

# 18. Turning Symbols

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And We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves.

— *Qur'án*, 41:53

The practice and realization of unsurpassed, complete enlightenment is brought forth sometimes by a teacher and sometimes by a sutra. A teacher is a buddha ancestor of the entire self. A sutra is a sutra of the entire self. We say this because you yourself are the self of all buddha ancestors, and the self of all sutras.

— Dogen, SBGZ 'Kankin' (Tanahashi 2010, 222)

## Intimologies

Experiencing subjects, sentient beings, are also complex adaptive systems, incorporating guidance systems. They navigate the world and adapt themselves to it, but some also adapt it to themselves, more or less intentionally. The ability to do this can be extended dramatically by artificial means or *technologies*. On this planet, the unprecedented human success at doing this has an enormous effect on the quality of life for all earthlings. We have learned that our technologies amplify the unintended consequences of our acts along with the intended ones, yet we

often fail to take responsibility for this.

Taking responsibility would mean changing the routines that lead to unconscionable results, because once the results become predictable, they also become *intentional*, for any being capable of conscious self-control. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we knew that human niche-building was destroying the niches of countless other beings. We were using up biodiversity just as we were using up fossil fuels. We have caught ourselves in the act of biocide, and there is no consolation in knowing that we didn't *mean* it. Unless we learn to use our power more effectively and more humbly at the same time – in a word, *mindfully* – we will proceed to render the biosphere as inhospitable to ourselves as it has already become for the other species we have driven to extinction. Biocide is suicide. We can read the signs, and they tell us that technologies alone are not enough to save the inhabitants of Earth from our maladaptive habits. We need *intimologies* as well in order to read the turning signs and keep the meaning cycle turning in the ecosystems and in ourselves.

We humans can develop technologies for manipulating things because we are capable of directing our joint *attention*. Pre-eminent among the tools harnessing and extending this capability is language. We can call it a 'tool' or 'technology' because we *use* it intentionally, though we have not consciously *designed* it to work the way it does. Natural languages have evolved, just as human beings have, in a manner beyond human control; the designer is nature. But linguistic semiosis can amplify and modify the effects of other technologies which already amplify the human effect on the biosphere. This makes language a crucial component of the guidance system which is external to each person but internal to the mind of humanity. This is the context of *turning symbols*, and of the intimologies which add another dimension of self-control to the universal communion of subjects.

How do we read the turning signs to *make up our minds*, to self-organize our guidance systems at personal, social and spiritual levels? The inquiry which aims to answer that question started out as *hermeneutics* (introduced in Chapter 6), but has developed beyond its narrow focus on the interpretation of Scripture: language itself being rooted in semiosis, the inquiry is essentially semiotic. Theories articulating the way turning signs work can be

called *intimologies* because they study the intimacy of relations among subjects, objects, signs, interpretants and selves. For any subject or self, semiosis involves interpretation, which we also call 'reading,' of signs – which we also call 'texts' in order to suggest their interwoven complexity. 'To interpret a text,' says Umberto Eco (1979, 42), 'means to actualize its content starting from its expression.' Some interpretation processes are better than others because they actualize 'content' more mindfully, more intimately, more deeply than others. These are the practices of the ideal reader, who turns signs – especially *symbols* – and is turned by them, actualizing the communion of subjects. Just as logic is the ethic of reasoning, intimologies are the ethics of turning symbols.

## Symbolicity

The emergence of communication based on symbolic reference was a leap forward in the evolution of guidance systems on this planet. Signs have to combine iconic and indexical functions, as dicisigns do, in order to be informative. Symbols greatly facilitate the combination, especially when they develop into the comprehensive multipurpose system that we call a *language*. Symbolic systems, internalized as complex habits, enable guidance systems to economize by channeling energy of the highest transformity into both discovery and communication. Symbols can *compress* meaning as no other form of semiosis can.

The symbolic recoding of systems of iconic and indexical relationships is so useful because it ultimately allows us to ignore most of the vast web of word-object, word-word, and object-object indexical relations. The availability of this mnemonic shortcut makes possible the incredible acceleration and compression of information transmission and reception during language production and comprehension, as opposed to most other forms of communication. We become lightning calculators of reference. These ignored indexical relationships are still the implicit grounding of word reference ....

Symbolic interpretation requires a sort of idealized recapitulation of the indexical acquisition history that led up to the establishment of this referential relationship, which need not invoke anything but the most skeletal elements of the underlying indexical and iconic support—only what is essential to the immediate combinatorial and pragmatic context.

— Deacon (2007, 302)

The price we pay for the ‘acceleration and compression’ of meaning enabled by symbolic reference is that the process of meaning can become more habit-bound as contact with the reality beyond the cognitive bubble becomes more indirect. The *generality* of symbols means that they cannot furnish their interpreter with knowledge of their individual dynamic objects, so the interpreter of every symbol can only select something from the universe of her *collateral experience* and take it to be the subject that the sign is about. The real subject (the dynamic object) may have any degree of complexity, but as ‘denotation essentially takes a part for its whole’ (EP2:322), the *immediate* object of the sign is a partial or simplified version of it. Thus immersion in language tends to foster a feeling that we know what we’re talking about, even when we don’t.

The (relatively recent) invention of writing as a (relatively) permanent record of a symbolic utterance exacerbated this problem. Now the guidance of a whole community could be encoded and embodied – and *enforced* – apart from the act of meaning which produced its original expression. In the play of life, a fixed and static *script* could now dominate the dynamics of *performance*. Religious communities refer to such an authoritative text as a *scripture* (or in Buddhism, a *sutra*). The authority vested in such a symbol may become central to the communal guidance system. If a privileged class appropriates it to their own purposes, writing becomes another technology useful to some humans for the domination of others. Yet it also becomes a technology of liberation and transformation, for those who can read and interpret such powerful symbols in the light of their own experience, living by that reading and reading by that living. They turn the pages of scripture and the pages turn them.

Whether a text is a turning sign for you depends on how you read it. We speak of words as *having* meaning when they symbolize experience; or in more basic semiotic terms, when they stand to us for the form experience takes. This requires a genuine intimacy between the Author imagined by the reader, and the Reader imagined by the author, of the text. 'It is requisite,' wrote Peirce,

in order to show what we are talking or writing about, to put the hearer's or reader's mind into real, active connection with the concatenation of experience or of fiction with which we are dealing, and, further, to draw his attention to, and identify, a certain number of particular points in such concatenation. If there be a reader who cannot understand my writings, let me tell him that no straining of his mind will help him: his whole difficulty is that he has no personal experience of the world of problems of which I am talking, and he might as well close the book until such experience comes.

— CP 3.419 (1892)

But how is the reader supposed to know whether 'such experience' will ever come, or whether it *has* actually come but is not recognized by the reader as the object of the sign he is reading? And what about the reader who does understand the text, or feels that she does – does that feeling guarantee that the object of the interpretant sign she has in mind is really the same as the object of this text? People whose memories fail them typically (and often effortlessly) *confabulate* or construct an imaginary past that seems to account for the present situation as they see it. How do you know that you aren't confabulating right now, when you think you know what this text is referring to?

You can carry out a reality check on any symbolic representation of truth, discovery or revelation only if you are acquainted with what it represents. No concatenation of words can tell you that; the most a symbol can do is tell you in general terms where to look.

The Sign can only represent the Object and tell about it.

It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object; for that is what is meant in this volume by the Object of a Sign; namely, that with which it presupposes an acquaintance in order to convey some further information concerning it.

— Peirce, CP 2.231 (1910); context in rePatch ·15

As for the author, all she can do is bear witness to the phenomenon as it appears to her. Lee Smolin (1997, 218-19) puts this in interstellar terms:

If we sent a message out into the universe, not knowing who would read it or where, how could we tell them where we are? We have no idea what our location would look like from their point of view; therefore our only option is to depict how the universe looks from our point of view, and hope that they can deduce from their own knowledge of the universe from what point the universe would look that way.

Any deep reading of a symbol must begin with an implicit guess at what its dynamic object might be. Your first guess is likely to be something familiar to you, but may be quite remote from what the author had in mind. If so, the text will probably seem less and less relevant as you read on – as if you were trying to find your way around London with a map of Paris. Whether you ‘close the book’ at that point or not, you will have to guess again in order to reopen your reading of it, and see for yourself whether the map fits the territory as you expect it to – and if it does, whether it conveys ‘further information’ about it. If it does, it may serve your purpose – or better, it may *turn* your purpose and get you a little closer to the Whole Truth beyond any private purpose of yours or the author’s.

## **Authority and authenticity**

Sometimes a text can surprise you. It makes sense, but not the sense you habitually make in the comfort of the cognitive bubble. A symbol becomes a turning sign because its reader begins to expect

the unexpected from it.

What makes a text a *turning symbol* for you is not the authority vested in it by others but the *authenticity* of your reading. According to the OED, *authority* and *authenticity* came into the English language from different sources, yet they have been entangled ever since. The connection seems too deep to be accidental. The linking factor is the *author*, from the Latin *auctor*, the agent-noun from the verb *augere*, 'to make to grow, originate, promote, increase.' The author is the "grower" of symbols – although, semiotically speaking, the power of growth resides in the symbols rather than the author, just as it resides in the plant rather than the planter.

What you say is *authentic* insofar as you speak honestly from experience of your subject. Every social consensus or inquiry relies on authentic testimony. But who is the author of the reality beyond your personal experience, including the unknown other selves you speak *to*? You are *subject to* that external reality because you are *not* the author of it. Rather it is the author of you, and of your very nature as an author. It makes and unmakes you what you are. Whatever authority you have is a chip off the old uncarved block from which all things emerge and to which they all return. And the same goes for turning symbols.

Such a symbol could be a story, a play or picture, an exposition, description or prescription. Any text can act as a turning symbol, though naturally some are better suited for this role than others. The difference it makes to your performance, to the life you lead, is the *actual* meaning of such a symbol, the interpretant emerging dynamically from a dialogue between the text and your guidance system.

This does not mean that meaning is a private or individual matter. If a text is in a human language, its meaning at the moment is at least an interplay among the histories and intentionalities of the language, the writer and the reader. To read it scripturally is to read it as being about the core of the *commens*, the experiential ground which you the reader have in common with all readers of symbols, though the figures arising from that ground vary from person to person and time to time. You might say that the reader realizes her functional identity as a member of the human Bodymind by lighting up the consensual domain with the flame of

her personal experience. When this happens, her interpretant act of meaning can make a difference to all humanity. Intimologically, though, the meaning is attributed not to the reader but to the text or its author.

Poets, prophets, composers and transmitters of scripture universally testify that its real source is higher or deeper than their own conscious intentions. For instance, the Anishinaubae storytellers who passed on the traditions of their culture always ascribed the authorship of the stories they told to the *manitous* (Johnston 1995, 162). Others have called that source intuition, the unconscious, the body, the soul, the Muses, the Angel, God, the Unknown, ..... – and as Mary Catherine Bateson (2004, 16) remarked, ‘the claim of merely passing on what one hears has many layers.’

Inspired prophets, artists and visionaries are described by Northrop Frye (1982, 127) as ‘people with what seems to be an open channel of communication between the conscious and the unconscious.’ In the monotheistic religious traditions, this quality of their experience expresses itself as a claim ‘to speak with the voice or authority of God’ (Frye 1982, 126). If the prophet actually succeeds in transforming his society, then his authority may be appropriated and institutionalized by custodians who venerate the prophet and his Book rather than the *presence* of his original sources, and may even try to circumscribe or discourage direct access to those sources. If they succeed, then transformation and renewal of that community depends on the advent of a new revelation, since the old one has been effectively ‘buried’ in conventions.

The content of revelation, then, is ‘revealed’ not so much *by* the author *to* the reader, as primally *through* both author and reader *from* a higher/deeper Source *to* a more genuine Practice.

## Trusting and turning

We typically imagine thought as preceding the expression of it, even when we know that all thought is in signs. Likewise we imagine an Author who already knows the meaning of scripture dictating the text to the human author; or we take the utterer of the

text to be reading the mind of the Creator. Even in a diagrammatic system such as Peirce's Existential Graphs, which represent the thought process with minimal use of words, the *graphist* (who actually *scribes* the graph) reads the mind of the *grapheus*, who 'creates the universe by the continuous development of his idea of it' (CP 4.431, 1903). But the sign delivered to the interpreter can only re-present the idea according to the symbol system and context shared by utterer and interpreter at the time. So we tend to think of communication as the transmission of a message from sender to receiver (utterer to interpreter), neglecting the fact that the original "message," prior to its "encoding" by the utterer or graphist, was already a sign, so that the utterance is *another* sign, a translation or interpretant of the first.

The interpreter, for his part, has to read the text as authentic testimony to the experience of the writer – including the experience of being divinely inspired, or at least *authorized* by a higher power to say things that the unaided writer could not have known, invented or said on his own authority. This is essentially the same principle which Peirce explained in an essay on 'The Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents':

... our first hypothesis should be that the principal testimonies are true; and this hypothesis should not be abandoned until it is conclusively refuted. No practice is more wasteful than that of abandoning a hypothesis once taken up, until it becomes evident that it is quite untenable. An excellent method in the great majority of those cases in which it is applicable and in which it leads to any unequivocal results is to give precedence to that hypothesis which reposes upon a deep and primary instinct, such as is the instinct to believe testimony, without which human society could not exist.

— EP2:113

The same principle applies to the intimologies of drawing guidance (i.e. pragmatic meaning) from ancient scriptures, or indeed from any turning symbol. We *begin* by trusting the symbol to turn us in the right direction. As Dogen says, 'There is no path that comes

from anywhere other than sincere trust' (SBGZ 'Raihai Tokuzui' (Tanahashi 2010, 73)).

Antonio Damasio, commenting on recent research into the deeper quirks of human nature, writes: "Trust Shakespeare to have been there before' (2003, 27). A *turning symbol*, whether sacred or secular, scriptural or fictional, mythical or factual, no matter who or when its author was, manages to be about the time you are now living, because it is a local manifestation of the universal condition. You *trust* the text to speak to you directly, through the medium of the whole symbolic system in which the text is framed. This is true of your encounter with any potentially turning symbol, whether it be religious, literary, philosophical or scientific. Michael Polanyi's remarks about formal theorizing apply to all of the above:

Formal operations relying on *one* framework of interpretation cannot demonstrate a proposition to persons who rely on *another* framework. Its advocates may not even succeed in getting a hearing from these, since they must first teach them a new language, and no one can learn a new language unless he first trusts that it means something.

— Polanyi (1962, 151)

The hermeneutic circle (introduced in Chapter 10) applies to scientific texts as well as scriptures. You work toward a holistic grasp of the author's argument by learning a 'new language,' and your assumptions are continually modified in the process. The process is circular because you can only start with *part* of the text, but as your sense of the whole emerges, that sense changes what each part means, including the part you started with. Then you may have to re-cycle it, re-read it after you have a feel for the whole, in order to actualize its potential meaning. As with any trusted text, the re-reading may also change your grasp of the whole, and the more deeply the text connects with core experience, the more this is likely to happen. A re-turning symbol can thus become a "scripture" for those who keep returning to it.

The 'bootstrapping' aspect of the hermeneutic circle is also intrinsic to the way we acquire a first language.

The logical structure of languages is replicated (acquired) and passed on as a complete system, not just a collection of words. Even though it may be learned word by word and phrase by phrase, what is acquired only becomes a language when the prescribed ways of using these words have been internalized to the point that one is theoretically capable of knowing how to phrase all thoughts for which words are available and able to determine the grammaticality of any novel sentences of known words.

— Deacon (1997, 113)

The meanings expressible in a language are not built up from the accumulated meanings of words and phrases; rather the words or a language derive what meanings they have from the completeness of the system at every stage of its development, and its role as model in the meaning cycle. Trust in that system and its role is also essential to an ordinary conversation, which is ‘a wonderfully perfect kind of sign-functioning,’ according to Peirce (EP2:391) – relying as it does upon the ‘deep and primary instinct to believe testimony.’

There is evidence that when we hear someone speak, normally what is said goes directly into belief, exactly as when we observe some event happening directly (Gilbert 1993). We do not first understand what is said and then evaluate whether to believe it. Rather, we first believe what is said and then, if we are not under too much cognitive stress, we may think it over critically and reject it.

— Ruth Millikan (2004, 121)

In reading a scripture, you begin by assuming that what it says is true, and on that basis trying to guess what it could be telling you about the universe of which it is true. If that universe is one that you inhabit, then the scripture is your guide into the living future. Your continuing experience becomes an endless series of experiments testing the trustworthiness of your guesses at its meaning. In science, on the other hand, the course of

experimentation begins with a pragmatic understanding of the hypothesis proposed, and on that basis the truth of the hypothesis is what gets tested. A hypothesis is scientific to the extent that the course of experimentation *can* have an end, because an actual observation could conclusively refute it. On the other hand, the inductive logic of science does not allow for conclusive *confirmation* of a hypothesis, because the evidence is never complete.

## Seeds and sense

What turns a text into a scripture or a literary “classic” is an extra measure of what Northrop Frye calls *resonance*, through which ‘a particular statement in a particular context acquires a universal significance’ (Frye 1982, 217). A turning symbol as manifested in a particular text *grows* in breadth or depth: its scope of application broadens, or its archetypal signification deepens (or both), and thus its ability to convey *information* increases as interpretants proliferate. According to Peirce, a symbol ‘is an embryonic reality endowed with power of growth into the very truth, the very entelechy of reality’ (EP2:324). Every symbol grows by creating an interpretant, which is ‘an outgrowth of the symbol’ (EP2:322); but whether it represents an actual growth of meaning depends on the interpreting bodymind. Frye elucidates this in terms of the ‘traditional but still neglected theory of “polysemous” meaning’ – which is not a ‘superimposed series of different contents of understanding, where we move from one level to the next like grades in a school. What is implied is a single process growing in subtlety and comprehensiveness, not different senses, but different intensities or wider contexts of a continuous sense, unfolding like a plant out of a seed’ (Frye 1982, 221).

The seed, as a concentrated or compressed form of life, is iconic of the turning symbol which (thanks to the semiotic *compression* explained above by Deacon) can be a highly concentrated component of a guidance system. This effect is enhanced by the ‘conceptual blending’ which, according to Fauconnier and Turner (2002, 323), can produce ‘impressions of global insight.’ And the shorter the scripture, the better it enables

you

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour

— Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence' (PPB, 484)

As we saw in Chapter 6, many teachers of whole truths have used seedlike sayings to point the way to their students. Jesus was one of these; Peirce remarked on the 'germinative virtue' of his sayings (HL 139, 1903), which Jesus himself compared to the kingdom of heaven in the *Gospel of Thomas*:

(1) The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what heaven's kingdom is like." (2) He said to them, "It is like a mustard seed. (3) < It > is the smallest of all seeds, (4) but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of heaven."

— *Thomas* 20 (NHS)

The birds of heaven take shelter in this plant just as a Buddhist takes refuge in the Dharma. Its continuous growth is the practice of the Dharma, in which all sentient beings are enlightened. A seed encodes the plant in miniature; the parable of the mustard seed emphasizes the smallness of the seed, which is the measure of its concentration. But it takes a whole ecosystem to grow a seed into a plant. Similarly one's whole life experience is concentrated in the turning sign which one accepts by taking it as *given*. Where the 'soil' of experience (or *karma*) is not 'prepared' to support the growth of the seed into a new life, the ground is barren and the Word not heard.

The other side of the coin of compressed meaning is the relative *vagueness* of the seed-symbol: as it unfolds, its content grows more definite in form.

By the time we say exactly what we meant, it isn't quite the same; it is richer, more explicit, more fully known. We use symbols not only to tell others what we mean; we tell ourselves. The process of 'thought' consists of

many more felt meanings called forth by any symbol, as these again interact and create (metaphorically) more meanings for us. Such a process occurs also in comprehension and brings about change and development of the felt meaning.

— Gendlin (1997, 120)

But as the interpretant life actualizes its potential, it sheds some of its latent possibilities along with its vagueness. The irreversibility of time entails that taking one path always means not taking others that one *could* have taken. The same applies to an embryo, as Salthe (1993, 162) explains:

Semiotically, the early, vague system can have many more possible interpretations, perhaps an indefinite number of them. As development continues, fewer and fewer interpretations are possible concerning what is developing.

In other words, development of a seed, system or symbol involves *specification* or *specialization*. Concluding a series of illuminating variations on the seed metaphor, including the ‘parable of the sower,’ the Gospel of Mark tells us that

With many such parables, he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.

— Mark 4:33-4 (RSV)

Seeds work because they are portable: the sacred seed-texts work as The Word because they are concise, aphoristic, epigrammatic, proverbial and vague. Symbols grow by self-explication, but the form they grow into depends on the context where they are planted. Tending to the intimate dialogic context, as a teacher does with his disciples, increases the chances of a good harvest. But elaborations and explanations are only effective within esoteric (specialized) circles whose members share a common language more precise than parabolic. Meaning is hidden in turning signs as the plant is hidden in the seed: it is revealed or manifested only

through interaction with the environing context.

Those with sense plant seeds;  
The fruits grow from the ground.  
Since there is no seed without sense,  
There is no nature, no life.

— Grand Master Hung-jen, the Fifth Patriarch, in the *Sutra of Hui-neng* (Cleary 1998, 11)

Your *inhabitation* of a turning symbol makes a difference to your life, *informs* it, makes your future its interpretant. As the reader consciously takes its direction, the *form* appears as an ideal that one can ‘live up to’ (or at least live *toward*.) *Living the time* is a continuum from past experience through presence to future practice.

The mind ground contains the seeds:  
With universal rain, all of them sprout.  
When you’ve suddenly realized the blossoming heart,  
The fruit of enlightenment will naturally mature.

— Grand Master Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch, in the *Sutra of Hui-neng* (Cleary 1998, 75)

A “revelation” which does not blossom in your presence, and bear fruit in your practice, is not a revelation for you. Whether a text reveals anything to you depends crucially on its connection with your collateral experience of the time and your attention to the dynamic object of the sign. It is your attention to that object that determines the dynamic interpretant of the sign, but the effect is enhanced if the text is the *one* channel to which you are tuned at the time. In his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* (1926, 191), Gandhi told the community of his *ashram* that ‘We should make it our only source as far as possible.’ This invites devoted readers to invest the scripture with any and all sacred meaning; it becomes a microcosm of meaning space, since the believers are required to derive a *whole* system of guidance from it.

Once canonized and institutionalized, though, a sacred Scripture may become too familiar and conventional, and thus lose its power to challenge, to startle the reader out of his mental routines. As Aldous Huxley (1945, x) pointed out, ‘familiarity with

traditionally hallowed writings tends to breed, not indeed contempt, but something which, for practical purposes, is almost as bad – namely a kind of reverential insensibility, a stupor of the spirit, an inward deafness to the meaning of the sacred words.’ This kind of “reverence” elevates the symbol above – and thus uproots it from – the dialogic context from which its transforming power originally emerges. Then it may be time to turn to another text, perhaps one that other people in other traditions have found to be sources of guidance and inspiration. On the other hand, too many turns may weaken one’s ability to stay tuned to one text at a time.

## Communicants and interpretants

What is really “communicated” or “transmitted” by a turning sign, and what is “revealed” to the reader in the kind of semiosis conducive to the communion of subjects?

According to one analysis by Peirce (EP2:477, 1906), what really gets communicated is a “Form” which is the Object of the Sign. In the first place, this Form has to be *embodied* in a Subject existing independently of the Sign, but located somewhere (or possibly everywhere!) in the *commens* (Umwelt, universe, ..... ) inhabited by the utterer and the interpreter of the Sign. When genuine communication takes place, *another* Subject comes to embody that same Form, i.e. becomes *inFormed* by the Sign. An informable Subject is a bodymind (or ‘mind’ or ‘quasi-mind’) capable of being *determined* by a Sign. ‘Determination implies a *determinandum*, a subject to be determined. What is that? We must suppose that there is something like a sheet of paper, blank or with a blank space upon it upon which an interpretant sign may be written’ (EP2:322). Supposing that the Sign is a text replicated in written or printed form, the Subject to be determined is the reader, who may be *turned* by the Sign into a somewhat different person (continuous with her former and future “selves” but now differently informed).

This transformation of the reader, this *turning*, is in Peircean terms the ‘Effectual Interpretant’ of the Sign. What the writer meant by the Sign is another Interpretant, the ‘Intentional.’ But as

Gershom Scholem pointed out,

It is the usual fate of sacred writings to become more or less divorced from the intentions of their authors. What may be called their after-life, those aspects which are discovered by later generations, frequently becomes of greater importance than their original meaning; and after all—who knows what their original meaning was?

— Scholem (1946, 14)

If the original Object of a sacred writing is the Form which comes to be embodied by the two Subjects (writer and reader), genuine communication is only possible when there is a fusion of minds between the two. This common, fused mind is determined by the Object through the medium of the Sign, and the resulting sign is a third Interpretant, which Peirce calls 'Communicational.' The three interpretants must be distinguished in order to explain the interpretation process, just as the immediate and dynamical objects must be distinguished in order to explain the representation process. Peirce gave this analysis in a 1906 letter to Lady Welby:

In order that a Form may be extended or communicated, it is necessary that it should have been really embodied in a Subject independently of the communication; and it is necessary that there should be another subject in which the same form is embodied only in consequence of the communication. The Form (and the Form is the Object of the Sign), as it really determines the former Subject, is quite independent of the sign; yet we may and indeed must say that the object of a sign can be nothing but what that sign represents it to be. Therefore, in order to reconcile these apparently conflicting truths, it is indispensable to distinguish the *immediate* object from the *dynamical* object.

The same form of distinction extends to the interpretant; but as applied to the interpretant, it is

complicated by the circumstance that the sign not only determines the interpretant to represent (or to take the form of) the *object*, but also determines the interpretant to represent the sign. Indeed in what we may, from one point of view, regard as the principal kind of signs, there is one distinct part appropriated to representing the object, and another to representing how this very sign itself represents that object. The class of signs I refer to are the *dicisigns*. In “John is in love with Helen” the object signified is the pair, John and Helen. But the “is in love with” signifies the form this sign represents itself to represent John-and-Helen’s Form to be. That this is so, is shown by the precise equivalence between any verb in the indicative and the same made the object of “I tell you.” “Jesus wept” = “I tell you that Jesus wept.”

EP2:477-8

Peirce’s next paragraph, already cited in Chapter 12, identifies ‘the *Intentional* Interpretant, which is a determination of the mind of the utterer; the *Effectual* Interpretant, which is a determination of the mind of the interpreter; and the *Communicational* Interpretant, or say the *Cominterpretant*, which is a determination of that mind into which the minds of utterer and interpreter have to be fused in order that any communication should take place. This mind may be called the *commens*’ (EP2:477). The ‘complicating’ factor which necessitates this three-way distinction, the implicitly self-referential nature of *dicisigns*, arises from their function as ‘double signs’ (recalling Chapter 16).

## Signs involving signs of themselves

A *dicisign* such as a proposition joins subject and predicate in order to mediate between object and interpretant; and crucially, it ‘represents itself to represent’ its object. This self-representing sign is an ‘index of connection’ (EP2:310) of subject and predicate, and this index involves an icon: the predicate not only signifies qualities of the object but also represents the structure of the sign

itself. Here is part of Frederik Stjernfelt's explanation:

the predicative side of the Dicisign includes all that is not immediately indexical:

“The most perfectly thorough analysis throws the whole substance of the Dicisign into the Predicate.” (*Syllabus* 1903, EPII, 281; 2.318)

This implies that the predicate also includes the *syntax* of the Dicisign, making of the predicate-subject composite a claim, cf. the idea that the Predicate is “... representing (or being) an Icon of the Dicisign in some respect” (*Syllabus*, EPII 279, 2.316). The predicate not only depicts certain characters of the object, it also depicts the Dicisign claiming those characters to pertain to the object. The predicate iconically describes that very aspect of the Dicisign—its syntax. So, the predicate operates on two levels simultaneously, on the object and metalanguage level, as it were.

— Stjernfelt 2014, 58

This is a semiotic parallel to the ‘continuity and progression’ (explained in the previous chapter) between Damasio’s ‘self-as-knower’ and ‘self-as-object,’ where the former is ‘grounded on’ the latter. The ‘metalanguage level’ where the predicate depicts the Dicisign is continuous with, and grounded on, the ‘object level’ where the Dicisign represents its object to its interpretant. Yet another dimension of semiotic continuity appears in the *argument*, which Peirce calls a ‘triple sign’ where he calls the dicisign a ‘double sign’ (EP2:275). While a dicisign combines two parts (*subject* and *predicate*) in order to convey information, an *argument* combines dicisigns into a train of thought leading to an explicit conclusion as an interpretant which also *represents the thought itself as doing so* by implicitly claiming to be a valid inference process.

Peirce’s classification of signs divides them into three ‘trichotomies’: one according to the representamen-object relation (icon / index / symbol), one according to the representamen-

interpretant relation (rheme or 'term' / dicisign / argument), and one according to whether the sign itself is a quality, a singular occurrence or a law (qualisign / sinsign / legisign). In each trichotomy, we may say that the third develops meaning, or conveys information, by *involving* the other two. For instance, the symbol conveys information by involving an index involving an icon. But rather than think of meanings as built up from their component parts, we might better think of them as processes analyzed into those parts for semiotic purposes. Semiosis, even at the most primitive level, is always a process which must *continue* for some *time*. Irreducible Thirdness is essential to it. Accordingly, Peirce gives a top-down account of the relations between arguments, propositions and 'names' (i.e. 'terms'):

... an Argument is no more built up of Propositions than a motion is built up of positions. So to regard it is to neglect the very essence of it. ... Positions are either vaguely described states of motion of small range, or else (what is the better view,) are *entia rationis* (i.e. fictions recognized to be fictions, and thus no longer fictions) invented for the purposes of clear descriptions of states of motion; so likewise, Thought (I am not talking Psychology, but Logic, or the essence of Semiotics) cannot, from the nature of it, be at rest, or be anything but inferential process; and propositions are either roughly described states of thought-motion, or are artificial creations intended to render the description of thought-motion possible; and Names are creations of a second order in service to render the representation of propositions possible. An Argument may be defined as a Sign which intends itself to be understood as fulfilling its function.

MS 295, 1906 (quoted by Stjernfelt 2014, 78)

Peirce also observed that 'Arguments can only be Symbols, not Indices or Icons' (EP2:286). This is obvious in terms of the semiotic trichotomies, because only symbols necessarily involve *time* and its continuity or Thirdness. 'A symbol is something which has the power of reproducing itself, and that essentially, since it is

constituted a symbol only by the interpretation' (EP2:322). This self-reproduction process is a continuous train of Thought, which according to Peirce is not limited to the musings of human thinkers:

the universe is a vast representamen, a great symbol of God's purpose, working out its conclusions in living realities. Now every symbol must have, organically attached to it, its Indices of Reactions and its Icons of Qualities; and such part as these reactions and these qualities play in an argument, that they of course play in the universe, that Universe being precisely an argument.

— EP2:193-4

That argument is *the time* itself, which claims to be intelligible, so that its conclusion is the Whole Truth as it would be known by an omniscient being. But if this symbol is *presently* 'working out its conclusions in living realities,' its 'conclusions' (i.e. its interpretants) could not have been determined in advance, as they could by a 'clockmaker' God of a pre-designed, mechanical universe. Rather they unfold organically, and this unfolding is time as we live it.

However, it seems that we must regard the cosmic Sign as a single semiotic process, *as if* we were third-person observers of it, and give it a name (provisionally at least), in order to make any sense of it, or of our role in it. So we may call it an *argument*, which (being also a *symbol* and a *legisign*) is the epitome of 'Thought' as a complete process. The continuity of this process extends all the way from the primitive semiosis in which the simplest forms of life are engaged up to the metalanguage of semiotics (and perhaps beyond, in both directions). The evolution of semiosis actualizes the universal communion of subjects, exemplified for human subjects by the genuine communication between the author and the reader of a turning sign.

## Deep reading

A text can mean no more than its deepest reader means by it. Your task as reader is to hear from the text the truth which no one has heard before.

In order to commit the act of meaning, the reader must believe that the text (or its author) is doing the meaning. In order to explicate the act, we consider the role of the reader in the process. In order to consider the outcome of the semiotic process, we consider the reader as a *sign* – defined by Peirce as ‘anything, of whatsoever mode of being, which mediates between an object and an interpretant; since it is both determined by the object *relatively to the interpretant*, and determines the interpretant *in reference to the object*, in such wise as to cause the interpretant to be determined by the object through the mediation of this “sign”’ (EP2:410).

This process of determination could not work in a fully deterministic universe. Signs and interpretants are in a measure indeterminate, and ‘the latitude of interpretation which constitutes the indeterminacy of a sign must be understood as a latitude which might affect the achievement of a purpose’ (EP2:393). Peirce’s ‘pragmaticistic’ theory of meaning distinguishes

two kinds of indeterminacy, viz.: indefiniteness and generality, of which the former consists in the sign’s not sufficiently expressing itself to allow of an indubitable determinate interpretation, while the latter turns over to the interpreter the right to complete the determination as he pleases. It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact that the entire universe,—not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part, the universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as “the truth,”—that all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs.

EP2:394

Perhaps this implies that the inhabitants of this semiotic

universe called ‘the truth,’ being signs themselves, are fused with the general signs they interpret, just as the minds of communicating subjects are fused into the *commens*. In the case of a turning symbol, the intimacy between the text and the reader’s deepest experience generates the depth of meaning which makes it a “sacred text.” Deep reading of such a sign engages the whole bodymind, to the point where body and mind ‘drop off’ (Dogen), or we ‘lose ourselves in the aim of self-realization’ (Gandhi). Since a turning symbol embodies your mission of living the time of your life, it is an end which is likewise a beginning, a *re-creation* of meaning. Such re-creation plays the crucial part in developing the multidimensional space in which we will continue to live, move, and evolve.

This is especially true if the “sacred text” is the natural world, the universe which Thomas Berry declares to be ‘the primary revelation of the divine, the primary scripture, the primary locus of divine-human communion’ (Berry 1988, 105). Then a major part of our quest for meaning is carried forward by learning to learn from experience, by developing the *ethos* of scientific inquiry. Although we may call science a ‘dialogue with nature,’ we don’t have to assume that nature or its Author communicates with us deliberately. Yet we do assume that there is *some* connection between the logic of our reasoning and the causal logic of events. The wellspring of this connectivity in humans, according to Peirce, is ‘the light of nature,’ which he defined in *Baldwin’s Dictionary* as ‘a natural power, or instinct, by which men are led to the truth about matters which concern them, in anticipation of experience or revelation.’ The name comes from the Latin of Aquinas, and appeared in Galileo’s Italian as *il lume naturale*. Spinoza too argued that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things (*Ethics*, Part II, Proposition VII: *Ordo, & connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo, & connexio rerum*). For Peirce, ‘every scientific explanation of a natural phenomenon is a hypothesis that there is something in nature to which the human reason is analogous’ (EP2:193). This hypothesis is itself analogous to the ‘structural coupling’ of Maturana and Varela, and to the relation between inference and causality in Rosen’s model of the modeling relation (Chapter 9). It also partakes of the self-referential quality inherent in dicisigns and arguments.

The Mind of nature, or of its divine Author, merges into the 'Mother Book' or 'Source of Scripture' (*Qur'an* 43:4, tr. Haleem), the matrix of signs perfusing the universe which would constitute the Whole Truth if anyone could read it. Scriptures in human languages are domesticated versions of the wild Truth, temporarily captured in the networks of natural symbol systems such as human languages – though the original creativity may spontaneously break out at any time, revealing itself as inspired interpretant.

When you follow and study a sutra, it emerges. A sutra means the entire world of the ten directions— mountains, rivers, the earth, grass, trees, self, and others. It is having a meal, putting on a robe, and engaging in activities. When you study the way, following a sutra, thousands and myriads of sutras that have never existed emerge and become present.

— Dogen, SBGZ 'Jishō zammai' (Tanahashi 2010, 696)

As a sutra devolves into a conventional symbol, its reading depends increasingly on the reader's linguistic habits, different as they may be from the writer's – and few readers are fully aware of the differences. A reader of the 'New Testament', for example, may overlook the fact that the text he reads has been translated from Greek manuscripts which vary among themselves, and that any actual sayings of the historical Jesus recorded in the Greek text were already translations, since Jesus spoke Aramaic. He may also ignore the fact that the current meanings of terms in his habitual idiom have developed gradually through a process of metaphorical extension from root meanings which are intrinsically vague. This could distract the reader from the deeper meanings of the text, even close his mind to them.

But turning symbols can turn you by meaning more than you know how to mean. They have a way of saying what we really mean better than our own words have ever done. Respectfully trusting such a text requires you to assume that if it seems incompatible with what you know, it may well be your reading that is wrong.

When we hear a Dharma talk or study a sutra, our only

job is to remain open. Usually when we hear or read something new, we just compare it to our own ideas. If it is the same, we accept it and say it is correct. If it is not, we say it is incorrect. In either case, we learn nothing. If we read or listen with an open mind and an open heart, the rain of the Dharma will penetrate the soil of our consciousness.

— Thich Nhat Hanh (1998, 12)

Todd Lawson (1997, 174-5) quotes a 'more or less standard Muslim guide to reading the Qur'án' which is formulated differently from Thich Nhat Hanh's guidance, yet the actual practice of reading which follows from it may be essentially the same.

Be fully convinced that it is God's revelation.  
Be aware that you are always in God's presence.  
Feel as though you hear the Qur'án from God.  
Feel as though the Qur'án addresses you directly.  
Consider each verse as relevant today, not as a thing of the past.  
...  
Strive to live by the teachings of the Qur'án, since it is God's guidance for mankind.  
This is the way to get close to the Qur'án and to grasp its meanings....

Compare also this Tibetan Buddhist intimology:

Those who have the essential concern to practice the stages of the path of enlightenment must understand that all the Victor's teachings of Sutra and Mantra are exclusively methods for their own attainment of enlightenment, thinking, 'That compassionate Teacher taught this Dharma for the sake of liberating me personally from the suffering of the hellish states and the life-cycle in general and to establish me in the exaltation of Buddhahood.'

— Tse Chokling Yongdzin Yeshe Gyaltsen (Thurman 1995, 93-4)

Of course there are differences among traditions in the way they conceive the reader's relationship to scripture. The Qur'án is perhaps unique in the degree to which believers venerate *the Book itself* as 'co-eternal with the divine essence' (Lawson 1997, 199) – though the Torah is similarly venerated in some Jewish traditions. But in these traditions the transcendent status of the Book does not absolve the reader of his responsibility to become intimate with it; on the contrary, his role is to be consumed in it as by a flame, a process and practice dubbed 'inlibration' by Harry A. Wolfson (Lawson 1997, 199). This practice, like its Christian or Buddhist counterparts, involves penetrating beneath the habitual or surface meanings of the text, though the methods of doing this may vary.

## Revelation and recognition

'Inlibration' is risky precisely because it is grounded in trust. No matter how trustworthy the source, its explicit or implicit precepts bear fruit in practice only when they work implicitly in the guidance system, and it takes time for all fruits to grow and ripen. The path to true guidance is no shorter or straighter than the meaning cycle itself. Moreover, in living practice, precepts are always entangled with others in a pragmatic context. The human practice of a precept, unlike an ideal experiment in the laboratory, is not sealed off from other processes, other precepts, other lives.

(1) Jesus said, "The Father's kingdom is like a person who had [good] seed. (2) His enemy came at night and sowed weeds among the good seed. (3) The person did not let them pull up the weeds, but said to them, 'No, or you might go to pull up the weeds and pull up the wheat along with them.' (4) For on the day of the harvest the weeds will be conspicuous and will be pulled up and burned."

— *Thomas 57* (NHS)

*Matthew 13:24-30* tells the same story, one of many Gospel sayings in which the 'kingdom is like a person.' The seeds are planted internally and issue forth in practice, which is the *actual* 'kingdom'

of the Father or of Heaven. (*Thomas* 40 tells us that a grapevine planted ‘outside of the Father’ will be unsupported and therefore will perish.) This process takes time, and there is always the danger of throwing out something valuable if you try to evaluate the fruits prematurely.

As an ideal reader, you expect the text or its author to tell you unexpected truths which are nevertheless in accord with your experience. This is your *default* stance or attitude, and whether you direct it toward the author or the text matters little. *Default* means that you begin with this ‘faith’ or expectation, continue with it as long as it is borne out by further experience, and switch to another if your faith is unsustainable by experience. At some point you might decide that you’ve heard it all before (that it’s a “truism”), or that it can’t be true because it is incompatible with facts which you have no pragmatic warrant for doubting. At that point you may lose your faith in the text. But if you drop this faith too quickly (or never assume it in the first place), you are effectively insulated against learning anything new from that text.

When presented with a text, if you are familiar enough with its terms, you can usually construct a context for it (a mental space) in which it at least makes sense, and at most is a turning symbol. Let us call this a *friendly reading*. But if you are so inclined, you can usually construct a context in which the same text is false, trivial, exaggerated, or otherwise worthy of rejection. This is a *hostile reading*, and it is easily achieved if you wish to justify ignoring a text, or to rationalize your having no use for it. But no matter how easy, this is wasted effort – and worse than wasted if you take pride in hostile readings, using them to stake out or defend mental territory, or to bolster your ego. The fact that you can only attend to one text at a time, and only a few even in a lifetime, is a simpler and more honest reason for ignoring other texts, as the economy of inquiry often requires a reader to do.

Whether a text actually *works* as a turning sign depends on the role of the reader, and some texts invite the reader’s active participation in meaning-making more than others. One of these is the *Gospel of Thomas*; as Valantasis (1997) observes, the sayings in this gospel ‘provide a means of instruction to the reader by encouraging the reader to interpret them’ (23). This in turn encourages the reader to develop self-control by *learning from*

*experience* rather than obedience to an established authority. Readers of a scripture who delve into its primarily experiential meanings are often called ‘mystics’ – or, if they come into open conflict with religious institutions, ‘heretics.’ The texts identified with their views may then be excluded from the canon or banned, as in the case of the *Gospel of Thomas* and the other texts of the Nag Hammadi library, which were evidently forced ‘underground’ by the church fathers (specifically by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in 367 C.E.).

For some Christians, the authority of Jesus is backed up by prophecies found in the ‘Old Testament’ and read as pointers to his identity and mission as a unique divine intervention *in history* (that is, in the future foreseen by the prophets, which is the past from the reader’s point of view). This frames the Christian reading of the whole Bible, including the sayings of Jesus. The discovery of the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* in 1945 re-presented these sayings as direct and intimate challenges to each reader. They were no longer important because of their status as instructions from an already-recognized moral authority; rather the authority of the ‘living Jesus’ derives from the reader’s genuine recognition of the Author in the act of reading the signs and realizing their interpretant fruits in practice. This – and not any event on the timeline of history, not even at the end of it – is the real *resurrection of the body*.

His disciples said to him: ‘Twenty-four prophets have spoken in Israel, and all (of them) have spoken through you.’ He said to them: ‘You have pushed away the living (one) from yourselves, and you have begun to speak of those who are dead.’

— *Thomas 52 (5G)*

Other translations of the first sentence in 52 have the prophets speaking ‘in’ or ‘of’ Jesus rather than ‘through’ him, but the point of his reply is the same: if you ‘push away’ the source of moral authority into the past, you will be distracted from the challenge of actualizing the living guidance of Jesus in the present context and the living future. This is a retreat from the resurrection. Pushing it off to a distant future (later on in life, or after life) is just as bad.

Jesus said, 'Take heed of the living one while you are alive, lest you die and seek to see him and be unable to do so.'

— *Thomas 59* (Lambdin)

Jesus says: 'There was a rich person who had many possessions. He said: "I will use my possessions so that I might sow, reap, plant, (and) fill my storehouses with fruit so that I will not lack anything." This was what he was thinking in his heart. And in that night he died. Whoever has ears should hear.'

— *Thomas 63* (5G)

Seeking to increase your holdings, whether of wealth or knowledge, in the hope of a secure future, is a deadly habit. The life of the spirit is living the time; all along the spiral path of testing and questing, timing (presence of mind) is of the essence. It all depends on asking the right questions at the right time - as we have seen already in Chapter 7.

Jesus says: 'Seek and you will find. But the things you asked me about in past times, and what I did not tell you in that day, now I am willing to tell you, but you do not seek them.'

— *Thomas 92* (5G)

Maybe you don't ask because you think you know all the answers?