their regret that it should be impossible to keep him. That can have only one meaning.””⁷⁸ But it can have many meanings. Perhaps the boy was sick or inconsolable, even if there was misbehavior.

Mrs. Grose’s response seems to indicate the absurdity of the little boy having been “an injury to the others” as the governess (who has never had any contact with the little boy) suggests. Mrs. Grose never once indicates, of her accord, that there is anything of Miles that would suggest he is “bad”—again, the word of the governess. And if he was guilty of egregious behavior, why did the school not specify? The governess wants to know if Miles is “bad” and the question comes from “the youngest of several daughters” who cannot have had much, if any, experience with young boys. Is this young and inexperienced daughter of the vicar capable of dealing with a boy, whatever the problem? We might infer that she is woefully ill-equipped for the task. We get a sense that the combination of her mandate from the gentleman and her sudden exalted position (both making her feel afloat at sea) have placed her in a position of power that promises to have serious consequences. Charles

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 20

Thomas Samuels notes that the religious upbringing of the governess makes her “hell-bent to establish her place in the eyes of God.”⁷⁹ He commits to the idea that she has an “intellectual pretentiousness” as she is the learned one and Mrs. Grose the illiterate servant. There is nothing to indicate the true nature of the letter from the school, other than the governess’s interpretation of it.

But we find that it is always the interpretation of the governess that James uses to give the reader a picture of what is happening. It is what she sees and believes that we learn, and only this. Her impressions of what Mrs. Grose thinks and feels and knows come only from the governess who is constantly providing the missing information for Mrs. Grose. Samuels notes, “The governess is always having to ‘press’ Mrs. Grose, to supply the right word, to help the old woman make things out.”⁸⁰ The governess interjects her own words into the timid woman’s half statements. In addition, Samuels goes on to point out, Mrs. Grose’s limitations prevent her from being able to actually read the letter, or from being able to see the phantoms that are yet to come. “When, at last, she comes in triumph with a contribution to the governess’s burgeoning theory of childish vice, it turns out simply to be the news that Flora had called the governess names.”⁸¹ We can glean from this not only that the governess is unfamiliar with little boys but that she may be unfamiliar with children’s behavior as well. She is the “youngest of several daughters” and therefore we can infer that she may be quick to judge any behavior that is not “angelic” as quite the opposite. The governess sees Flora leaving her lessons because of “the affection she had

⁷⁹ Charles T. Samuels, *The Ambiguity of Henry James* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 15.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

conceived for my person.”⁸² This simple act of homage caused the governess to melt into adoration and “catching my pupil in my arms, covered her with kisses in which there was a sob of atonement.”⁸³

We must note, in contrast, Mrs. Grose’s apprehension as the governess “began to fancy she rather sought to avoid me.” Regarding Miles, the governess uses words like “contaminate” and “corrupt,” which bring forth Mrs. Grose’s question, “Are you afraid he’ll corrupt *you*?”⁸⁴ And this is where we come to the question of corruption and innocence. The governess, truly not much more than a child herself, is set to be the authority of behavior, upbringing, care, and judgment for the two orphans of the man whose hand-kissing was a reward already for the undertaking. According to her own selfish, innocent sense of justice, she places upon the imperfect children, now surrounding her, the burden of a purity that no longer seems appropriate to the situation. She begins to cross from her own conflicting roles and defining qualities (mother/lover, judge/protector, exalted desires and fulfillment of the mandate that both excites her and corrupts her, as ultimate power tends to do) in order to protect the children from an evil that only she can see.

The governess’s relationship to Miles, her desire to overpower and rule him, her interpretation of the mandate—all conspire to create the need for heroic actions and moral triumph on her part. She is obsessed with the boy even before he arrives. Yet, as Samuels explains, “When he arrives, his beauty and apparent freedom from evil or suffering become themselves proof of his contamination.”⁸⁵ Her intuitions are both selfish and self-serving as she tries to fit every action into her grand scheme of demonic evil. She says of Miles, with

⁸² Henry James, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸⁵ Charles Samuels, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

whom she passionately adored upon first sight, "What I then and there took him to my heart for was something divine . . . his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love." But we know from the text that this child has experienced loss and abandonment; he would have to be affected by these things if his character is to be credible. Again, her intuitions are inconsistent with the reality James has described. With Mrs. Grose, too, the governess presupposes affection: "'Would you mind, miss, if I used the freedom—' "To kiss me? No!" I took the good creature in my arms and, after we had embraced like sisters, felt still more fortified and indignant.'"⁸⁶

The governess continually projects her own impressions on others. It then becomes clear that she is prone to bring to life her own imaginings. She dreams of meeting someone on her walks, "One of the thoughts that . . . used to be with me in these wanderings was that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet someone. Someone would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve. I didn't ask more than that—I only asked that he should *know* . . ."⁸⁷ But what is this man to know? She wants him to "approve," and with this in mind, she conveys how "my imagination had, in a flash, turned real. He did stand there!"⁸⁸ Whether there was a man or not, present or imagined, her vanity leads her to believe that she can conjure his existence. We can say that she has difficulty distinguishing between what is there and what is not, what is evil and what is not. She is shocked and surprised because she suddenly has been faced with the reality of her fantasy, "the man who met my eyes was not the person I had precipitately supposed." We surmise that she has read popular novels by Brontë and

⁸⁶ Henry James, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Radcliffe when she asks, “Was there a ‘secret’ at Bly—a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?”⁸⁹ A sensible person would not immediately connect the most extreme horrors with the benign image before her. The question of evil moves to the foreground. The demonizing of the object of desire can turn excitement into fear and hatred. Suddenly, there is an enemy. The enemy is evil and evil is that which threatens paradise. But what the governess sees as evil is simply a projection.

It is the projection of evil and the guarding against it that is at the heart of *The Turn of the Screw*. While Samuels suggests that the governess is in a struggle with the ghosts (real or imagined) for good over evil, and that she is “no less exploitive than the ghosts,” what he does not thoroughly discuss is how the ghosts appear in her mind.⁹⁰ When the ghost of Miss Jessel is *seen* to be sitting with Flora, the governess perceives evil. The image of Quint and his abhorrent behavior is again a judgment of the governess. If the ghosts can be considered real, there is nothing to indicate, beyond the impressions of the biased witness, that they are guilty of anything. They may, in fact, be the ones attempting to save the children from the clutches of the governess. We must remember we are also told that the uncle has hired good people. Mrs. Grose cannot really express evils done, only the hint of some possible indiscretion. It is the governess who takes this to the level of moral absolutes and perceives evil where there is anything less than divine perfection and beatitude. In a strange moment, the governess looks at sleeping Flora as “shrouded . . . the perfection of childish rest.”⁹¹ The “shroud” and “rest” almost anticipate Miles’s final achievement of freedom from evil through death. At the same time, the pollution that the

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

⁹⁰ Charles Samuels, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁹¹ Henry James, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

governess feels is brought on by the ghosts and the children who are associated with the ghosts, creating the impression of the search for a scapegoat or sacred object that can be identified with the source of contamination and the obvious dangers of corruption.⁹² As the governess has erased the outer world, she becomes increasingly consumed in a struggle between good versus evil, a battle that she believes she is fighting in good faith.

When discussing the vision of the man, Peter Quint, the governess feeds Mrs. Grose information. While she describes someone in particular, she conjures a familiar valet with red hair and borrowed clothes. This immediately grows into the idea of nefarious ghosts coming to usurp her power and becoming the enemy who she can fight. As she had tried to project impressions of Miles onto Mrs. Grose, she now begins to do so regarding the ghosts that only she can see. Mrs. Grose refers to the evil behavior of Peter Quint, “It was Quint’s own fancy. To play with him, I mean—to spoil him.”⁹³ Quint behaved too “freely” and didn’t know his place. This, for the governess, will not do. She imagines that Quint died from falling down drunk when armed only with the explanation that he perished from a fall on an icy road. She expresses joy in responding heroically to the challenge that comes to define her. But as Samuels notes, “Like evil, good is an abstraction, false to the shaded substance of humanity.”⁹⁴

Blinded by righteous indignation, the governess does not read human behavior or intuit the actions of those around her. She says of Mrs. Grose, who finally pulls away: “My

⁹²The governess, like ancient people in René Girard’s *Violence and The Sacred*, is in conflict with her desires and the evil forces that cause desires, while needing to be heroic by overcoming them. The threat of violence as connected with this conflict seems to have a hand in guiding the fictional narrative to the death of Miles.

⁹³James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw*. New York. Dell Publishing, 1954. P 41.

⁹⁴ Charles Samuels, op., cit., p. 16.

friend, with an odd impulse, fell back a step.”⁹⁵ The governess must be the hero. She must be good and prove herself the focus of attention lest the children look away. She admits, “*Never . . . have they so much as alluded to either of their old friends . . .*”⁹⁶ But this is more of her hubris, insisting to herself and Mrs. Grose that she *knows* what is going on around her. But Flora shows her terror when she asks to be taken away from the governess herself. Flora utterly denies seeing Miss Jessel, even as she becomes feverish, one may suppose, from this ceaseless persecution by the governess. Miles, on the other hand, asks to be noticed and perhaps to hear the voice of reason, while the governess threatens that people will come and take him away—a hurtful thing to say to a child who has lost so many and has already been forced from home. Miles begs her to let him alone and admits to being the one who blew out the ghostly candle, attempting to prove that there was no ghost, or protecting the ghost from the ghost hunter.

In the frantic crescendo, the governess realizes she has not only lost Flora but has lost Mrs. Grose as well, who cries out, “What a dreadful turn, to be sure, miss! Where on earth do you see anything?”⁹⁷ The governess resents exclusion from what she sees as Miles’s and Flora’s private world, since “at those moments of torment . . . knowing the children to be given to something from which I was barred, I sufficiently obeyed my habit of being prepared for the worst.”⁹⁸ We, too, have learned that incessant preparation “for the worst” has led her to anticipate the worst and intuit the worst, succumbing to her faulty intuition. She is relentless, and does “spring straight upon him” when Miles turns away:

⁹⁵ Henry James, *op. cit.*, p. 47

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

“Is she *here?*’ Miles panted . . . with a gasp, I echoed it, ‘Miss Jessel, Miss Jessel!’ and then. ‘It’s *he?*’ I was so determined to have all my proof that I flashed into ice to challenge him. ‘Whom do you mean by ‘he?’’ ‘Peter Quint—you devil!’ His face gave again, round the room, its convulsed supplication. ‘*Where?*’ They are in my ears still, his supreme surrender of the name and his tribute to my devotion.”⁹⁹

In this final scene, and in the last line, James’s ambiguity strikes its final blow. The governess tells that she gains possession of Miles physically: “We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped.”¹⁰⁰ It seems as if the boy fainted, and when the governess “held” him with such a “passion,” she literally, as she had figuratively, smothered him. Comparing the behavior of the ghosts and that of the governess, Samuels points out that hers is “ultimately more deadly.”¹⁰¹

We cannot demand that the text provide evidence that the ghosts, real or imagined, are either good or evil. It is only the imposition of the governess’s moral judgment and her mandate—assigning her the role as “protectress” of the children, in care of the house, and supreme authority—that has led to the madness that ends in Miles’s death. There is nothing in the text that confirms her declarations that the ghosts, if real, are evil. There is nothing to show that they have come to harm the children, as they never did in life. As the end grows nigh, the governess steels herself against what is to come, claiming “only another turn of the screw of ordinary human virtue.”¹⁰² We are given our own mandate: that we look at the harm to a child, the visitation of evil, as the extra “turn of the screw.” But here indeed, the governess tells us, what turns the screw is “virtue.” The screw is truly in the hand of the governess.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁰¹ Charles Samuels, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁰² Henry James, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

Conclusion:

Ambiguity as a Problem in Meaning

Our discussion of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* has suggested that the author can become a reader for whom a text does not have a single, unalterable meaning. Once the text is in the world and becomes an object to which meaning can be attributed, the author becomes separate from the text and may develop a new relationship to it in time. The author is the first to experience the text while writing it, but in subsequent readings, the author re-experiences it as somewhat different from what it was at the moment of its composition. Each experience with the text will be different, if only slightly, from what constituted the previous interaction. The structuralist consideration of text is incomplete insofar as it fails to adequately address the question of the reader. The structure of a text has no meaning without a reader.

One of the implications of this conception to the relationship between the reader and the text is that the meaning of a text is not exhausted in purely historical accounts. An author may provide us with some sense of what the text means to him during its period of composition; however, this does not have to coincide with what the text means to us. This does not imply that an author is duplicitous or cannot be trusted to tell the truth. An author may contend that there was a clear intention behind the creation of a piece of literature. When asked what a work means, he may insist that what he says was the *original* meaning, the truth behind the fiction. The established criticism of that work may follow the author's contention. However, this does not mean that other ways of interpreting the work are null. In fact, the author may adjust, dismiss, or later recant an earlier declaration. This new interpretation may be different or even contrary to the original interpretation, but it is

not for this reason invalid. A new and unexpected interpretation may bring a different meaning into light, while adding ambiguity to a conversation already in progress.

This is not to say that the author does not perform a vital role in the relationship between reader and text. That the author is somehow present—for example, that words were not arbitrarily thrown together to produce what we know as *Burnt Norton*—is crucial to the reader's discovery of meaning. A reader who knows something of the author's life can find meanings and intentions in the text that others, not privy to that knowledge, are unable to uncover. At the same time, we cannot extricate the author from the text because the text depends on the author who begins to constitute it. A reader's interpretation of a text may rely on various forms of knowledge, but knowledge of the author is not the sole criterion for deriving meaning from the text, as separate from the author and perhaps even apart from the author's intention. Nor does having that intimate knowledge denote a reader who can read it conclusively.

What is read comes from the author, as a child comes from its mother, but who that child or text is in the world depends on how the text or child finds itself in that world, interacts with the world, and how the world interacts and continues to interact with it. We can say that, without creation, a text does not exist, and that creation is partially the responsibility of readers. Robert Crosman explains the situation in this manner: "Thus the act of understanding a poet's words by placing them in the context of his intentions is only one of a number of possible ways of understanding them."¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Robert Crosman, "Do Readers Make meaning?" *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 151.

Consider three examples which can help us understand different degrees of separation from authorial intention. First, let us imagine a situation in which we discover a long lost poem, written in the author's hand, but completely forgotten by the author. It seems strange to say that the poem has no meaning, or no longer has meaning, because the author has no connection to the text. We might assume that the author, as reader, can rediscover the text herself. Will her new discovery have more meaning than that of a different reader, or less meaning than what might have been present in the forgotten intentions? This question is difficult to answer, but what would be difficult to refute is that the text can acquire meaning because the author can begin to relate to it in ways that may or may not have been part of its original meaning.

Second, let us imagine a situation in which an author wakes to find a pencil and paper in hand and a work of writing on the page. Again, it is hard to consider that the writing has no meaning since it came from the hand of the person who discovered it. However, because there was no discernable intention, there is a gray area when it comes to meaning if we consider meaning as coextensive with authorship. Can the author even claim authorship? While the person who discovers the writing may have a hard time recognizing herself in the text at hand, we nonetheless can relate a growing awareness of what the words mean to the act of remembering itself, insofar as the text discovered bears some sort of relationship to the life of the person who expressed herself on the discovered page.

Third and finally, let us imagine a situation in which we find words that seem to have been thrown together arbitrarily onto a page of writing. This is perhaps an extreme case, but it does resemble the situation of someone who confronts certain types of so-called avant-garde poetry that is initially so opaque that it appears to be meaningless. In time,

however, we might come to discover that these words indeed do make up sentences and that those sentences are made of words that fit into some comprehensible syntax and flow together. This case is especially valuable because it shows how meaning is much harder to dismiss even when complete transparency is impossible to achieve. In such instances, the reader picks up the paper and discovers that the words have meaning. How can we dismiss the reader as someone who merely “invents” meanings because the words at hand do not have a known author? In the case of a text that does not have an author about whom we know anything specific, the reader is precisely the one who provides meaning to the text.

If meaning is accessible to the reader, we cannot say that even an authorless text—a series of sentences, with comprehensible syntax and a combination of words from which meaning can be derived—is devoid of meaning. We can certainly say that a text ceases to have meaning if it is never read, but if it is discovered and the reader is moved to find meaning in it, is that reader wrong? It seems counter-intuitive to say that words are meaningless when a reader finds meaning in them, and that the reader is wrong when a text is experienced as meaningful, even if the text uses language in a somewhat ambiguous manner. It seems premature to say that a written document is a text, whatever its pedigree, until the reader (including the author) gives it meaning.

As investigated in this thesis, ambiguity has been approached as a problem in meaning that pertains to the basic genres that form the literary canon as a whole. In discussions of Sophocles’s play, *Oedipus the King*, T. S. Eliot’s poem, *Burnt Norton* and Henry James’s novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, the role of the reader in the reception of the text was underscored as a basic component in the experience of literary meaning. Our preliminary comments on Aristotle, Augustine and Wolfgang Iser were designed to indicate how the

reader opens up the space within which the text can be experienced thoughtfully as more than factual history, literal truth or identical in time. Without ambiguity, what is called literature would not be literature; it would be little more than reportage, unvarying testimony or a mute record of what is no longer alive.

Hence, the struggle to eliminate ambiguity in day-to-day language serves important practical purposes but does not help us understand literature as literature. Ambiguity is not synonymous with obscurity. When we are not able to derive meaning or understanding from literary texts, we are alienated from them. But ambiguity can assist us in coming to terms with the meaning of literature as a unique form of verbal expression. Ambiguity is not a lack of clarity, but instead it is the element in literature that provides the space for reflectivity and interpretive creativity. The appropriation of myth in drama, the metaphors of poetry, and the textual characteristics of literary prose each provide a home for the motivated reader. In this way, literature creates interaction between the reader and the text. This could not happen without ambiguity. We find in the end that ambiguity happens, not as obscurity, but as the catalyst of different paths to comprehension and discovery.

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