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Struggling with the Absent Structure: On the Rise and Fall of Umberto Eco's Semiotics

Abstract: Umberto Eco's career as a literary theorist and a scholar might be divided into two stages. The first, early stage would be marked with an attempt at devising a semiotic theory of literary interpretation, as it was attempted in works such as *The Open Work*, *A Theory of Semiotics*, or *The Role of the Reader*, whereas the second stage would encompass the bulk of Eco's later theoretical work, including *The Limits of Interpretation*, and *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Perhaps the biggest difference between these two periods is Eco's gradual retraction from creating any overarching theoretical framework for literature, from the possibility of formulating a general, semiotic literary theory. Indeed, whereas in his early works, Eco tries to combine C.S. Peirce's processual semiotics and reader-response criticism in order to create a positive program for literary studies, in his later works, he moves to a more defensive position, as if acknowledging the almost uncontrollable character of interpretation, setting himself a more modest goal of merely defining its limits. This essay will try to show that Eco's early, grand semiotic theory is marked with a paradoxical attitude towards the literary text, as he wishes to see interpretation as an equal dialogue between the text, and the reader, but in fact, he is never able to give a coherent account of this dialogic relation. His concept of the Model Reader cannot transgress the paradox of circularity, of being the creator, and the product of the text at the same time. His idea of a dialogue of equals seems to be subverted by the practical applications of his theory which suggest that readers cannot simply generate meanings, but have to also evaluate it. A serious discrepancy between Eco's theory and practice emerges as a result of an unresolved struggle between endorsing reader's constructionism and textual essentialism, between promoting the processual, and the mechanistic idea of interpretation. And, although any personal reasons for which Eco might have abandoned his major work in semiotics are of no importance for this analysis, it is perhaps true that his theory could never have met its very own expectations.

1. Semiotics of the open work

Notwithstanding various theoretical twists in Eco's works throughout his academic career, two general, related concepts concerning literary meaning might be recognized as essential to his views. The first, relating to the nature of interpretation, is

the insistence on the dialectical mode of meaning production, seen as a dialogue between the work and the reader. The other characteristic feature of Eco's work, the one relating to the nature of meaning, is his emphasis of the processual character of meaning, instead of a fixed one.

The development of these concepts might be traced to Eco's earliest work on interpretation, as presented in his *The Open Work*, where he offers a classification of the works of art into closed and open structures. In Eco's theory, openness is a feature of the modern art that stresses "multiplicity, plurality, or polysemy, … the role of the reader [and sees] literary interpretation and response as an interactive process between reader and text" (Eco 1989: viii). Closed structures, as well as traditional art, on the other hand, are more schematic and simplistic, minimizing the active role of the reader in their interpretations and severely limiting their range of possible meanings, leading their readers or listeners, in one semantic direction. By introducing the notion of openness, Eco not only anticipated many later reader-oriented and post-structuralist theories, but he also posed a direct challenge to the widespread structuralist beliefs of the time which opposed both any form of ambiguity of meaning and reader's active participation in the meaning's production. Indeed, Levi-Strauss's hostile reaction to *The Open Work* which he condemned as anti-structuralist, emphasizing that the work of art "is an object endowed with precise properties, that must be analytically isolated, and this work can be entirely defined on the grounds of such properties" (Eco 1984: 3) is very telling. One might say that Eco's early work heralds both his later methodological orientation, such as emphasizing the dialogue of the structure and the subjective act, the process in literary interpretation, or trying to find alternatives for the Saussurean structuralist semiotics, as well as the potential problems of his theory, such as the causal relation of the interpretive dialogue, or the status of the reader of the "open" and "closed" texts.

Eco's later major work, *A Theory of Semiotics*, proved his estrangement from the structuralist mainstream. In this work, Eco emphatically rejects the concept that lies at the foundation of the structuralist thought, namely, the Saussurean notion of sign. Saussure's simplistic and static semiology stood in sharp contrast with Eco's insistence on openness and process. While Eco supposedly retained the structuralist belief that individual meanings are only elements whose value is determined in relation to other units of larger underlying structures, he embraced the triadic model of sign developed by Charles S. Peirce. In contrast to de Saussure's diadic model of sign as a signifier and signified, Peirce introduced in his theory a third element, the interpretant, an effect, or an interpretation which the sign/object relation evokes in the mind of the code's addressee. What soon became the central idea of Eco's semiotic work was a development of Peirce's idea of *unlimited semiosis*. Eco's claim was that the meaning, or in broader terms, the content of an expression, can be understood only as a never-ending process of production of new interpretants, since, in Peirce's semiotics, each interpretant becomes a new sign that

produces another interpretant which, in turn, leads to a new sign that produces yet another interpretant. Thus, says Eco,

> signs are the provisional result of coding rules which establish transitory correlations of elements, each of these elements being entitled to enter — under given coded circumstances — into another correlation and thus form a new sign. (1976: 49)

Eco's semiotics modifies classical structuralist assumptions by positing both that every interpretant is potentially linked to all others in the system and that meaning is a process that does not have any closure. With the very idea that every interpretant is understood in relation to other interpretants to which it refers "there begins a process of unlimited semiosis" (Eco 1976: 68).

Peirce's processual semiotics are in accord with Eco's drive towards defining meaning as a dialogue between the reader and the text. In fact, *unlimited semiosis* possibly questions not only the stability of the text, but its very existence prior to interpretation. Eco's assumption that the code is neither "a natural condition … nor a stable structure" (Eco 1976: 126), and his insistence on its transient character, leads him to a conclusion that it is "a purely temporary device posited in order to explain a certain message, a working hypothesis that aims to control the immediate semantic environment of given semantic units" (Eco 1976: 126–127). But, just like in his earlier, more structuralist-influenced period, Eco is not univocally on the constructionist side, still as if concentrating his work on the semiotic structures. Continuing his earlier work on art and aesthetics, but now placing it in the framework of semiotic theory, Eco observes that it is in the nature of aesthetic texts to enrich the commonly encountered codes. The aesthetic character of a text (or art in general) implies ambiguity and subversion of the rules of the code. Eco, thus, again pays his debt to the formalist-structuralist tradition, referring to Jakobsonian poetics (Eco 1976: 262). As a result, the role of literature is to reveal that

> within its basic matter there is a further space in which sub-forms and sub-systems can be isolated, [it] suggests that the codes on which the aesthetic sign relies can likewise be systematically submitted to such further segmentation. (Eco 1976: 268)

Eco seems to be suggesting, echoing formalist influences, that the nature of literature is to defamiliarize, to continually complicate, or as William Ray noticed, to produce "an inflation in the overall complexity of the addressee's semantic universe" (1984: 128) which "quite literally increases one's own culture" (Ray, 128). Experiencing aesthetic texts, "the addresee becomes aware of new semiotic possibilities and is thereby compelled to rethink the whole language, the entire inheritance of what has been said, can be said, and could and should be said" (Eco 1976: 274). Such definition of aesthetic (literary) texts might suggest their essentialist understanding, again reinforced by Eco's use of Jakobson's definition of poetic language in reference to aesthetic texts. Still, it already foreshadows later problems with Eco's semiotics: if the aesthetic essence of literary language implies its "ambiguity and self-focus" which is in turn derived from the violation of conventions,

then "any text can be made code-inventive simply by reading it according to con-
ventions it seems to violate" (Ray, 129). Although supposedly questioning the
structuralist idea of a literary text as a crystal, Eco's notion of the aesthetic encoun-
ters precisely the same difficulties as any theory rooted in the formalist-structuralist
tradition, where it is attempted to define literature, or to identify its distinctive
features, in terms of a linguistic deviation from the ordinary language. But the
case seems to be precisely the opposite. The aesthetic in the code, or the language
can never be identified without any reference to extra-lingustic knowledge of the
conventions, literary traditions, the context of creation, or the author's intentions,
as the contextless analysis can prove absolutely any text to be aesthetic, depending
on the semiotic background against which it is read.[1]

      In his following collection of essays, *The Role of the Reader*, Eco both de-
veloped and applied his theory of semiotics to the analysis of literary texts. Once
again presenting meaning as a dynamic interaction between the reader and the
text, Eco introduced the crucial notion of the Model Reader. Since, according to
Eco, "semiotics studies all cultural processes as *processes of communication*" (Eco
1984: 7), in his theory literature is also grounded in the communicative frame-
work. Thus, he remarks that "the author has to foresee a model of the possible
reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the
expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them" (Eco
1984: 8). This definition, however, taken at face value, would be dangerously close
to psychologism and the intentional fallacy, but Eco specifies it, again showing
his attachment to textual autonomism and excluding the direct involvement of the
empirical author in the process of interpretation, stating that "the Model Reader
is a textually established set of felicity conditions … to be met in order to have a
macro-speech act (such as a text is) fully actualized" (Eco 1984: 11). Moreover,
since the contact between the sender and the addressee in such communicative
processes as literature is not that direct as in everyday speech acts, Eco regards the
text's empirical author as detached from the process of interpretation, and his role
is reduced to a textual strategy, his presence is "textually manifested only (i) as a
recognizable style or textual idiolect — this idiolect frequently distinguishing not
an individual but a genre, a social group, a historical period" (Eco 1984: 10). This
approach recapitulates Eco's earlier thoughts on the nature of the text's structure.
In structuralist theory, it was the semiotic-semantic structure that presupposed any
interpretive, subjective act, but Eco seems to be suggesting that the structure can
only be a temporary, "working hypothesis," which, far from being treated as a
universal, all-encompassing code, can only serve as a key to understanding a given
message, a unique text-idiolect (Eco 1976: 128).

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      [1] The compelling arguments to which I refer, and which speak against the notion of the aes-
thetic, or literary, as understood in merely linguistic or semiotic terms, were presented by Olsen
(1976).

   The Role of the Reader marks also an attempt to devise a general theory of textual interpretation that would consider the reader/text dialectic. The process of interpretation, as Eco suggests, seems to be operating simultaneously on many levels, starting with what he calls "linear text manifestation," that is, "the text as such as it appears verbally with its lexematic surface" (Eco 1984: 15). The linear text manifestation on which the reader works, confronting it "with the system of codes and subcodes provided by the language in which the text is written" (Eco 1984:17), as well as using the context of its creation, biographical and historical information, is transformed into actualized content which is later subdivided into further, specific elements. The first element in that stage is what Eco calls, the *discoursive structure*. It is, in other words, the basic content actualized by the reader so as to create a general framework of the work. In order to do that, the reader actualizes the explicit semantic content of the text, as well as those elements which are "virtually present" (Eco 1984: 23). For example, the reader has to determine whether the fact that the text describes a human being requires him to focus on the fact of having "two lungs and a pancreas" (Eco 1984: 23), in case of which the fact becomes "blown-up," or whether such deduction is irrelevant for the text and remains a "narcotized" possibility ready for being "blown-up" if the text suggests its importance.

   The next stage is to construct, on the basis of the *discoursive structures*, the more detailed *narrative structures* which Eco also calls *fabula*, or "the basic story stuff, the logic of actions or the syntax of characters, the time-oriented course of events" (Eco 1984: 27). Although this might resemble a purely formalist notion of the text, Eco elaborates on it, adding that the reader always has to predict the direction in which the narrative is going. In order to do so, it is necessary to perform, as he calls it, *inferential walks*, that is, to move outside the specific text in search for intertextual information which would support the reader's predictions. On the deeper levels of interpretation, the reader formulates the text's basic ideological structures such as "Good vs. Bad, Positive vs. Negative, True vs. False" (Eco 1984: 38) and "at the same time the reader has to compare (if he has not yet done so) the world such as is presented by the text with his own 'real' world, that is, the world of his (presumed) concrete experience" (Eco 1984: 37), again moving outside the textual framework in the creation of its content.

2. The limits of theory

The basic problem stems from Eco's ambiguous stance on the dialectical model of meaning creation. In all of his works, he avoids making any explicit claims about its nature, any definite judgment about whether the meaning precedes interpretation or whether it is the reader who is responsible for its creation. As he puts it:

All along the course of history we are confronted with two ideas of interpretation. On one side it is assumed that to interpret a text means to find out the meaning intended by its original author or — in any case its objective nature or essence, an essence which, as such, is independent of our interpretation. On the other side it is assumed that texts can be interpreted in infinite ways. Taken as such, these two options are both instances of epistemological fanaticism. (Eco 1990: 24)

It is evident that he renounces both and places himself somewhere in between. But the question that arises immediately is: where exactly? Eco's reluctance to express his stance explicitly leads to possible theoretical confusions and a general indeterminacy of his claims. Specifically, as William Ray observed, "Eco's model eludes reduction to causal paradigms. Reading is neither a production of textual structures nor a response to them, but both at once" (Ray, 133). This circularity is also transposed into the notion of the Model Reader whom Eco describes as "a product of the reading process that elaborates it" (Ray, 134), claiming at the same time that "the text is nothing else but the semantic-pragmatic production of its own Model Reader" (Eco 1984: 10). As a result, Eco safely avoids the traps of relativist constructionism and textual essentialism, only to cast himself into the pit of vagueness, pretending that the causal problem does not exist.

At this point, Eco's indeterminate stance might be compared to E.D. Hirsch's "schizophrenic" (Kalaga 2001: 27) attitude towards text, as the latter attempted to save the determinacy and the stability of textual meaning and acknowledge its ever-changing character at the same time, by introducing the distinction into meaning and significance (Hirsch 1967). There are, however, certain implicit aspects of Eco's work that might lead to a conclusion that while he retains his schizophrenic attitude, he tends to give tacit primacy to the notion of the text. This tacit textual primacy is perhaps the only way to save the coherence of Eco's theory, but it also puts the active role of the reader, into question. This is reflected in his concept of *intentio operis* that seems to constitute the centre of his later interpretive model. Rhetorically, when Eco compares the text to a machine that generates interpretations (Eco 1996), it is doubtless that the intention of the work precedes that of the reader. Indeed, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which seems to be Eco's ideal exemplification of his theory (Markowski 1996: 131), is presented as:

a sort of computer which has received the input of all available knowledge and which returns an output of new connections effected among the various elements of this knowledge. *Finnegans Wake* is the representation (even if in an artistic rather than theoretical form) of an encyclopedia in action. (Eco 1990: 147)

Of course, such a mechanical idea of producing interpretations is in stark contrast with its dialectic, processual nature promoted elsewhere. If the text generates meaning like a machine, then, clearly, the role of the reader is greatly reduced and subjected to the text. This problem is further aggravated when Eco elaborates on the interaction between the reader and *fabula.* Reader's activities appear to be limited to a mechanical adjustment of his forecasts about the development of the plot to a fairly

static structure of the text. Apparently Eco treats this process as a simple, mechanical act of matching and confirming, saying that "when the reader realizes his mistakes he does not manipulate his possible (wrong) world to come back to the story. He simply throws it out" (Eco 1984: 246). Such a claim is perhaps highly problematic, as it overlooks the fact that acknowledging a mistake would have to be an arbitrary judgment of the reader, depending both on his will and his creativity (tolerance, perhaps?) in constructing a coherent story. Apart from the problem of the course of reader's critical self-assessment, its credibility and even possibility, such account seems to be surprisingly simplistic. In fact, the processual character of meaning that Eco endorsed in his writings, including his idea of its gradual construction through a system of forecasts and expectations, is hard to reconcile with his simple rejection of the constructed possible world, as "by Eco's own theory, that possible world is not given in a mode stable enough to permit disqualification" (Ray, 138). It is always a temporary product of a dialogic relation. To claim such a form of rejection one has to tacitly acknowledge the existence of a stable, underlying textual structure which controls the reader. Thus, Eco seems to be claiming that, on the one hand, the reader actively constructs (posits) the textual structure, but on the other hand, after constructing it, the posited, underlying structure becomes as if solid and autonomous, beginning to control the somewhat passive reader. Moreover, if the texts always control the production of meanings, there is hardly any space left for critical practice which seems to be severely restricted and reduced to the inevitable realization of the self-evident textual meaning. Surprisingly, then, there is not much left from the original claim that the semiotic structure is only temporarily posited by the active and creative reader, as this absent structure seems to be controlling the reader all the way through the interpretive inquiry, whose only aim, it seems, is to let the text demonstrate its self-evident meaning. One of the foundations of Eco's semiotics was the claim that a code is never a permanent, autonomous structure. However, his following analyses seem to contradict this, and in this respect his theory appears to be incongruent with practice.

The above paradox and the discrepancy between theory and practice is further widened when Eco attempts to analyze particular works in his *The Role of the Reader*. As Ray noted, Eco focuses almost exclusively on rather schematic texts such as James Bond novels, or Superman comic books that are not only closed on the readers active role but also closed on Eco's whole program (Ray, 135). In the last chapter of his book he attempts to give a detailed analysis of a short story from 1890 by Alphonse Allais entitled *Un Drame bien parisien* which he sees as teasing the reader, leaving him many red herrings during reading, and at the same time, requiring him to fomulate his forecasts basing on inferential walks, extratextual and intertextual knowledge. However, as Ray noticed, Eco focuses mainly on the final element of his model — the possible worlds, on which he comments that "when one imagines a set of individuals (and of relations among them) that the text cannot finally admit, one in fact resorts to opposing to the world of the text a possible

world not accessible to it" (Ray, 136). Ray quite correctly sees this as a rejection of the harmonious interaction between the text and the reader and a redefinition of "reading in terms of an opposition between text and reader" (Ray, 136), which eventually implies the renouncement of the "paradigm of meaning generation for one of meaning evaluation" (Ray, 136). Eventually, the reader's inventive potentiality is subordinated to the text, and evidently the relation is no longer that of a dialogue of equals, as the reader cannot simply produce meanings but he also has to evaluate them. Hence Eco's program of a semiotic analysis of meaning production becomes in fact reduced to a "traditional evaluative criticism" (Ray, 138). In other words, Eco's rejection of structuralism was based on his supposition that semiotic code is not a stable, universal structure, but a temporary posit that can only serve to decipher a single message, a single text. In practice, however, it seems that the semiotic analysis is not much different from traditional, evaluative forms of interpretive enquiry. If the semiotic analyst becomes the interpretive critic and the description of a text's subcode is achieved "through its performance as interpretation" (Ray, 139), then the idea of a "distanced and objective analysis" (Ray, 139) has to fail. "If any well-argued reading will disclose the Model Reader of a text, the reading of a skilled semiotician has no claim to distinctiveness" (Ray, 140) and, as a result, the semiotician and his work become redundant.

Interestingly, in his later works, such as *The Limits of Interpretation*, or *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Eco apparently retracted from the earlier claims about the special status of semiotic analysis. In both works, one can hardly find the products of his former, more scientist approach to the analysis of the reading processes, narrative structures, or semiotic codes, such as elaborate schemas or diagrams. Although he still uses the semiotic vocabulary, most notably, the notion of infinite semiosis, his chief purpose is to indicate its distinctness from the deconstructionist free play of signifiers (which he calls the hermetic drift of signs), distancing himself both from the poststructuralist radical liberation of the text, from any delimiting constraints, and from his prior emphasis on the conversational model of reader-text relationship. In both works, he sets out to merely define a criterion of demarcation between acceptable and non-acceptable interpretations, rather than trying to put forward an all-encompassing theory of literary interpretation and instead of a technical, semiotic language, he talks about different types of intentions (the reader's, the text's, and the author's, all of which interact in the process of meaning production) as if openly moving from semiotics to more traditional hermeneutics. Although a more detailed analysis of his later work is beyond the scope of this essay, it is fair to say that the most important concept developed in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, that is *intentio operis*, the autonomous intention of the work posited as a result of producing its most coherent interpretations, does not resolve the earlier paradox concerning the reader's active constructionism and supposed textual essentialism, which was pointed out in Richard Rorty's polemics (Rorty 1992: 93). Moreover, the clarity of the idea of

a text/structure in Eco's works was put into question by other scholars who write extensively on literary meaning. Peter Lamarque claimed that rather than proposing anti-intentional, textual autonomism, Eco's position is actually "comparable to hypothetical [authorial] intentionalism" (Lamarque 2009: 129), that is to say, *intentio operis* is the reader's creative construct which nevertheless always remains a guess about the hypothetical (model) author's intentions, a position perhaps similar to Stanley Fish's intentionalism. Paisley Livingston dubbed it "textual intentionalism" (2010: 405), a stance similar to that described by Lamarque, which he elsewhere claims untenable (Livingston 1993: 91–104), and Patrick Colm Hogan, in his book on interpretation, accuses Eco's ambiguous discussion of meaning of a vagueness intrinsic to many debates in literary theory concerning the most basic questions of meaning and interpretation (Hogan 1996: 1–8).

Thus, looking at Eco's theoretical work from the 1990's onward, as well as considering his successful career of a novelist, it is perhaps fair to say that "the great era of theory" in Eco's works has ended. In the collection of essays entitled *Kant and the Platypus*, he blatantly undermines the possibility of continuing his early program in semiotics in its traditional form, asserting that

> while in the sixties it was possible to think of linking up the scattered members of many semiotic research projects in order to attempt a summa of them, today the area covered has become so wide (overlapping that of the various cognitive sciences) that any new systematization would seem rash. What we are now faced with is an expanding galaxy and no longer a planetary system for which fundamental equations can be supplied, a situation that strikes me as a sign of success and health. (Eco 2000: 2)

Of course, there is no reason not to accept Eco's modest claims, but apart from the challenges which emerged as a result of the development of some new disciplines, or apart from any personal motivations, there are reasons to think that Eco's semiotics could not have overcome some serious theoretical problems. On the other hand, however, this does not mean that Eco's theory has nothing to offer, or that his readings and analyses of given literary texts are of no value. His point that both the semiotic theory, and the basic considerations on interpretation, meaning and the reading process require a more interdisciplinary approach, merging with various areas of cognitive science seems a promising direction of development. Regrettably, Eco has never attempted to make this giant step forward which he only hinted in the above quotation, and, as a result, his theory falls into the trap of the disciplinary self-containment which apparently cannot successfully answer the questions it poses.

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