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Introduction: Umberto Eco's interpretative semiotics: Interpretation, encyclopedia, translation

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This volume is an anthology of selected papers on Umberto Eco's theory of semiotics. The essays in this collection seek to bring to a broader and variegated readership a discussion of Eco's work as it pertains to broad spheres of human activity. In particular, these essays focus on the act of interpretation, on the formation of culture as a matrix of thought, on the perceptible and imperceptible acts of translation, and on the regulative theoretical hypothesis of the encyclopedia. These essays address highly cogent issues in semiotic and cultural studies and reflect the debate which begun in Bologna in the 1990s between Eco and some of his researchers and students, but which has not had sufficient impact abroad because of limited circulation outside national boundaries and the Italian language.

Italian is a beautiful and expressive language but in the greater scheme of things it is a language only accessible to a relative minority of speakers. English, on the other hand, with its global spread, its dominance in the scientific and academic arenas, and its huge body of readers offers clear advantages to the spread of ideas and influence. The solution clearly lies in the act of translation. English has become the vehicular language for the accumulated knowledge that has roots in various cultures, languages, and histories. The world of ideas has been made accessible with the considerable effort of numerous translators whose input and contribution to the spread of knowledge has remained largely shrouded in shadow.

It is an interesting cultural fact that the role of translation in this movement of knowledge is often not credited, not brought into focus and made relevant, and therefore, in Lawrence Venuti's (1995) term remains "invisible." The established English preference for a "transparent" style of translation, one that does not draw attention to itself as translation, which reads smoothly and fluently and creates the impression that the work was originally written in English, does not encourage the reader to pay prolonged and significant

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attention to the possible changes that translation may have wrought on the text and on the ideas contained within. Translation enables the transference and preservation of ideas and themes from various forms of linguistic “otherness,” including the “foreign country” that is the past, into more familiar, contemporary forms of language accessible to greater numbers of readers. The channels through which information, influence, and ideas come to us are, inevitably, not free of side-effects.

One of the themes that runs through this volume dedicated to the theoretical work of Umberto Eco is precisely that of translation, and some of Eco’s recent work has focused firmly on the issue. His experience of having been both a translator and a translated writer himself provides precious insight into the practical complications of translation thereby providing him with a firm basis from which to develop his argument on translation as a form of interpretation. Eco argues that translation is a genus of the species of interpretation. He reminds us that a translation or interpretation always says something more and therefore can never say *exactly* the same thing as the original. There is a mediation of meaning that necessitates some form of manipulation on the part of the translator and that leaves open the possibility, as in all forms of interpretation, of a range of uses and mis-uses, of readings and mis-readings, of deliberate and accidental manipulation of the intended meaning of the text.

The individual essays in this collection bring to the fore the idea that interpretation can be considered as the central focus of all of Eco’s thought from at least as early as his *A Theory of Semiotics* published in 1975, in which he elaborated an organic theory of semiotic knowledge, defined its spheres, its methods, and ultimately the borders and limits to potential research in the field of semiotics. However, as can also be seen through these essays, aspects of the centrality of interpretation were already present and implied in some of his earlier works particularly in *Opera Aperta* (1962) [The Open Work, 1989] and in *La struttura assente* [The Absent Structure, 1968]. His analysis of aesthetic texts, such as those of aleatory music, informal painting, and Joyce’s poetics, helped Umberto Eco to define the idea of the “open” text and thus to begin his reflections on the collaborative relationship between text and its interpreter. Nevertheless, *A Theory of Semiotics* continues to be the most original attempt to create a fertile dialogue between Structuralism and American Pragmatism, on the one hand, and the theory of codes, which is slowly but surely translated into a theory of interpretation over which Charles Sanders Peirce’s reading of “semiosis” as a dynamical process prevails. Interpretation remains the focus of Eco’s reflections thereafter, in such works as *Lector in fabula* and *The Role of the Reader* (1979), *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), *Interpretation and*

Overinterpretation (1992), and *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994). In each of these works he develops and explores aspects of textual interpretation while emphasizing the relationship between the reader and the text paying particular attention, as we will see in the essays, to the various interpretative limits imposed by the text onto the reader.

Another of Eco's works that is particularly relevant to his interpretative theory is *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* published in 1984, which has, at its theoretical center, the concept of the encyclopedia. The encyclopedia is described by Eco as the ensemble of all registered interpretations conceivable in objective terms, as well as "the library of all libraries," which can be succinctly defined as the overarching horizon of knowledge to which we all make reference in order to make sense of and to interpret any kind of text. For these reasons, the encyclopedia is like a net, a labyrinth conceived as an infinite aggregation of units of meaning, or a rhizome conceived "as a tangle of bulbs and tubers appearing like rats squiring one on top of the other" (1984: 81). Eco borrow this "vegetal metaphor" from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) and emphasizes that every point of the rhizome can and must be connected to every other point. It is a net of collective knowledge of which each of us is familiar with a fairly limited section but which in its totality is the sum total of all human knowledge.

The two dominant themes of interpretation and of the encyclopedia can be further elaborated in a number of ways. In this volume we propose some developments and discussion that seem particularly favorable to deeper theoretical reflection of the pivotal role they play in the organization and apprehension of knowledge. The collection of papers described below bring to the fore the workings of interpretative and encyclopedic habits that determine the various constructions of knowledge.

The volume begins with an essay by Giampaolo Proni "Umberto Eco and Charles Peirce: A slow and respectful convergence," which acts as an introduction to the main themes and diverse subjects covered in the volume, and developed by Eco in such works as *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984). The aim of this essay is to link Eco's theory of encyclopedia with his theory of interpretation, by evidencing the intrinsic dynamic character of the encyclopedic model. Eco adopts Peirce's view of semiosis as a flow of interpretants, but the notion of a semantic model is not to be found in the work of the American. Eco is thus attracted by the challenge of combining the process-based model of interpretation and the formal model of a semantic system. The attempt meets with some difficulties due to the difference between the two approaches. Yet, according to the author, it opens a fascinating landscape to future research.

Valentina Pisanty's paper "From the Model Reader to the Limits of Interpretation" discusses the role of the reader as discussed by Umberto Eco in numerous instances: *Lector in fabula* (1979), *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992) and *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (2003, *Experiences in Translation* and *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*). According to Eco, the interpretation of a text implies the grasping of the *intentio operis* by way of the *intentio lectoris*. Yet, the question to be asked is: what is the *intentio operis* and how can it be known? This is especially cogent since such intention is not explicit at the superficial level of the text but is apprehended in the recognition of various clues and suggestions that are disseminated throughout. Readers become actively involved in recognizing the *intentio* while simultaneously developing their own specific interpretation of the text.

Isabella Pezzini, in her paper "Nothing is more open than a closed text: The case of Oedipus," develops the multiple "passional" implications implied within every act of reading. Texts have the potential power to elicit the passions of the reader through various textual strategies that, in turn, enable the reader to become emotionally or "passionately" involved in the narration and, furthermore, to share in the emotions of the characters. The interpretative model elaborated by Eco functions alongside the ordinary process of reading, indeed it emphasizes and develops the manner in which the reader is involved and "captured" by the text as a key element of the collaborative process.

The concept of encyclopedia is at the center of two further essays, but is treated from a different angle in each: Violi's paper develops the pragmatic aspect of lexical meaning, whereas Bianchi's emphasis is on shared value systems.

The contribution by Patrizia Violi "Global and local: Encyclopedic meaning revisited," provides an in-depth investigation into linguistic understanding as an interpretative process and not as a simple passage of information. She argues that meaning, language use, and communication are connected through the concept of encyclopedia, which is a regulative theoretical hypothesis postulating how lexical meanings may be connected to a highly complex knowledge background. This reading coincides with various studies in pragmatics as well as with recent research in more narrowly linguistic fields.

In "Thresholds, boundaries, limits of ideological analysis in the semiotics of Umberto Eco," Cinzia Bianchi traces the evolution of Eco's thinking from a particular point of view, that of his reflections on ideology and ideological discourse. The aim is to identify which elements of interpretative semiotics can still be useful in understanding ideological phenomena and their theorizations. Even though modern-day semiotics would no longer regard its main task to be the unmasking of the ideology underlying texts, nor would it think that a

“semiological war” was still necessary in order to radically change society, yet, notwithstanding this and quite irrespective of any theoretical and political fervor, it would be unwise to underestimate the potential offered by modern semiotic tools for grasping the interpretative dynamics of texts and discourse in which ideological meanings and values are transmitted together with aesthetic, stylistic, and other values. Furthermore, it provides insight into understanding the relationship between the former and the latter in a period of the fracturing of points of view as well as of the cultural and social “fabric.”

Piero Polidoro’s paper “Umberto Eco and the problem of iconism” presents an apparently different subject that is nonetheless intrinsically connected to the main themes of the volume. It focuses on the key features and the evolution of the so-called “debate on iconism” in which Eco was deeply involved. This discussion (one of the most important in general and visual semiotics) began at the end of the 1960s and dealt with the problem of reality and image perception. It was characterized by the contrast between the supporters of visual language “naturalness” and those of its “conventionality”; Eco, in *La struttura assente* (1968) and *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) elaborated a moderate conventionalist theory. Then, more than twenty years later in *Kant and the Platypus* (1999), Eco focused his attention on the link between reality and visual language thereby drawing in the question of perception as interpretation, which, as Peirce argues, is the first and inevitable step of every interpretation. Polidoro tries to understand what has really changed in Eco’s theory and how far the reflections in *Kant and the Platypus* were already implied in his earlier ideas. Besides, Polidoro underlines the importance of the theory of perceptive modalities, which is Eco’s most recent contribution to visual semiotics.

The topics of translation and interpretation are elaborated in the last two essays of this anthology. The principal reference, or point of departure, is the fundamental division proposed by Roman Jakobson in his seminal essay “On linguistic aspects of translation” (1959) in which he described three broad categories: the “Intralingual” (translation within the same language) or “rewording”; the “Interlingual” (or what he calls “translation proper”); and the “Intersemiotic” (translation between different systems and structures, e.g., a novel into a film, or “transmutation”).

In the first essay by Clare Vassallo “What’s so ‘proper’ about translation? Interlingual translation and interpretative semiotics” picks up some of the arguments that highlight the main issues in the field of translation as they connect with Eco’s theory of interpretative semiotics. In particular, it draws attention to similar strategies of translation and interpretation employed during the act of reading within a single language and in that of translating into another, and how in both cases of interpretation something more is added. This “something more” has

implications as to what is an acceptable or “proper” translation. The act of translation is inevitably also dependent on dynamic interpretation as described by Peirce and Eco. Habit, in the form of “textual abduction” plays a central role in the pragmatic understanding of implied as well explicit meanings as they come into play in a text. The translator acts between the limits of an acceptable contractual translation agreement and a reading of a text that activates interpretations that go well beyond those “proper” expectations.

The second contribution on translation is by Nicola Dusi, “Intersemiotic translation: Theories, problems, analysis.” Dusi focuses specifically on the issue of intersemiotic translation, questioning and showing what it means to “translate” from one “language” to another, such as from the novel to the medium of film, and to what extent the term translation is used metaphorically or is semantically extended to include a broader notion of translation than that between natural languages.

The choice of papers that make up this volume on Eco’s interpretative semiotics is not in any way a casual choice. They have been selected in order to showcase central themes of Eco’s thinking and his contribution to academic scholarship in the field of the organization of knowledge. One of the intentions of this work is to counteract a consistent reception of Eco’s work in the Anglo-American context where emphasis on his novels is given precedence over his work as a theoretical semiotician. Eco’s reception in Italy, as well as in most of Europe, rests more firmly on his contribution to debates on structuralism, post-structuralism, interpretation, politics, and cultural commentary, which highlight his achievements as an involved critical and cultural theorist and commentator. His novels are important, of course, but secondary to his contribution to the field of knowledge.

Here, as the brief summaries of the papers have shown, the focus is squarely upon the theoretical aspects of Eco’s discussion of semiotics. The ongoing discussion of his evolving theoretical positions on the semiotics of interpretation are central to the study and research carried out by his students and remains the principal area of their own teaching in various universities in Italy and beyond. This aspect of Eco as semiotician seems less present in academic discussion on cultural debate in English. This collection of essays therefore, seeks to shift the balance back towards the theoretical issues that Eco developed and debated over the years.

This anthology is not intended to be either a reconstruction of Eco’s intellectual development nor a biographical account, even though each of the papers seeks to identify and trace the beginning and the evolution of certain key ideas and themes that have their roots in the 1960s and 1970s. Readers will have to confront some of the characteristic themes of Eco’s theory as each of the authors revisits and gives their own interpretation thereby building upon Eco’s foundations and adding their own personal theoretical contribution to the arguments.

Finally, a few words about the publication pitfalls awaiting the reader of Umberto Eco's work in English. As the explanatory footnotes at the opening paragraphs of many of the following papers will testify, Eco's work has not been systematically translated from Italian to English and use of the same title does not always translate into the same book. *Opera aperta* (1962) and *The Open Work* (1989), *Lector in fabula* (1979) and *The Role of the Reader* (1979), which seem to be obvious translations are not and the English versions are only partial translations of the Italian originals. Another factor that further complicates the issue is that some sections were added to each volume that were not present in the original Italian version. However, expectations of incompletely translated versions are thwarted in the case of *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975) and *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) since the English versions in these cases fully correspond to the Italian. Whereas *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio* and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, although both published in 1984, do not fully correspond and some key sections of the Italian versions are not present in the English ones. The single volume *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (2003) is translated into two volumes in English, *Experiences in Translation* (2001) and *Mouse or Rat: Translation as Negotiation* (2003) neither of which fully corresponds to the Italian and both of which have additional sections.

These, and other complications, make the movement between the Italian and the English versions of Eco's work somewhat unusual. To this end, we have prepared an annotated and detailed bibliographical list of Eco's books and papers in both English and Italian at the end of the volume. This should guide the reader and future researcher through the bibliographical pathways of Eco's publications. The editors have made certain that each essay uses published English translations of passages of Eco's work where they are available, and where they are not then each of the *ad hoc* translations is accompanied by the original Italian passage in a footnote.

References

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