

Umberto Eco: On Semiotics and Pragmatism

Interview by Chong-Min Hong, David Lurie and Jiro Tanaka

HRP: Most of your academic work has centered around the field of semiotics. What exactly is semiotics? What, in your view, are its goals?

Eco: The technical answer should be that it is the study of semiosis in all of its aspects — but at this point I should define semiosis. And since I have written several books on this subject it probably would not be appropriate or adequate to answer in a few sentences (otherwise, all these books would have been unnecessary — which I cannot admit). In academic terms I do not consider semiotics as a discipline, not even as a department, but perhaps as a school, as an interdisciplinary network, studying human beings in so far as they produce signs, and not only the verbal ones.

The study of a specific system of signs is usually called “semiotics of —”. For instance, linguistics is a semiotics of verbal language; there is, as well, a semiotics of traffic lights. The difference between a language like English and the system of traffic lights is that the latter is simpler than the former. Then there is a general approach to the whole of the semiotic behavior, and I call this study general semiotics. In this sense semiotics asks some fundamental philosophical questions.

Try to imagine a philosophy of language that, instead of analyzing only our verbal behavior, analyzes every kind of sign production and interpretation. General semiotics is for me a form of philosophy — to be honest, I think it is the only acceptable form of philosophy, today. After all, when Aristotle says that Being can be told in various ways, he characterizes philosophy as a semiotic inquiry.

HRP: Clearly, you have found that fiction enables you to accomplish something other than what you have accomplished in your philosophical and critical work. When you write your novels, in what sense do you approach philosophical questions differently than you do as a theorist?

Eco: Your question permits two different answers since it, in fact, concerns two different problems, namely, (a) the psychology of literary creation; and (b) the role of literature in the philosophical debate, especially today. As for the first point I would say that when beginning a novel I do not think of any specific philosophical question. I start from an image, a situation, and I do not know where I am going. Only afterwards I realize that in some way I dealt with philosophical problems — which is not so inexplicable because they are *my* problems. At this point I realize that, when dealing with philosophical problems in an essayistic way, I try to reach a conclusion, a univocal

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one, ready to defend it — even though I am aware that in order to reach that conclusion I had to cut off some other possible ways of looking at the same problem.

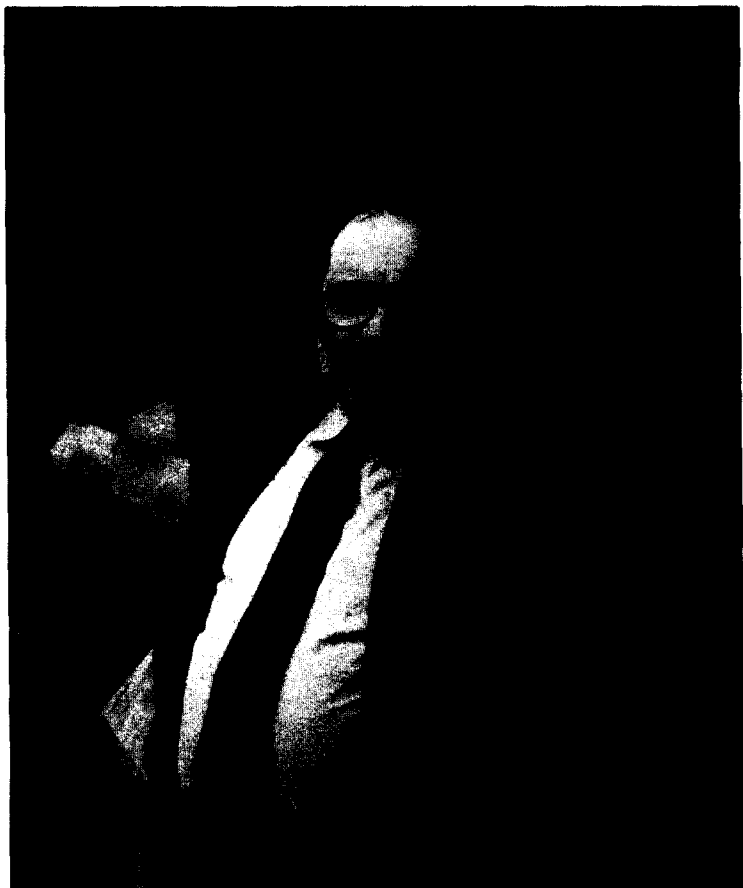
On the contrary, when writing a novel I have an impression to stage, and I try to represent the fact that the conclusions can be many. In other words I offer the readers a series of questions, not answers. To translate all this in terms of a “philosophical” metaphor, to write scholarly work is like writing the *Tractatus*, whereas writing a novel is more like to write the *Philosophical Investigations*.

This leads us to the second part of your question. A consistent number of philosophers of our time have used literary creations as a playground for dealing with philosophical problems: there are philosophers reflecting on Kafka, on Mann or on Proust. They use literature as some Greek philosopher used myth, as an open-ended and problematic representation of human problems — just because poetic or narrative discourses are not to be accepted or refused (pass or fail) but can be explored as a source of unending questions.

HRP: Your writings, and especially your fiction, will be interpreted by various readers in numerous different ways. What is the difference between interpretation and misinterpretation?

Eco: I was largely influenced, at the beginning of my philosophical career, by Luigi Pareyson, whose philosophy of interpretation was in fact a form of hermeneutics. It is for that reason that decades later I met the thought of C.S. Peirce, and I was conquered by his theory of interpretation as the unifying category able to explain how mind and languages (and even nature) work. But a central feature of Pareyson’s philosophy was that every act of interpretation involved both freedom and fidelity (or respect). You are free because you are looking at something from your own perspective, but you are looking at *something*. Such a dialectic between freedom and loyalty still remains central in my thought and in the way I elaborated upon Peirce’s notion of unlimited semiosis (see, for instance, the recent essays in my book, *The Limits of Interpretation*).

To put the whole thing in a rude way, I still believe that there is a literal level in language, a zero degree. Interpretation starts from that level and cannot ignore it. Can you read *Finnegan’s Wake* as a free interpretation of *Gone With the Wind*? If the answer is, “No” (and it is “No” — don’t be silly), this means that some interpretations of a text simply cannot be accepted as an interpretation of *that* text. Then, if you ask me (and I did something like this in my literary parodies now published in English as *Misreadings*), I am able to write an essay in which I read Joyce as if he were Margaret Mitchell. You can say—and I agree—that even this is a way to interpret a text. But you would admit that there are, in the job of interpretation, degrees of fidelity. I can play Chopin with an ocarina and such an exercise can be hermeneutically fruitful, but generally people admit that a



good performance by Cortot is closer to Chopin, and I think people are right.

HRP: The literary figures of St. Thomas Aquinas and James Joyce have figured prominently in your writings. What is it about Aquinas and Joyce that attracts you?

Eco: One meets an author for many reasons, and there is no previous program. It is like falling in love: it happens, and it is stupid to ask, “why with X rather than with Y?” Then, later in life, you might think that there was something like a project, but of course it is only a teleological illusion. To play the game of the teleological illusion, I see those two guys (Aquinas and Joyce) as very complementary for my education: one seems to work in order to produce Order, but his ordered world conceals a subtle way of putting out of joint the whole of the previous tradition; the other one seems to play on Chance and Disorder, but to do so he needs underlying ordered structures. Nice “fearful symmetry,” isn’t it? Certainly it did not depend on an intentional plot. But who knows?

HRP: Why has American pragmatism in general and the Harvard philosopher and pragmatist C.S. Peirce in particular attracted so much attention on the Continent?

Eco: Apropos of American pragmatism, I would distinguish between the pragmatism of James, or Dewey, and the philosophy of Peirce — you know that he was irritated by the Jamesian version of his ideas and he decided to call his philosophy “pragmaticism” so to distinguish it from pragmatism (he said that nobody would have stolen such an ugly word). American pragmatism in the sense of James and Dewey had many followers in Italy in the first half of this century, and it happened as a reaction to the idealism of Croce and Gentile. Peirce was mainly rediscovered in the second half of the century, and it is his semiotic aspect that fascinated Europeans (by the way, such an aspect was the less considered one among the happy few that studied Peirce in the U.S.—until recently). Peirce was studied because the structuralist semiotic approach had privileged the linguistic model, and Peirce was aware of the enormous variety of signs that we produce and use.

HRP: How do you distinguish continental and analytic philosophy?

Eco: Every attempt to distinguish continental from analytic philosophy according to their problems, questions, and answers is misleading. At every step one can discover that there is more in common than people usually believe. Nevertheless, what is in common is concealed, as if from both parts one worked in order to render both universes mutually impenetrable.

In order to explain the real difference, let me use an analogy concerning the difference between medieval and modern philosophy: The Schoolmen were continually innovating, but they tried to disguise any innovation, presenting it as a gloss, as a commentary of a unified tradition. On the contrary, modern philosophers, like Descartes, were pretending to start from a “tabula rasa”, by putting the previous tradition upside down and polemically casting it in doubt. Well, I think that analytical philosophy still has a medieval attitude: It seems that every discourse is expected to start from a previous one, everybody recognizing a sort of canon, let us say the Fregean one. In this line of thought one has to respect a common philosophical jargon, to start from a set of canonical questions, and any new proposal must stem from that corpus of questions and answers. Continental philosophers

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try to show that they have nothing to do with the previous philosophical discourses, even when they are only translating old problems into a new philosophical language. I know that there are other differences, but let me stress this one, which is more based on a difference in philosophical style than on a differing set of contents or methods.

HRP: The 17th century English philosopher John Locke famously claimed in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that “even ideas are signs,” and Peirce seems to have held this position as well. Can the mind truly be structured as a sign process? If not, what then is the actual “subject” of semiotics?

Eco: The idea that concepts or ideas are signs is older than that—think of Ockham, for instance. But it can be found even before. Let us assume that something happens in the so-called Mind. If Mind = Brain, then what happens are certain physical states; if not I set you free to decide what the hell it can be. Certainly they are not things. But through the Mind we are able to think of things. Thus what happens in Mind, whatever it can be, even a dance of little gnomes, stands for something else. This (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*) is the definition of the sign, or of the semiotic process, since the ancient times. Thus Mind is a semiotic business.

HRP: In recent years, intellectual life in the United States has centered around a furious debate over the political nature of knowledge. As a European and an intellectual grounded in the Western tradition, how do you view this controversy?

Eco: In European high schools you start reading Homer and Vergil at the age of 12 and at the age of 16 you are supposed to know everything about Plato and Aristotle. But you never read the Bible, not to speak of the Koran; the principles of Buddhism are quoted only when speaking of certain Western philosophers, and only those who study cultural anthropology at the university hear about African myths. This is a wrong curriculum, for it is Eurocentric. But likewise it would be wrong (and racist) to give black students access only to non-Western culture, keeping them afar from Plato or Aristotle. It is true that, as Benjamin Lee Whorf suggested, contemporary nuclear physics can probably be better expressed in Hopi than in English, but a great part of modern science can be understood only if one understands certain fundamental principles of the Western legacy; to know them is a right for every human being. The problem for the curricula of tomorrow is how to provide a complete culture (what the Greeks called an *enkyklios paideia*, a circular education) which will be “enkyklios” just because it will not only be Eurocentric. φ

