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Deixis in Charles Williams's *Et in Sempiternum Pereant*

Abstract

This paper applies the Deictic Shift Theory (DST) — as developed within the paradigm of cognitive poetics — to the analysis of Charles Williams's short story, *Et in Sempiternum Pereant*. It is argued that by employing DST it is possible to account for the reader's interpretations, which result from her/his "getting immersed" in and "moving" mentally through the story world, regardless of its "metaphysical" quality.

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1.

This article proposes an analysis of Charles Williams’s short story, “Et in Sempiternum Pererant”, with regard to one of the cognitive mechanisms accounted for by cognitive poetics — a discipline which, in Peter Stockwell’s (Stockwell 2009) words, is focused on “the description of readings [...] [which] consist of the *interaction* of texts and humans” (1, emphasis added). In his classic study, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*, Stockwell adapts the linguistic concept of deixis, “central to the idea of the embodiment of perception” (Stockwell 2002: 41), for the purposes of cognitive literary studies.

In what follows, I will apply his theoretical proposition to the investigation of a text which might be regarded as “metaphysical” — in the sense that it deals, as Glen Cavaliero puts it, not with “the supernatural or the weird [...] [or] [the] paranormal” but rather with “the revelation of a spiritual order that provides the ambience and meaning of the material one” (Cavaliero 1996: 90–91). Such a rendition aptly characterizes the literary output of Charles Williams (1886–1945), a somewhat forgotten poet, playwright, novelist, literary critic, and lay theologian, who is usually remembered (if at all) in the context of his bonds with the literary circle of Oxford Inklings, including C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, and others¹.

Williams authored seven novels, more willingly described as “metaphysical/supernatural thrillers”, “theological shockers”, “occult fictions”, etc. Their titles speak for themselves; suffice it to mention *War in Heaven* (1930), *Many Dimensions* (1931), *Descent into Hell* (1937) and *All Hallows’ Eve* (1945). Whereas they often combine different genres (e.g. the crime story, the romance, the novel of ideas, etc.), the pivotal design in all of them involves the intrinsic connection between the “mimetic” world, modelled on Williams’s contemporary England, and its underlying spiritual dimension — the “metaphysical” world. And yet, rather than depicting an intrusion of the supernatural into the ordinary, and thus underscoring a dualistic nature of things, these texts embody what, in T. S. Eliot’s words, “comes near to defying definition [,] [for] [i]t was not simply a philosophy, a theology, or a set of ideas: it was primarily something imaginative” (xiii).

¹ Apparently, Williams’s life was as intriguing as his complex, multifaceted works; suffice it to say that the recently published “definitive” biography (Lindop 2015) is a bulky volume which comprises almost five hundred pages.

The short story to be discussed below also represents this type of fiction; however, it will be approached with a view to addressing a cognitive-literary and not a theological/philosophical question: *how* is it possible for the reader, including a non-religious one, to mentally “enter”, “move through”, and “orient her/himself” in Williams’s imaginative (*sensu* Eliot) world and construct coherent meanings? One of the answers can be provided with regard to cognitive deixis, and more precisely — to the Deictic Shift Theory (DST).

2.

As Keith Green explains, “[a] Greek word meaning ‘pointing’, deixis [...] refer[s] to the encoding of the spatio-temporal context and the subjective experience of the encoder in an utterance” (Green 1995: 11). He also notices, and rightly so, that “[t]here can be no rigid taxonomy of deictic elements and terms because deixis depends so much upon usage” (Green 1995: 22). In turn, Stockwell underscores the fact — obvious enough to literary scholars but not to all linguists dealing with literary texts — that the experience of reading literature is of a different kind than non-literary reading (Stockwell 2002: 41). What makes the two readings dissimilar is precisely “the feeling of being immersed in the world of the text, relating to characters, scenes and ideas” (Stockwell 2002: 41).

Accordingly, Stockwell adapts some linguistic approaches to deixis, and puts forward six (sub)categories as relevant to the literary text, distinguishing:

- (i.) *perceptual deixis*, which encompasses “expressions concerning the perceptive participants in the text” (e.g. personal pronouns, demonstratives, definite articles, cases of definite reference) (Stockwell 2002: 45);
- (ii.) *spatial deixis*, which includes “expressions locating the deictic centre in a place” (e.g. spatial adverbs, locatives, demonstratives, as well as — importantly enough — what he calls “verbs of motion: ‘come/go’, ‘bring/take’) (Stockwell 2002: 45–46);
- (iii.) *temporal deixis*, which “locat[es] the deictic centre in time” (e.g. by virtue of temporal adverbs and locatives [‘in my youth’] as well as “tense and aspect in verb forms that differentiate ‘speaker-now’, ‘story-now’ and ‘receiver-now’) (Stockwell 2002: 46);
- (iv.) *relational deixis*, which concerns “encod[ing] the social viewpoint and relative situations of authors, narrators, characters, and readers, including modality and expressions of point of view and focalisation; naming and address conventions; evaluative word-choices” (Stockwell 2002: 46);
- (v.) *textual deixis*, which involves foregrounding “the textuality of the text” with such devices as “chapter titles and paragraphing; co-reference to other stretches of text; reference to the text itself” (Stockwell 2002: 46);
- (vi.) *compositional deixis*, associated with those textual aspects which “manifest the generic type or literary conventions available to readers with the appropriate literary competence” (Stockwell 2002: 46). Compositional deixis further relates to certain “[s]tylistic choices [which] encode a deictic relationship between author and literary reader” (Stockwell 2002: 46). Importantly, Stockwell’s understanding of compositional deixis seems to encompass intertextuality; as he puts it, “compositional deixis anchors the

deictic centre in relation to the generic tradition, intertextuality and conventions of the speaking voice, essentially through all the register choices of lexicogrammar" (Stockwell 2002a: 79).

As introduced by the author of *Cognitive Poetics* (Stockwell 2002), the Deictic Shift Theory (DST) "models the common perception of a reader «getting inside» a literary text as the reader taking a cognitive stance within the mentally constructed world of the text" (Stockwell 2002: 46–47). To put it differently, the reader may shift her/his egocentric deictic centre, owing to which s/he can orient her/himself in her/his empirical world, into the text-world and thus "construct a rich context" from such an intra-textual perspective (Stockwell 2002: 47). Deictic shifts, Stockwell further explains, may be "up" or "down" the virtual planes associated with the so-called deictic fields (sets of expressions pointing to one deictic centre); they are respectively referred to as "pops" and "pushes" (Stockwell 2002: 47). The subsequent analysis is intended to demonstrate how deictic centres and fields are created, how they are shifted, and how such dynamic shifts help the reader construct coherent meanings, leading her/him to general interpretative conclusions. Arguably, this is what "traditional" (i.e. text-centred) literary studies can gain from the so-called cognitive turn², which would direct the pendulum, so to say, back towards the actual reader, and not only towards the implied/virtual one.

3.

First printed in 1935 in *The London Mercury*, *Et in Sempiternum Pereant*³ was anthologized in two more recent collections: *Visions of Wonder: An Anthology of Christian Fantasy* (1981) and *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories* (1986). Both titles are informative, for they point out the generic (the "fantasy" and ghost story) and ideological (Christian) scope of Williams's text. In other words, the volume titles may be indicative of compositional deixis, shaping the reader's presuppositions. A similar role is played by the story's Latin title, which literally translates as "And let them perish for ever"⁴. The choice of language, coupled with the idea of eternal suffering, involves some biblical correspondence: it may not be a direct one, for the phrase is missing from the *Vulgate*, but it is evocative of relevant passages from the books of Job and Revelation (Kowalik 2010: 78).

The story's first deictic field is constructed around the protagonist, introduced in the opening sentence: "Lord Arglay came easily down the road". Here and in the subsequent paragraph, perceptual deixis is coded by proper nouns and the related personal and possessive pronouns. The man's noble title ("Lord"), together with the narrator's remark concerning Arglay's being former Chief Justice and author of *History of Organic Law*, are the indicators of relational deixis, responsible for creating an air of respect. The reader learns that Arglay, though retired, continues his intellectual quest and considers the editing of some "yet

² Cf. how it is presented by Wolfgang Teubert: "In the 1950s, the cognitive sciences replaced previous paradigms trying to make sense of human interaction such as the American traditions of pragmatism [...] and of behaviourism [...]. Both behaviourism and pragmatism have a social focus. Cognitivism, on the other hand, is about the working of the individual mind. It has become a prominent scientific paradigm in many disciplines of the human and social sciences" (Teubert 2010: 33).

³ Henceforth *Sempiternum*.

⁴ The editors of the 1981 anthology translate the story's title as *And May They Be Forever Damned* (Beach 1991: 459).

unpublished legal opinions” of Francis Bacon, reported to be placed “in a country house of England”. This is what sets Arglay on the road. The reader familiar with Williams’s oeuvre will associate the protagonist’s name with the novel *Many Dimensions* (1935), where Lord Arglay is one of the major characters. Thus, the name may stimulate a deictic pop-shift — out of the diegetic level to an “extra-textual” one — as well as evoke the reader’s frames of knowledge due to which at the outset of the story Lord Arglay is a person endowed with particular features⁵.

Since the story focuses on Arglay’s walking, there are numerous signals owing to which the reader constructs and vicariously perceives the fictional space from the protagonist’s standpoint. A more general sense of space is established by the phrases “English geography” and “a very deserted part of the country”. In turn, such expressions as e.g. “*down* the road”, “a couple of miles *behind* him”, and “*far in front*” [emphasis added] illustrate the reader’s looking at the story world from within, as it were.

Timewise, Arglay’s present moment (Simple Past) is contrasted with his earlier expectations (Past Perfect), as well as with a number of counterfactuals. The latter are followed by a series of spatial- and temporal-deictic signals defying the rules of commonsensical logic:

There was a cloud of trees high up behind him; it must have been *half an hour ago that he passed through it*, yet it was not merely *still in sight*, but *the trees themselves were in sight*. He could remark them as trees; he could almost, he thought, if he were a little careful, *count them*. (emphasis added)

It is, as a matter of fact, hard to expect “a good walker”⁶ to be able to recognize particular elements of an object s/he passed through “half an hour ago” (What pace did s/he have to be moving at?) Some additional confusion derives from the narrator’s use of the phrase “half an hour *ago*” instead of the anticipated “half an hour *before/earlier*”, superimposing, as it were, the narrator’s present onto the character’s past.

Such observations prepare the reader for the approaching experience of what Barbara Kowalik calls the world “outside ordinary time-space” (Kowalik 2010: 77). Indeed, soon Arglay is faced with a new kind of reality, or, in the narrator’s words, with “everlastingness”. Its impact is underscored by the mentioning of Sisyphus and his eternal toil: “his [Arglay’s] breathing, as it grew slower and heavier, would become the measure of everlasting labour—the labour of Sisyphus, who pushed his own slow heart through each infinite moment”. A sign of compositional deixis, the remark may make the reader perceive Arglay in mythical terms, as a representative of humankind, the more so because at the end of the paragraph the protagonist is simply referred to as “he” and only once as “Arglay”, his noble title being omitted.

Next, the reader’s attention is drawn to the house, noticed by Arglay “at *that moment*” [emphasis added] — the moment of “everlastingness”(?) — while the road “seemed to make a full half-circle and so turn back in the direction that he had come”. Apart from coding spatial deixis, the description augments the impression of mythical circularity inherent in the story and thus functions in terms of compositional deixis. It is also from Arglay’s vantage point (i.e. he remains the deictic centre) that the reader notices and mentally follows a different path, trodden “by the passage of many feet”, leading to the house. The description of

⁵ However, as Beach (1991) notices, and rightly so, “a valid interpretation of the story may be achieved independent of the novel” (460).

⁶ Cf. “He was usually a good walker, and on that morning he was not conscious of any unusual weariness”.

the house, as Charles Franklyn Beach convincingly argues (Beach 1991: 460–461), evokes another spiritual experience metaphorized via walking, namely Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*⁷. This signal may indicate compositional deixis and thus suggest a relevant interpretation of the story. Indeed, Beach considers Arglay to be the Pilgrim whose “pilgrimage [...] involves [his] intellectual as well spiritual development” (Beach 1991: 461). As the narrative progresses, both Arglay's and the reader's attention is drawn to the house's chimney, the narrator highlighting the difference between facts as described in the empirical world and in the story world:

The chimney, in the ordinary phrase, was smoking. It was smoking effectively and continuously. A narrow pillar of dusk poured up from it, through which there glowed every now and then a deeper undershade of crimson, as if some trapped genius almost thrust itself out of the moving prison that held it.

Based on the word “pillar”, critics notice here Williams's allusion to the pillars of cloud and of fire which symbolized God's presence among the Israelites in the desert (Cavaliero 1996: 95). The colour crimson, strangely overlooked by the story's commentators, in Christianity is the colour of God's majesty or of Jesus's redemptive suffering, but even more common are its liturgical connections with penance and atonement (Forstner 1990: 120–122). Such references to the Christian tradition are a case of compositional deixis and may underline the story's theological message.

After a moment's consideration, Arglay decides to investigate whether the smoke is not caused by unattended fire. He looks through the house's dirty window and notices what he believes to be a face. The narrator, however, relativizes the experience, first by virtue of a conditional phrase (“if face it were”), then through a metaphor (“a kind of sudden white scrawl against the blur”), and via a conditional conjunctive structure (“as if it were a mask hung by the window rather than any living person”). Consequently, the reader is not allowed, to count Arglay's observation as *factual*. To put it in cognitive terms, there may be a deictic pop-shift from the level of Arglay to the one of the narrator, which results in some ontological ambiguity. It is one of the points where a “ghostly” reading of the story may be projected, the more so because the narrator also refers to the occurrence using the word “apparition”.

Meanwhile, the reader learns that the bright, sunny morning has changed into a lightless one. In such circumstances, reminiscent of the ghost story mechanics (obviously, for the reader whose frames of knowledge encompass it), Arglay becomes subjected to exceedingly strong emotions, with which the reader empathizes⁸ precisely because s/he “experiences” them from Arglay's deictic centre. The protagonist knocks the door, but no one responds; his ensuing annoyance changes into the sudden recollection of his dead brother-in-law, whom he truly hated, “with a fury of selfish rage and detestation”. The reader conversant with Williams's fiction is likely to treat this allusion in terms of a deictic projection and recall the figure of Sir Giles Tumulty from *War in Heaven* and, especially, from *Many Dimensions*. This may greatly affect the story's interpretation, for Sir Giles, a man of undisputed intellectual

⁷ And so does the narrator's mentioning of “innumerable travellers, all solitary, all on foot”, as he also observes, “if there had been burdens, they had been carried on the shoulders of their owners”.

⁸ My understanding of the concept of “empathy” here is equivalent to what Hans Robert Jauss (1974) calls “associative identification” (296–97). For an informative study on cognitive aspects of empathy in literary texts see Pluciennik 2004.

potential, was portrayed as Arglay's antagonist: a cruel, supercilious experimenter who used to derive pleasure from treating people like laboratory mice.

And yet, the Arglay from *Sempiternum* realizes that there can be no excuse for such hate — even though it is, in a manner of speaking, still alluring⁹ — which could be read as evidence of the protagonist's spiritual progress in comparison with the novels, whose events are chronologically earlier. This is the moment when God is overtly evoked in the story, as Arglay utters the following words which help him overcome the temptation of indulging in hate: "There is [...] entire *clarity* in the Omnipotence [emphasis added]"¹⁰. What follows is another deictic pop-shift onto the level of the narrator, who asserts: "It operated; the temptation passed into the benediction of the Omnipotence and disappeared".

Having come in (a push-shift "down", onto the diegetic level), Arglay perceives the hut to be "completely and utterly void" except for a flight of stairs leading to "the attics" on the one hand and, most probably, to "a cellar", on the other¹¹. Owing to several phrases encoding spatial deixis, such as "on his left", "opposite the door", "against the right-hand wall" and the like, the interior can be mentally constructed accurately from Arglay's vantage point — thus establishing another spatial deictic field (the inside). Furthermore, thanks to this precision of description, there is no apparent contrast between the "real" and "non-real" dimensions of the story world (but see note 13 below).

Surprisingly enough, Arglay notices no material fire which could be the source of the pillar of smoke outside. And yet, as he approaches the stairs, Arglay experiences an abrupt unpleasant sensation related to high temperature: "a concentration of dank and deadly heat, pricking at him, entering his nostrils and mouth". Meanwhile, he becomes aware of another *being* entering the house. The newcomer looks like an extremely emaciated figure, dressed only in a black coat flapping around the limbs. To Arglay's astonishment and horror, the stranger first performs a sequence of jerky, lunatic-like movements only to find himself lying on the floor and gnawing at his own wrist. In a futile attempt to stop the wretched creature, Arglay looks into his eyes and feels overwhelmed by "effluvia of heat risen round him".

The ontological status of the newcomer is decisive as far as the story's overall interpretation is concerned. First, following Arglay's perspective, the being is referred to as "someone [coming] in;" accordingly, the pronouns associated with the figure are male ("he/his"). Other perceptual deictic indicators are "the stranger", "the man", and "the figure". Arglay's attempt to stop the creature from the act of self-cannibalism is described as an essentially *physical* sensation: "He *held*, he *felt*; he *grasped*, he could not control [emphasis added]". On the other hand, the newcomer's eyes do not see Arglay; as the passage develops, the narrator becomes more hesitant with regard to the creature's status of a human being: "the man, *if it were man*, cast his arm away" [emphasis added]. Confronted with the stranger's "burning" eyes, the accompanying heat, and his own terror, Arglay has to close his eyes, and when he opens them again, the situation changes.

⁹ Cf. "His [Arglay's] brother-in-law was dead. Lord Arglay almost regretted it. Almost he desired to follow, to be with him to provoke and torment him, to..."

¹⁰ Williams's "clarity" (cf. Latin *claritas*) may refer to both "clarity/brightness" and "glory". Cf. 2 Cor 4: 6.

¹¹ Here, Williams's use of indefinite articles with regard to the "underworld" part of the scene ("a door which gave a way presumably to a cellar" [emphasis added]) — in contrast with "the door", "the right-hand wall", and "the attics" — makes the reader's sense of spatial deixis less definitive, thus introducing the air of the unknown, to be enhanced in the subsequent part of the story.

The protagonist finds himself in “a new corner of that world;” the stranger’s black coat disappears, with the further suggestion that it might have been imagined “by a habit of mind”. From now on, the newcomer is deictically referred to as “the thing” and “it”, let alone the non-corporeal metaphor of “a wasted flicker of pallid movement [which] danced and gyrated in white flame”. Two paragraphs later, the phrase “that other spirit” appears, “it” being the corresponding pronoun.

Meanwhile, Arglay opens his eyes to “the reality of his hate” and the pleasure he has derived from it. This essentially spiritual experience is demonstrated to the reader in visual terms: “a fountain of fire”, “a thick cloud of burning smoke”, “the cloud of the sin of his life”, and, overwhelmingly, as “smoke”. The narrator explains that this ever-present smoke, metaphorically, equaled with “the hut and the world” and Arglay himself and “all like him”, is “in itself of *another nature* [emphasis added]”.

What saves Arglay from “the smoke of his prison” — note one other metaphor through which the negative aspect of his experience is coded — is his come back to the present: “*Now — now —* was the only possible other fact, chance, act. He cried out, defying infinity, *Now!* [emphasis added]”. The corresponding decision is expressed, not surprisingly, in deictic categories. Arglay perceives a confluence of “darkening and lightening as if two ways, of descent and ascent, met”. The imagery of walking is reinforced: if there was “a way in”, there must be “a path out”. This choice could be rendered in symbolic terms, as stepping out of one’s self-centeredness, one’s own “greedy loves and greedy hates;” as Williams observes elsewhere, “the glory of God is in facts” (qtd. in Beach 1991: 462). Consequently, Arglay desires to act in the *now* and become “of use” to “that other spirit” — the word “spirit” perhaps suggesting the first step towards the newly-gained unity of all souls. Within the same metaphorical context of walking, the protagonist offers “to make a ladder of himself” and thus enable the stranger to evade perdition. The final perceptual- and relational-deictic sign pertaining to the newcomer is the phrase “his neighbour”, which clearly illustrates Arglay’s change of attitude towards the Christian one (cf. Christ’s commandment to love one’s neighbour).

Subsequently, the reader witnesses a bizarre description of the story’s last but one event, which deserves to be quoted in full:

He saw, at first he felt, nothing. His eyes returned to that vibrating oblong of an *imagined door*, the heart of the smoke beating in the smoke. He looked at it; he remembered the way; he was on the point of movement, when the stinging heat struck him again, but this time from behind. *It* leapt through him. The torrent of *its* fiery passage struck the darkening hollow in the walls. At the instant *it* struck, there came a small sound; there floated up a thin shrill pipe, too short to hear, too certain to miss [...] — a weak wail of multitudes of the lost. The shrill lament struck his ears, and he ran. (emphasis added)

In its context, we may come back to the crucial question of the stranger’s identity: is he/it a man or a ghost? Does he/it perish or is he/it saved? Glen Cavaliero construes the figure as “a lost soul hastening to its own destruction” (Cavaliero 1983: 78) and “the lost spirit” (Cavaliero 1996: 96), admitting that it is not certain whether the aforementioned wail of the lost is one of defeat or of greeting (Cavaliero 1996: 97)¹². Accordingly, *Sempiternum* would be a unique rendition of the ghost story genre. Suzanne Bray, in turn, prefers a slightly

¹² In his earlier study, however, Cavaliero does state that Arglay “intercedes for” the soul “and saves it” (Cavaliero 1983: 78).

less precise word “the shade” to refer to the stranger, but she also speaks of “another living ghost”. Her interpretation of the final wail is positive and involves “lost souls lamenting the loss of the one who has just escaped”. In a completely opposite vein, Beach argues that “[t]he emaciated man is not a ghost [...] but is instead a man who repeatedly chooses self-love over courtesy” (Beach 1991: 463); furthermore, the man is all but saved, being “literally set on fire by his own hatred” (Beach 1991: 464).

A “deictic” reading of the story demonstrates how such mutually exclusive interpretations are created. Depending on a particular reader’s preferences and on her/his frames of knowledge, certain signals foregrounded in the text may be noticed, while others may be ignored¹³. For instance, the “it” in the above excerpt apparently refers to the preceding noun that is to “the heat” (a physical sensation). However, it may be mentally linked to the mysterious figure Arglay meets, to the it-stranger/it-ghost. That is why Bray talks about “the shade accept[ing] the offer and travel[ing] through Lord Arglay’s body, leaping into new life on the road to heaven”. Likewise, if one decides to treat the expression “an imagined door” as associated with the deictic centre of the narrator rather than Arglay’s, and recall the whole range of distancing signals in the text (e.g. “It *seemed* to him”; “from where he stood, *he could not be certain*”; “Arglay saw it [the stranger] but only now *as a dreamer may* hear, half-asleep and half-awake” [emphasis added]), it is possible to undermine the whole experience, considering it hallucinatory. After all, as Cavaliero aptly puts it, “the entire story happens not *to* Lord Arglay but *in* him” (Cavaliero 1996: 98, italics original).

Be that as it may, two facts are certain at the close. First, Arglay does change as a result of his readiness to offer himself for his neighbour, for the narrator depicts him running out of the house and crying: “Now is God: now is glory in God”; soon after his running becomes “more light” and he is reported to have “some communion of peace at heart”. Second, Arglay withdraws from the “straight way” and “[comes back] into the curving road”¹⁴. The light of the spring sun reappears, while the protagonist, still running, leaves the trees “with the house [...] at their heart” behind and finally reaches the bus which brings him to civilization.

Although with regard to action the story terminates with Arglay’s sitting down on the bus, there is one more extra-textual deictic shift encoded — to Dante Alighieri’s *La Commedia Divina* or, more specifically, to the *Inferno*, as its concluding line is evoked by the protagonist (“his mind said”): “*E quindi uscimmo, a riveder le stelle*” (“And thence we came forth to see again the stars”). This, on the one hand, indicates the interpretative perspective of Arglay’s journey being equivalent of Dante’s and, on the other hand, demonstrates the protagonist’s *understanding* of what has just happened.

In light of the above, Arglay’s experience is more likely to be one of a visitor, than of someone facing the choice between salvation or damnation. Beach rightly concludes that never is Arglay’s salvation “at stake” (Beach 1991: 463), but his other comment that “Wil-

¹³ On the one hand, as Stockwell observes, “[c]ertain aspects of literary texts are commonly seen as being more important or salient than others” (Stockwell 2002: 14). “Though”, he continues, “this is *partly a subjective matter*, it is also largely *a matter of the cues that the text provides*” [emphasis added] (Stockwell 2002: 14). On the other hand, as Ellen van Wolde contends, “[m]eaning does not reside solely in the inherent properties of the entity or situation it describes, but crucially involves *the way we choose to think about this entity or situation and mentally portray it*” (van Wolde 2003: 23). In her subsequent literary analyses, she convincingly demonstrates how the figure-ground alignment depends on a particular reading of the text (van Wolde 2003: 23n.).

¹⁴ This is truly surprising, for in the Bible it is the “straight way” which leads to righteousness and God (Cf. Psalms 5: 1; Isaiah 40: 3; Jeremiah 31: 9; Matthew 3: 1, etc.).

liams is not portraying hell in this story” should be taken with reserve, to say the least. True, the everlasting presence of hell is only suggested (and not described in a Dantesque-like manner), but the textual signals leading to the “hellish” rendering are abundant, beginning with the story’s title, imagery, up to the conclusion¹⁵.

4.

An instance of cognitive-poetic approach, the deictic analysis demonstrates that *Sempiternum* is a complex, multi-layered text whose informational “gaps” can be completed in *several* ways, enabling different interpretations, dependent on the reader’s frames of knowledge as well as on her/his figure-ground choices. Owing to deictic shifts, the reader “moves” through the story world s/he mentally constructs. It can be argued that more evident, “intra-textual” deictic shifts (mainly perceptual, spatial, temporal, and relational ones) serve as means of “immersing” the reader into such a world, eliciting her/his cognitive empathy (or, in Jauss’s [1974] terms, “associative identification”) with the protagonist. “Extra-textual” shifts (relational, textual, and compositional), in turn, allow the reader to place the story in rich generic, intertextual, and ideological contexts.

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¹⁵ Likewise, Kowalik (2010) claims that in *Sempiternum* “Williams, like Dante and the majority of the early Church Fathers, assumes hell literally to be a place of fiery torments, darkness, weeping, gnashing of teeth, and various forms of self-destruction” (78).

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