MICHAEL CAESAR

UMBERTO ECO

Philosophy, Semiotics and the Work of Fiction
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Michael Caesar

Polity Press
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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Harvard University Press for permission to quote from the English translation of *The Open Work* (1989), to Harcourt Brace and Company for permission to quote from the English translations of *The Name of the Rose* (1983) and *The Island of the Day Before* (1995), and to Indiana University Press for permission to quote from *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) and *The Role of the Reader* (1979), and to use the diagram from *The Role of the Reader* reproduced here on p. 129.

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Note on References

The following forms of referencing are used:

A. Writings by Eco published in volume form (which include many essays first published elsewhere) are referred to by the initial letters of the title and page number. Full details are given in section A of the Select Bibliography, pp. 184–6. In the case of Eco's theoretical works, reference is normally given to editions in both Italian and English, where the latter exists; exceptions to this norm are explained in the text.

B. Shorter writings by Eco not available in volume form: these are indicated by the author's name, date of publication and short title. Full details are given in section B of the Select Bibliography.

C. Writings by authors other than Eco are referred to by the author's name and short title. Full details are given in section C of the Select Bibliography.
Introduction

Umberto Eco was born in Alessandria (Piedmont) in 1932. He graduated in philosophy from Turin University in 1954 with a thesis on the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas. After that his *curriculum vitae* starts to get complicated. His religious faith began to wane after a militant youth in Catholic Action; the middle and late 1950s were for him a period of religious and political crisis, which finally resolved into that sort of humanist secularism that has characterized his writing ever since (but nobody who has had such an education, he says, ever entirely loses a sense of the religious). It was also a period of professional and intellectual ferment. He was working for a time for the state television company and becoming involved in the artistic and cultural life of Milan at a particularly creative moment of its recent history. The outcome was two books that made Eco’s reputation in Italy and, within a short time, more widely in Europe too. *Opera aperta* (The Open Work), published in 1962, sought to establish an aesthetics of indeterminacy in modern art, particularly music and the visual arts. *Apocalittici e integrati* (‘Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals’, 1964) was the first sustained attempt in Italy to understand how the messages transmitted by the media of popular culture actually work. Since the first edition of *Opera aperta* also included a book-length study of James Joyce, and Eco’s Joyce shared with his author a not inconsiderable interest in Aquinas, these publications of the early 1960s brought together three strong interests which on the face of it seemed well-nigh incompatible: medieval scholasticism, avant-garde art and contemporary popular culture.
Introduction

Eco’s search for a philosophical discourse which would bring the objects of his research within a unified field took him beyond the post-Crocean aesthetics of his younger years through linguistics and information theory to structuralism and semiotics. The period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s was devoted to the construction of a theory of semiotics, of which the most visible outcome was the book of that title, first published in Italy in 1975. The works of the 1960s and 1970s involve a considerable effort of theoretical intensity, but it was never in Eco’s case detached from engagement with social praxis. What Eco was undertaking was the construction of a theory of semiotics which would be a theory of the constitution and understanding of human cultural phenomena, an enterprise which in his more tongue-in-cheek moments he cheerily accepted as ‘imperialistic’ in its scope and ambition. It was during the 1960s too that Eco began to obtain regular employment as an academic, first as a lecturer in aesthetics at Turin (1961–4), then teaching the semiology of visual communication in the Architecture Faculty at Florence (1966–9) and semiotics, again in Architecture, at the Milan Polytechnic (1969–71), before moving in 1971 to the University of Bologna, which has been his academic base ever since.

The itinerary sketched out above is described in greater detail in the first four chapters of this book, which follow Eco’s trajectory in broadly chronological sequence. Chapter 1 presents and analyses a series of pre-semiotic aesthetic positions which, though later incorporated into a wider vision, remain formative. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to Eco’s reflections on mass culture, reflections which gave the essential impetus to the construction of his semiotics. The principal aim throughout is to present Eco’s thought in as clear and accurate a manner as possible, and this aim is particularly evident in the two chapters (chapters 3 and 4) on the evolution of his systematic semiotics between 1967 and 1975: here more than anywhere else the discussion keeps closely to the order and argument of Eco’s own text, while essential contextual information is provided in a relatively condensed form.

Chapter 5 represents a transition in the book, as we move from an account of the arguments put forward in *A Theory of Semiotics* to a discussion of some of the more important objections to it and of Eco’s clarifications of semiotic issues (some of them in partial, and not always direct, response to his critics). After *A Theory of Semiotics*, three major lines are discernible in Eco’s work. Firstly, there is a continuing preoccupation with questions of logic and epistemology, often focused around Eco’s continuing reflection on
the theories of C. S. Peirce, and with an increasing interest in the work of the cognitive sciences in recent years: *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* is an important staging-post in this journey and is discussed here in chapter 5. In the second place, Eco pays particular attention from the late 1970s on to text pragmatics and theories of narrativity (*Lector in fabula* and its English-language cousin *The Role of the Reader* both appeared in 1979); his semiotic concerns loop back here to issues first raised in *Opera aperta* and other essays from his early years, issues that have to do with the nature, scope and limits of interpretation (*The Limits of Interpretation*, 1990). And finally, it is during this same period that Eco conquers planetary fame as a novelist: *The Name of the Rose* was published in Italy in 1980, succeeded by *Foucault's Pendulum* in 1988 and *The Island of the Day Before* in 1994, translations closely following in their wake.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine the relation between the theory and practice of fiction from different points of view. The first discusses Eco's views concerning the construction of model readers and fictional worlds and analyses the three novels together from a metatextual stance; it resolutely refuses, however, to regard the novels as 'applications' of the theory. Chapter 7 raises two critical questions about the body of work produced between 1979 and 1994, asking how far Eco's denunciation of 'hermetic' interpretation (in the name of limits) might be turned against his own theory, and whether his important distinction between the use and the interpretation of literary texts is adequate to a description of the reading process. The distant origins of this chapter in a public lecture may still be perceptible in the marginally more relaxed tone of its argument. The final chapter (chapter 8) introduces the substantial collection of philosophical essays which Eco published in late 1997 with the intriguing title *Kant e l'ornitorinco* (*Kant and the Platypus*); he particularly recommended it to readers of *A Theory of Semiotics* on the grounds that it contained a rethinking of some of his old positions. As well as giving a brief account of the major issues touched on in *Kant*, chapter 8 ends with a metaphor, perhaps appropriately for a thinker for whom the aesthetic text has always had particular resonance; the metaphor in question is one that is uniquely powerful in the more recent Eco. The reader of this book will, I hope, understand why any greater sense of closure than that would be entirely alien to a practice of thought that over some forty years has not ceased to evolve and deepen.

Eco is a prolific, and highly professional, writer. A study like this, which draws on the most public and monumental of Eco's
productions, particularly those in book form, cannot do justice even to all the books. Eco the medievalist, who has written extensively on medieval philosophy and aesthetics (Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages was translated into English in 1986), but also edited a lavishly illustrated Beato di Liébana for Franco Maria Ricci in 1973, is poorly represented here. So too is the player of experimental literary games (Vocali, 1991), the writer of children’s books with the painter Eugenio Carmi, the translator of Queneau (Esercizi di stile, 1983), the author of a student guide on how to write a degree thesis (Come si scrive una tesi di laurea, 1977 – still one of Eco’s best-selling books), the organizer and compiler of a CD-ROM on the seventeenth century, above all perhaps the journalist, cultural and social commentator and critic who has hardly ever missed his weekly (now fortnightly) column for L’Espresso and has recently started trying his hand at new arts, such as that of interviewing.

Still less can it do justice to the mobility, variety, yet interconnectedness of Eco’s writing. An anatomy of the body of his work would show the complexity of the system as a whole, at every level. What is striking is not just the big leap between ‘theoretical’ and ‘narrative’ writing, but also the way in which ideas are tried out and returned to and revised (and their temperature raised or lowered) in different kinds and at different levels of discourse (which often reappear in written form): seminar, lecture course, conference paper, scientific journal paper, newspaper article, dictionary or encyclopedia entry, foreword, preface, introduction, commentary, postface or afterword to other people’s books, interview, collection of essays, treatise, novel, word games, exercises de style. Mobility, variety and interconnectedness are features of Eco’s thought as well, which in this book we see in its most (relatively) settled form. Although he builds his semiotic model on firmly rationalist and humanistic grounds, he knows that it remains provisional, always to be verified. Having to decide whether semiotics is an ontology or a methodology, he plumps firmly for the latter, which leaves him, and the reader, with the maximum of flexibility – and responsibility.

Many friends and colleagues have helped me in the writing of this book, but I should first thank Umberto Eco who, whenever I have discussed it with him, or indeed talked about other things entirely, has always proved an informative and witty, but also tactful, interlocutor. Vita Fortunati and Giovanna Franci at Bologna provided the vital introduction. Members of the Italian Section at the
University of Kent at Canterbury and of the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Birmingham have been supportive in every way, including enabling me to take sabbatical leave. I am grateful to Jean Petitot for inviting me to the ten-day conference devoted to Eco, with the participation of the author, at Cerisy-la-Salle in June–July 1996, and the British Academy and the Faculty of Arts at Birmingham for providing funds to allow me to go. The British Academy also generously supported a research visit to Rome in June 1994. John Thompson with Gill Motley at Polity Press have shown remarkable forebearance which I have deeply appreciated. The work done on Eco by two of my graduate students, Manuela Barranu and Ruth Glynn, and by another, Stephen Martin, on Peirce has helped me constantly to focus my ideas. I should particularly like to thank Ann Hallamore Caesar whose participation both in the inception of this project and in its completion was decisive.
On form and interpretation: from Croce to Pareyson

Eco’s aesthetic was formed under the guidance of the Catholic philosopher Luigi Pareyson. Pareyson’s theory of ‘formativity’ was one of several lines of research in the 1940s and 1950s to challenge what for many had become the dogmatic and ultimately sterile idealism of Benedetto Croce. For the post-Crocean generation, there were vast tracts of the artistic and aesthetic landscape which Croce had not simply ignored, but had peremptorily decreed were no concern of the philosopher’s. His insistence on imaginative, or lyrical, intuition as the only valid component of the aesthetic experience – ‘Let me say straight away, as simply as possible, art is vision or intuition’1 – entailed a number of explicit exclusions: art is not a physical fact, it is not a utilitarian act intended to produce pleasure, it is not a moral act. Translated into the perspective of his critics, these exclusions meant that Croce had displayed sovereign indifference to the materiality of the work of art, to the historical conditions of its production, to the processes of conceptualization through which the work of art came into being, to the positive role played by convention and rhetoric (dismissed by Croce as ‘precepts’, in a rearguard polemic with a long-dead classicism), and to the reception and consumption of the work. All this in spite of the fact that is evident to any reader of Croce that he was a superb historian, an acute reader of literary texts, even, perhaps especially, the most obscure, and a wonderful writer, whom Eco was later to describe, in a 1991 review of a new edition of Croce’s Estetica, with an adjective
that might harbour some ambiguity, as ‘overwhelming’ (scrivitore travolgente: KO, p. 387).2

As Eco’s horizons widened beyond his Turinese education in the middle and late 1950s, other alternatives to Croce came into view. From America, where the New Criticism appeared to perform a similar role to Crocean idealism, the pragmatism of John Dewey in Art as Experience offered a valuable antidote; already in 1957, on the other hand, Eco could use a review of Wellek and Warren’s Theory of Literature in Italian translation to regret its lack of interest in the ‘consumption’ of the work of art on the grounds that: ‘to think about the work of art in terms of consumption, extra-aesthetic consumption and for daily life, is one sign that a given historical period is substantially healthy.’3 Later, other Italian critics and aestheticians such as Luciano Anceschi, Gillo Dorfles and Dino Formaggio would illuminate further aspects of the ‘making’ of a work of art — rhetoric, poetics, technique, the fact that it is above all a ‘work’ — which constitute the key facets of the turn against Croce; a distinctive contribution is made by the Marxist critique of intuitionism elaborated by Galvano Della Volpe in his rigorous polemics for the rationality of art, especially in Critica del gusto (1960). But Pareyson was particularly important for the young Eco. He was his teacher in the energetic Department of Philosophy at Turin, and looking back on Opera aperta nearly thirty years later Eco would acknowledge its debt to a ‘secularized’ version of Pareyson’s ideas on interpretation (LII, p. 20; cf. LIE, p. 50, which, however, omits the reference to ‘secularization’). It was Pareyson who at the time had proposed the most comprehensive aesthetic after Croce: his Estetica had appeared in instalments in the journal Filosofia between 1950 and 1954, and was published in book form in the latter year. Pareyson’s ‘theory of formativity’, where the word ‘formativity’ replaces the ‘ambiguous’ notion of ‘form’,4 emphasized the twofold dynamism of artistic form, as something that is made (or done — the Italian fare may cover both senses) and as something organic. This emphasis on the work of art as ‘production’ rather than ‘expression’ necessarily affects the mode of its reception: with Pareyson, neither ‘intuition’ nor ‘empathy’ plays a part in our response to the work; as readers or viewers or listeners, we ‘interpret’. By the same token, at the other end of the line that joins the ordinary reader to the theoretical aesthetician, Pareyson’s aesthetics is not ‘a metaphysics of art’, but ‘an analysis of the aesthetic experience’.5

Eco’s review of Estetica, which appeared in Lettere italiane in July 1955, was subsequently incorporated into a longer essay on
‘L’estetica della formatività e il concetto di interpretazione’ (DA, pp. 9–31), partially translated into English as ‘Form and Interpretation in Luigi Pareyson’s Aesthetics’ (OW, pp. 158–66), and at this point we may join Eco in his account of a theory of interpretation which is at the same time a mapping-out of the territory of aesthetics. The concept of interpretation, which is as central to Pareyson’s theory as is that of formativity, occasioned controversy in the 1950s in particular because it did not admit of any substantial difference between the normal appreciation of a work of art and specialized critical discourse. The theory developed as a critique of Croce’s views on theatrical and musical performance. Croce regarded the theatrical performance as a new work, as something different from the original text; musical performance, on the other hand, he regarded as a ‘re-creation’ of the original, thus assuming the continuity of the work in its performance, but denying any autonomy to the performer. Pareyson objected, first of all, in the name of the Crocean principle of the unity of all the arts, that the notion of performance (esecuzione) should be extended to them all. Notwithstanding the specific and material differences between the arts, Pareyson believed that ‘every kind of work requires a performance, even a purely inner one, one that makes it come alive again in the experience of the receiver’ (DA, p. 19). He also drew attention to the contradiction of Croce’s position, whereby the performance was either the faithful rendition of the work or it was the expression of the personality of the performer. Croce could not accommodate both the unity of the work and the multiplicity of its performances because, in his view, ‘the spirit neither interprets nor performs, for either it creates new works or re- evoke s those which it has created’ (quoted DA, p. 20).

Pareyson, by contrast, puts forward a theory of knowledge which is intimately linked to the process of figuration. Knowledge is a continual exchange between the stimuli offered by reality as ‘cues’ and the hypotheses that the person puts forward in response to the cues in order to give them a shape and a meaning. The process of figuration leads to a form which is itself the occasion for successive interpretations. The process is actualized in form and this means that it is constantly open to the possibility of being re-interpreted, albeit from the position of the producer (‘to interpret means to assume the point of view of the producer’), in following the same tentative path that led to the work. Pareyson points to the gap between ‘work’ and ‘performance’. The two are identical, but at the same time the ‘work’ (which at this point seems close to an ‘idea’ of
the work) transcends the particular form which the artist has finally achieved:

Just as the artist could intuit, in the intrinsic disorder of the cues, the outlines of a future order, so will the interpreter refuse to be dominated by the work as a completed physical whole, and will instead try to situate himself at the beginning of the process and to re-apprehend the work as it was meant to be. (DA, p. 26/OW, p. 163)

We may discern here germs, or more than germs, of future Echian positions. The dialectic between ‘order’ and ‘disorder’ will be a constant presence in Eco’s thinking from Opera aperta on; less immediately, the variable hierarchy suggested in the passage from artist to interpreter and back again may suggest the relation between ‘idioloc’ and ‘lexicon’ which will be explored in La struttura assente and discussed here in chapter 3. This is not to ignore the strongly personal and interpersonal nature of Pareyson’s aesthetics. For the latter the notion of interpretation is closely linked to his idea of style as a ‘way of forming’, that point at which the process of formation and the personality of the form-giver coincide. The only ‘knowledge’ which the artist necessarily establishes is that of his or her concrete personality which has become a ‘way of forming’. This position enables the sociological critic to approach the historical arena through the personality of the ‘form-giver’, and it is opposed to the ‘ impersonality’ of the artist argued for by Eliot, Joyce and New Criticism. The permanence of the work in the infinity of its interpretations is made possible for Pareyson precisely by the polarity between the two personalities in play, that of the form-giver and that of the interpreter: ‘The work lives only in the interpretations that are given of it’ (DA, p. 30/OW, p. 165). Interpretation takes place in an atmosphere of ‘congeniality’, based on the fundamental oneness of different forms of human behaviour, but also on an act of trust and loyalty towards the work, and of openness towards the personality of the artist; a trust and openness, however, which are exercised by another personality, which would be excluded from interpretation if it were confronted by a work that was closed and defined for ever. The specificity of the personality, experience, likes and dislikes of the receiver is not a barrier to, but an opportunity for interpretation.

There is in Pareyson’s aesthetic a very close link between the genesis of the work, its formal properties and possible reactions on the part of the receiver; while the New Criticism formalists tend to keep these three distinct, and to concentrate on the second, they
cannot be separated in the theory of formativity. ‘A work consists of the interpretive reactions it elicits, and these manifest themselves as a retracing of its inner genetic process – which is none other than the stylistic resolution of a “historical” genetic process’ (DA, p. 31/OW, p. 166).

Art and rationality

Unlike his teacher, Eco does not, at this stage at least, write an aesthetic. The numerous reviews, conference papers, catalogue presentations, articles and more substantial essays that he wrote for both academic publications and cultural periodicals aiming at a wider audience in the 1950s and the early 1960s (many of the ones specifically concerned with aesthetic questions being subsequently collected in Opera aperta and La definizione dell’arte) approach the problems of the definition of art and the role of aesthetics itself from a particular angle, through the eyes of the critic, the historian or the ordinary reader. Pareyson’s commitment to a description of artistic phenomena and processes that is as comprehensive as possible and stresses continuities rather than ruptures is evident also in Eco’s multi-directional activity of this period, though it is only later, in the elaboration of a theory of semiotics, that he will come close to the synthesis that Pareyson achieves, and then in substantially different terms. What particularly exercise him in the years leading up to the publication of Opera aperta in 1962 and immediately afterwards are the relationships between the work and the reader, stimulus and response, ambiguity and analysis.

As Croce is firmly taken leave of, Eco shores up the defences against a possible return, by himself dismissing the positivism against which Croce’s idealism had been (at least in Croce’s eyes?) such a powerful device. A sociology of art, for example, can only take us so far, as Arnold Hauser himself acknowledges; it has to be ‘completed’ by ‘an organic-structural explanation’ (DA, pp. 42–3), one, however, that takes full account of the insights already gained by the methods of sociology. A series of essays establishes Eco’s distance from the ‘positivism’ of Raymond Bayer, and he is equally sceptical of Léon Bopp’s search for an ‘objective’ critical methodology at which Bopp hopes to arrive by means of a statistical tabulation of sixty-six ‘values’ derived from Lanson’s (obviously historically limited) Histoire de la littérature française (DA, pp. 50–5).