

Marc Lowe

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“If there’s no meaning in it,” said the King, “that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn’t try to find any. And yet I don’t know...I seem to see some meaning in [it], after all.”

– Lewis Carroll: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

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I read the lines from right to left. My eyes drift across the page, my breathing conforms to the rhythm. One character follows the next. The characters that precede and/or follow the other characters look strikingly similar to the ones they surround and/or are surrounded by, yet at the same time all are somehow – ever-so-subtly – different from one another. It takes an expert’s eye to decipher them, I can assure you. If I look at the paper through half-closed eyes all of the characters appear to be exactly the same, yet if I open them wide and stare long enough each line, each character reveals its unique qualities to me. I glance for a moment at the corner of the page I am currently decoding to see how far I’ve progressed. However, there is neither a number, nor any character there to provide the slightest indication. All I can make out is a kind of stain, a blotch the size of the tip of a child’s crayon, which could in fact have some meaning, though it’s hard to tell. Might I have squashed a fruit fly with the back

of my hand as I was turning the page or, rather, is the spot simply a dab of black ink? It's certainly too small to be a character, yet its shape doesn't suggest that it was meant to be a page number either. Hmm, perhaps the page numbers are to be found elsewhere; maybe they reside within the text itself in the form of characters? There must be numbers in the text somewhere! One could argue, I suppose, that the text is composed of nothing *but* numbers (as all texts are, finally), numbers that each possess some intrinsic – or extrinsic? – value that can only signify something physically existing somewhere in the universe, thereby assigning them meaning/significance over and beyond their function as mere symbols on a page. For all I know I may be holding the story of the human race from its inception to its eventual and inevitable destruction in my trembling white hands, though I've yet to determine whether this text is really about anything quite so lofty. I do have my suspicions, however.

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An indeterminate quantity of pages – roughly equivalent to those that remain to be interpreted – have already been scanned, read, pondered, deconstructed and reconstructed by yours truly. This suggests (logically speaking, of course) that, as it has taken me X number of hours/days to scan/read/ponder/deconstruct/reconstruct approximately 50% of the text, it ought to take an equal number of hours/days to do the same for the second, as-yet unread half. First, though, I'll force myself to stand up, stretch my limbs, and drink another paper cupful of water.¹

¹ Coffee gives me the runs, while water – though easier on my stomach – has the unpleasant effect of putting pressure on my bladder, which means I have to take frequent urination breaks; this is extremely disruptive when trying to concentrate on the task of drawing forth hidden meaning from characters that all look practically alike, as I'm sure you can imagine.

At any rate, I ought to let my brain cells rejuvenate a bit. They say the brain stops working properly if one does not allow it sufficient rest. When was the last time I stood up from this desk and went to the toilet? I've lost track already. No matter. I need to complete the task of deciphering the text before I return home. Perhaps I should make a quick call to my wife before she goes to bed; she might start to think I'm out cheating on her with some floozy from the university. If she has any doubts about my whereabouts she can confirm the number with caller I.D., which will prove *incontrovertibly* that I'm still in my study, and thereby exonerate me of any possible suspicions regarding my fidelity.² No one else has access to the phone here, at any rate, as I always keep the door bolted when I'm out.

² As an aside, about a year after we were married I came to the realization that masturbation is much quicker and also less messy than sleeping with women. It also smells a lot less, which is a major plus—I have a very keen sense of smell and can't stand the scent of other people's bodies, though I can go for weeks without a shower and not notice my own smell. Isn't that curious? I've also discovered that, since I can masturbate any time I feel the urge, I no longer have to do piles of dishes or vacuum the entire house in order to gain my wife's favor, chores which were physically draining and took time away from my research here. I can't bother going home every time I have an erection, after all, can I? I'm not going to carry on like some animal, driven by impulses it cannot control. Some people just don't understand...

Well, it seems as though she's turned the answering machine off again; she's been unplugging the phone after eleven p.m. these past few weeks so that any potential unsolicited calls won't disturb her already-shallow sleep. How could I have forgotten this? The last time I rang to inform her I'd be in my study all night she explicitly stated that she wouldn't answer in future unless I called *before* eleven. Is it after eleven already? Oh dear, my watch has stopped working; the battery must have run out. Damn it. How long has it been like

this? Maybe I should pack up my things and call it a day; no, I simply can't do that. There's still much work to be done, much too much work...

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Something about reading the lines from right to left doesn't quite add up. I get the feeling that if I just...Ahh, now *that's* interesting. What would happen if I were to attempt a reading of the text from left to right instead of from right to left? I could, hypothetically, read the same section I just completed *backwards* – the same 50% or so that I've spent the last X hours/days de-/reconstructing – in an attempt to glean a completely new meaning from the lines of characters. But, alas, this poses a further dilemma, for if I reread the first half of the text from left to right rather than from right to left, it will take me approximately the same amount of time to complete [re]reading it as it would for me to simply read the remainder of the text in the same fashion as I've already done with the first half, and then I'd *still* need to go back afterward and reread the second (as yet unread/decoded) section from right to left, lest I be left with insufficient data for my penultimate *Final Analysis Report* (FAR). As an aside, who was it that first insisted the text be read – and, by extension, interpreted – from right to left anyway? Funny, but I can no longer recall.³ Ah, the perils of deconstructive hermeneutics! Convention be damned. Where are my glasses? Hell, do I even need them for this?

³ If the text were instead written in, say, Hebrew, or another of the Semitic (Arabic) languages, it would make perfect sense to read it from right to left, but, for me, a native speaker/reader of English and a *connoisseur* of various Romance and Germanic languages, left to right seems at least as good a way to read/interpret it as right to left, and certainly a more intuitive one. I'm willing to bet that those rarefied, exceedingly audacious minds who are said to have devoted their lives to deciphering this text – and others like it – spent their final days debating the intention of its author (or authors), as well as the hidden meanings inherent in the characters when looked at in various types of light, states of consciousness, and/or when employing different methodologies to decode them (perhaps they were scholars of Kabbalistic texts as well? this would

certainly explain their preference for reading from right to left!). If only their meticulous records hadn't all been destroyed in the great flood of 2023 (see Clew, Myers, Stein, et. al.), I might now be able to back up some of these theoretical claims...

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I read the lines from left to right. My eyes drift across the page, my breathing conforms to the rhythm. Wait a second. What page was I on anyway? Hmm, the corner of this page appears to be smeared. How curious. I suppose there must be some reason for it; perhaps the person (or persons) who wrote (or compiled) the text created it in such a way as to allow the reader – that's me, in case you haven't been paying attention – to just open it to *any* page and assign to it some number, *any* number, so that s/he need not worry about getting lost in the labyrinthine lines of characters and text ever again. Yes, this makes perfect sense! I'll label this page, the one with the smear in the corner like a small Rorschach blot, *page 00*. (I can always change it again later if necessary.) Now I'll be able to read the text from right to left, left to right, top to bottom, bottom to top, diagonally, or in any other pattern my mind is able to devise. Further, whenever I get too tired or have to urinate – though with so many possibilities to explore, it's unlikely I'll be taking frequent breaks – I'll simply get up from my desk and stretch, fetch myself another cup of water, phone my wife to make sure she knows I'm still thinking about her, or whatever...⁴

⁴Without a properly working watch to confirm the time, however, it's possible my wife may not answer when I call. I've boarded up the windows to block out light and other distractions; it's a small price to pay for freedom of the intellect, if you ask me. I still don't understand how she (my wife) can liken me to a "prisoner trapped inside of his own skull," when in fact it's *she* who's "trapped," trapped inside her meaningless life of domestic drudgery, predictable television programming, and an all-consuming obsession with superficial beauty (we all die a little with every breath; why try to bury this essential truth beneath layers of perfume?). Such trifles! Alas, some people will *never* understand...

Tentative Conclusion

All of the characters mean something – they have to; I’m just not sure of exactly *what* yet. No matter. There’s still plenty of time to figure it all out.

Marc Lowe’s fictions and hybrids have appeared or will appear in various journals, such as *5_trope*, *elima*, *Mindfire Renewed*, *Opium Magazine*, *Pindelyboz*, *The Salt River Review*, *Steel City Review*, and many others. Marc holds a Master’s degree in Japanese literature, edits for the online multimedia journal Mad Hatters’ Review, and has recently completed his second labyrinthine novel. Please visit him at www.malo23.com for more information.