

# *Aspects of Modernism*

Studies in Honour of  
Max Nännny

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Andreas Fischer, Martin Heusser and Thomas Hermann

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## *Modernist Mysteries: Cracking the Code*

Daniel Ammann

### RIGHT-BRAIN DETECTIVES

“Literary critics make natural detectives,” said Maud. “You know the theory that the classic detective story arose with the classic adultery novel – everyone wanted to know who was the Father, what was the origin, what is the secret?” (A. S. Byatt, *Possession* 237-8)

In his “Typology of Detective Fiction” Tzvetan Todorov has pointed out that the conventional whodunit draws on a narrative duality in so far as it “contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” (159). According to the formula of the classical detective novel, the first story – i.e. the one that leads up to the crime – takes place before the second one starts and thus, for the time being, remains hidden from us, because it does not form part of the narrative discourse.

The story of the investigation sets in with the act of violence (usually a murder) that ends the first one. In this second story we follow the steps of some kind of detective who attempts to understand and solve the enigma of the crime by reconstructing its story. This process of revelation is often presented to us in the form of a series of objective observations and strict logical deductions. After all, there can only be one correct solution to the mystery – and the detective guides us to it. But, as Umberto Eco has suggested, these inferences should actually be treated as examples of what Charles Sanders Peirce has termed “abduction” (*The Limits of Interpretation* 158). Unless the detective him/herself is a close witness of the crime (which can be ruled out simply by there being a story worth telling), the solution to the murder mystery is always a reconstruction. No matter how convincing the circumstantial evidence may be, it is merely an interpretation of the known facts, probably the most plausible version

of the detective's guesswork – rather like reading one half of a correspondence or listening to someone on the phone without really knowing what the person at the other end says.<sup>1</sup> The ultimate truth may tell yet another tale, perhaps not quite so rational, but still linking the same material facts to build a coherent story. Fictional detectives are hardly ever found guilty of miscarriage of justice, and readers are not wont to appeal.

Whereas in deductive reasoning a specific conclusion follows from a given rule or set of axiomatic premises, and induction proposes or establishes such a rule based on experience or experimental evidence – abduction lies half-way between these two. “With Abduction, I find myself confronted by a strange and unexplainable Result,” Umberto Eco explains in *The Limits of Interpretation*. “Now I need to find a Rule such that, if it were true, and if the Result were considered a Case of that Rule, the Result would no longer be strange, but rather extremely reasonable” (157). In other words, abduction is a form of speculative or hypothetical thinking. Taking all the evidence of a particular murder case into account, the detective imagines the solution by *conjecturing* a probable crime-story and he presents it “as if it were the truth; and immediately Watson, the killer who is present, or someone else verifies the hypothesis” (Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* 160).<sup>2</sup>

It may be noted in an aside that the early history of detective fiction and its prominent characters aptly illustrate this point. Both Sherlock Holmes and even more so his literary ancestor C. Auguste Dupin – of Edgar Allan Poe's “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842) and “The Purloined Letter” (1844) – appear, at first glance, as pure rational analysts and scientific logicians. But their respective life-styles clearly point in another direction, distinguishing them as eccentrics with artistic or even bohemian traits (cf. Suerbaum 35ff.). The following description

<sup>1</sup> *The [unsolved] Mystery of Edwin Drood* by Charles Dickens serves as an excellent example. To date, many solutions have been suggested and a few writers have actually attempted to finish Dickens' book. Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini (*La verità sul caso D.*; Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1989) satirically combine Dickens' unfinished text with an imaginary symposium of well-known fictional detectives.

<sup>2</sup> Eco's own mystery novel *The Name of the Rose* is a subtle parody of classical detective fiction in so far as the hero-detective solves the mystery case by making the wrong “deductions.”

by Poe's anonymous first-person narrator in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” may serve as an illustrative example:

At the first dawn of the morning we closed all the massy shutters of our old building; lighted a couple of tapers which, strongly perfumed, threw out only the ghastliest and feeblest of rays. By the aid of these we then busied our souls in dreams – reading, writing, or conversing, until warned by the clock of the advent of the true Darkness. Then we sallied forth into the streets, arm and arm, continuing the topics of the day, or roaming far and wide until a late hour . . . (*Selected Writings* 193)

The traditional detective story makes an effort to create the false impression that the sleuth first gathers the necessary information and then – by way of infallible deductive reasoning – comes up with the one and only answer. But Holmes' and Dupin's success rates in solving cases cannot simply be explained by attentive observations and logical inferences alone. According to Poe, the “necessary knowledge is that of what to observe” (*Selected Writings* 191). The detective must already possess hypotheses about what *might* have happened, before he can look for more information, which will either corroborate or eliminate his tentative explanation. In this process of trial and error, speculative and ratiocinative thinking work hand in hand. It “is in matters beyond the limits of mere rule that the skill of the analyst is evinced,” as Dupin's friend observes (*Selected Writings* 191). – With abduction, it should be argued then, right-brain activities such as creative imagination and intuition rank higher than straight analytical abilities and deductive calculation. When Poe introduced the heterodiegetic device of the detective's companion as chronicler and narrator, he not only found a suitable way to obfuscate this fact, but also to further mystify his hero-protagonist by keeping him out of (the reader's) range. We are merely allowed to “observe” the investigator's actions from an outside point of view, through the eyes and sometimes puzzling comments of a bystander. Introspection into the mechanics of detection is denied or at least very limited.

## FRAMING THE READER

The mystery was unveiled. Haines was the third brother. His real name was Childs. (Joyce, *Ulysses* 409/337)<sup>3</sup>

If we look at the double narrativity of detective fiction from a literary-critical or semiotic point of view, it provides a very fitting metaphor for the act of reading and the search for meaning. If the second story progressively unravels the investigator's (re)construction of the first story by following and explaining its hints, by analogy, one might also suggest that the actual detective novel (as linear text manifestation) offers an appropriate *reading* of the hidden or untold story, an acceptable interpretation of the genesis of the crime. All the detective has to do is to arrange the data and circumstantial evidence of the case and combine the given information into a plausible narrative. "The attempt to read the mystery in this way presupposes the existence of a *text*," as Peter Hühn argues. "From the perspective of the detective, the traces left by the criminal appear as 'clues', possible indicators of the hidden story of the crime" (Hühn 454). Thus the detective's interpretive operations could be compared to the task of the critic, who takes salient linguistic phenomena and persistent clusters of theme and imagery and uses them to suggest and support a certain reading of the text. Analogous to the murder mystery, what appears to be marginal and unobtrusive or what is actually absent from the text as such (cf. allusions, omissions, places of indeterminacy, lexical suppression) may eventually turn out to be just as significant as the more blatant features of the surface structure. Both literary critics and detectives make an attempt to restore some of the deleted context in order to make sense of the text in question.

As Poe's detective stories and the overall popularity of mystery fiction demonstrate, double narrativity works perfectly as a stratagem for the purpose of creating narrative suspense and mystification. Readers willingly suspend their disbelief and, eventually, do not really object to the fuzzy right-brain logic of the tale. On the other hand, the same device seems to function as a form of *mise en abîme*, mirroring the critical reading process within the confines of the story. In this (metanarrative) sense, Poe implicitly provides us with an interpretive

framework, a critical paradigm for dealing with the classic-realist text. The model reader of such a text would certainly agree with Poe's character William Legrand in "The Gold-Bug," who doubts "whether human ingenuity can construct an enigma of the kind which human ingenuity may not, by proper application, resolve" (835).

One of literary criticism's intriguing assumptions has always been the notion that a text hides a potential secret, that it conceals its true message or at least something important by withholding vital pieces of information. Modernism especially – with its marked tendency towards enigma, ambiguity and unconventional symbolism – seems to have invited such an approach. Indeed, the language of criticism is often invested with the vocabulary of detection. But unlike the plot of classical detective fiction, modernist criticism is not concerned with solving a single problem or mystery. The modernist text – at the same time over- and undercoded – resists resolution, and occasionally the detective work of literary critics turns into a self-perpetuating activity, endlessly spawning new and even conflicting abductions. The critic's case is a much more problematic one, because there tend to be several conclusive interpretations without a chance of final verification or falsification. "Outside the detective novels," as Umberto Eco declares, "abductions are riskier and are always exposed to failure" (*The Limits of Interpretation* 160).

As I consider the "enigmatic" in any text to function as a fundamental textual strategy, it will be most informative to see how mysteries are treated in the modernist (and postmodernist) novel and in which way this allows the text to construct its model reader. The underlying assumption is that characters – within the realm of their fictional universe – are basically also readers and to a certain degree their dealing with obstacles and mysteries reflects our relationship to the text.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Joyce's reference to the Childs fratricide case, "the most celebrated unsolved crime of the day," see Kenner (122).

## A HOLE IN THE MIDDLE

“Have you guessed the riddle yet?” the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.  
 “No, I give it up,” Alice replied.  
 “What’s the answer?”  
 “I haven’t the slightest idea,” said the Hatter.  
 “Nor I,” said the March Hare.  
 Alice sighed wearily. “I think you might do something better with the time,” she said, “than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers.” (Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* 97)

In *Heart of Darkness* Joseph Conrad uses the narrative technique of the classical detective story to the power of 2. As with Poe’s anonymous narrator or Doyle’s Dr. Watson, Marlow’s story is not about himself. “The thrust of the narrative,” as Robert Hampson points out, “is towards Kurtz and Kurtz’s experience” (xxvi). But the mystery about Kurtz is never fully revealed and in the end his story remains untold. Marlow, who presents several possible readings of Kurtz’s case, is himself part of a frame story related by yet another first-person narrator. This method of “oblique narration” allows Conrad to guarantee Marlow’s reliability as a story-teller and also to delay the decoding of the mystery.

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (Conrad 18)

Through the unnamed first narrator of the novella, Marlow himself becomes an object of mystification, and the whole story is permeated with a sense of secret darkness. Quite typically for modernism, the text is scattered with red herrings, tempting its puzzled readers into endless speculation and finally – perhaps – teaching them a lesson in overinterpreting ambiguities. As the simile in the above quotation illustrates, the centre of the story is left empty – a blank space, a spot of indeterminacy, as reception theory has it. Metaphorically speaking, the secret is not just something hidden in the *dark*, but it also refers to uncharted territory, a *white* patch on the map.

Leaving the mystery unsolved also means that eventually we learn nothing about its true nature. Quite purposefully, the modernist text leaves a blank at the centre. The mystery might as well refer to something completely banal or not be a mystery at all. The empty space, the unfathomable riddle does only exist in so far as there is a frame defining it, and it is the function of the narrative discourse to provide such a frame. The text covers a lot of ground but leaves a hole in the middle, and this “negative space” (by virtue of its implied complementary shape in the forefront of our attention) actually acquires to the status of an entity or figure in the foreground.

A look at one of the marginal mysteries in the text will show that quite often the enigmatic is a result of abduction overreaction if not pathological suspicion. As all the information is mediated and filtered through the telling character, we have no option but to rely on Marlow’s perception. On his way up the river, he finds a strange book in a deserted hut:

Such a book being there was wonderful enough but still more astounding were the notes pencilled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn’t believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher. Fancy a man lugging with him a book of that description into this nowhere and studying it – and making notes – in cipher at that! It was an extravagant mystery. (Conrad 65-6)

In a rather throwaway manner, the mystery is solved some twenty pages later.

‘You made notes in Russian?’ I asked. He nodded. ‘I thought they were written in cipher,’ I said. He laughed, then became serious. ‘I had lots of trouble to keep these people off,’ he said. (Conrad 89)

This ironic device serves at least two specific purposes. Firstly, it introduces “a little bit of sober mystification” (to borrow Poe’s phrase), and in this enigmatic aura even the ordinary is presented as a riddle, like reading plaintext as if it were cipher. – Secondly, it emphasizes the text’s playful nature, warning and instructing its (model) readers and at the same time conspiring with them. In quite a similar way Conrad’s text veers towards an open and anti-climactic end, swallowing up the mystery as it draws to a close. “Droll thing life is –”, as Marlow muses at one point, “that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of unextinguishable regrets” (112-13).

## MYSTERIES AND MYSTICISM

And then he discovered the simple and sufficient explanation of the mystery. Miss Quested wasn't lost. (E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* 165)

Modernist literature abounds in examples of such backgrounded mysteries, teasing us with gaps and ciphers, riddles and anagrams. Leopold Bloom, for instance, never finds out who the “chap in the macintosh” (112/90), “that fellow today at the graveside” (373/308) really was: “What selfinvolved enigma did Bloom . . . not comprehend? – Who was M‘Intosh?” (*Ulysses* 650/600). Neither will we ever learn what message Bloom intends to leave in the sand. “I. AM. A.” he begins to write, but then, on a sudden impulse, leaves off: “No room. Let it go. Mr Bloom effaced the letters with his slow boot” (379/312). These blanks will never be filled. Like a form of mystical initiation they only prepare us for the great enigmas. – What did Maisie really know? Was Kurtz a remarkable man? What happened in the Marabar Caves? We should remember, however, that the text merely *creates* the illusion of emptiness by referring to what it does not say. Ultimately, there can be no revelation where the text remains silent.

Vladimir Nabokov is another cunning conjurer when it comes to playing with blanks and logogriphs. In *Lolita*, for instance, Humbert Humbert’s paranoiac pursuit of his nymphet is slowly twisted into a “cryptogrammic paper chase,” as the I-narrator calls it:

What a shiver of triumph and loathing shook my frail frame when, among the plain innocent names in the hotel recorder, his fiendish conundrum would ejaculate in my face! I noticed that whenever he felt his enigmas were becoming too recondite, even for such a solver as I, he would lure me back with an easy one. “Arsène Lupin” was obvious to a Frenchman who remembered the detective stories of his youth; and one hardly had to be a Coleridgean to appreciate the trite poke of “A. Person, Porlock, England.” (*Lolita* 248)

In the twisted mind of Nabokov’s hero every name in a motel register is suspicious. “Not everyone is Quilty,” as Michael Wood observes, “it’s just that anyone could be” (126). Obviously, Nabokov engages in a similar game with his reader and proves himself a true master of the literary hide-and-seek. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, where he also employs the technique of double narrativity, the effects are even more striking. The first-person narrator (designated only as V.) sets

out to write a scientific biography of his half-brother and novelist Sebastian Knight but probably ends up inventing most of it, filling in the blanks of Sebastian’s personal life. Early on in the novel V. remarks that “the manner of his prose was the manner of his thinking and that was a dazzling succession of gaps; and you cannot ape a gap because you are bound to fill it in somehow or other – and blot it out in the process” (33). When he vividly imagines Sebastian’s first adolescent romance, the girl beside his brother is not visible in the picture, as he decides to “let her remain achromatic: a mere outline, a white shape not filled in with colour by the artist” (136). But as V. goes on with his defeating project, there are indications that he actually elaborates on bits and pieces out of his brother’s books to make up for absences and missing links.

To keep the plot, and his biography, going, V. begins to plunder his characters out of Sebastian’s fiction. Several commentators have noted that Mr. Silbermann, the mysterious detective whom V. so fortunately meets on the train when leaving Blauberg, is the alter-ego of Mr. Siller in Knight’s *The Back of the Moon*. (Begna! n.p.)

The narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* clearly epitomizes the type of obsessive reader who always suspects some hidden meaning behind the simplicity of words. It is as if he were looking at a flat Magic-Eye illustration, waiting for the three-dimensional picture to manifest itself.

I sometimes feel when I turn the pages of Sebastian’s masterpiece [*The Doubtful Asphodel*] that the “absolute solution” is there, somewhere, concealed in some passage I have read too hastily, or that it is intertwined with other words whose familiar guise deceived me. (Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* 178)

Much in the way of *Heart of Darkness*, this novel also ends with a frustrating anti-climax. On his way to his brother’s death-bed, V. is absolutely certain that Sebastian has “something of boundless importance” to tell him (190): “His last book, my recent dream, the mysteriousness of his letter – all made me firmly believe that some extraordinary revelation would come from his lips” (192). Eventually, he makes it to the hospital, stays with his brother for a short while and then, quite unexpectedly, learns that he has been visiting another person and that his brother died the day before. And yet, for the narrator this disappointing experience takes on the quality of an epiphany in the modernist sense.

But those few minutes I spent listening to what I thought was his breathing changed my life as completely as it would have been changed, had Sebastian spoken to me before dying. Whatever his secret was, I have learnt one secret too, and namely: that the soul is but a manner of being – not a constant state – that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. (202)

In a lot of ways modernist characters seem to function as replicas of their suspicious readers, re-enacting their obsessive methods of interpretation in a desperate search for meaning and closure. On the other hand, it is probably part of the text's (if not the author's) intention to forewarn its "ideal" or model readers by making this process somewhat transparent. Ironically enough, any attempt to find "the figure in the carpet," to uncover some concealed message must ultimately fail, for the open modernist text is a writerly text and as such full of traps, "calling unnecessary attention to errors, omissions, repetitions and misalignments" (Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* 120). As Max Näny has convincingly shown, much of the deleted context "has to be supplied by the reader's creative imagination from hints in the text" (75). Apparently, this task turns out to be harder and riskier than that of any detective in a traditional mystery story. The modernist reader is often led into an abduction abyss and ends up with no solution at all, with nothing but a hole in the middle.

#### MESSAGE FOUND IN A BOTTLE

Mr Bloom stooped and turned over a piece of paper on the strand. He brought it near his eyes and peered. Letter? No. Can't read. Better go. Better. I'm tired to move. Page of an old copybook. All those holes and pebbles. Who could count them? Never know what you find. Bottle with story of a treasure in it thrown from a wreck. (Joyce, *Ulysses* 378f./312)

The only true test for a conjectural statement about a given text is the text itself. However convincing and meaningful an interpretation may be, it is still an abduction. In his interdisciplinary bestseller *Gödel*,

*Escher, Bach* (1979), the mathematician Douglas R. Hofstadter gives a simple but useful distinction between meaningful and meaningless interpretations: "An interpretation will be meaningful to the extent that it accurately reflects some isomorphism to the real world" (52-3). In mathematics formal systems exist independently from "reality," and any form of equation between the two is an interpretation. Although, strictly speaking, fictional texts do not fall into this category, the same isomorphic connection may be asserted between their "theorems" and some portion of reality – including other texts in the widest sense. Joyce's *Ulysses* could be cited as a prominent example here. The title itself is an intertextual hint and, as one of the major passwords, allows immediate access to the novel's subtext. Even if heavily travestied by the author, the Homeric parallel with Bloom as Odysseus, Molly as Penelope, Stephen as Telemachus, Gerty MacDowell as Nausicaa and Boylan as one of Penelope's numerous suitors makes more sense and is therefore more meaningful as an interpretation than, say, other intertextual correspondences between Joyce's characters and figures of Greek mythology – such as Bloom / Agamemnon, Molly / Clytemnestra, Stephen / Orestes, Gerty / Cassandra, Boylan / Ægisthus.

As the example illustrates, there could be a host of more or less plausible equations (and variant readings) to choose from, but there are differences in the acceptability of interpretations. Once more, the analogy with cryptography and the decoding of ciphertexts suggests itself. "When you hit a good choice, a 'meaningful' choice," as Hofstadter points out in connection with cryptanalysis, "all of a sudden things just feel right, and work speeds up enormously. Pretty soon everything falls into place" (50). Since literary texts tend to be open as well as overdetermined, they cannot be "cracked" like simple substitution ciphers, where a particular symbol is matched by a fixed meaning. Ciphertexts are, by definition, encrypted according to a certain key or code. In fiction such a key does usually not exist. The structural schema we have for *Ulysses* is essential for an understanding of Joyce's compositional technique, but it is still a pattern and a metaphor rather than an explanation. The text is purposefully multi-layered and overcoded. "I may have oversystematized *Ulysses*," Joyce suspected (Ellmann 702), and indeed, we do not have one, but a whole set of keys.

Without prior knowledge of the key, then, the cryptogram is just another variety of the unsolved mystery. Whatever translation we come up with must be the result of abduction logic, and the only

proof we get is that it makes sense. Theoretically, there may be a great number of interpretive choices. For a comparison with the classic-realist point of view we can fall back on E. A. Poe again. “The Gold-Bug” (1843), in which “he combined two of his inventions, the detective story and literary cryptography” (Wimsatt 778), is yet another demonstration of his ratiocinative method in the form of a double narrative. As in the Dupin stories, the hero, one William Legrand, is introduced by a nameless narrator, who first feeds us the amazing story of a treasure-hunt and then goes on to reveal Legrand’s ingenious cipher-breaking.<sup>4</sup> In his article on “What Poe Knew About Cryptography” W. K. Wimsatt shows that – exactly like his character Legrand – Poe asserted on various occasions that it was not possible to concoct a cipher which human ingenuity (and he) could not resolve (776). Of course, Poe was wrong. “Today, experienced and knowledgeable cryptologists agree that a number of cryptographic systems are unsolvable by analytic techniques. Cryptographic systems in which a key is used only once . . . can be mathematically proven to be analytically unsolvable” (Barker n.p.).

While the cryptanalyst works from the notion that the code or key itself is written into the cryptogram, it is the reader or critic’s belief that the text itself must contain the means by which the secret it creates can be solved. But, of course, true secret writing disguises the fact that it is secret. The textual surface has to be unobtrusive in order to effectively hide its secrecy. This technique either works in the

<sup>4</sup> Ironically enough, the cryptogram in “The Gold-Bug” could be solved faster than Legrand demonstrates. For several reasons, Poe’s statistics are not quite correct. According to his story the letter frequency in an English text should yield the following succession: E A O I D H N R S T U Y C F G L M W B K P Q X Z. But Laurence Dwight Smith, in his intriguing little book on *Cryptography*, presents us with a slightly different order: E T O A N I : R S H : D L : C W U M : F Y G P B : V K : X Q J Z (153). The most striking deviance occurs in the letter “T,” which Poe has moved eight notches down. But – and in accordance with Smith – “T” is indeed the second most frequent letter in the story’s cryptogram. When Poe wrongly assigns it to the tenth place in his sequence, this gives him another opportunity to show off Legrand’s acumen in the speculative assumption that “e is doubled with great frequency in English” and that “repetitions of any three characters, in the same order of collocation . . . most probably represent the word ‘the’” (837). The definite article is in fact the most frequent trigraph, and amongst the most common doubles “ee” ranks in the second place, right after “ss” (cf. Smith 153).

manner of Poe’s “Purloined Letter” or as described in his story “Mystification”:

He now explained the mystery . . . the language was ingeniously framed so as to present to the ear all the outward signs of intelligibility, and even of profundity, while in fact not a shadow of a meaning existed. The key to the whole was found in leaving out every second and third word alternately, when there appeared a series of ludicrous quizzes upon a single combat as practised in modern times. (126-7)

Once the cryptographic message is discovered, the cryptanalyst can proceed to the actual decipherment. Obviously, the reading of modernist mysteries involves the same stages. The entire process could be compared to finding a manuscript in a bottle. (It could have been dropped from an alien spaceship, for all it matters.) For the decipherment of such out-of-context messages, Hofstadter distinguishes three levels of information, namely the *frame* message, the *outer* message and the *inner* message:

The first level, the frame message, is found when one picks up the bottle and sees that it is sealed, and contains a dry piece of paper. Even without seeing writing, one recognizes this type of artifact as an information-bearer, and at this point it would take an extraordinary – almost inhuman – lack of curiosity, to drop the bottle and not look further. Next, one opens the bottle and examines the marks on the paper. Perhaps they are in Japanese; this can be discovered without any of the inner message being understood – it merely comes from a recognition of the characters. The outer message can be stated as an English sentence: “I am in Japanese.” Once this has been discovered, then one can proceed to the inner message, which may be a call for help, a haiku poem, a lover’s lament . . . (Hofstadter 167-9)

The analogy between the message in a bottle and modernism seems justified, since this movement has always claimed a certain autonomy of discourse and displayed a very high degree of context-sensitivity (cf. the *mot juste*, the natural symbol). The modernist text discourages superficial readings and tempts its readers to excavate deeper levels of meaning. The reader creates such a text quite as much as the text itself creates its reader. And the same holds for the codes of interpretation.

## TOWARDS A CODE OF CODES

At this point the story grows obscure. The information has run out, and the events that follow this last sentence will never be known. It would be foolish even to hazard a guess" (Auster, *City of Glass* 157)

Drawing on Poe as an intertext for interpretive frameworks we can sum up as follows:

In the classic-realist mode, the text writes as well as "unwrites" the mystery. The text first creates the mystery by withholding information from the reader and then undoes it by revealing the secret. The mystery is solved in front of the reader's eyes. In other words, the text moves from confusion to meaning. – Of course, there is another side to Poe's fiction, an irrational and a more "modernist" one, so to speak, pointing towards the same inscrutable horror summed up in Kurtz's last words (cf. Conrad 112). In several of these tales of mystery and imagination Poe takes us close to the edge of some literal pit or precipice, and like the sender of the "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" "we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge – some never-to-be-imparted secret . . ." (*Selected Writings* 109), but, along with the teller, the mystery disappears in the abyss. These stories, however, clearly belong to the genre of the fantastic, whereas the texts considered here generally represent a form of fictional realism.

In a lot of ways, modernism has made use of and playfully varied the pattern of detective fiction, but refuses closure and leaves the mystery unsolved. This calls for a new generation of model readers, who – beyond the semantic interpretation of the text – suspect yet another code written into the inner message: subtexts, intertexts, subliminal messages, compositional codes and lexical patterns, chiasmic structures and what not. It is this form of artistic appreciation and critical interpretation modernism has cultivated – and we still have to live up to it.

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