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UMBERTO ECO

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Eco's semiotic theory

Cinzia Bianchi and Manuela Gieri

The last pronouncement in Umberto Eco's fifty-year-long period of reflection on the processes of cognition and interpretation comes in the form of a novel, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana: An Illustrated Novel*. Some readers of Eco see continuity between his first two novels (*The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*) and the semiotic theory he produced up to that period in his career, while others argue that there is a discontinuity of sorts between his last three novels and his semiotic theory, or at least an expressive independence. It might be more useful in an attempt to understand the development of Eco's semiotic theory if we assume that after the publication of his third novel, *The Island of the Day Before*, in 1994, Eco entered a new phase of his reflection on semiotics that did not destroy the organic nature of the development of his work on this subject that had begun in 1975 with the publication of *A Theory of Semiotics* (Italian edition).

A number of reasons led Eco to write this general treatise. One of his preoccupations was the urgency to define the field, the methods, and most importantly the disciplinary boundaries of semiotic inquiry. Up to 1975, in books such as *The Open Work*, the frame of reference that Eco either accepted or criticized was structuralism and the theory of codes as it developed, beginning with the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev, and later modified in new ways by Roland Barthes.

Beginning with *A Theory of Semiotics*, which represents a most original attempt to spark an intellectual dialogue between structuralism and American pragmatism, Eco slowly but surely translates a theory of codes associated with structuralism into a theory of interpretation dominated by the ideas of Charles S. Peirce, a reading of semiosis in which the construction of meaning is a dynamic process. In subsequent works after *A Theory of Semiotics* – *The Role of the Reader*, *The Limits of Interpretation*, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, and *Six*

Walks in the Fictional Woods – interpretation explicitly stands at the center of Eco's reflections. A concern for interpretation runs through his entire work, beginning with *The Open Work* where, even though in a "pre-semiotic" way, the analysis of such diverse topics as aleatory music, Joyce's poetics, informal painting, and Antonioni's films helped Eco define what he meant by the "opening" of a text and thereby began his reflection on the collaborative relationship between text and interpreter:

A work of art is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself. (Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 4).

In these works, and others – such as *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984) – there is also an investigation of such fundamental semiotic concepts as "sign," "dictionary vs. encyclopedia," "metaphor," "symbol," and "code," all topics that could easily be developed in other essays. Here we wish to suggest a specific itinerary within Eco's semiotic theory, one that moves from *A Theory of Semiotics* – specifically, from the notion of encyclopedia – and eventually becomes a connecting concept between a theory of knowledge and a theory of interpretation.¹ On the one hand, this concept allows Eco to overcome a code-based semiotic theory, and, on the other, it provides him with a necessary framework for the regulation of interpretation.

In *A Theory of Semiotics* Eco still foresees semantic expansions connected to a dictionary-like conception of each term. Yet, he then proposes a semantic model in which he moves from a fairly static dictionary-like model to the dynamic one that stands at the heart of the encyclopedia. Beyond a quantitative expansion of the structuralist idea of code, the most significant difference is a qualitative one. Indeed, the notion of encyclopedia allows one to go from a fundamentally static idea of decoding to a dynamic notion of abduction. According to Peirce, abduction (or hypothesis) is one of the three types of logical inference that regulate our reasoning. Deduction allows one to comprehend that what we perceive can be brought back to a given general rule. Induction allows one to come to a general rule even though moving from particular and individual cases. The reasoning Peirce defines as abduction is slightly more complex, since it proceeds by tentative and hazardous acts of inference. Abduction

is, in fact, a case of inference "where we find some very curious circumstances, which would be explained by the supposition that it was a case of a certain general rule, and thereupon adopt that supposition" (Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 8 vols., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–58, 2:624).² The example par excellence of abduction is the act of criminal detection. Facing the scene of a murder, the detective forms an hypothesis starting from the traces left by the murderer; such an hypothesis must then be verified by comparison with other data (such as the relationships between the victim and the murderer, the alibi of the suspect, the motive, and so on) before the correct solution, the identity of the criminal, can be discovered.

With the wider range of vision that the concept of encyclopedia entails, Eco's thought also moves from a fairly limited correlation between expression and content to a vast system of possible inferences. By joining semantics and pragmatism, the notion of encyclopedia avoids the impasse provoked by the clash between the rigor of a dictionary that dismisses situational meaning, and the supposedly unlimited wealth of meanings generated by the plethora of possible uses one can identify for each term. Eco further develops the notion of encyclopedia in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* where he argues that "the encyclopedia is...the ensemble of all registered interpretations, conceivable in objective terms as the library of all libraries, where a library is also an archive of the non-verbal information that has been somehow recorded, from rock paintings to film libraries."³ Therefore, 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 squirming one on top of the other" (Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 81). Eco borrows this "vegetable metaphor" from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,⁴ and particularly he draws the suggestion that "every point of the rhizome can and must be connected with every other point"; furthermore, "a rhizome is not a calque but an open chart which can be connected with something else in all of its dimensions; it is dismountable, reversible, and susceptible to continual modifications," and "no one can provide a global description of the whole rhizome; not only because the rhizome is multidimensionally complicated, but also because its structure changes through time; moreover, in a structure in which every node can be connected with every other node, there is also the possibility of contradictory inferences" (Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, pp. 81–2).

Even though the rhizome is the only model that can reasonably explain the connection of semantic units into the encyclopedia, from Eco's perspective on general semiotics, it is still impossible to provide a global representation in which contradictory interpretations coexist with conflicting perceptions of the world. In such a way, the encyclopedia cannot be apprehended in its entirety nor can it be represented except by the model of the rhizome – a net of connections where every point can and must be linked to all the others.

On the contrary, if we consider the encyclopedia not from the perspective of general semiotics but from a socio-semiotic perspective, for instance, it becomes a sort of reservoir for all the possible interpretations amongst which the receiver of the sign can then select the most appropriate. This is the process through which one can detect and emphasize one's own various levels of command of the encyclopedia itself. In every interpretative activity, the interpreter is asked to know that segment of the encyclopedia that is necessary to comprehend a given text. Thus, every interpreter, either an individual or a group, has a partial or limited competence that depends upon various conditionings, but most importantly from those coming upon the culture of belonging.

Because of this connection to culture and its internal structures, encyclopedia is based on a semantics of the "interpretants," where every sign constantly refers back to another sign in a process of unlimited semiosis. The principle of unlimited semiosis is vital to Eco's semiotic theory and is derived from Peirce. According to this principle, the meaning of every sign, both verbal and non-verbal, can be understood only through another sign, its "interpretant," as Peirce calls the second sign. But the meaning of this second sign, in turn, can only be seen again through another sign, and so on *ad infinitum*. As Peirce himself states, a sign is "anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*" (Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 2:303). The encyclopedia thus explains partial semiotic competence and elucidates the complexity of semiosis. At the same time, Eco maintains that by bringing the semiotic process back to the object, the encyclopedia becomes a kind of regulating hypothesis for interpretative activity. This notion of encyclopedia is complex insofar as it implies both a collective and an individual competence. Yet, in Eco's vision, even though individual encyclopedias belong either to a group (ethnic or otherwise), or to a social class, they must be considered as segments

of a global encyclopedia. This means that they become interesting to semiotic inquiry only to the extent that they form part of a shared background – a repertoire of socially and culturally defined knowledge in a precise historical moment and belonging to a specific group.

In his major treatise on semiotics, Eco identifies two thresholds – an upper and a lower one – within which semiotic research ought to take place (Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, pp. 19–28). If semiotics bypassed the “lower threshold,” the one that involves the analysis of humans’ non-intentional reactions to the stimuli coming from the natural environment, it would find itself immersed within the territory of other disciplines, such as psychology. The upper threshold pertains to cultural phenomena and elucidates the fact that “objects, behavior and relationships of production and value function as such socially precisely because they obey semiotic laws.” To identify an “upper threshold” of semiotics means to believe that it is possible to analyze objects in their materiality (p. 27). This is why, according to Eco, it is possible to study the whole culture as *sub specie semiotica*. From a semiotic perspective, a study of culture becomes possible only if and when a certain object or value is communicated with verbal or non-verbal signs and circulates within a given community. Thus, “to reduce the whole of culture to semiotics does not mean that one has to reduce the whole of material life to pure mental events” (p. 27). As we shall discover, the notion and role of cultural and social community is a crucial part of Eco’s thinking.

Eco has repeatedly stressed the fact that semiotics must identify the limit of its own investigation in the emergence of a communal dimension of experience in what he comes to recognize as an enrichment, a transformation, and a historical crystallization of the encyclopedia. Semiotics is not interested in how an individual perceives the world, what she or he thinks or desires; nor is semiotics engaged in investigating one’s psychological motivations or personal interpretative processes as such. Since an individual is defined by specific competences that characterize one’s own knowledge, she or he can be considered only as having been formed by a number of competences negotiated and avowed through intersubjective communication. This communal dimension of experience constitutes the field of semiotic investigation, and this way of delineating the limits of the discipline has theoretical consequences for Eco’s subsequent theory of interpretation as well.

Eco presents an organic theory of textual interpretation for the first time in *The Reader in the Story*, suggesting that a semantic model in the

form of encyclopedia implies the possibility of accounting for the multiplicity of interpretations in each given text. According to Peirce, semiosis occurs through the interaction of three elements – the object, the sign, and the interpretant – a process that may generate “infinite interpretations” thanks to the ability of the interpretant to engender yet another interpretant ad infinitum. Indeed, Eco comes to explain the process of how a text is received by further investigation of the notion of unlimited semiosis where a reader is called upon to perform an abductive activity. Thus, he provides a pragmatic definition of interpretation, coherent with Peirce’s theory, in which reading comes to be defined as a process of cooperation between reader and text. In *The Reader in the Story*, Eco’s analysis concentrates on what occurs when one activates the semiotic activity that each text demands from its readers in order to be actualized. Eco does not consider this pragmatic activity of the reader as central simply because it fosters the comprehension of the text, but because it is a constitutive part of the text – only because of this process does a text acquire meaning. Thus, for Eco, the act of reading is already envisaged and regulated by the text.⁵ In this case, as well, we no longer have an “empirical reader” but a true “textual strategy” – that is, a series of operations inscribed in a text and conceived to actualize it.

Eco discusses this notion frequently in his work, but perhaps nowhere as clearly as in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*:

A text is a device conceived in order to produce his 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 (Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brook-Rose. Ed. Stefan Collini. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 64).

It is the Model Reader which constitutes, together with the Model Author, a communicative scheme that explains both the production and the interpretation of a text without considering the empirical author and the various empirical readers. The Model Reader is thus inscribed in the text, and somehow coincides with the wealth of knowledge the text demands – that is, the ability to recognize codes and subcodes, to actualize the narrative structures of fabula, topic and frames, and finally the capacity to recognize ideological structures. The text manifesting itself in the surface

is indeed a structure made of unspoken matter, of premises that must be comprehended and integrated by the reader thanks to a more or less complex net of encyclopedic competences demanded by the text itself.

Within this net of competences required by the text, aberrant processes of decoding can take place. With a cooperative attitude and following a non-linear strategy, the reader may decide where to expand and where to block the process of unlimited interpretability. Eco further clarifies his views by stating:

frames and sememic representations are both based on processes of unlimited semiosis, and as such they call for the responsibility of the addressee. Since the semantic encyclopedia is in itself potentially infinite, semiosis is unlimited, and, from the extreme periphery of a given sememe, the center of any other could be reached, and vice versa (Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, p. 24).

The notion of encyclopedia implies a fair amount of freedom, since transformations are certainly possible in a system open to change and subject to constant metamorphosis. On the other hand, such a notion also offers a regulating principle for the interpretative act, it provides criteria to evaluate different types of decoding or, as Eco stated a few years later, it provides the parameters to distinguish the interpretations from other possible uses, no matter how legitimate, of the same text. In *The Reader in the Story*, such a regulating principle is enacted by the Model Reader who not only comes to limit the freedom of the empirical reader, but also reduces the field of cooperation as well as the possibility of "free readings."

Later, in *The Limits of Interpretation*, Eco takes a further step in the individuation of criteria to limit the possible interpretations of a text and maintains that the most radical results obtained by deconstruction make it necessary for us to emphasize the power implicit in the encyclopedia to limit the possibility of infinite interpretations:

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" for the mere sake of itself. To say that a text potentially has no end does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy ending. (Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, p. 6)

Reacting against exaggerated deconstructionist interpretations, Eco opens up the field of the discussion, and connects his reflection to a larger, classical debate that discusses the nature of interpretation as the search of what he calls the *intentio auctoris* (the intention of the author), the *intentio operis* (the intention of the work), and the *intentio lectoris* (the intention of the reader). While analyzing a text, classical literary interpretation paid attention to the search for

(a) what its author intended to say or (b) what the text says independently of the intentions of its author. Only after accepting the second horn of the dilemma can one ask “whether what is found is (i) what the text says by virtue of its textual coherence and of an original underlying signification system or (ii) what the addressees found in it by virtue of their own system of expectations.” (pp. 50–1)

While hardly ever taking the side of the author, and yet giving centrality to the classical debate on this topic, Eco restates the necessity of a kind of regulation of interpretative hermeneutics. Indeed, he also intended to emphasize the necessity of a constant dialectic between the initiative of the reader and the fidelity to the text at a time when most scholars seemed to privilege the role of the reader or the *intentio lectoris*. Most importantly, Eco deemed problematic and even questionable the tendency shown by most deconstructionist thought that considered the text solely as generated by the initiative of the reader and in so doing exasperated and multiplied the possible reading paths in order to underscore the inconsistency of more traditional approaches to literary criticism.

While referring to the American school of deconstruction, Eco certainly has in mind Jacques Derrida and the two essays – *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*⁶ – in which, as he maintains, “Derrida wants to establish a practice (which is philosophical more than critical) for challenging those texts that look as though dominated by the idea of a definite, final, and authorized meaning” (Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, p. 33). What challenges is an interpretative practice rather than a text, and what is at stake is the refusal to acknowledge the existence of a critical metalanguage different from the language that is analyzed. According to Eco, the core of Derrida’s theory is the notion of the impossibility of a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified, and the necessity to acknowledge the infinite possibility for both the signifier and the signified to be submitted to a never-ending process aimed at the creation of signification. In short, as Eco concludes, Derrida “wants to show the *power* of language and its ability to say more than it literally pretends to say” (Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, p. 33).

It is along this path that Derrida encounters Peirce as the French philosopher acknowledges the fact that Peirce went a long way in the direction of what has been called “deconstruction” with his idea of an infinite semiosis. Such indefiniteness is the criterion that allows one to recognize the very presence of a *segnic* system. As Peirce states in his classic definition of a sign, when “the series of successive interpretants comes to an end,

the sign is thereby rendered imperfect, at least" (Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. II, p. 303). The sign thus functions merely because it generates an interpretant that becomes itself a sign. In this way, meaning moves incessantly without having the ability to interrupt the process. Upon explaining the triadic relationship between sign, object, and interpretant, Peirce concludes by saying: "The interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again" (p. 339).

Umberto Eco's critique of Derrida's reading of Peirce departs from a different understanding of the infinite possibility of interpretation. Furthermore, Eco does not believe that the infinite drift of deconstruction is a form of unlimited semiosis, as Derrida does. In fact, if it is true that a notion of literal meaning is highly problematic, one cannot deny that in order to explore all possibilities of a text, even those that its author did not conceive, the interpreter must first of all take for granted a zero-degree meaning that can be found in dictionaries, texts that allow one to discover different meanings for a single word in a given historical moment. But Peirce's concept of infinite semiosis does not also imply that interpretation has no object, as Derrida maintains.

Peirce recognized the fact that in the semiotic process we can never know the Dynamical Object as such but can only know it through the Immediate Object. Yet, the Dynamical Object – even though not present in the moment of interpretation – is still the motor of the semiotic process, a process that, by moving from interpretant to interpretant, leads us inevitably to the conclusion, no matter how transitory, of a final logic interpretant, the Habit.⁷ The formation of this Habit as a disposition to action stops – or rather, momentarily appeases – the never-ending process of interpretation. In fact "multiple reiterated behavior of the same kind, under similar combinations of percepts and fancies, produces a tendency – the *habit* – actually to behave in a similar way under similar circumstances in the future" (p. 487).

To maintain that a text potentially has no conclusion does not mean that every act of interpretation can reach a happy ending. In essence, the principle of unlimited semiosis requires that each and every time, a sign tells us something *more*, but can never tell us something *else*. The difference between something more and something else is, in substance, the difference between the "interpretation" and the "use" of a text, and in this distinction one finds the limits that every interpretative act must respect. Contrary to what Derrida suggested, Eco agrees with a pragmatic rule

by which the meaning of any proposition is only made of the possible practical effects implicated within it. Eco also maintains that the decision to stop or continue the process of interpretation cannot be taken by one interpreter arbitrarily, but must be taken by an entire interpretative community: "from the moment in which the community is pulled to agree with a given interpretation, there is, if not an objective, at least an *intersubjective* meaning which acquires a privilege over any other possible interpretation spelled out without the agreement of the community" (Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, p. 40).

Consequently, Eco makes a distinction between interpretations that are acceptable to a vast segment of the community and others that are agreeable to an individual only. Such interpretative agreement becomes the primary aim of the encyclopedia, and it is this very distinction that Derrida disregards completely. Eco believes that as soon as a text is inserted in a historical, social, and cultural context, the local encyclopedia allows one to comprehend the text and establishes the very limits of our conjectures – that is, the limits of the inferential walks or interpretative abductions one can sustain.

According to Umberto Eco, then, in principle, our interpretations can be infinite, as Peirce maintained, and yet, they can be truly considered "interpretations" only if they respect the *intentio operis*. Otherwise, they are simply subjective and unjustified, and thus true and simple "uses" of the text. The limits of interpretation thus coincide with the rights of the text; there are some privileged interpretations and not every interpretation has the same value as another. This idea runs through Eco's speculation throughout the 1990s, and he investigates this further in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. This volume is of particular interest for two reasons: it collects the proceedings of a series of lectures Umberto Eco gave as Tanner lecturer at Clare Hall in Cambridge in 1990; and it also records the debate between Eco and a community of scholars who advance different views. Near the conclusion of his lecture on overinterpretation, Eco argues:

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's 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 the text's intention only as a result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the

reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text's intention. A text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader...A text can foresee a model reader entitled to try infinite conjectures. (Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 64)

He then concludes his lecture by asking himself and his audience "can we still be concerned with the empirical author of a text?" (p. 67). This query is immediately connected to a statement Eco makes in his conclusive remarks in response to his critique of Richard Rorty's reading of *Foucault's Pendulum*, and in answer to Christine Brooke-Rose who defended overinterpretation: "I accept the statement that a text can have many senses. I refuse the statement that a text can have every sense" (p. 141). While Eco seems to agree with Jonathan Culler when he supports the notion that even overinterpretation can be fruitful, he argues that while it is "difficult to say whether an interpretation is a good one, or not," one must "recognize that *it is not true that everything goes*" (p. 144; Eco's emphasis).

If we willfully make what Eco believes to be an arbitrary interpretation, we would merely "use" rather than "interpret" a text. That is, if we were somehow to superimpose on the text our own personal knowledge, our own personal encyclopedia, we would look in the woods for what is, instead, a part of our own private memory, as Eco points out in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 9). While it is legitimate to take a stroll in these woods to understand one's life, one's present, past, and future, and while it is also legitimate to "use" a text to wander and fantasize about one's own life, Eco notes, one ought to remember that this constitutes a private, not a public activity. "It is not at all forbidden to use a text for daydreaming, and we do this frequently, but daydreaming is not a public affair; it leads us to move within the narrative wood as if it were our own private garden" (p. 10). Eco employs the image of the woods as a metaphor for the narrative text, an image he borrows from Jorge Louis Borges insofar as he takes it to be a garden in which all paths split, and the wanderer or the reader must make a choice at all times (p. 6).

Eco's subject matter is only apparently different in *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (2000). Here, Eco discusses a number of semiotic issues related to cognitive processes, and he consolidates the notion that meaning can be attained and defined through continuous negotiations. All the themes discussed in this text pertain to

what Eco had previously defined in *A Theory of Semiotics* as “the lower threshold” (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp. 19–21). By the end of the 1990s, the sphere of individuality and personal experience had indeed become increasingly interesting to all those disciplines concerning themselves with the complex notion of semiosis, such as cognitive science, and in this book Eco scrutinizes in detail the notion of a lower threshold in continuity with his previous work. In fact, Eco’s main inspiration continues to be Peirce and, in particular, the idea that perception is the primary stage of semiosis, an initial cognitive act from which the whole interpretative process begins. One must, however, underscore the fact that the need to address this threshold of semiotic inquiry is a logical consequence of Eco’s earlier work on the limits of interpretation.

To clarify this proposition of ours, one must return to Peirce’s distinction between Dynamical Object and Immediate Object. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco almost exclusively focuses upon the Immediate Object. He defines meaning as a “cultural unit,” and therefore he must necessarily consider its social and historical character as well. As he states: “if, in a Peircean sense, there is such a thing as a Dynamical Object, we know it only through an Immediate Object. By manipulating signs, we refer to the Dynamical Object as a *terminus ad quem* of semiosis” (Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. New York: Harcourt Brace, 2000, p. 3). This is why in *A Theory of Semiotics* “the lower threshold of semiotics” – the place in which the Dynamical Object acquires centrality – is placed in a secondary position. Subsequently, particularly in *The Limits of Interpretation* where Eco focuses on the interpretational limits that the text poses to its reader and interpreter and develops his critique of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction, his work moves towards the investigation and definition of the Dynamical Object – an analysis of what takes place before the interpretative process conceived in Peircean terms as a “chain of interpretants” begins.

This is the main subject of *Kant and the Platypus*, a work in which Eco studies what happens when a subject – in general terms, whether it be the reader, the interpreter, and so on – comes into contact with the world – that is, with the Dynamical Object. As Eco states:

When we presume a subject that tries to understand what it experiences (and the object – that is to say, the Thing-in-Itself – becomes the *terminus a quo*), then, even before the formation of the chain of interpretants, there comes into play a process of interpreting the world that, especially in the case of novel or unknown objects (such as the platypus at the end of the eighteenth century), assumes an

“auroral” form, made up through trial and error; but this is already semiosis in progress, which calls pre-established cultural systems into question. (p. 4)

In this citation, one finds virtually all the subjects Eco investigates in detail in the book: his focus is the perception of the objects of the world moving from a knowledge generated either from our own previous experiences or from a consolidated encyclopedic knowledge. Such knowledge of ours can be undermined by unknown phenomena and, in this case, one may proceed by approximation; that is, one may, for instance, bring the new evidence back to what we already know, and it is philosophically and semiotically interesting to unveil the procedures that we follow to accomplish such recognition. Unquestionably, Umberto Eco proposes a cognitive semiotics that still claims our knowledge is formed through the mediation of cultural schema but does not ignore the fact that something in the world – the Dynamical Object – determines our interpretation:

Yet the Dynamical Object is what drives us to produce semiosis. We produce signs because there is something that demands to be said. To use an expression that is efficacious albeit not very philosophical, the Dynamical Object is Something-that-sets-to-kicking-us and says “Talk!” to us – or “Talk about me!” or again, “Take me into consideration!” (p. 14)

In order to become cultural facts, cognitive processes must develop from the object that is to be interpreted – the Dynamical Object – and then they must meet its “lines of resistance.” As a *datum* of the world, the object can come to our perception in an unpredictable way, and at times even impose itself through revisions of segments, no matter how large, of our knowledge.

Thus, if our way of experiencing the world is always tentative, there are cases in which this general principle becomes particularly interesting, as occurs when we encounter an object never seen before or hardly traceable within an already given cultural category. This was the celebrated case of the platypus: it was discovered in Australia at the end of the eighteenth century and its nature was an object of discussion for almost an additional hundred years. Named at first *watermole*, *duck-mole*, or *duckbilled platypus*, it shares the characteristics of all mammals, but it lays eggs, has no nipples, and nurses its babies. Its history is similar to that of a beaver, for it has a fur coat, the beak of a duck, and webbed “feet.” All these odd characteristics make the platypus an animal that foils all scientific or popular classifications. At times, observation of the animal emphasized contradictory aspects of it. Some scientists, for instance, maintained that the platypus was a mammal (and would negate the fact that it laid eggs),

while others claimed it to be oviparous (and would dismiss the presence of mammae). For several decades, observers of the platypus could not conceive of what we now accept to be an accurate scientific description of this unusual Australian animal: the platypus is a mammal and an oviparous contemporarily, and it belongs to the Monotremes. As Umberto Eco maintains, it is almost as if the story of the platypus was “a splendid example of how observation sentences can be made only in the light of a conceptual framework or of a theory that gives them a sense, in other words, that the first attempt to understand what is seen is to consider the experience in relation to a previous categorial system”(pp. 248 – 9).

At the same time, though, the observational data have undermined the pre-existent categorial framework, moving from some limitations posed by the object itself. Scientists agreed on the fact that the platypus was a strange animal that resembled, at the same time, the beaver, the duck, and the mole, and yet they also agreed that the platypus was certainly dissimilar to a horse, a cat, or even a plant. It was impossible to negate some characteristics, while on others the scientific community debated for a long time. This striking example of difficult classification led Eco to conclude that knowledge is continuously negotiated; categories can be redefined constantly, and new phenomena can be recognized by moving from the new category. Yet, we can only negotiate by moving from an object that inevitably defines its own lines of resistance: “There were eighty-odd years of negotiation, but the negotiations always revolved around resistances and the grain of the *continuum*. Given these resistances, the decision, certainly contractual in nature, to acknowledge that certain features were undeniable, was obligatory” (p. 250).

To negotiate meanings is an activity that permeates various aspects of our cultural existence. In three different volumes, two in English and one in Italian – *Experiences in Translation*; *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*; and *Saying Almost the Same Thing: Experiences in Translation*⁸ – Eco demonstrates how negotiation is of utmost relevance even in the act of translation. Translation may entail moving from one language to another (what Eco calls “translation proper”); or it may involve what he calls “intersemiotic translation,” such as the adaptation of a novel by a film, a musical score that becomes a dance, and so forth. Eco prefers to term the second type of translation “transmutations” or “adaptations” to distinguish them from “translations proper” – the main object of his inquiries.

To translate means to start from a text that belongs to a specific linguistic system and to build another one, its “double,” in yet another linguistic

system. If the translation is adequate, this latter text should produce effects that are analogous to those produced by the source text from the syntactical, semantic, stylistic, metric, and even emphatic point of view. Translation is, however, a fairly complex activity and Eco maintains that every translation presents inevitable margins of infidelity that depend on the translator and her or his continuous activity of *negotiation*:

Numerous are the elements that come into play in the process of negotiation; on one side, there is the original text, with its own rights, sometimes an author who claims rights over the whole process, along with the cultural framework in which the original text is born; on the other side, there is the destination text, the cultural milieu in which it is expected to be read, and even the publishing industry, which can recommend different translation criteria, according to whether the translated text is to be put in an academic context or in a popular one (Umberto Eco, *Saying Almost the Same Thing: Experiences in Translation*. Milan: Bompiani, 2003, p. 18).⁹

In every process of translation, one negotiates losses of meaning, one violates and adjusts the various semantic implications, and so on. Yet, in any case, this can occur only bearing in mind that to translate means to respect the principle of equivalence, no matter how imperfect, between a source text and a target text, between the text to be translated and the one that is the result of such translation. It is indeed the very principle of equivalence that undergoes a constant process of negotiation, and not merely the process of translation itself, whether it be from one natural language to another or from a linguistic system to another, or else from a signic system to another. As Umberto Eco remarks in the opening of the introduction to the Italian volume of his essays on translation:

What does it mean to translate? The first and reassuring answer should be: to say the same thing in another language. If it did not mean that, in the first place we would experience numerous problems in establishing what "to say the same thing" truly means, and we would not know this because of all those operations that we call paraphrasis, definition, explanation, or rephrasing, not to mention the so-called sinonimic substitutions. In the second place, we would experience numerous problems because we do not know what the "thing" is when we are faced with a text requiring translation. Finally, in some circumstances, one wonders even what "to say" means. (p. 9; authors' translation)

It is apparent, then, that what constantly undergoes negotiation is the very notion of equivalence. This leads Eco to declare that "even though knowing that one never says the same thing, one may say *almost* the same thing" and to equivocate even on the meaning and flexibility of the word "almost" itself (p. 10).

Once again, negotiation rests at the very heart of any process of translation. In Eco's conclusion, he emphatically connects his reflections on translation to his long-standing speculation on the processes of interpretation when he states that:

faithfulness is not a method which results in an acceptable translation. It is the decision to believe that translation is possible, it is our engagement in isolating what is for us the deep sense of a text, and it is the goodwill that prods us to negotiate the best solution for every line. Among the synonyms of *faithfulness* the word *exactitude* does not exist. Instead there is loyalty, devotion, allegiance, piety. (Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003, p. 192)

Back to the dictionary, back to the encyclopedia, back to interpretation, back to negotiation of the limits of any cognitive process: this is the trajectory of our journey through the Echian woods. We began our walk by identifying in *A Theory of Semiotics* the means by which Eco aimed at defining the field of semiotic inquiry, its methods, and its theoretical foundations – in short, its thresholds. In discussing the limits of the discipline, we have reviewed Eco's famous distinction between the static dictionary-like model, and the encyclopedia – that is, a fairly dynamical cognitive model. Through the notion of encyclopedia, a connecting concept between the theory of knowledge and the theory of interpretation, we managed to disentangle a number of other issues investigated by Eco in several different works. Ultimately, we have focused our attention on the issue of interpretation because of its inherent theoretical relevance, as well as its importance in critical and theoretical debates up to the 1990s. We have also underscored the centrality of interpretation to Umberto Eco's reflections on translation in his more recent theoretical works. As Eco relentlessly repeats in his writings, the problem of interpretation rests at the very heart of his entire work, a theoretical obsession of his. The theory of interpretation also remains an important focus in Eco's latest novel, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. As the main character of the novel traumatically and suddenly loses memory of his personal past, he can still recollect events and even details of a collective past – the past of a collectivity, of his generation. Indeed, this fifth novel Eco has produced may be the most striking metaphor for Eco's beloved notion of encyclopedia and may offer fruitful and heuristic suggestions to the reader about the impact of semiotics upon his entire intellectual career.

NOTES

- 1 For an important discussion of the role that the concept of encyclopedia plays in the shaping of Eco's semiotic theory, see Patrizia Violi, "Individual and Communal Encyclopedias," in Norma Bouchard and Veronica Pravadelli (eds.), *Umberto Eco's Alternative: The Politics of Culture and the Ambiguities of Interpretation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), pp. 25–38.
- 2 All references to Charles S. Peirce's *Collected Papers* come from this standard edition as per international convention.
- 3 This particular sentence, translated into English by the authors from p. 109 of the original Italian edition of this work, is not included in the English edition, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
- 4 See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Rhizome* (Paris: Minuit, 1976).
- 5 Violi's "Individual and Communal Encyclopedias," in Bouchard and Pravadelli (eds.), *Umberto Eco's Alternative*, underlines how, when formulating his notion of encyclopedia, Eco does not intentionally consider that subjective sphere constituting an individual perspective on the world and states that the "individual competence" is "a type of knowledge necessary for an individual to become an active participant in a given language and culture" (p. 32).
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, corrected edn., 1998); and *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). It should be noted that in his discussion of deconstruction, Eco only makes direct reference to *Of Grammatology*.
- 7 The difference between Dynamical Object and Immediate Object is a fairly complex aspect of Peirce's theory to which Eco repeatedly returns. Peirce believes that "it is necessary to distinguish the *Immediate Object*, or the object as the sign represents it, from the *Dynamical Object*, or really efficient but not immediately present object" (Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. VIII, ¶ 343).
- 8 The Italian volume on translation, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa: esperienza di traduzione* (*Saying Almost the Same Thing: Experiences in Translation*) appeared after the English volume *Experiences in Translation* and before *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*.
- 9 This passage and others subsequently cited in this chapter are translated by the authors from the Italian edition of *Saying Almost the Same Thing*; page references refer to this edition and to neither of the English volumes in translation.