Obituary

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The Umberto Eco gaze

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On February 19, 2016, a person not only dear to many of us, but essential for all of us, scholars of semiotics (not only Italian), passed away. It is hard to think of contemporary semiotics without the contributions of Umberto Eco, but perhaps particularly difficult to think of semiotics without the amplitude of outlook that he has taught us, without the connections that he impelled us to make, without the disciplinary dialogue that he has always practiced and with which he made our discipline alive and rich.

Born in Alessandria in the region of Piedmont in 1932, Eco spent his formative years in Turin, where, in 1954, he graduated in medieval philosophy and literature. His first published book was The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas (1956), an examination of the principal aesthetic ideas of medieval Latin culture. After that, Eco lectured at his alma mater and during the same period worked in Milan at Italy’s state broadcaster, RAI, as a cultural editor. In Milan, where had lived for all his life, he met a group of avant-garde writers, musicians, and painters, and developed a passion for the late James Joyce, the atonal music of Karlheinz Stockhausen, and the symbolist poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé. In Milan, he worked in publishing as well, as non-fiction editor for the publishing house Bompiani. He has maintained his passion for publishing until his death, having collaborated to found, very recently, a new Italian publishing house: La Nave di Teseo. These experiences put him in contact with mass culture, pop culture, allowing a look inside the media that he never abandoned. Eco went through all of these experiences with marvelous aesthetic and philosophical skills. One of the essays that most stands out is, in 1964, Apocalittici e integrati (partially translated in Apocalypse Postponed, 1994), which connects the Peanuts and Superman cartoons with Aristotle’s Poetics and where he began his practice of structural analysis. In the autumn of 1963, with some other experimentalists, he founded “Group 63,” a cultural association that rejected “conservatism” in the arts and aimed to produce ultra-modern novels and poems. One can find a

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theoretical reflection on these new forms of arts and communication in two books: *The Open Work* (1962) and *The Absent Structure* (1968). In 1975, Eco became professor of Semiotics at the University of Bologna, where he would later go on to become professor emeritus and chairman of the Higher School of Humanities.

A pivotal year for him is 1975, because it is also the year of *Theory of Semiotics*. Many were the reasons that led Eco to write this book; yet, unquestionably, one of his aims was the urgency to elaborate a shared semiotic knowledge, and therefore to define the field, its methods and, most importantly, the disciplinary boundaries of semiotic inquiry. Up to 1975, in works such as *The Open Work* and *The Absent Structure*, the frame of reference to be accepted or criticized was Structuralism, and namely the theory of codes as it was developed from Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjemslev to its new directions elaborated by Roland Barthes.

Subsequently, beginning with *A Theory of Semiotics*, which continues to be the most original attempt to unite Structuralism and American Pragmatism, the theory of codes is slowly but surely transformed into a theory of interpretation where Charles Sanders Peirce’s reading of semiosis becomes prominent, whereby the construction of meaning is seen as a dynamical process. Interpretation remains the focus of Eco’s reflection thereafter, in such works as *Lector in fabula* (1979), *The Role of the Reader* (1979), *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1990), and *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994). Each of these works, together with others, such as *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language* (1984), in which one finds investigations of such fundamental semiotic concepts as “sign,” “dictionary versus encyclopedia,” “metaphor,” “symbol,” and “code,” allows him to put forth an organic theory of textual interpretation. He thus provides criteria to evaluate different types of decoding and identifying the parameters for deriving interpretations from other possible uses of the same text. The text, Eco stated, has its own right to exist; there are some privileged interpretations and not every interpretation has the same value as any another. In his later works Eco came to investigate the problem of interpretation in relation to other aspects of our experience.

This attention to the experience, to negotiation of meaning, to the subject, to memory, was in essence already present in *A Theory of Semiotics* in a part of the book neglected at the time of publishing, but which is of extraordinary relevance today. In that second part of the book, in fact, Eco faces the problem of discourse practices, of enunciation, of ideologies, of topic. He faced, in other words, all of those problems that, over the past decade have become an intrinsic part of cognitive psychology and logic (in the Anglo-Saxon world) or neo-structuralism (in Europe), becoming central to contemporary semiotic debates,
where semiotics handles the issues of distributed cognition, ideological practices, widespread forms of subjectivity, and agency in its own unique ways.

Another issue that emerged clearly in *Theory of Semiotics* and that Eco continued to develop for many more decades, up to *Kant and the Platypus* at least, is the problem of reference. In 1975, in the era of rigidly referentialist semantics, Eco felt the need to take a strong and clear position towards the role of reference in meaning-making: for him, it had no place as a study of semiosis, where the categories at stake are those of signs, interpretations, meanings, and the like. Over the years, his position weakened, though, and gradually involved a partial inclusion of referentiality, no longer considered a *terminus ad quem* of communication, reference, interpretations, but as a *terminus a quo* in the inferential chain that leads from perception to cognition and to more complex semiotic activity.

In *Kant and the Platypus* (1997), he discussed a number of semiotic issues related to cognitive processes, and consolidated the notion that meaning can be attained and defined through continuous interactions. All the themes discussed in this text pertain to what Eco had previously defined in *A Theory of Semiotics* as “the lower threshold of perception.” By the end of the 1990s, the sphere of individuality and personal experience had indeed become increasingly interesting to all those disciplines that investigate the complex notion of semiosis, like cognitive science, and in his book Eco scrutinizes in detail the notion of lower threshold in relation to his previous work. In fact, his main inspiration continues to be Peirce and in particular the idea that perception is the primary stage of semiosis, an initial mental act from which the whole interpretative process begins.

To negotiate meanings is an activity that permeates various aspects of our cultural existence. In *Experiences in Translation* (2000) and *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (2003), Eco demonstrated how negotiation of meaning is of utmost relevance in the act of translation – both when one translates from one language to another and when one does “intersemiotic translations” (such as when a novel becomes a film, a musical score becomes a dance, and so on). He sees the process as a form of trust in the strength of “Community” and in the power of “Reality,” a view that perhaps best encapsulates the main semiotic approach of Umberto Eco: an approach that has always been able to express his philosophical background, to structure itself through the template of linguistics, allowing him to confront the problems of logic, in all domains of human expression and representation, from verbal to television and the Internet. This eclectic perspective is what links Eco the semiotician to Eco the writer.

Eco himself often said that he saw no disconnection between his semiotics and his narrative productions. Often his novels are, in effect, “other ways” to address issues and concerns that he was considering philosophically and semiotically. Eco’s first novel, *The Name of the Rose*, was published in 1980 and
garnered so much success that the French director Jean-Jacques Annaud released cinematic adaptation in 1986. The story, narrated from the perspective Adso of Melk when he was old, has as principal character the Franciscan monk William of Baskerville who, through accurate investigation, is able to discover the cause of a series of mysterious deaths in an isolated Benedictine Abbey in northern Italy during a week in November of 1327. The solution of the mystery is found in the labyrinthine library, but the novel goes beyond a mere mystery story; it reconstructs a medieval historical era characterized by rigid rules, supernatural beliefs, and religious domination. The success of the novel was astronomical and overwhelmed Eco, but he never relinquished his love of academia, producing novels, cultural works, alongside his many columns written for national newspapers and magazines. Collections of the latter were published in English as *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986), *How to Travel with a Salmon and Other Essays* (1992), *Apocalypse Postponed* (1994), *Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism* (2007). In 1988 his second novel was published, *Foucault’s Pendulum*, a thriller set amid the shadowy cabals and conventicles of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Rosicrucian Society. A further five novels followed, all receiving great acclaim and translated into several languages: *The Island of the Day Before* (1994), *Baudolino* (2000), *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004), *The Prague Cemetery* (2010) and *Numero Zero* (2015). Eco’s last novel is another thriller set in Milan in 1992, in which he explored the darker side of twentieth-century Italy and the so-called “strategy of tension,” where Italian secret-service agents connived with cabinet ministers to implicate people in acts of terrorism rearing the head of fascism once again. The plot takes place in newspaper offices and, a subplot of the novel, is all about how news are manufactured behind the scenes.

Before passing away, Umberto Eco was working on two books, two essays, including the *Library of Living Philosophers* (an intellectual autobiography and a series of other papers on him), which included philosophers such as Dewey, Cassirer, Popper, etc. The book published posthumously, a few days after his death, *Pape Satàn aleppe: Chronicles of a Liquid Society*, is a collection of short essays from the 2000s to today – an anthology that he occasionally loved to compile in order to provide a broad perspective on everyday life.

We all miss his intellectual gaze, his ability to arrive, through semiotics, to grasp the essence of reality and of the Self.