

*Interpretation and Overinterpretation:  
World, History, Texts*

*UMBERTO ECO*

THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at

Clare Hall, Cambridge University  
March 7 and 8, 1990

UMBERTO ECO was born in Piedmont, Italy, in 1932, and studied philosophy at the University of Turin. In addition to holding appointments at the Universities of Turin, Milan, and Florence, he has also worked for Italian television. Since 1975 he has been Professor of Semiotics at the University of Bologna. He is the author of over a dozen books on semiotics, literary theory, and cultural criticism as well as the best-selling novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) and, most recently, *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989).

## I. INTERPRETATION AND HISTORY

In 1957 J. M. Castillet wrote a book entitled *La hora del lector* (The time of the reader).<sup>1</sup> He was a prophet, indeed. In 1962 I wrote my *Opera aperta*.<sup>2</sup> In that book I advocated the active role of the interpreter in the reading of texts endowed with aesthetic value. When those pages were written, my readers mainly focused on the “open” side of the whole business, underestimating the fact that the open-ended reading I was supporting was an activity elicited by (and aiming at interpreting) a work. In other words, I was studying the dialectics between the rights of texts and the rights of their interpreters. I have the impression that, in the course of the last decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed.

In my more recent writings (*A Theory Of Semiotics, The Role of the Reader, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*)<sup>3</sup> I elaborated on the Peircean idea of unlimited semiosis. In my presentation at the Peirce’s International Congress at Harvard University (September 1989) I tried to show that the notion of unlimited semiosis does not lead to the conclusion that interpretation has no criteria. To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object and that it “riverruns” merely for its own sake.<sup>4</sup> To say that a text has potentially no end does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy end.

<sup>1</sup>J. M. Castillet, *La hora del lector* (Barcelona, 1957).

<sup>2</sup>Translated as *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup>All published by Indiana University Press.

<sup>4</sup>See my forthcoming book, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

Some contemporary theories of criticism assert that the only reliable reading of a text is a misreading, that the only existence of a text is given by the chain of responses it elicits, and that, as maliciously suggested by Tzvetan Todorov (quoting Georg Cristoph Lichtenberg apropos of Jakob Boehme), a text is only a picnic where the author brings the words and the reader brings the sense.<sup>5</sup>

Even if that were true, the words brought by the author are a rather embarrassing bunch of material evidences that the reader cannot pass over in silence, or in noise. If I remember correctly, it was in this country [England] that somebody suggested, years ago, that it is possible to do things with words. To interpret a text means to explain why these words can do various things (and not others) through the way they are interpreted. But if Jack the Ripper told us that he did what he did on the grounds of his interpretation of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, I suspect that many reader-oriented critics would be inclined to think that he read Saint Luke in a pretty preposterous way. Non-reader-oriented critics would say that Jack the Ripper was deadly mad — and I confess that, even though feeling very sympathetic with the reader-oriented paradigm, and even though I read David Cooper, Ronald Laing, and Felix Guattari, much to my regret I would agree that Jack the Ripper needed medical care.

I understand that my example is rather farfetched and that even the most radical deconstructionist would agree (I hope, but who knows?) with me. Nevertheless I think that even such a paradoxical argument must be taken seriously. It proves that there is at least one case in which it is possible to say that a given interpretation is a bad one. In terms of Karl Popper's theory of scientific research, this is enough to disprove the hypothesis that interpretation has no public criteria (at least statistically speaking).

One can object that the only alternative to a radical reader-oriented theory of interpretation is the one extolled by those who

<sup>5</sup>T. Todorov, "Viaggio nella critica americana," *Lettera* iv, 12 (1987): 10.

say that the only valid interpretation aims at finding the original intention of the author. In some of my recent writings I have suggested that between the intention of the author (very difficult to find out and frequently irrelevant for the interpretation of a text) and the intention of the interpreter who (to quote Richard Rorty) simply “beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose,” there is a third possibility.<sup>6</sup> There is an *intention of the text*.

In the course of my second and third lectures I shall try to make clear what I mean by intention of the text (or *intentio operis*, as opposed to — or interacting with — the *intentio auctoris* and the *intentio lectoris*). During the present lecture I would like, on the contrary, to revisit the archaic roots of the contemporary debate on the meaning (or the plurality of meanings, or the absence of any transcendental meaning) of a text. Let me, for the moment, blur the distinction between literary and everyday texts, as well as the difference between texts as images of the world and the natural world as (according to a venerable tradition) a Great Text to be deciphered.

Let me, for the moment, start an archaeological trip which, at first glance, would lead us very far away from contemporary theories of textual interpretation. You will see at the end that, on the contrary, most so-called postmodern thought will look very pre-antique.

In 1987 I was invited by the directors of the Frankfurt Book-fair to give an introductory lecture, and the directors of the Book-fair proposed to me (probably believing that this was a really up-to-date subject) a reflection on modern irrationalism. I started by remarking that it is difficult to define *irrationalism* without having some philosophical concept of *reason*. Unfortunately, the whole history of Western philosophy serves to prove that such a definition is rather controversial. Any way of thinking is always seen as irrational by the historical model of another way of think-

<sup>6</sup>R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 151.

ing, which views itself as rational. Aristotle's logic is not the same as Hegel's; *ratio*, *ragione*, *raison*, *reason*, and *Vernunft* do not mean the same thing.

One way of understanding philosophical concepts is often to come back to the common sense of dictionaries. In German I find that the synonyms of *irrational* are *unsinnig*, *unlogisch*, *unvernünftig*, *sinnlos*; in English they are *senseless*, *absurd*, *nonsensical*, *incoherent*, *delirious*, *farfetched*, *inconsequential*, *disconnected*, *illogic*, *exorbitant*, *extravagant*, *skimble-skamble*. These meanings seem too strong or too weak to define respectable philosophical standpoints. Nonetheless, they indicate something going beyond a limit set by a standard. One of the antonyms of *unreasonableness* (according to *Roget's Thesaurus*) is *moderateness*. Being moderate means being within the *modus* — that is, within limits and within measure.

The word reminds us of two rules we have inherited from the ancient Greek and Latin civilizations : the logic principle of *modus ponens* and the ethical principle formulated by Horace: “est modus in rebus, sunt certi denique fines quos ultra citraque nequit consistere rectum [There is a measure for everything. There are precise limits one cannot cross].”<sup>7</sup>

At this point I understood that the latin notion of *modus* was rather important, if not for determining the difference between rationalism and irrationalism, at least for isolating two basic interpretative attitudes, that is, two ways of deciphering either a text as a world or the world as a text.

For Greek rationalism, from Plato to Aristotle and others, knowledge meant understanding causes. In this way, defining God meant defining a cause, beyond which there could be no further cause.

To be able to define the world in terms of causes, it is essential to develop the idea of a unilinear chain: if a movement goes from

<sup>7</sup>Horace, *Satires*, 1.1.106–107.

A to B, then there is no force on earth that will be able to make it go from B to A. In order to be able to justify the unilinear nature of the causal chain, it is first necessary to assume a number of principles: the principle of identity ( $A=A$ ), the principle of non-contradiction (it is impossible for something both to be A and not to be A at the same time) and the principle of the excluded middle (either A is true or A is false and *tertium non datur*). From these principles we derive the typical pattern of thinking of Western rationalism, the *modus ponens*: “if p then q; but p: therefore q.”

Even if these principles do not provide for the recognition of a physical order to the world, they do at least provide for a social contract. Latin rationalism adopts the principles of Greek rationalism but transforms and enriches them in a legal and contractual sense. The legal standard is *modus*, but the *modus* is also the limit, the boundaries.

The Latin obsession with spatial limits goes right back to the legend of the foundation of Rome: Romulus draws a boundary line and kills his brother for failing to respect it. If boundaries are not recognized, then there can be no *civitas*.

Horatius becomes a hero because he manages to hold the enemy on the border — a bridge thrown up between the Romans and the Others. Bridges are sacrilegious because they span the *sulcus*, the moat of water delineating the city boundaries: for this reason, they may be built only under the close, ritual control of the Pontifex. The ideology of the Pax Romana and Caesar Augustus’s political design are based on a precise definition of boundaries: the force of the empire is in knowing on which borderline, between which *limen*, or threshold, the defensive line should be set up. If the time ever comes when there is no longer a clear definition of boundaries, and the barbarians (nomads who have abandoned their original territory and who move about on any territory as if it were their own, ready to abandon that too) succeed in imposing their nomadic view, then Rome will be finished and the capital of the empire can just as well be somewhere else.

Julius Caesar, in crossing the Rubicon, not only knows that he is committing sacrilege but knows that, once he has committed it, then he can never turn back. *Alea iacta est*. In point of fact, there are also limits in time. What has been done can never be erased. Time is irreversible. This principle was to govern Latin syntax. The direction and sequence of tenses, which is cosmological linearity, makes itself a system of logical subordinations in the *consecutio temporum*. That masterpiece of factual realism which is the absolute ablative establishes that, once something has been done, or presupposed, then it may never again be called into question.

In a *Quaestio quodlibetalis*, Thomas Aquinas (5.2.3) wonders whether “*utrum Deus possit virginem reparare*” — in other words, whether a woman who has lost her virginity can be returned to her original undefiled condition. Thomas’s answer is clear. God may forgive and thus return the virgin to a state of grace and may, by performing a miracle, give her back her bodily integrity. But even God cannot cause what has been not to have been, because such a violation of the laws of time would be contrary to his very nature. God cannot violate the logical principle whereby “p has occurred” and “p has not occurred” would appear to be in contradiction. *Alea iacta est*.

This model of Greek and Latin rationalism is the one that still dominates mathematics, logic, science, and computer programming. But it is not the whole story of what we call the Greek legacy. Aristotle was Greek but so were the Eleusinian mysteries. The Greek world is continuously attracted by *apeiron* (infinity). Infinity is that which has no *modus*. It escapes the norm.

Fascinated by infinity, Greek civilization, alongside the concept of identity and noncontradiction, constructs the idea of continuous metamorphosis, symbolized by Hermes. Hermes is volatile and ambiguous, he is father of all the arts but also God of robbers — young and old at the same time. In the myth of Hermes we find the negation of the principle of identity, of noncontradiction, and

of the excluded middle, and the causal chains wind back on themselves in spirals, the after precedes the before, the god knows no spatial limits and may, in different shapes, be in different places at the same time.

Hermes is triumphant in the second century after Christ. The second century is a period of political order and peace, and all the peoples of the empire are apparently united by a common language and culture. The order is such that no one can any longer hope to change it with any form of military or political operation. It is the time when the concept of *enkyklios paideia*, of general education, is defined, the aim of which is to produce a type of complete man, versed in all the disciplines. This knowledge, however, describes a perfect, coherent world, whereas the world of the second century is a melting pot of races and languages, a crossroad of peoples and ideas, one where all gods are tolerated. These gods had formerly had a deep meaning for the people worshiping them, but when the empire swallowed up their countries, it also dissolved their identity: there are no longer any differences between Isis, Astartes, Demetra, Cybele, Anaitis, and Maia.

We have all heard the legend of the caliph who ordered the destruction of the library in Alexandria, arguing that either the books said the same thing as the Koran, in which case they were superfluous, or they said something different, in which case, they were wrong and harmful. The caliph knew and possessed the truth and he judged the books on the basis of that truth. Second-century Hermetism, on the other hand, is looking for a truth it does not know, and all it possesses is books. Therefore, it imagines or hopes that each book will contain a spark of truth and that they will serve to confirm each other. In this syncretistic dimension, one of the principles of Greek rationalist models, that of the excluded middle, enters a crisis. It is possible for many things to be true at the same time, even if they contradict each other.

But if books tell the truth, even when they contradict each other, then their each and every word must be an allusion, an

allegory. They are saying something other than what they appear to be saying. Each one of them contains a message that none of them will ever be able to reveal alone. In order to be able to understand the mysterious message contained in books, it was necessary to look for a revelation beyond human utterances, one which would come announced by divinity itself, using the vehicle of vision, dream, or oracle. But such an unprecedented revelation, never heard before, would have to speak of an as yet unknown god and of a still-secret truth. Secret knowledge is deep knowledge (because only what is lying under the surface can remain unknown for long). Thus truth becomes identified with what is not said or what is said obscurely and must be understood beyond or beneath the surface of a text. The gods speak (today we would say: the Being is speaking) through hieroglyphic and enigmatic messages.

By the way, if the search for a different truth is born of a mistrust of the classical Greek heritage, then any true knowledge will have to be more archaic. It lies among the remains of civilizations that the fathers of Greek rationalism had ignored. Truth is something we have been living with from the beginning of time, except that we have forgotten it. If we have forgotten it, then someone must have saved it for us and it must be someone whose words we are no longer capable of understanding. So this knowledge must be exotic. Carl Jung has explained how it is that once any divine image has become too familiar to us and has lost its mystery, we then need to turn to images of other civilizations, because only exotic symbols are capable of maintaining an "aura" of sacredness. For the second century, this secret knowledge would thus have been in the hands either of the Druids, the Celtic priests, or wise men from the East, who spoke incomprehensible tongues.

Classical rationalism identified barbarians with those who could not even speak properly (that is actually the etymology of *barbaros* — one who stutters). Now, turning things around, it is the supposed stuttering of the foreigner that becomes the sacred language, full of promises and silent revelations. Whereas for

Greek rationalism a thing was true if it could be explained, a true thing was now mainly something that could not be explained.

But what was this mysterious knowledge possessed by the barbarians' priests? The widespread opinion was that they knew the secret links that connected the spiritual world to the astral world and the latter to the sublunar world, which meant that by acting on a plant it was possible to influence the course of the stars, that the course of the stars affected the fate of terrestrial beings, and that the magic operations performed about the image of a god would force that god to follow our volition. As here below, so in heaven above. The universe becomes one big hall of mirrors, where any one individual object both reflects and signifies all the others.

It is possible to speak of universal sympathy and likeness only if, at the same time, the principle of noncontradiction is rejected. Universal sympathy is brought about by a godly emanation in the world, but at the origin of the emanation there is an unknowable One, who is the very seat of the contradiction itself. Neoplatonic Christian thought will try to explain that we cannot define God in clear-cut terms on account of the inadequacy of our language. Hermetic thought states that our language, the more ambiguous and multivalent it is, and the more it uses symbols and metaphors, the more it is particularly appropriate for naming a Oneness in which the coincidence of opposites occurs. But where the coincidence of opposites triumphs, the principle of identity collapses.

As a consequence, interpretation is infinite. The attempt to look for a final, unattainable meaning leads to the acceptance of a never-ending drift or sliding of meaning. A plant is not defined in terms of its morphological and functional characteristics but on the basis of its resemblance, albeit only partial, to another element in the cosmos. It is vaguely like part of the human body; it has meaning because it refers to the body. But that part of the body has meaning because it refers to a star, and the latter has meaning because it refers to a musical scale, and this in turn because it refers to a hierarchy of angels, and so on ad infinitum.

Every object, be it earthly or heavenly, hides a secret. Every time a secret has been discovered, it will refer to another secret in a progressive movement toward a final secret. Nevertheless, there can be no final secret. The ultimate secret of Hermetic initiation is that everything is secret. Hence the Hermetic secret must be an empty one, because anyone who pretends to reveal any sort of secret is not himself initiated and has stopped at a superficial level of the knowledge of cosmic mystery, Hermetic thought transforms the whole world theater into a linguistic phenomenon and at the same time denies language any power of communication.

In the basic texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which appeared in the Mediterranean Basin during the second century, Hermes Trismegistos receives his revelation in the course of a dream or vision, in which the nous appears unto him. For Plato, nous was the faculty that engendered ideas and, for Aristotle, it was the intellect, thanks to which we recognize substances. Certainly, the agility of nous worked counter to the more complicated operations of dianoia, which (as early as Plato) was reflection, rational activity; to episteme, as a science; and to *phronesis* as a reflection on truth; but there was nothing ineffable in the way it worked. On the contrary, in the second century, nous became the faculty for mystic intuition, for nonrational illumination, and for an instantaneous and nondiscursive vision.

It is no longer necessary to talk, to discuss, and to reason. We just have to wait for someone to speak for us. Then light will be so fast as to merge with darkness. This is the true initiation of which the initiated may not speak.

If there is no longer temporal linearity ordered in causal links, then the effect may act on its own causes. This actually happens in theurgical magic but it also happens in philology. The rationalist principle of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* is replaced with *post hoc, ergo ante hoc*. An example of this type of attitude is the way in which Renaissance thinkers demonstrated that *Corpus Hermeticum* was not a product of Greek culture but had been written before

Plato: the fact that the *Corpus* contains ideas that were obviously in circulation at the time of Plato both means and proves that it appeared before Plato.

If these are the ideas of classical Hermetism, they returned when it celebrated its second victory over the rationalism of medieval scholastics. Throughout the centuries when Christian rationalism was trying to prove the existence of God by means of patterns of reasoning inspired by the *modus ponens*, Hermetic knowledge did not die. It survived, as a marginal phenomenon, among alchemists and Jewish Cabalists and in the folds of the timid medieval Neoplatonism. But, at the dawn of what we call the modern world, in Florence, where in the meantime the modern banking economy was being invented, the *Corpus Hermeticum* — that creation of the second Hellenistic century — was rediscovered as evidence of a very ancient knowledge going back even before Moses. Once it had been reworked by Pico della Mirandola, Ficino, and Johannes Reuchlin, that is to say, by Renaissance Neoplatonism and by Christian Cabalism, the Hermetic model went on to feed a large portion of modern culture, ranging from magic to science.

The history of this rebirth is a complex one: today, historiography has shown us that it is impossible to separate the Hermetic thread from the scientific one or Paracelsus from Galileo. Hermetic knowledge influences Francis Bacon, Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton, and modern quantitative science is born, inter alia, in a dialogue with the qualitative knowledge of Hermetism. In the final analysis, the Hermetic model was suggesting the idea that the order of the universe described by Greek rationalism could be subverted and that it was possible to discover new connections and new relationships in the universe such as would have permitted man to act on nature and change its course.

But this influence is merged with the conviction that the world should not be described in terms of a qualitative logic but a quantitative one. Thus the Hermetic model paradoxically contributes to the birth of its new adversary, modern scientific rationalism.

Now Hermetic irrationalism oscillates between, on the one hand, mystics and alchemists, and on the other, poets and philosophers, from Goethe to Gérard de Nerval and William Butler Yeats, from Friedrich Schelling to Franz von Baader, from Martin Heidegger to Carl Jung. And in many postmodern concepts of criticism, it is not difficult to recognize the idea of the continuous slippage of meaning. The idea expressed by Paul Valéry, for whom *il n'y a pas de vrai sens d'un texte* (there is no true sense of a text), is a Hermetic one.

In one of his books, *Science de l'homme et tradition* — highly questionable for its author's fideistic enthusiasm, though not without alluring arguments — Gilbert Durand sees the whole of contemporary thought, in opposition to the positivist mechanistic paradigm, run through with the vivifying breath of Hermes, and the list of relationships he identifies invites reflection: Oswald Spengler, Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Scheler, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Károly Kerényi, Max Planck, Wolfgang Pauli, Robert Oppenheimer, Albert Einstein, Gaston Bachelard, Pitirim Sorokin, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Noam Chomsky, A. J. Greimas, Gilles Deleuze.<sup>8</sup>

But this pattern of thought deviating from the standard of Greek and Latin rationalism would be incomplete if we were to fail to consider another phenomenon taking shape during the same period of history.

Dazzled by lightning visions while feeling his way around in the dark, second-century man developed a neurotic awareness of his own role in an incomprehensible world. Truth is secret and any questioning of the symbols and enigmas will never reveal ultimate truth but simply displace the secret elsewhere. If this is the human condition, then it means that the world is the result of a mistake. The cultural expression of this psychological state is gnosis.

<sup>8</sup>Gilbert Durand, *Science de l'homme et tradition* (Paris: Berg, 1979).

In the tradition of Greek rationalism, gnosis meant true knowledge of existence (both conversational and dialectic) as opposed to simple perception (*aisthesis*) or opinion (*doxa*). But in the early Christian centuries the word came to mean a metarational, intuitive knowledge, the gift, divinely bestowed or received from a celestial intermediary, which has the power to save anyone attaining it.

Gnostic revelation tells in a mythical form how divinity itself, being obscure and unknowable, already contains the germ of evil and an androgyny which makes it contradictory from the very start, since it is not identical to itself. Its subordinate executor, the Demiurge, gives life to an erroneous, instable world, into which a portion of divinity itself falls as if into prison or exile.

A world created by mistake is an aborted cosmos. Among the principal effects of this abortion is time, a deformed imitation of eternity. Throughout the same period of centuries, patristics was endeavoring to reconcile Jewish messianism with Greek rationalism and invented the concept of the providential, rational guidance of history. Gnosticism, on the other hand, developed a rejection syndrome vis-à-vis both time and history.

The Gnostic views himself as an exile in the world, as the victim of his own body, which he defines as a tomb and a prison. He has been cast into the world, from which he must find a way out. Existence is an ill — and we know it. The more frustrated we feel here, the more we are struck with a delirium of omnipotence and desires for revenge. Hence the Gnostic recognizes himself as a spark of divinity, provisionally cast into exile as a result of a cosmic plot. If he manages to return to God, man will not only be reunited with his own beginnings and origin, but will also help to regenerate that very origin and to free it from the original error. Although a prisoner in a sick world, man feels himself invested with superhuman power. Divinity can make amends for its initial breakage thanks only to man's cooperation. Gnostic man becomes an *Übermensch*.

By contrast with those that are bound to matter (*hylics*), it is only those that are of spirit (*pneumatikoi*) who are able to aspire to truth and hence redemption. Unlike Christianity, Gnosticism is not a religion for slaves but one for masters.

It is difficult to avoid the temptation of seeing a Gnostic inheritance in many aspects of modern and contemporary culture. A Catharic, and hence a Gnostic, origin has been seen in the courteous (and thus romantic) love relationship, seen as a renouncement, as the loss of the loved one, and at all events as a purely spiritual relationship excluding any sexual connection. The aesthetic celebration of evil as a revelatory experience is certainly Gnostic, as is the decision of so many modern poets to search for visionary experiences through exhaustion of the flesh, by means of sexual excess, mystic ecstasy, drugs, and verbal delirium.

Some people have seen a Gnostic root in the governing principles of romantic idealism, where time and history are reassessed, but only to make man the protagonist for the reintegration of the Spirit. On the other hand, when Georg Lukàcs claims that the philosophical irrationalism of the last two centuries is an invention of the bourgeoisie trying to react to the crisis it is facing and giving a philosophical justification to its own will to power and its own imperialistic practice, he is simply translating the Gnostic syndrome into a Marxist language. There are those who have spoken of Gnostic elements in Marxism and even in Leninism (the theory of the party as the spearhead, an elect group possessing the keys to knowledge and hence to redemption).

Others see a Gnostic inspiration in existentialism and particularly in Heidegger (existence, *Dasein* as being "cast into the world," the relationship between worldly existence and time, pessimism). Jung, in taking another look at ancient Hermetic doctrines, has recast the Gnostic problem in terms of the rediscovery of the original ego. But in the same way a Gnostic element has been identified in every condemnation of mass society by the aristocracy, where the prophets of elected races, in order to bring

about the final reintegration of the perfect, have turned to bloodshed, massacre, the genocide of slaves, of those inescapably tied to *hyle*, or matter.

Both together, the Hermetic and the Gnostic heritage produce the syndrome of the secret. If the initiated is someone who understands the cosmic secret, then degenerations of the Hermetic model have led to the conviction that power consists in making others believe that one has a political secret. According to Georg Simmel,

the secret gives one a position of exception; it operates as a purely socially determined attraction. It is basically independent of the context it guards but, of course, is increasingly effective in the measure in which the exclusive possession of it is vast and significant. . . .

From secrecy, which shades all that is profound and significant, grows the typical error according to which everything mysterious is something important and essential. Before the unknown, man's natural impulse to idealize and his natural fearfulness cooperate toward the same goal: to intensify the unknown through imagination, and to pay attention to it with an emphasis that is not usually accorded to patent reality.<sup>9</sup>

Let me try now to suggest in which sense the results of our trip toward the roots of the Hermetic legacy can be of some interest for understanding some of the contemporary theory of textual interpretation. Certainly a common materialistic point of view is not sufficient to draw any connection between Epicurus and Stalin. In the same vein, I doubt that it would be possible to isolate common features between Nietzsche and Chomsky, in spite of Gilbert Durand's celebration of the new Hermetic atmosphere.

Still, it can be interesting for the purpose here to list the main features of what I would like to call a Hermetic approach to texts.

<sup>9</sup>Georg Simmel, "The Secret and the Secret Society," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 332–33.

We find in the ancient Hermetism and in many contemporary approaches some disquietingly similar ideas:

A text is an open-ended universe where the interpreter can discover infinite interconnections.

Language is unable to grasp a unique and preexisting meaning — on the contrary, language's duty is to show that what we can speak of is only the coincidence of the opposites.

Language mirrors the inadequacy of thought: our being-in-the-world is nothing else than being incapable of finding any transcendental meaning.

Any text, pretending to assert something univocal, is a miscarried universe, that is, the work of a muddle-headed Demiurge (who tried to say that “that's that” and on the contrary elicited an uninterrupted chain of infinite deferrals where “that” is not “that”).

Language (and authors') fate is nevertheless redeemed by the pneumatic reader who, being able to realize and to show that Being is drift, corrects the error of the author-Demiurge and understands what the hylics (those who thinks that texts can have a definite meaning) are condemned to ignore.

Contemporary textual Gnosticism is very generous, however: everybody, provided one is eager to impose the intention of the reader upon the unattainable intention of the author, can become the *Übermensch* who really realizes the truth, namely, that the author did not know what he or she was really saying, because language spoke at his or her place.

To salvage the text — that is, to transform it from an illusion of meaning to the awareness that meaning is infinite — the reader must suspect that every line of it conceals another secret meaning; words, instead of saying, hide the untold; the glory of the reader is to discover that texts can say everything, except what their

author wanted them to mean; as soon as a pretended meaning is allegedly discovered, we are sure that it is not the real one; the real one is the further one and so on and so forth; the hylics — the losers — are those who end the process by saying “I understood.”

The Real Reader is the one who understands that the secret of a text is its emptiness.

I know that I have made a caricature out of the most radical reader-oriented theories of interpretation. Besides, I think that caricatures are frequently good portraits: probably not portraits of what is the case, but at least of what could become the case, if something were assumed to be the case.

What I want to say is that there are somewhere criteria for limiting interpretation.

I know that there are poetic texts whose aim is to show that interpretation can be infinite. I know that *Finnegans Wake* was written for an ideal reader affected by an ideal insomnia. But I also know that although the entire opus of the Marquis de Sade was written in order to show what sex could be, most of us are more moderate.

At the beginning of his *Mercury; Or, the Secret and Swift Messenger* (1641), John Wilkins tells the following story:

How strange a thing this Art of Writing did seem at its first Invention, we may guess by the late discovered Americans, who were amazed to see Men converse with Books, and could scarce make themselves to believe that a Paper could speak. . . .

There is a pretty Relation to this Purpose, concerning an Indian Slave; who being sent by his Master with a Basket of Figs and a Letter, did by the Way eat up a great Part of his Carriage, conveying the Remainder unto the Person to whom he was directed; who when he had read the Letter, and not finding the Quantity of Figs answerable to what was spoken of, he accuses the Slave of eating them, telling him what the

Letter said against him. But the Indian (notwithstanding this Proof) did confidently abjure the Fact, cursing the Paper, as being a false and lying Witness.

After this, being sent again with the like Carriage, and a Letter expressing the just Number of Figs, that were to be delivered, he did again, according to his former Practice, devour a great Part of them by the Way; but before he meddled with any, (to prevent all following Accusations) he first took the Letter, and hid that under a great Stone, assuring himself, that if it did not see him eating the Figs, it could never tell of him; but being now more strongly accused than before, he confesses the Fault, admiring the Divinity of the Paper, and for the future does promise his best Fidelity in every Employment.<sup>10</sup>

Someone could say that a text, once it is separated from its utterer (as well as from the utterer's intention) and from the concrete circumstances of its utterance (and by consequent from its intended referent) floats (so to speak) in the vacuum of a potentially infinite range of possible interpretations. Wilkins could have objected that in the case he was reporting, the master was sure that the basket mentioned in the letter was the one carried by the slave, that the carrying slave was exactly the one to whom his friend gave the basket, and that there was a relationship between the expression "30" written in the letter and the number of figs contained in the basket.

Naturally, it would be sufficient to imagine that during the way the original slave was killed and another person substituted, that the thirty original figs were replaced with other figs, that the basket was brought to a different addressee, that the new addressee did not know of any friend eager to send him figs. Would it still be possible to decide what the letter was speaking about? We are, nevertheless, entitled to suppose that the reaction of the new addressee would have been of this sort: "Somebody, and God

<sup>10</sup>John Wilkins, *Mercury; Or, the Secret and Swift Messenger*, 3d ed, (London: Nicholson, 1707), pp. 3-4.

knows who, sent me a quantity of figs which is lower than the number mentioned in the accompanying letter.”

Let us suppose now that not only was the messenger killed but that his killers ate all the figs, destroyed the basket, put the letter into a bottle and threw it in the ocean, so that it was found seventy years after by Robinson Crusoe. No basket, no slave, no figs, only a letter. Notwithstanding this, I bet that the first reaction of Robinson would have been Where are the figs?

Now, let us suppose that the message in the bottle is found by a more sophisticated person, a student of linguistics, hermeneutics, or semiotics. Such a new accidental addressee can make a lot of hypotheses, namely:

1. Figs can be intended (at least today) in a rhetorical sense (as in such expressions as “to be in good fig,” “to be in full fig,” “to be in poor fig”), and the message could support a different interpretation. But even in this case the addressee will rely upon certain preestablished conventional interpretations of *fig* which are not those of, say, *apple* or *cat*.

2. The message in the bottle is an allegory, written by a poet: the addressee smells in that message a hidden second sense based upon a private poetic code, holding only for that text. In this case the addressee can make various conflicting hypotheses, but I strongly believe that there are certain “economical” criteria on the grounds of which certain hypotheses will be more interesting than others. To validate his or her hypothesis, the addressee probably ought to make certain previous hypotheses about the possible sender and the possible historical period in which the text was produced. This has nothing to do with research about the intentions of the sender, but it has certainly to do with research about the cultural framework of the original message.

Probably our sophisticated interpreter will decide that the text found in the bottle had at one time referred to some existing figs and had indexically pointed toward a given sender as well as toward a given addressee and a given slave, but that now it had

lost every referential power. Still, the message will remain a text that one can certainly use for innumerable other baskets and other innumerable figs, but not for apples or unicorns. The addressee can dream of those lost actors, so ambiguously involved in exchanging things or symbols (perhaps to send figs meant, at a given historical moment, to make an uncanny innuendo), and can start from that anonymous message to try a variety of meanings and referents. But he or she will not be entitled to say that the message can mean *everything*.

It can mean many things, but there are senses that it would be preposterous to suggest. Certainly it says that once upon a time there was a basket full of figs. No reader-oriented theory can avoid such a constraint.

Certainly there is a difference between discussing the letter mentioned by Wilkins and discussing *Finnegans Wake*. *Finnegans Wake* can help us to cast in doubt even the supposed common-sensicality of Wilkins's example. But we cannot disregard the point of view of the slave who witnessed for the first time the miracle of texts and of their interpretation.

If there is something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something which must be found somewhere, and in some way respected. Thus my proposal is: let us first rank with the slave. It is the only way to become, if not the masters, at least the respectful servants of semiosis.

## II. OVERINTERPRETING TEXTS

In my first lecture I looked at a method of interpreting the world and texts based on the individuation of the relationships of sympathy that link microcosm and macrocosm to one another. Both a metaphysic and a physic of universal sympathy must stand upon a semiotics (explicit or implicit) of similarity.

Michel Foucault has already dealt with the paradigm of similarity in *Les mots et les choses*, but here he was principally concerned with that threshold moment between the Renaissance and

the seventeenth century in which the paradigm of similarity dissolves into the paradigm of modern science.

My hypothesis is historically more comprehensive and is intended to highlight an interpretive criterion (which I call Hermetic semiosis) the survival of which can be traced through the centuries.

In order to assume that the similar can act upon the similar, the Hermetic semiosis had to decide what similarity was. But its criterion of similarity displayed an overindulgent generality and flexibility. It included not only those phenomena that today we would list under the heading of morphological resemblance or proportional analogy but every kind of possible substitution permitted by the rhetoric tradition, that is, contiguity, *pars pro toto*, action for actor, and so on and so forth.

I have drawn the following list of criteria for associating images or words not from a treatise on magic but from a sixteenth-century mnemonics or *ars memoriae*.<sup>11</sup> The quotation is interesting because — quite apart from any Hermetic presumption — the author has identified in the context of his own culture a number of associative automatisms commonly accepted as effective.

1. By similitude, which is in turn subdivided into similitude of substance (man as a microcosmic image of the macrocosm), quantity (the ten fingers for the ten commandments), by metonymy and antonomasia (Atlas for astronomers or astronomy, the bear for an irascible man, the lion for pride, Cicero for rhetoric)

2. By homonymy: the animal dog for the constellation Dog

3. By irony or contrast: the fool for the sage

4. By sign: the spoor for the wolf, or the mirror in which Titus admired himself for Titus

5. By a word of different pronunciation: *sanum* for *Sane*

6. By similarity of name: Arista for Aristotle

<sup>11</sup>Cosma Rosselli, *Thesaurus artificiosae memoriae* (Venice, 1589).

7. By type and species: leopard for animal
8. By pagan symbol: eagle for Jupiter
9. By peoples: the Parthians for arrows, the Scythians for horses, the Phoenicians for the alphabet
10. By signs of the Zodiac: the sign for the constellation
11. By the relationship between organ and function
12. By a common characteristic: the crow for Ethiopians
13. By hieroglyphics : the ant for Providence
14. And finally, pure idiolectal association, any monster for anything to be remembered

As can be seen, sometimes the two things are similar for their behavior, sometimes for their shape, sometimes for the fact that in a certain context they appeared together. As long as some kind of relationship can be established, the criterion does not matter.

Once the mechanism of analogy has been set in motion there is no guarantee that it will stop. The image, the concept, the truth that is discovered beneath the veil of similarity, will in its turn be seen as a sign of another analogical deferral. Every time one thinks to have discovered a similarity, it will point to another similarity, in an endless progress. In a universe dominated by the logic of similarity (and cosmic sympathy) the interpreter has the right and the duty to suspect that what one believed to be the meaning of a sign is in fact the sign for a further meaning.

This makes clear another underlying principle of Hermetic semiosis. If two things are similar, then one can become the sign for the other and vice versa. Such a passage from similarity to semiosis is not automatic. This pen is similar to that one, but this does not lead us to conclude that I can use the former in order to designate the latter (except in particular cases of signification by ostension, in which, let's say, I show you this pen in order to ask you to give me the other one or some object performing the same

function; but semiosis by ostension requires a previous agreement). The word *dog* is not similar to a dog. The portrait of Queen Elizabeth on a British stamp is similar (under a certain description) to a given human person who is the queen of the United Kingdom, and through the reference to her it can become the emblem for the UK. The word *pig* is neither similar to a swine nor to Noriega or Ceausescu; nevertheless, on a grounds of a culturally established analogy between the physical habits of swine and the moral habits of dictators, I can use the word *pig* to designate one of the above-mentioned gentlemen.

A semiotic analysis of such a complex notion as similarity (see my analysis in *A Theory of Semiotics*) can help us to isolate the basic flaws of the Hermetic semiosis and through it the basic flaws of many procedures of overinterpretation.

It is indisputable that human beings think (also) in terms of identity and similarity. In everyday life, however, it is a fact that we generally know how to distinguish between relevant, significant similarities on the one hand and fortuitous, illusory similarities on the other. We may see someone in the distance whose features remind us of person A, whom we know, mistake him for A, and then realize that in fact it is B, a stranger: after which — usually — we abandon our hypothesis as to the person's identity and give no further credence to the similarity, which we record as fortuitous. We do this because each of us has introjected into him or her an indisputable fact, namely, that *from a certain point of view everything bears relationships of analogy, contiguity, and similarity to everything else*. One may push this to its limits and state that there is a relationship between the adverb *while* and the noun *crocodile* because — at least — they both appeared in the sentence that I have just uttered. But the difference between sane interpretation and paranoid interpretation lies in recognizing that this relationship is minimal, and not, on the contrary, deducing from this minimal relationship the maximum possible. The paranoid is not the person who notices that *while* and *crocodile* curiously appear in

the same context: the paranoiac is the person who begins to wonder about the mysterious motives that induced me to bring these two particular words together. The paranoiac sees beneath my example a secret, to which I allude.

In order to read both the world and texts suspiciously one must have elaborated some kind of obsessive method. Suspicion, in itself, is not pathological: both the detective and the scientist suspect on principle that some elements, evident but not apparently important, may be evidence of something else that is not evident—and on this basis they elaborate a new hypothesis to be tested. But the evidence is considered as a sign of something else only on three conditions: that it cannot be explained more economically; that it points to a single cause (or a limited class of possible causes) and not to an indeterminate number of dissimilar causes; and that it fits in with the other evidence. If on the scene of a crime I find a copy of the most widely circulated morning paper, I must first of all ask (the criterion of economy) whether it might not have belonged to the victim; if it did not, the clue would point to a million potential suspects. If, on the other hand, at the scene of the crime I find a jewel of rare form, deemed the unique example of its kind, generally known to belong to a certain individual, the clue becomes interesting; and if I then find that this individual is unable to show me his own jewel, then the two clues fit in with each other. Note, however, that at this point my conjecture is not yet proved. It merely seems reasonable, and it is reasonable because it allows me to establish some of the conditions in which it could be falsified: if, for example, the suspect were able to provide incontrovertible proof that he had given the jewel to the victim a long time before, then the presence of the jewel on the scene of the crime would no longer be an important clue.

The overestimation of the importance of clues is often born of a propensity to consider the most immediately apparent elements as significant, whereas the very fact that they are apparent should allow us to recognize that they are explicable in much more eco-

nomical terms. One example of the ascription of pertinence to the wrong element provided by the theorists of scientific induction is the following: if a doctor notices that all his patients suffering from cirrhosis of the liver regularly drink either whiskey and soda, cognac and soda, or gin and soda, and concludes from this that soda causes cirrhosis of the liver, he is wrong. He is wrong because he does not notice that there is another element common to the three cases, namely alcohol, and he is wrong because he ignores all the cases of teetotal patients who drink only soda and do not have cirrhosis of the liver. Now, the example seems ridiculous precisely because the doctor fixes upon what could be explained in other ways and not upon what he should have wondered about; and he does so because it is easier to notice the presence of water, which is evident, than the presence of alcohol.

Hermetic semiosis goes too far precisely in the practices of suspicious interpretation, according to principles of facility which appear in all the texts of this tradition. First of all an excess of wonder leads to overestimating the importance of coincidences which are explainable in other ways. The Hermeticism of the Renaissance was looking for “signatures,” that is, visible clues revealing occult relationships. Those of the tradition had discovered, for example, that the plant called orchis had two spheroidal bulbs, and they had seen in this a remarkable morphological analogy with the testicles. On the basis of this resemblance they proceeded to the homologation of different relationships: from the morphological analogy they passed to the functional analogy. The orchis could not but have magical properties with regard to the reproductive apparatus (hence it was also known as satyrion),

In actual fact, as Bacon later explained (“Parasceve ad historiam naturalem et experimentalem,” in Appendix to *Novum organum*, 1620), the orchis has two bulbs because a new bulb is formed every year and grows beside the old one; and while the former grows, the latter withers. Thus the bulbs may demonstrate a formal analogy with the testicles, but they have a different func-

tion with respect to the fertilization process. And, as the magic relationship must be of a functional type, the analogy does not hold. The morphological phenomenon cannot be evidence of a relationship of cause and effect because it does not fit in with other data concerning causal relationships. Hermetic thought made use of a principle of false transitivity, by which it is assumed that if A bears a relationship  $x$  to B, and B bears a relationship  $y$  to C, then A must bear a relationship  $y$  to C. If the bulbs bear a relationship of morphological resemblance to the testicles and the testicles bear a causal relationship to the production of semen, it does not follow that the bulbs are causally connected to sexual activity.

But the belief in the magic power of the orchis was sustained by another Hermetic principle, namely the short circuit of the *post hoc, ergo ante hoc*: a consequence is assumed and interpreted as the cause of its own cause. That the orchis must bear a relationship to the testicles was proved by the fact that the former bore the name of the latter (orchis=testicle). Of course, the etymology was the result of a false clue. Nevertheless Hermetic thought saw in the etymology the evidence that proved the occult sympathy.

The Renaissance Hermetists believed that the *Corpus Hermeticum* had been written by a mythical Hermes Trismegistos who lived in Egypt before Moses. Isaac Casaubon proved at the beginning of the seventeenth century not only that a text which bears traces of Christian thought had to be written after Christ but also that the text of the *Corpus* did not bear any trace of Egyptian idioms. The whole of the occult tradition after Casaubon disregarded the second remark and used the first one in terms of *post hoc, ergo ante hoc*: if the *Corpus* contains ideas that were “afterwards” supported by the Christian thought, this meant that it was written before Christ and influenced Christianity.

I shall show in a while that we can find similar procedures in contemporary practices of textual interpretation. Our problem is, however, the following: we know that the analogy between satyrion and testicles was a wrong one because empirical tests have

demonstrated that the plant cannot act upon our body. We can reasonably believe that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not so archaic because we do not have any philological proof of the existence of its manuscripts before the end of the first millennium A.D. But by what criterion do we decide that a given textual interpretation is an instance of overinterpretation? One can object that in order to define a bad interpretation one needs the criteria for defining a good interpretation.

I think on the contrary that we can accept a sort of Popper-like principle according to which if there are no rules that help to ascertain which interpretations are the “best” ones, there is at least a rule for ascertaining which ones are “bad.” We cannot say if the Keplerian hypotheses are definitely the best ones but we can say that the Ptolemaic explanation of the solar system was wrong because the notions of epicycle and deferent violated certain criteria of economy or simplicity and could not coexist with other hypotheses that proved to be reliable in order to explain phenomena that Ptolemy did not explain. Let me for the moment assume my criterion of textual economy without a previous definition of it.

Let me examine a blatant case of overinterpretation a propos of secular sacred texts. Forgive me the oxymoron. As soon as a text becomes “sacred” for a certain culture, it becomes subject to the process of suspicious reading and therefore to what is undoubtedly an excess of interpretation. It had happened, with classical allegory, in the case of the Homeric texts, and it could not but have happened in the patristic and scholastic periods with the Scriptures, as in Jewish culture with the interpretation of the Torah. But in the case of texts which are sacred, properly speaking, one cannot allow oneself too much license, as there is usually a religious authority and tradition that claims to hold the key to its interpretation. Medieval culture, for example, did everything it could to encourage an interpretation that was infinite in terms of time but nevertheless limited in its options. If anything char-

acterized the theory of the fourfold sense of Scripture it was that the senses of Scripture (and, for Dante, of secular poetry as well) were four in number; but senses had to be determined according to precise rules, and these senses, though hidden beneath the literal surface of the words, were not secret at all but, on the contrary — for those who knew how to read the text correctly — had to be clear. And if they were not clear at first sight, it was the task of the exegetic tradition (in the case of the Bible) or the poet (for his works) to provide the key. This is what Dante does in the *Convivio* and in other writings such as the *Epistula XIII*.

This attitude toward sacred texts (in the literal sense of the term) has also been transmitted — in secularized form — to texts which have become metaphorically sacred in the course of their reception. It happened in the medieval world to Virgil; it happened in France to Rabelais; it happened to Shakespeare (under the banner of the “Bacon-Shakespeare controversy” a legion of secret-hunters have sacked the texts of the Bard word by word, letter by letter, to find anagrams, acrostics, or other secret messages through which Francis Bacon might have made it clear that he was the true author of the 1623 in-folio); and it is happening, maybe too much, to Joyce. Such being the case, Dante could hardly have been left out.

Thus we see that — starting from the second half of the nineteenth century up to now — from the early works of the Anglo-Italian author Gabriele Rossetti (father of the better-known Pre-Raphaelitic painter Dante Gabriele), of the French Eugène Aroux, or of the great Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli, until René Guenon, many critics have obsessively read and reread Dante’s immense opus in order to find in it a hidden message.

Notice that Dante was the first to say that his poetry conveyed a nonliteral sense, to be detected “sotto il velame delli versi strani,” beyond and beneath the literal sense. But not only did Dante explicitly assert this; he also furnished the keys for finding out nonliteral senses. Nevertheless these interpreters, whom we shall

call Followers of the Veil (Adepti del Velame), identify in Dante a secret language or jargon on the basis of which every reference to erotic matters and to real people is to be interpreted as a coded invective against the Church. Here one might reasonably ask why Dante should have gone to such trouble to conceal his Ghibelline passions, given that he did nothing but issue explicit invective against the papal seat. The Followers of the Veil evoke someone who, upon being told “Sir, you are a thief, believe me!” replies with: “What do you mean by ‘believe me’? Do you perhaps wish to insinuate that I am distrustful?”

The bibliography of the Followers of the Veil is incredibly rich. And it is incredible to what extent the mainstream of Dantesque criticism ignored or disregarded it. Recently I encouraged selected young researchers to read — maybe for the first time — all those books.<sup>12</sup> The aim of the research was not so much to decide whether the Followers of the Veil were wrong or not (it happens that in many instances, by a felicitous case of serendipity, they were probably right) but rather to evaluate the economic value of their hypotheses.

Let us examine a concrete example in which Rossetti deals with one of the paramount obsessions of the Followers of the Veil:<sup>13</sup> according to them in his text Dante depicts a number of symbols and liturgical practices typical of the Masonic and Rosicrucian traditions. This is an interesting question that runs into a historical-philological problem: while documents exist which attest to the rise of Rosicrucian ideas at the beginning of the seventeenth century and the appearance of the first lodges of symbolic Freemasonry at the beginning of the eighteenth century, there are none — none at least that are accepted by serious scholars — attesting to the earlier existence of these ideas and/or organizations.

<sup>12</sup>M. P. Pozzato, ed., *L'idea deforme: Interpretazioni esoteriche di Dante* (Milan: Bompiani, 1989).

<sup>13</sup>Gabriele Rossetti, *La Beatrice di Dante*, Ninth and Final Discussion, part 1, art. 2 (Rome: Atanòr, 1982), pp. 519-25.

On the contrary, reliable documents exist which attest to how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries various lodges and societies of different tendencies chose rites and symbols which would demonstrate their Rosicrucian and Templar lineage. Indeed, any organization that claims its own descent from an earlier tradition chooses for its emblems those of the tradition to which it refers back (see, for example, the Italian Fascist party's choice of the lictor's fasces as a sign that they wished to consider themselves the heirs of ancient Rome). Such choices provide clear proof of the intentions of the group, but do not provide proof of any direct descent.

Rossetti sets out with the conviction that Dante was a Freemason, Templar, and member of the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross, and he therefore assumes that a Masonic-Rosicrucian symbol would be as follows: a rose with the cross inside it, under which appears a pelican that, in accordance with traditional legend, feeds its young with the flesh it tears from its own breast. Now Rossetti's task is to prove that this symbol also appears in Dante. It is true that he runs the risk of demonstrating merely the only reasonable hypothesis, namely that Masonic symbology was inspired by Dante, but at this point another hypothesis could be advanced: that of a third archetypal text. In this way Rossetti would kill two birds with one stone: he would be able to prove not only that the Masonic tradition is an ancient one but also that Dante himself was inspired by this ancient tradition.

Normally one accepts the idea that if document B was produced before document C, which is analogous to the first in terms of content and style, it is correct to assume that the first influenced the production of the second but not vice versa. One could at most formulate the hypothesis of an archetypal document, A, produced before the other two, from which the two later ones both drew independently. The hypothesis of an archetypal text may be useful in order to explain analogies between two known documents that would otherwise be unaccountable. But it is necessary only if the

analogies (the clues) cannot otherwise — and more economically — be explained. If we find two texts of different periods both of which mention the murder of Julius Caesar, there is no need to suppose either that the first influenced the second or that they were both influenced by an archetypal text, because here we are dealing with an event that was, and still is, reported in countless other texts.

Worse can happen, however: in order to show the excellence of C, one needs an archetypal text A on which both B and C depend. Since, however, A is not to be found, then it is fideistically postulated as being in all respects identical to C. The optical effect is that C influenced B, and thus we have the *post hoc, ergo ante hoc* effect.

Rossetti's tragedy is that he does not find in Dante any remarkable analogy with Masonic symbology, and having no analogies to lead him to an archetype, he does not even know what archetype to look for.

If we are to decide whether the phrase *the rose is blue* appears in the text of an author, it is necessary to find in the text the complete phrase *the rose is blue*. If we find on page 1 the article *the*, on page 50 the sequence *ros* in the body of the lexeme *rosary* and so on, we have proved nothing — because it is obvious that, given the limited number of letters in the alphabet that a text combines, with such a method we could find any statement we wish in any text whatsoever.

Rossetti is surprised that in Dante we find references to the cross, the rose, and the pelican. The reasons for the appearance of these words are self-evident. In a poem that speaks of the mysteries of the Christian religion it is not surprising that sooner or later the symbol of the Passion should appear. On the basis of an ancient symbolic tradition, the pelican became the symbol of Christ very early on in the Christian tradition (and medieval bestiaries and religious poetry are full of references to this symbol). As regards the rose, because of its complex symmetry, its softness,

the variety of its colors, and the fact that it flowers in spring, it appears in nearly all mystical traditions as a symbol, metaphor, allegory, or simile for freshness, youth, feminine grace, and beauty in general. For all these reasons, what Rossetti himself calls the “fresh, sweet-smelling rose” appears as a symbol of feminine beauty in another poet of the thirteenth century, Ciullo d’Alcamo, and as an erotic symbol both in Apuleius and in a text which Dante knew well, the *Roman de la Rose* (which in its own turn intentionally makes use of pagan symbology). Thus, when Dante has to represent the supernatural glory of the Church triumphant in terms of splendor, love, and beauty, he resorts to the figure of the spotless rose (*Paradiso* 31). Incidentally, since the Church triumphant is the bride of Christ as a direct result of the Passion, Dante cannot avoid observing that “Christ made (the Church) his bride by his blood”; and this allusion to blood is the only case among the texts presented by Rossetti in which, by inference, the rose can be seen in reference (conceptual, but not iconographic) to the cross. *Rosa* appears in the *Divine Comedy* eight times in the singular and three in the plural. *Croce* appears seventeen times. But they never appear together.

Rossetti, however, wants the pelican as well. He finds it, on its own, in *Paradiso* 36 (its only appearance in the poem), clearly in connection with the cross, for the pelican is the symbol of sacrifice. Unfortunately the rose is not there. So Rossetti goes in search of other pelicans. He finds a pelican in Cecco d’Ascoli (another author over whom the Followers of the Veil have racked their brains for the very reason that the text of *L’acerba* is intentionally obscure), and Cecco’s pelican appears in the usual context of the Passion. Moreover, a pelican in Cecco is not a pelican in Dante, even though Rossetti tries to blur such a minor difference by confusing the footnotes. Rossetti believes he has found another pelican in that incipit of *Paradiso* 23, where we read of the fowl that, waiting impatiently for the dawn, sits alert among the beloved fronds on a leafy branch watching for the sunrise so as to go and

find food for its young. Now, this bird, graceful indeed, searches for food precisely because it is not a pelican, otherwise it would not need to go hunting, as it could easily feed its young with flesh torn from its own breast. Second, it appears as a simile for Beatrice, and it would have been poetic suicide had Dante represented his beloved by the awkward features of a billed pelican. Rossetti, in his desperate and rather pathetic fowling, could find in the divine poem seven fowls and eleven birds and ascribe them all to the pelican family: but he would find them all far from the rose.

Examples of this kind abound in Rossetti's work. I will cite only one other, which appears in canto 2, which is generally considered one of the most philosophic and doctrinal of the whole *Paradiso*. This canto exploits fully a device which is a basic element in the whole of the third book: the divine mysteries, otherwise inexpressible, are represented in terms of light — in full accord with theological and mystic tradition. Consequently even the most difficult philosophical concepts must be expressed with optical examples. It should be noted here that Dante was led to this choice by all the literature of the theology and physics of his time: Arabian treatises dealing with optics had reached the Western world only a few decades earlier; Robert Grosseteste had explained cosmogonic phenomena in terms of light energy; in the theological field Bonaventura had debated the difference between *lux*, *lumen*, and *color*; the *Roman de la Rose* had celebrated the magic of mirrors and had described phenomena of the reflection, refraction, and magnification of images; Roger Bacon had claimed for optics the dignity of a major and fundamental science, reproaching the Parisians for not considering it enough, while the English were investigating its principles. It is obvious that, having used the similes of a diamond struck by the sun, of a gem, and of a mass of water penetrated by a ray of light to describe a number of astronomical phenomena, Dante, faced with having to explain the different brightnesses of the fixed stars, should have recourse to an optical explanation and propose the example of three mirrors

which, placed at different distances, reflect the rays of a single source of light.

For Rossetti, however, in this canto Dante would be “whimsical” if we did not take into account that three lights arranged in a triangle — three sources of light, note, which is not the same as three mirrors reflecting the light of another source — appear in Masonic ritual.<sup>14</sup> Even if we accept the principle of *post hoc, ergo ante hoc*, however, this hypothesis would at most explain why Dante (knowing Masonic rituals of a later date!) chose the image of three sources of light, but it does not explain the rest of the canto.

Thomas Kuhn observes that to be accepted as a paradigm, a theory must seem better than the other theories in the lists but need not necessarily explain all the facts with which it is concerned. Let me add, however, that neither must it explain less than previous theories. If we accept that here Dante is speaking in terms of medieval optics, we may also understand why in verses 89–90 he speaks of the color that “turns through glass — which hides lead behind it.” If, on the other hand, Dante is speaking of Masonic lights, the other lights of the canto remain obscure.

Let me now consider a case where the rightness of the interpretation is undecidable but where it is assuredly difficult to assert that it is wrong. It can happen that certain more or less esoteric interpretive practices recall those of certain deconstructionist critics. But in the shrewdest representatives of this school the hermeneutic game does not exclude interpretive rules.

Here is how one of the leaders of the Yale deconstructionists, Geoffrey Hartman, examines some lines from William Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems, in which the poet speaks explicitly of the death of a girl:

I had no human *fears*:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 486

The touch of earthly *years*.  
 No motion has she now, no force;  
 She neither *hears* nor sees,  
 Rolled round in earth's *diurnal course*  
 With rocks and stones and trees. [My italics.]

Hartman sees here a series of funereal motifs under the surface of the text. "Others even show Wordsworth's language penetrated by an inappropriate subliminal punning. So "diurnal" (line 6) divides into "die" and "urn," and "course" may recall the older pronunciation of "corpse." Yet these condensations are troublesome rather than expressive; the power of the second stanza resides predominantly in the euphemistic displacement of the word *grave* by an image of gravitation ("Rolled round in earth's diurnal course"). And though there is no agreement on the tone of this stanza, it is clear that a subvocal word is uttered without being written out. It is a word that rhymes with "fears" and "years" and "hears," but which is closed off by the very last syllable of the poem: "trees." Read "tears" and the animating, cosmic metaphor comes alive, the poet's lament echoes through nature as in pastoral elegy. "Tears," however, must give way to what is written, to a dull yet definitive sound, the anagram "trees."<sup>15</sup>

It must be noticed that, while *die*, *urne*, *corpse*, and *tears* can be in some way suggested by other terms that appear in the text (namely, *diurnal*, *course*, *fears*, *years*, and *hears*), *grave* is, on the contrary, suggested by a *gravitation* which does not appear in the text but is produced by a paraphrastic decision of the reader. Furthermore, *tears* is not the anagram of *trees*. If we want to prove that a visible text A is the anagram of a hidden text B, we must show that all the letters of A, duly reorganized, produce B. If we start to discard some letters, the game is no longer valid. *Top* is an anagram of *pot*, but not of *port*. There is, thus, a con-

<sup>15</sup>Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Easy Pieces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 149–50.

stant oscillation (I do not know how acceptable) between the phonic similarity of terms in *praesentia* and of terms in *absentia*). In spite of this, Hartman's reading sounds, if not fully convincing, at least charming.

Hartman is certainly not suggesting here that Wordsworth actually wished to produce these associations — such searching after the author's intentions would not fit Hartman's critical principles. He simply wishes to say that it is legitimate for a sensitive reader to find what he finds in the text, because these associations are — at least potentially — evoked by the text, and because the poet might (perhaps unconsciously) have created some “harmonics” to the main theme. If it is not the author, let us say it is the language which has created this echo effect. As far as Wordsworth is concerned, though on the one hand nothing proves that the text suggests neither tomb or tears, on the other hand nothing excludes it. The tomb and the tears evoked belong to the same semantic field as the lexemes in *praesentia*. Hartman's reading does not contradict other explicit aspects of the text. One may judge his interpretation too generous, but not economically absurd. The evidence may be weak, but it does fit in.

In theory, one can always invent a system that renders otherwise unconnected clues plausible. But in the case of texts there is at least a proof depending on the isolation of the relevant semantic isotopy.

Greimas defines *isotopy* as “a complex of manifold semantic categories making possible the uniform reading of a story.”<sup>16</sup> The most flashing and maybe the most sophomoric example of contradictory readings due to the possible isolation of different textual isotopies is the following: two fellows talk during a party and the first praises the food, the service, the generosity of the hosts, the beauty of the female guests, and — finally — the excellence of the “toilettes”; the second replies that he has not yet been there. This

<sup>16</sup>A. J. Greimas, *Du sens* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), p. 88.

is a joke, and we laugh about the second fellow, because he interprets the French term *toilette*, which is polysemic, in the sense of sanitary facilities and not of garments and fashion. He is wrong because the whole of the discourse of the first fellow was concerning a social event and not a question of plumbing. The first movement toward the recognition of a semantic isotopy is a conjecture about the topic of a given discourse; once this conjecture has been attempted, the recognition of a possible constant semantic isotopy is the textual proof of the “aboutness” of the discourse in question.<sup>17</sup> If the second fellow had attempted to infer that the first one was speaking of the various aspects of a social event, he would have been able to decide that the lexeme *toilettes* had to be interpreted accordingly.

Deciding what is being talked about is, of course, a kind of interpretive bet. But the contexts allow us to make this bet less uncertain than a bet on the red or the black of a roulette wheel. The funereal interpretation of Hartman has the advantage of betting on a constant isotopy.

Bets on the isotopy are certainly a good interpretive criterion, but only as long as the isotopies are not too generic. This is a principle which is valid also for metaphors. A metaphor exists when we substitute a vehicle for the tenor on the basis of one or more semantic traits common to both the linguistic terms: but if Achilles is a lion because both are courageous and fierce, we would be inclined to reject the metaphor *Achilles is a duck* if it were justified on the basis of the principle that both are bipeds. Few others are as courageous as Achilles and the lion, whereas far too many others are bipeds like Achilles and the duck. A similarity or an analogy, whatever its epistemological statute, is important if it is exceptional, at least under a certain description. An analogy between Achilles and a clock based on the fact that both are physical objects is of no interest whatsoever.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 195.

The classical debate aimed at finding in a text either what its author intended to say or what the text said independently of the intentions of its author. Only after accepting the second horn of the dilemma can one ask if what is found is what the text says by virtue of its textual coherence and of an original underlying signification system or what the addressees found in it by virtue of their own systems of expectations.

It is clear that I am trying to keep a dialectical link between *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris*. The problem is that, if one perhaps knows what is meant by “intention of the reader,” it seems more difficult to define abstractly what is meant by “intention of the text.”

The text intention is not displayed by the textual surface. Or, if it is displayed, it is so in the sense of the purloined letter. One has to decide to “see” it. Thus it is possible to speak of text intention only as the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text intention.

A text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader. I repeat that this reader is not the one who makes the “only right” conjecture. A text can foresee a model reader entitled to try infinite conjectures. The empirical reader is only an actor who makes conjectures about the kind of model reader postulated by the text. Since the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text.

Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result. I am not ashamed to admit that I am so defining the old and still valid “hermeneutic circle.”

To recognize the *intentio operis* is to recognize a semiotic strategy. Sometimes the semiotic strategy is detectable on the

grounds of established stylistic conventions. If a story starts with “Once upon a time” there is a good probability that it is a fairy tale and that the evoked and postulated model reader is a child (or an adult eager to react in a childish mood). Naturally I can witness a case of irony, and as a matter of fact the following text should be read in a more sophisticated way. But even though I can discover by the further course of the text that this is the case, it has been indispensable to recognize that the text pretended to start as a fairy tale.

How to prove a conjecture about the *intentio operis*? The only way is to check it upon the text as a coherent whole. This idea, too, is an old one and comes from Augustine (*De doctrina christiana*): any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed and must be rejected if it is challenged by another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.

Once Jorge Luis Borges (apropos of his character Pierree Ménard) suggested that it would be exciting to read the *Imitation of Christ* as if it were written by Louis Ferdinand Céline.<sup>18</sup> The game is amusing and could be intellectually fruitful. I tried; I discovered sentences that could have been written by Céline (“Grace loves low things and is not disgusted by thorny ones, and likes filthy clothes”). But this kind of reading offers a suitable grid for very few sentences of the *Imitatio*. All the rest, most of the book, resists this reading. If on the contrary I read the book according to the Christian medieval encyclopedia, it appears textually coherent in each of its parts.

I realize that, in this dialectics between the intention of the reader and the intention of the text, the intention of the empirical author has been totally disregarded. Are we entitled to ask what was the “real” intention of Wordsworth when writing his “Lucy” poems?

<sup>18</sup>*Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1944).

My idea of textual interpretation as the discovery of a strategy intended to produce a model reader, conceived as the ideal counterpart of a model author (which appears only as a textual strategy), makes the notion of an empirical author's intention radically useless. We have to respect the text, not the author as person so and so. Nevertheless it can look rather crude to eliminate the poor author as something irrelevant for the story of an interpretation. There are, in the process of communication, cases in which an inference about the intention of the speaker is absolutely important, and this always happens in everyday communication. An anonymous letter reading "I am happy" can refer to an infinite range of possible subjects of the utterance, that is, to the entire class of persons who are not sad; but if I, in this precise moment, utter the sentence "I am happy" it is absolutely certain that my intention was to say that the happy one is me and not someone else, and you are invited to make such an assumption, for the sake of the felicity of our interaction. Can we (likewise) take into account cases of interpretation of written texts to which the empirical author, still alive, reacts by saying, "No, I did not mean that"?

### III. BETWEEN AUTHOR AND TEXT

I ended my last lecture with a dramatic question. Can we still be concerned with the empirical author of a text?

When I speak with a friend I am interested in detecting the intention of the speaker, and when I receive a letter from a friend I am interested in realizing what the writer wanted to say. In this sense I feel perplexed when I read the *jeu de massacre* performed by Jacques Derrida upon a text signed by John Searle.<sup>19</sup> Or, rather, I take it only as a splendid exercise in philosophical paradoxes, without forgetting that Zeno, when demonstrating the impossibility of movement, was nevertheless aware that for doing that he had at least to move both his tongue and his lips.

<sup>19</sup>John Searle, "Limited Inc.," *Glyph 2* (1977): 162–254.

There is a case, however, where I feel sympathetic with many reader-oriented theories. When a text is put in the bottle — and this happens not only with poetry or narrative but also with the *Critique of Pure Reason* — that is, when a text is produced not for a single addressee but for a community of readers — the author knows that he or she will be interpreted not according to his or her intentions but according to a complex strategy of interactions which also involve the readers, along with their competence in language as a social treasury. I mean by social treasury not only a given language as a set of grammatical rules but also the whole encyclopedia that the performances of that language have implemented, namely, the cultural conventions that that language has produced and the very history of the previous interpretations of many texts, comprehending the text that the reader is in the course of reading.

The act of reading must take into account all these elements, even though it is improbable that a single reader can master all of them. Thus every act of reading is a difficult transaction between the competence of the reader (the reader's world knowledge) and the kind of competence that a given text postulates in order to be read in an economic way.

In his *Criticism in the Wilderness* Hartman made a subtle analysis of Wordsworth's poem "I Wander Lonely as a Cloud."<sup>20</sup> I remember that in 1985, during a debate at Northwestern University I said to Hartman that he was a "moderate" deconstructionist because he refrained from reading the verse "A poet could not but be gay" as a contemporary reader would do if the line were found in *Playboy*. In other words, a sensitive and responsible reader is not obliged to speculate about what happened in the head of Wordsworth when writing that verse but has the duty to take into account the state of the lexical system at the time of Wordsworth. At that time *gay* had no sexual connotation, and to ac-

<sup>20</sup>Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 28.

knowledge this point means to interact with a cultural and social treasury.

In my *The Role of the Reader* I stressed the difference between interpreting and using a text. I can certainly use Wordsworth's text for parody, for showing how a text can be read in relation to different cultural frameworks, or for strictly personal ends (I can read a text to get inspiration for my own musing), but if I want to interpret Wordsworth's text I must respect his cultural and linguistic background.

What happens if I find the text of Wordsworth in a bottle and I do not know when it was written or by whom? I shall look, after having met the word *gay*, to see if the further course of the text supports a sexual interpretation, so to encourage me to believe that *gay* also conveyed connotations of homosexuality. If so, and if clearly or at least persuasively so, I can try the hypothesis that that text was not written by a romantic poet but by a contemporary writer — who was perhaps imitating the style of a romantic poet.

In the course of such a complex interaction between my knowledge and the knowledge I impute to the unknown author, I am not speculating about the author's intentions but about the text's intention, or about the intention of that model author that I am able to recognize in terms of textual strategy.

When Lorenzo Valla demonstrated that the *Constitutum Constantini* was a forgery he was probably influenced by his personal prejudice that the emperor Constantine never wanted to give the temporal power to the pope, but in writing his philological analysis he was not concerned with the interpretation of Constantine's intentions. He simply showed that the use of certain linguistic expressions was implausible at the beginning of the fourth century. The model author of the donation could not have been a Roman writer of that period.

Recently one of my students, Mauro Ferraresi, suggested that between the empirical author and the model author (which is nothing else than an explicit textual strategy) there is a third,

rather ghostly figure that he christened Liminal Author, or the Author on the Threshold — the threshold between the intention of a given human being and the linguistic intention displayed by a textual strategy.

Returning to Hartman's analysis of Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems (quoted earlier), the intention of Wordsworth's text was certainly (and it would be difficult to doubt it) to suggest by the use of the rhyme a strong relationship between *fears* and *years*, *force* and *course*. But are we sure that Mr. Wordsworth in person wanted to evoke the association, introduced by the reader Hartman, between *trees* and *tears*, and between an absent *gravitation* and an absent *grave*? Without being obliged to organize a séance and to press his or her fingers upon a jumping table, the reader can make the following conjecture: if a normal English-speaking human being is seduced by the semantic relationships between words in praesentia and words in absentia, why should not one suspect that even Wordsworth was unconsciously seduced by these possible echo effects? I, the reader, do not attribute an explicit intention to Mr. Wordsworth; I only suspect that on that threshold situation where Mr. Wordsworth was no longer an empirical person and not yet a mere text, he obliged the words (or the words obliged him) to set up a possible series of associations.

Until which point can the reader give credit to such a ghostly image of the liminal author? One of the most beautiful and famous poems of Italian romanticism is Giacomo Leopardi's "A Silvia." It is a love song for a girl, Silvia, and it begins with the name Silvia:

Silvia rimembri ancora  
 quel tempo della tua vita mortale  
 quando beltà splendea  
 negli occhi tuoi ridenti e fuggitivi  
 e tu lieta e pensosa il limitare  
 di gioventù salivi?

[Silvia are you still remembering that time of your mortal life when beauty was radiating in your smiling fugitive eyes, and

you, gay and pensive, were ascending the threshold of your youth?]

Do not ask me for which unconscious reasons I decided to use, for my rough translation, such words as *threshold*, *mortal*, and *gay*, which reproduce other key words of the present lecture. The interesting point is that this first strophe of the poem begins with *Silvia* and ends with *Salivi*, and *salivi* is a perfect anagram of *Silvia*.

This is a case in which I am obliged to look neither for the intentions of the empirical author nor for the unconscious reactions of the liminal one. The text is there, the anagram is there, and, moreover, legions of critics have stressed the overwhelming presence of the vowel *i* in this strophe.

We can obviously do more: we can, as I did, start looking for other anagrams of *Silvia* in the rest of the poem. I tell you that you can find a lot of pseudoanagrams. I say “pseudo” because in Italian the only reliable anagram of *Silvia* is just *Salivi*. But there can be hidden, imperfect anagrams. For instance, the last verse of “A Silvia”:

e tu SoLeVI  
 mIraVA IL ciel Sereno  
 Le VIe dorAte  
 queL ch’Io SentIV A in seno  
 che penSIeri soAVI  
 LA VIta umana  
 doLer dI mIA SVentura  
 moStrAVI dILontano.

It is probable that the liminal author was obsessed by the sweet sound of the beloved name. It is reasonable that the reader has the right to enjoy all these echo effects that the text qua text provides him or her. But at this point the act of reading becomes a vague terrain where interpretation and use inextricably merge together. The criterion of economy becomes rather weak.

I think that a poet can be obsessed by a name, beyond his empirical intentions, and to explore this issue farther I turned to Petrarch who, as is universally known, was in love with a lady called Laura. It goes without saying that I found many pseudo-anagrams of Laura in Petrarch's poems. But, since I am also a very skeptical semiotician, I did something very reprehensible. I went looking for Silvia in Petrarch and for Laura in Leopardi. And I got some interesting results — even though, I admit, quantitatively less convincing.

I believe that "Silvia" as a poem is playing upon those six letters with irrefutable evidence, but I also know that the Italian alphabet has only twenty-one letters and that there are many chances of meeting pseudoanagrams of Silvia even in the text of the Italian Constitution. It is economical to suspect that Leopardi was obsessed by the sound of the name of Silvia, while it is less economical to do what years ago a student of mine did: look in the whole of Leopardi's poems in order to find improbable acrostics of the word *melancholy*. It is not impossible to find them, provided you decide that the letters forming the acrostic have not to be the first of a verse and can be found by jumping here and there through the text. But this kind of grasshopper criticism does not explain why Leopardi had to invent such a Hellenistic or early medieval device, when the whole of his poetry tells at each verse, literally and beautifully, how melancholic he was. I think it is not economical to think that he wasted his precious time with secret messages when he was so poetically committed to making his mood poignantly clear by other linguistic means. It is not economical to suspect that Leopardi acted as a character of John Le Carré when he could say what he said in a better way. I am not asserting that it is fruitless to look for concealed messages in a poetic work: I am saying that, while it is fruitful for *De laudibus sanctae crucis* of Rabanus Maurus, it is preposterous for Leopardi.

There is, however, a case in which it can be interesting to resort to the intention of the empirical author. When the author is

still living, and the critics have given their interpretations of his text, it can be interesting to ask the author how much and to what an extent he, as an empirical person, was aware of the manifold interpretations his text supported. At this point the response of the author must be used not to validate the interpretations of his text but to show the discrepancies between the author's intention and the intention of the text. The aim of the experiment is not a critical one but, rather, a theoretical one.

There can be, finally, a case in which the author is also a text theorist. In this case it would be possible to get from him two different sorts of reaction. In certain cases he can say, "No, I did not mean this, but I must agree that the text says it, and I thank the reader that made me aware of it." Or, "Independently of the fact that I did not mean this, I think that a reasonable reader should not accept such an interpretation, because it sounds uneconomic."

I will tell you of some reactions I had, as the author of two novels, when facing some interpretations of them. A typical case where the author must surrender in face of the reader is the one I told about in my *Postscript on The Name of the Rose*.<sup>21</sup> As I read the reviews of the novel, I felt a thrill of satisfaction when I found a critic who quoted a remark of William's made at the end of the trial: "What terrifies you most in purity?" Adso asks. And William answers, "Haste."<sup>22</sup> I loved, and still love, these two lines very much. But then one of my readers pointed out to me that on the same page, Bernard Gui, threatening the cellarer with torture, says, "Justice is not inspired by haste, as the Pseudo Apostles believe, and the justice of God has centuries at its disposal." And the reader rightly asked me what connection I had meant to establish between the haste feared by William and the absence of haste extolled by Bernard. I was unable to answer. As a matter of fact the exchange between Adso and William does not exist in the

<sup>21</sup>Umberto Eco, *Postscript on The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 85.

manuscript. I added this brief dialogue in the galleys, for reasons of continuity: I needed to insert another scansion before giving Bernard the floor again. And I completely forgot that, a little later, Bernard speaks of haste. Bernard's speech uses a stereotyped expression, the sort of thing we would expect from a judge, a commonplace on the order of "All are equal before the law." Alas, when juxtaposed with the haste mentioned by William, the haste mentioned by Bernard literally creates an effect of sense; and the reader is justified in wondering if the two men are saying the same thing, or if the loathing of haste expressed by William is not imperceptibly different from the loathing of haste expressed by Bernard. The text is there, and it produces its own effects. Whether I wanted it this way or not, we are now faced with a question, an ambiguous provocation; and I myself feel embarrassment in interpreting this conflict, though I realize a meaning lurks there (perhaps many meanings do).

Now, let me tell of an opposite case. Helena Costiucovich before translating into Russian (masterfully) *The Name of the Rose*, wrote a long essay on it.<sup>23</sup> At a given point she remarks that there exists a book by Emile Henriot (*La rose de Bratislava*, 1946) where can be found the hunting of a mysterious manuscript and a final fire in a library. The story takes place in Prague, and at the beginning of my novel I mention Prague. Moreover, one of my librarians is named Berengar, and one of the librarians of Henriot was named Bergard Marre.

It is perfectly useless to say that, as an empirical author, I had never read Henriot's novel and that I ignored that it existed. I have read interpretations in which my critics found out sources of which I was fully aware, and I was very happy that they so cunningly discovered what I so cunningly concealed in order to lead them to find it (for instance, the model of the couple Serenus Zeitblom and Adrian in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* for the

<sup>23</sup>Helena Costiucovich, "Umberto Eco. Imja Roso," *Sovriemiennaja hodoziestviennaja literatura za rubiezom* 5 (1982): 101ff.

narrative relationship of Adso and William). I have read of sources totally unknown to me, and I was delighted that somebody believed that I was eruditely quoting them. (Recently a young medievalist told me that a blind librarian was mentioned by Cassiodorus of Seville.) I have read critical analyses in which the interpreter discovered influences of which I was unaware when writing, but I certainly had read those books in my youth and I understood that I was unconsciously influenced by them. (My friend Giorgio Celli said that among my remote readings there should have been the novels of Dmitri Mereskovskij, and I recognized that he was right.

As an uncommitted reader of *The Name of the Rose*, I think that the argument of Helena Costiucovich does not prove anything interesting. The research of a mysterious manuscript and the fire in a library are very common literary topoi and I could quote many other books which use them. Prague was mentioned at the beginning of the story, but if instead of Prague I had mentioned Budapest it would have been the same. Prague does not play a crucial role in my story. By the way, when the novel was translated in some eastern countries (long before perestroika), some translators called me and said that it was difficult to mention, just at the opening of the book, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. I answered that I did not approve any change of my text and that if there was some censure the responsibility was on the publisher. Then, as a joke, I added, "I put Prague at the beginning because it is one among my magic cities. But I also like Dublin. Put Dublin instead of Prague. It does not make any difference." They reacted, "But Dublin was not invaded by Russians!" I answered, "It is not my fault."

Finally, Berengar and Bergard can be a coincidence. In any case the model reader can agree that four coincidences (manuscript, fire, Prague, and Berengar) are interesting and as an empirical author I have no right to react. O.K.: to put a good face on this accident, I formally acknowledge that my text had the intention of paying homage to Emile Henriot.

Helena Costiucovich wrote something more to prove the analogy between me and Henriot, however. She said that in Henriot's novel the coveted manuscript was the original copy of the memoirs of Casanova. It happens that in my novel there is a minor character called Hugh of Newcastle (and in the Italian version, Ugo di Novocastro), The conclusion of Costiucovich is that "only by passing from a name to another is it possible to conceive of the name of the rose."

As an empirical author I could say that Hugh of Newcastle is not an invention of mine but a historical figure, mentioned in the medieval sources I used; the episode of the meeting between the Franciscan legation and the papal representatives literally quotes a medieval chronicle of the fourteenth century. But the reader does not have to know that, and my witnessing cannot be taken into account. As an uncommitted reader, however, I think I have the right to state my opinion. First of all, Newcastle is not a translation of Casanova, which should be translated as Newhouse, and a castle is not a house (besides, in Italian, or in Latin, Novocastro means New City or New Encampment). Thus Newcastle suggests Casanova in the same way it could suggest Newton. But there are other elements that can textually prove that the hypothesis of Costiucovich is uneconomic. First of all, Hugh of Newcastle shows up in the novel playing a very marginal role and having nothing to do with the library. If the text wanted to suggest a pertinent relationship between Hugh and the library (as well as between him and the manuscript) it should have said something more. But the text does not say a word about that. Second, Casanova was — at least according to common knowledge — a professional lover and a rake, and there is nothing in the novel which casts in doubt the virtue of Hugh. Third, there is no evident connection between a manuscript of Casanova and a manuscript of Aristotle and there is nothing in the novel which alludes to sexual incontinence as a value to be pursued. To look for the Casanova connection does not lead anywhere. Jeanne d'Arc was born in

Donremy; this word suggests the first three musical notes (do, re, mi). Molly Bloom was in love with a tenor, Blaze Boylan; *blaze* can evoke the stake of Jeanne, but the hypothesis that Molly Bloom is an allegory of Jeanne d'Arc does not help to find something interesting in *Ulysses* (even though one day or another there will be a Joycean critic eager to try this key).

Obviously, I am ready to change my mind if some other interpreter demonstrates that the Casanova connection can lead to some interesting interpretive path, but for the moment — as a model reader of my own novel — I feel entitled to say that such a hypothesis is scarcely rewarding.

Once during a debate a reader asked me what I meant by the sentence “the supreme happiness lies in having what you have.” I felt disconcerted and I swore that I had never written that sentence. I was sure of it, and for many reasons: first, I do not think that happiness lies in having what one has, and not even Snoopy would subscribe to such a triviality. Second, it is improbable that a medieval character would suppose that happiness lies in having what he actually has, since happiness for the medieval mind was a future state to be reached through present suffering. Thus I repeated that I had never written that line, and my interlocutor looked at me as at an author unable to recognize what he had written.

Later I came across that quotation. It appears during the description of the erotic ecstasy of Adso in the kitchen. This episode, as the dullest of my readers can easily guess, is entirely made up of quotations from the Song of Songs and from medieval mystics. In any case, even though the reader does not find out the sources, he or she can guess that these pages depict the feelings of a young man after his first (and probably last) sexual experience. If one rereads the line in its context (I mean the context of my text, not necessarily the context of its medieval sources), one finds that the line reads: “O lord, when the soul is transported, the only virtue lies in having what you see, the supreme happiness is having what

you have.” Thus, happiness lies in having what you have, but not in general and in every moment of your life, but only in the moment of the ecstatic vision. This is a case in which it is necessary to know the intention of the empirical author: the intention of the text is blatant and, if English words have a conventional meaning, the text does not say what that reader — obeying some idiosyncratic drives — believed he or she had read. Between the unattainable intention of the author and the arguable intention of the reader there is the transparent intention of the text, which disproves an untenable interpretation.

An author who has entitled his book *The Name of the Rose* must be ready to face manifold interpretations of his title. As an empirical author I wrote that I chose that title just in order to set the reader free: “the rose is a figure so rich in meanings that by now it hasn’t any meaning: Dante’s mystic rose, and go lovely rose, the War of the Roses, rose thou art sick, too many rings around Rosie, a rose by any other name, a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, the Rosicrucians.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover someone has discovered that some early manuscripts of *De contempu mundi* of Bernard de Cluny, from which I borrowed the hexameter “stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus,” read “stat Roma pristina nomine” — which after all is more coherent with the rest of the poem, which speaks of the lost Babylonia. Thus the title of my novel, had I come across another version of Cluny’s poem, could have been *The Name of Rome* (thus acquiring fascist overtones).

But the text reads *The Name of the Rose* and I understand now how difficult it was to stop the infinite series of connotations that word elicits. Probably I wanted to open the possible readings so much as to make each of them irrelevant, and as a result I have produced an inexorable series of interpretations. But the text is there, and the empirical author has to remain silent.

<sup>24</sup>*Reflections*, p. 3.

There are, however, once again, cases in which the empirical author has the right to react as a model reader. I have enjoyed the beautiful book by Robert F. Fleissner, *A Rose by Any Other Name: A Survey of Literary Flora from Shakespeare to Eco*, and I hope that Shakespeare would have been proud to find his name associated with mine.<sup>25</sup> Among the various connections that Fleissner finds between my rose and all the other roses of world literature there is an interesting passage: Fleissner wants to show “how Eco’s rose derived from Doyle’s *Adventure of the Naval Treaty*, which, in turn, owed much to Cuff’s admiration of this flower in *The Moonstone*.”<sup>26</sup>

I am positively a Wilkie Collins addict but I do not remember (and certainly I did not when writing my novel) Cuff’s floral passion. I believe I have read the complete works of Arthur Conan Doyle, but I must confess that I do not remember having read *The Adventure of the Naval Treaty*. It does not matter: in my novel there are so many explicit references to Sherlock Holmes that my text can support this connection. But in spite of my open-mindedness, I find an instance of overinterpretation when Fleissner, trying to demonstrate how much my William “echoes” Holmes’s admiration for roses, quotes this passage from my book: “‘Frangula,’ William said suddenly, bending over to observe a plant that, on that winter day, he recognized from the bare bush. ‘A good infusion is made from the bark.’” It is curious that Fleissner stops his quotation exactly after “bark.” My text continues, and after a comma reads: “for hemorrhoids.” Honestly, I think that the model reader is not invited to take frangula as an allusion to the rose — otherwise every plant could stand for a rose, like every bird, for Rossetti, stands for a pelican.

How can, however, the empirical author disprove certain free semantic association that the words he used in some way authorizes? I was delighted by the allegorical meanings that some

<sup>25</sup>Robert F. Fleissner, *A Rose by Any Other Name: A Survey of Literary Flora from Shakespeare to Eco* (West Cornwall: Locust Hill Press, 1989).

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 139.

readers found in such names as Umberto da Romans and Nicholas of Morimondo. As for Umberto da Romans, he was a historical figure who actually wrote sermons for women. I realize that a reader can be tempted to think of an Umberto (Eco) who writes a “roman,” but even if the author invented such a sophomoric pun it would not add anything to the understanding of the novel. More interesting is the case of Nicholas of Morimondo; somebody remarked that the monk who utters at the end “The library is on fire!” thus acknowledging the fall of the abbey as a microcosm, bears a name which suggests “death of the world.”

As a matter of fact, I christened Nicholas from the name of the well-known abbey of Morimondo, in Italy, founded in 1136 by Cistercians coming from Morimond (Haute-Marne). When I christened Nicholas, I did not know as yet that he had to pronounce his fatal statement. In any case, for a native Italian speaker living only a few miles from Morimondo, this name evokes neither death nor world. Finally, I am not sure that Morimond comes from the verb *mori* and the noun *mundus* (maybe *mond* comes from a German root and means “moon”). It can happen that a non-Italian reader with a certain knowledge of Latin or Italian smells a semantic association with the death of a world. I was not responsible for this allusion. But what does “I” mean? My conscious personality? My id? The play of language (of *la langue*) that was taking place in my mind when I was writing? The text is there. Rather, we can ask whether that association makes sense. Certainly not as far as the understanding of the course of narrative events is concerned, but perhaps for alerting — so to speak — the reader that the action takes place in a culture where *nomina sunt numina* or instruments of a divine revelation.

I called one of the main characters of my *Foucault's Pendulum* Casaubon, and I was thinking of Isaac Casaubon, who demonstrated that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was a forgery.<sup>27</sup> Those who

<sup>27</sup>Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989).

have followed my first lectures know it, and if they read *Foucault's Pendulum* they can find some analogy between what the great philologist understood and what my character finally understands. I was aware that few readers would have been able to catch the allusion, but I was equally aware that, in terms of textual strategy, this was not indispensable (I mean that one can read my novel and understand my Casaubon even though disregarding the historical Casaubon — many authors like to put in their texts certain shibboleths for a few smart readers). Before finishing my novel I discovered by chance that Casaubon was also a character of *Middlemarch*, a book that I had read decades ago and which does not rank among my bedside books. That was a case in which, as a model author, I made an effort to eliminate a possible reference to George Eliot. At page 63 of the English translation can be read the following exchange between Belbo and Casaubon:

“By the way, what’s your name?”

“Casaubon.”

“Casaubon. Wasn’t he a character in *Middlemarch*?”

“I don’t know. There was also a Renaissance philologist by that name, but we are not related.”

I did my best to avoid what I thought to be a useless reference to Mary Ann Evans. But then came a smart reader, David Robey, who remarked that, evidently not by chance, Eliot’s Casaubon was writing a *Key to All Mythologies*. As a model reader I feel obliged to accept that innuendo. Text plus encyclopedic knowledge entitle any cultivated reader to find that connection. It makes sense. Too bad for the empirical author who was not as smart as his readers. In the same vein my last novel is entitled *Foucault's Pendulum* because the pendulum I am speaking of was invented by Léon Foucault. If it were invented by Franklin the title would have been *Franklin's Pendulum*. This time I was aware from the very beginning that somebody could have smelled an allusion to Michel Foucault: my characters are obsessed by analogies and Foucault

wrote on the paradigm of similarity. As an empirical author I was not so happy about such a possible connection. It sounds like a joke and not a clever one, indeed. But the pendulum invented by Léon was the hero of my story and I could not change the title: thus I hoped that my model reader would not try a superficial connection with Michel. I was to be disappointed; many smart readers did so. The text is there, and maybe they are right: maybe I am responsible for a superficial joke; maybe the joke is not that superficial. I do not know. The whole affair is by now out of my control.

Giosue Musca wrote a critical analysis of my last novel that I consider among the best I read.<sup>28</sup> From the beginning, however, he confesses to having been corrupted by the habit of my characters and goes fishing for analogies. He masterfully isolates many ultraviolet quotations and stylistic analogies I wanted to be discovered; he finds other connections I did not think of but that look very persuasive; and he plays the role of a paranoiac reader by finding out connections that amaze me but that I am unable to disprove — even though I know that they can mislead the reader. For instance, it seems that the name of the computer, Abulafia, plus the names of the three main characters — Belbo, Casaubon, and Diotallevi — produces the series ABCD. Useless to say that until the end of my work I gave the computer a different name: my readers can object that I unconsciously changed it just in order to obtain an alphabetic series. It seems that Jacopo Belbo is fond of whiskey and his initials make JB. Useless to say that until the end of my work his first name was Stefano and that I changed it into Jacopo at the last moment.

The only objections I can make as a model reader of my book are (a) the alphabetical series ABCD is textually irrelevant if the names of the other characters do not bring it to X, Y, and Z, and (b) Belbo also drinks martinis and his mild alcoholic addiction is not the most relevant of his features. On the contrary I cannot

<sup>28</sup>Giosue Musca, "La camicia del nesso," *Quaderni Medievali* 27 (1989).

disprove my readers' remark that Pavese was born in a village called Santo Stefano Belbo and that my Belbo, a melancholic Piedmontese, can recall Pavese. It is true that I spent my youth on the banks of the river Belbo (where I underwent some of the ordeals that I attributed to Jacopo Belbo, and a long time before I was informed of the existence of Cesare Pavese). But I knew that by choosing the name Belbo my text would have in some way evoked Pavese. And it is true that by designing my Piedmontese character I also thought of Pavese. Thus my model reader is entitled to find such a connection.

I can only confess (as an empirical author, and as I said before) that in a first version the name of my character was *Stefano* Belbo. Then I changed it into Jacopo, because — as a model author — I did not want my text to make such a blatantly perceptible connection. Evidently this was not enough, but my readers are right. Probably they would be right whatever name I called Belbo.

I could keep going with examples of this sort, and I have chosen only those that were more immediately comprehensible. I skipped other more complex cases because I risked engaging too much of myself upon matters of philosophical or aesthetical interpretation. I hope my listeners will agree that I have introduced the empirical author in this game only in order to stress his irrelevance and to reassert the rights of the text.

I feel, however, I have not been generous to the empirical author. Still, there is at least one case in which the witness of the empirical author acquires an important function. Not so much in order to understand his texts better, but certainly in order to understand the creative process. To understand the creative process is also to understand how certain textual solutions come into being by serendipity, or as the result of unconscious mechanisms. It is important to understand the difference between the textual strategy — as a linguistic object that the model readers have under their eyes (so that they can go on independently of the empirical au-

[ECO]

thor's intentions) — and the story of the growth of that textual strategy.

Some of the examples I have given can work in this direction. Let me add now two other curious examples: they really concern only my personal life and do not have any detectable textual counterpart. They have nothing to do with the business of interpretation. They can only tell how a text, which is a machine conceived in order to elicit interpretations, sometimes grows out of a magmatic territory which has nothing — or not yet — to do with literature.

First story. In *Foucault's Pendulum* the young Casaubon is in love with a Brazilian girl called Amparo. Giosue Musca found, tongue-in-cheek, a connection with André Ampère, who studied the magnetic force between two currents. Too smart. I did not know why I chose that name: I realized that it was not a Brazilian name, so I was compelled to write, "I never did understand how it was that Amparo, a descendant of Dutch settlers in Recife who intermarried with Indians and Sudanese blacks — with her Jamaican face and Parisian culture — had wound up with a Spanish name."<sup>29</sup> This means that I took the name Amparo as if it came from outside my novel.

Months after the publication of the novel a friend asked me: "Why Amparo? Is it not the name of a mountain?" And then he explained, "There is that song, 'Guajira Guantanamera,' which mentions a mount Amparo."

Oh my God. I knew that song very well, even though I did not remember a single word of it. It was sung, in the mid-fifties, by a girl with which I was in love. She was Latin American, and very beautiful. She was not Brazilian, not Marxist, not black, not hysterical, as Amparo is, but it is clear that, when inventing a Latin American charming girl, I unconsciously thought of that other image of my youth, when I was the same age as Casaubon. I thought of that song, and in some way the name Amparo (that

<sup>29</sup>*Foucault's Pendulum*, p. 161.

I had completely forgotten) transmigrated from my unconscious to the page. This story is fully irrelevant for the interpretation of my text. As far as the text is concerned Amparo is Amparo is Amparo is Amparo.

Second story. Those who have read my *Name of the Rose* know that there is a mysterious manuscript, that it contains the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, that its pages are anointed with poison and that (at p. 570 of the paperback edition) it is described like this: "He read the first page aloud, then stopped, as if he were not interested in knowing more, and rapidly leafed through the following pages. But after a few pages he encountered resistance, because near the upper corner of the side edge, and along the top, some pages had stuck together, as happens when the damp and deteriorating papery substance forms a kind of sticky paste."<sup>30</sup>

I wrote these lines at the end of 1979. In the following years, perhaps also because after *The Name of the Rose* I started to be more frequently in touch with librarians and book collectors (and certainly because I had a little more money at my disposal) I became a regular collector of rare books. It had happened before, in the course of my life, that I bought some old book, but by chance, and only when it was very cheap. Only in the last decade have I become a serious book collector, and "serious" means that one has to consult specialized catalogs and must write, for every book, a technical file, with the collation, historical information on the previous or following editions, and a precise description of the physical state of the copy. This last job requires technical jargon in order to be precise: foxed, browned, waterstained, soiled, washed or crisp leaves, cropped margins, erasures, re-baked bindings, rubbed joints, and so on.

One day, rummaging through the upper shelves of my home library I discovered an edition of the *Poetics* of Aristotle, with

<sup>30</sup>Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983; paper ed., New York: Warner Books, 1984).

comments by Antonio Riccoboni, Padua, 1587. I had forgotten I had it; I found on the endpaper “1000” written in pencil, which meant that I had bought it somewhere for 1,000 liras, less than half a pound, probably twenty or more years before. My catalog said that it was the second edition, not exceedingly rare, and that there was a copy of it at the British Museum, but I was happy to have it because it was somewhat difficult to find and in any case the commentary of Riccoboni is less known and less quoted than those, let’s say, of Robortello or Castelvetro.

Then I started writing my description. I copied the title page and I discovered that the edition had an Appendix: “Ejusdem Ars Comica ex Aristotele.” This meant that Riccoboni had tried to reconstruct the lost second book of the *Poetics*. It was not, however, an unusual endeavor, and I went on to set up the physical description of the copy. Then it happened to me what had happened to a certain Zatesky, described by Lurija;<sup>31</sup> having lost part of his brain during the war, and with part of the brain the whole of his memory and of his speaking ability, Zatesky was nevertheless still able to write: thus automatically his hand wrote down all the information he was unable to think of, and step by step he reconstructed his own identity by reading what he was writing.

Likewise, I was looking coldly and technically at the book, writing my description, and suddenly I realized that I was rewriting *The Name of the Rose*. The only difference was that from page 120, when the “Ars Comica” begins, the lower and not the upper margins were severely damaged; but all the rest was the same, the pages progressively browned and stained from dampness and at the end stuck together, looking as if they were smeared with a disgusting fat substance. I had in my hands, in printed form, the manuscript I described in my novel. I had had it for years and years at my reach, at home.

At first I thought it was an extraordinary coincidence; then I was tempted to believe in a miracle; at the end I decided that

<sup>31</sup>A. R. Lurija, *Man with a Shattered World* (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

there is something called Id or Unconscious. I had bought that book in my youth, skimmed through it, realized that it was exceptionally soiled, and put it somewhere and forgot it. But by a sort of internal camera I had photographed those pages, and for decades the image of those poisonous leaves lay in the most remote part of my soul, as in a grave, until the moment it emerged again (I do not know for what reason) and I believed I had invented it.

This story too has nothing to do with a possible interpretation of my book. If it has a moral it is that the private life of the empirical authors is in a certain respect more unfathomable than their texts. Between the mysterious history of a textual production and the uncontrollable drift of its future readings, the text qua text still represents a comfortable presence, the point to which we can stick.