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# The Predicament of Semiotics

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**Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. 304 pp.**

In James Clifford's (1988) book *The Predicament of Culture*, various essays on critical practice, focusing on all sorts of cultural "texts" (exhibition catalogues, postcards, art collections, scholarly texts, and the very concepts we use to discuss all of these things), demonstrate the difficulty of talking about meanings. Meanings shift constantly according to social and historical pressures. The predicament of culture, it appears, is the instability of the categories used to address it, to analyze it, even to live in it. It seems that the attempts made in various domains of cultural studies—notably, ethnography and anthropological theory—to reflect on the meaning of the language of domination out of which these domains emerged only lead to deeper dilemmas, to more troubling instances of self-doubt (see, e.g., Fabian 1983). If anywhere, it is in anthropology that the importance of meaning as a tool of power has been recognized and, subsequently, theorized and analyzed.

The objects of Clifford's analysis constitute an ideal case for the importance of semiotics as a trans-, super-, or interdisciplinary theory. Although semiotics has largely been developed in conjunction with linguistics and literary analysis, thus almost inevitably giving language a position of theoretical privilege while simultaneously supporting the accusation that this very privileging is undue, in Clifford's work, semiotics confronts objects that are emphatically not linguistic—despite

having been so overlaid with discourse that their meanings are derived from the colonization of the object by the word. Meanings are uncertain, undecidable, but at the same time dominating, centripetal.

A similar uncertainty about meaning and its complicity with power and domination reigns in the domain of literary studies, but here the relations to social issues are so much less direct that this protest against domination seems much more diffused. While an increasing interest in “cultural studies” demonstrates a shift due to the awareness that meaning is not innocent, in other provinces uncertainties about meaning provide an arena of interpretive freedom, as well as often vehement debate. Even so, the issue of the nexus between meaning and power becomes visible as soon as one recognizes the anxieties involved in, and symptomatically indicated by, the very temperature of the debate. Often, the issue in question is not explicitly addressed but serves to motivate a theoretical discussion, which is then troubled by the unacknowledged emotional forces that politics inevitably lets loose.

Whereas scholars oriented to critical studies (sometimes scornfully termed “tenured radicals”) theorize the instability of meaning, the old school of semiotics continues to theorize some measure of stability. While the former analyze objects of all kinds and media, so as to understand how meaning operates and what discourse does to it, the latter scholars tend to stay within the admittedly arbitrary boundaries of language and literature. And while the former are overtly politically motivated, the latter are predictably silent about their motivations. This silence, however, creates a predicament for both these scholars and their theory, one deepened by the disavowal of the problems which anthropology and cultural studies embrace.

Umberto Eco’s new book demonstrates this predicament. Although a collection of previously published essays, its title seems to suggest a polemical project—and chapter titles like “Unlimited Semiosis and Drift” confirm that expectation. The opponents confronted are those who subscribe to the view that Eco summarizes with a classical metaphor: “Connotations proliferate like a cancer” (p. 31). As a compilation, this book takes a stand on the debate surrounding deconstruction and its alleged practice of, and plea for, wild interpretive liberalism—although not all of its constituent articles were originally intended to do so. Attacks on deconstruction are of two sorts: social and logical. Critics of the first kind are uneasy with the alleged liberalism that justifies ignoring power relations; critics of the second kind are uneasy about the undermining effect that interpretative liberalism has on systems of logic and other theoretical constructions. Whereas Eco is known to have argued for a social base for semiosis (Eco 1976; see also De Lauretis’s [1983] analysis of Eco’s chapter “The Subject of Semiotics” in *A Theory of Semiotics*), his concern in the present book is to

defend the constructions of semiotic theory and their claims to truth and semantic reliability.

The first three chapters all address this issue explicitly. In the first, Eco opposes two medieval models of interpretation, one promoting infinite interpretation and the other proclaiming unique meaning. In the second chapter, he reconsiders (and curtails) Peirce's concept of unlimited semiosis through the definition of the interpretant as a new, more developed sign, opposing it to Derrida's refusal to pin meaning down. The third chapter presents an overview of reader-response theories, similarly dividing them into two, opposed trends and contending that there is nothing new about the reader-response approach. The argument centers on the question of whether interpretations can be proved to be, if not right, then at least wrong, and Eco's answer is affirmative. In these three opening chapters, Eco takes what he calls a moderate position for limits.

The remainder of the book presents a variety of questions and perspectives which can be grouped in three clusters. Chapters 4, 5, and 12 are about simulation and the difficulty of defining authenticity and originality. Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11 are critical readings of primary texts by Pliny the Younger, Joyce, Borges, and Pirandello. These primary texts are read as theoretical ones. The texts are taken at their word, then turned upside down, then credited with belief once again, to yield a model of narrative, of meaning, of truth, and of humor. Chapters 13, 14, and 15 are theoretical treatises—with the apparent exception of chapter 15, called "On Truth: A Fiction," which is about truth and the difficulty of attaining it. These chapters pose the limits to Eco's limits on interpretation. Against the background of the division of semiotics into three disciplines, chapter 13 argues that the pragmatic dimension of semiotics cannot be separated from either one of the other two: semantics and syntactics. In chapter 14, the difficulty of mapping kinds of presuppositions leads to the predictable conclusion that isolated sentences cannot yield insight into the presuppositions they entail. The final chapter is a fictional account of a debate about truth and memory, a story that has the same overwhelming cleverness and overseriousness as Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*; a cleverness standing in the way of the brilliance of *The Name of the Rose*. Playful as it is, the use of a fiction to conclude a book that is so keen to salvage some possibility of establishing truth suggests that Eco's recourse to fiction is the product of a theoretical entanglement in the contradictions of some of the other essays.

Like most collections, this book is happily varied and, at times, inconsistent—an inconsistency which saves it from the monotonous orthodoxy denounced in the beginning. Thus, chapters 13 and 14 contradict chapters 1, 2, and 3: there Eco poses limits to interpreta-

tion; here he demonstrates the impossibility of theorizing those limits. The critical readings, having little connection with the theoretical debate in question, can be enjoyed in their own right. No review of such a mixed book can fully hope to do it justice, but the programmatic title of the collection does provide a certain lead which justifies my limiting myself to the discussion of a central theme that frames the collection. And this very framework is one that already gives me pause: a good old simple binary opposition.

The central debate which lends the book its title focuses on the distinction between indeterminacy of meaning, allegedly argued by Derrida through Peirce's notion of the interpretant and the subsequent infinite regression, on the one hand, and the *practical* necessity of interpreting on the basis of grounds shared by the social community (p. 41), on the other hand, which allegedly poses a limit to interpretation. In spite of the infinite regression consequent on an account of semiosis as process, then, the notion of ground (revised as code) repeatedly brings this process to a provisional halt.

Eco's earlier (1976: 315) interest in the acting subject might have been a suitable starting point for treating the tension between interpretant and ground. For, in the wake of both Eco's semiotic theory and psychoanalytic semiotic theory, the subject of semiosis has been extensively theorized as not coinciding with a simple sender (Silverman 1983; De Lauretis 1983; Bal 1991). If each interpretant is "a more developed sign" and hence, more specific than the one that triggered it, the basis of development (hence, specification) lies outside the subject, or rather, at the intersection of the subject and the discursive field that formed it. But this reflection yields to Eco's repeated appeal to a notion of intention, which represents a step back from the notion of the subject.

Of course, Eco is not so naive as to posit an unproblematic return to authorial intention. Instead, between *intentio auctoris* and *intentio lectoris*, he proposes an *intentio operis*, which is the locus of interpretation (p. 50). The latter can be retrieved by attending to "what the text says by virtue of its textual coherence and of an underlying original signification system" (p. 51). The criterion of textual coherence sends Eco back to the hermeneutic circle (p. 59); the original signification system will later lead him into a complicated discussion of serials (chapter 5) and of fakes, replicas, and forgeries (chapter 12). Thus "Interpreting Drama" (chapter 6) is not really about drama but about intention, for which drama is a theoretical allegory, and the chapter has a typology of intention (p. 106) that implicitly complicates the three intentions distinguished earlier (p. 50).

Intention is bound up with authenticity, another problematic topic that Eco discusses. Only if we are able to assume the expression of

an intention to be authentic would it make sense to posit intention at all. Later on, Eco argues convincingly that the criteria for determining authenticity are pragmatic variables, and hence, “fake” is a pragmatic category (p. 181). Consequently, standards for authenticity are semantically weak (p. 200). It follows that the textual intention posited earlier is pragmatically variable, in other words, context-sensitive in the extreme.

Another route to the *intentio operis*, claims Eco, is literal meaning (pp. 53–54). Literality refers to the criterion of the “underlying signification system.” But this privileging of literal meaning merely displaces the problem. Eco can offer us only common sense as a basis for the establishment of literal meaning, another guise of the unproblematically unified social community. Although not identical, the literal and the figurative often cannot be told apart; herein lies another source of undecidability. Literal and figurative can interact, shift, and even change places (Van Alphen 1988).

The implication is obvious. Texts do not have intentions, let alone “conscious” ones (p. 55). Indeed, this slippage from text to mind indicates that the *intentio operis* is not an intention at all, but an interpretation, personified in an image of subjective agency that is projected, ultimately and inevitably, upon the author. The effect of any such criterion is an authentication of an interpretation, no less subjective than any other because it is accomplished through a chain of interpretants pragmatically bound up with the reader, but an interpretation sanctioned by a reliability that can only be illusory.

Eco’s argument suffers from a casual use of key concepts. Thus his argument against the subjectivity of interpretation and the arrogance of the interpreter who overrules the work sometimes rests on a confusion between interpreter and interpretant, as on page 205. This occurs when Eco endorses Charles Morris’s (1946) behaviorist shift from interpretant to interpreter. The confusion is understandable from Morris’s point of view, but fatal for the argument that Eco is making. This may be an oversight; elsewhere, the terms “interpretant,” “signifier,” and “expression” (pp. 8, 32) are used interchangeably. But the consequence is that Eco never theorizes the distinction between interpretant and interpreter, a distinction that is so crucial to an understanding of Peirce, and this distinction in and of itself resolves the conflict between subjectivity and the limitedness of semiosis, hence, of interpretation.

Bracketing this tricky problem of intention and the projections entailed by any such personification of the reader’s assumptions about the author’s intention, the basic argument of the book remains that interpretation cannot be totally arbitrary. The problem I have with this argument is not that I disagree, but, on the contrary, that it is so

obvious. Arguable in theory, it has been acknowledged as necessary in practice. What needs to be done next is to analyze further the notion of ground and how it is fleshed out in social practice. This analysis has been undertaken by critics committed to understanding the influence of gender, class, ethnicity, and age on the degree of access to semiosis and interpretative authority—in other words, the social grounding of grounds. Eco limits himself to a theoretical issue that prevents him from contributing to such an analysis, nor does he provide it with new tools. But his argument does underwrite this commitment on theoretical grounds.

That interpretation is in practice bound up with social pressures and thereby limited is undeniable and, in fact, undenied. For more than a decade socially oriented critics have argued strongly for an acknowledgment of these pressures, but also for an analysis of their functioning. And whereas Eco holds on to some measure of certainty as warranted by the fact that codes are “socially shared,” what he simply passes off as “the community” is not monolithic, and that is where Eco and social criticism part company. For it is with the undermining of the construct of social unity that a critical analysis must begin. And Eco’s argument, sustained by his unique knowledge of the history of philosophy, and of Peirce in particular, could have offered a valuable methodological contribution to such an endeavor. For this further exploration of grounds is consistent with Peirce’s concepts and, in fact, is singularly able to resolve their apparent contradiction between infinitude and limitation by positioning the limitations otherwise than in logic alone.

It is because Eco, unlike Peirce *and* Derrida, does not cross that boundary that he is imprisoned within a contradiction. The symptoms of this problem are many. Thus, for example, in a discussion of Peirce’s pragmatist theory of interpretation, Eco writes on the same page that indices do and do not connect to their referent (p. 38); the ultimate limit to interpretation, the final logical interpretant called the Habit, is defined as being both inside and outside semiosis (p. 39); and the argument for pragmatics contradicts that made for limits (chapter 13). Elsewhere, confusion undermines the argument, as when Eco confuses (semantic) *misinterpretation* with reference to the mistaken object, or *misreference* (a third category here would be pragmatic misinterpretation, or *misfiring*) (p. 61).

The solution to Eco’s problem has been advanced by his opponent, Derrida himself, when the latter denied that deconstruction is a plea for indeterminacy. What is at stake is undecidability, which is something else altogether (Derrida 1988: 148). It is precisely the tension between the (obvious) limits bound up with the rules of sign systems like language, as well as with social constructions of identity and com-

munity, and the impossibility of exactly pinning down or predicting actual interpretations that underlies Eco's plea for the indistinguishability of pragmatics from both semantics and syntactics. The same tension also underlies deconstruction as a practice of the enhancement of this tension in order to promote reflection on interpretation beyond rigid systems and logical enclosure. Perhaps the most successful is Teresa de Lauretis's attempt to theorize Peirce's Habit as the locus of the social construction and framing of identity, which, in turn, partakes of the ground of interpretation in the way that it specifies the interpretant, rather than as the metaphysical Final Interpretant that Eco makes of it.

Eco's argument is damaged by the confining binary opposition between restraint and drift in interpretation, between preestablished criteria for policing and a priori anarchy; it makes the book seem belated. The debate on deconstruction has reached much more sophisticated levels. Much of Eco's opposition to it has already been addressed; the most widely known discussion is Jonathan Culler's (1983) *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, a book not even mentioned here. Eco's plea for a distinction between indeterminacy and infinite regression (Peirce) has already been emphatically endorsed by Derrida (1988), and the possibility of holding on to Peirce's interpretant as a means of analyzing the actual process of interpretation as subjective, hence infinitely complex, and yet to do justice to social pressures or framings (Culler 1988) is most thoroughly argued in the above-mentioned essay by de Lauretis (1983; see also 1987).

It is in the tension between the conceptions of the book as a collection of unrelated essays and as a polemical argument that the format of publication takes its toll. In light of these long-standing discussions, it is surprising that Eco seems so unaware of them, but is yet so prepared to attack (his latest Derrida citation is 1980!). His style of argumentation is not only quite frequently simplistic, but also, at times, close to authoritarian. The position of history in the argument, for example, often seems that of authority. The binary division of the medieval philosophy of language between dogmatic and free, or allegorical and pansemiotic, views of interpretation, while autonomously important as an essay, tends to function in this collection as the source of authority for the contemporary division, which, legitimated through this "myth of origin," becomes transhistorical. The quoting of isolated phrases from Peirce, provided with references but too a-contextual to be useful (e.g., on page 40), lends a specialist's authority to an otherwise simple argument. Eco's profound knowledge of Peirce, which makes his other work so exciting, could have made for a great debate; none of the socially oriented critics and proponents of deconstruction could have provided a more rigorously logical per-



spective combined with such an extensive knowledge of the history of logic. Instead, the discussion remains somewhat stuck in the binary.

There are other problems of argumentation. In chapter 3, an overview of reader-response criticism is reduced to the same binary opposition, and the argument is sometimes taken over by caricature, argumentation *ab absurdo*, truisms (“*p* . . . means what it intuitively means” [p. 54]), or even argument *ad hominem*. Thus, page 52 ends with the following caricature: “The most radical practices of deconstruction privilege the initiative of the reader and reduce the text to an ambiguous bunch of still unshaped possibilities, thus transforming texts into mere stimuli for the interpretive drift.” Since no particular critic is mentioned, it is unclear whether “radical” means more than just “bad,” hence, whether the alleged problem lies with the theory of deconstruction or with some sloppy imitator of its practice. The accusatory rhetoric is often aimed at unspecified groups (“I *suspect* that they [‘strong’ pragmatists] are scarcely interested in the way it [the text] works” [p. 57]), but sometimes at a specific person (a letter from Derrida to Eco serves to accuse the former of a dishonest inconsistency [p. 54]). Examples often reduce the discussion to the level of “when I kick you it hurts, *hors texte*.”

I should like to speculate that the problems of this book are not Eco’s alone. One reason for this atypical book might be an implicit ideological position. Indeed, a concept of “high” literature emerges in chapters 8, 9, and 11, and, together with a contempt for popular culture (“the series in this sense responds to the infantile need of always hearing the same story” [p. 86]), as well as for “naïve” readers (p. 136), suggests an anxiety about values other than logic. Whereas most of Eco’s arguments are logical and linguistic, his examples are almost all drawn from “high” literature, except for the made-up ones, which are usually a bit absurd. This choice is indexical: it points to the politics informing the refusal of politics.

Another possible reason could be theoretical rigidity. Eco was an important forerunner of semantic theory, which, in its heyday, focused so much of our hope for the “scientificity” of literary and semiotic theory. Some areas of that theory remain unsatisfactory, and I contend that part of the problem was and is due to the limited insights into Peirce’s concept of the ground and its profound, but still enigmatic, relationship to the interpretant. The social anchoredness of grounds, and the resulting need to theorize codes in intimate connection with social framing (Culler 1988; Bal 1988), was not seriously engaged by semantic theory. Many critics have long since abandoned hope for, and even interest in, the discipline’s “scientific status,” now deemed a positivist illusion, or even in intersubjectivity as a foundation for academic agreement and have turned away from the kind of theorizing at

which Eco is so brilliant. But more than such regrettable defection, the unwillingness of semiotic theorists to reconsider and refocus earlier convictions, to integrate concerns heretofore not adopted, and to seriously engage with strong opposition hurts a discipline like semiotics, whose usefulness for the humanities and beyond could be so great.

The consequence of this widening gap is the increasing isolation of an ever more idiosyncratic semiotic theory, like that coming out of the Bloomington center. (The journal *Semiotica* has managed to harbor both socially oriented semiotics and theoretical system-building without making the two really engage in dialogue, even within the pages of the journal.) Fernande Saint-Martin (1989) is an example: this semiotic theory of visual language is bound to remain more marginal than it deserves to be because it clings to such dogmas as the cumulative construction of meaning built up from elementary units, a dogma that is simply untenable for visual images (but also for other sign systems, including language). Saint-Martin's *Semiotics of Visual Language* is not only unreadable for anyone who is not thoroughly initiated; but its premises, including the priority of language proclaimed in its very title, are so debatable that the book will only reinforce the strong "resistance to theory" (de Man) that reigns in the fields of art criticism and art history.

By combining an attack on the vaguely defined bulk of contemporary criticism with essays exploring issues of theoretical semantics, Eco contributes to this unfortunate split. This is all the more regrettable given that he might be the only, or at least the best-equipped, person to remedy it: that is, if only his arguments were positive and theoretical, not polemical and oblique; were less limited to linguistic examples and more transdisciplinary; were more his own, so to speak. But perhaps there is something intrinsically harrowing about the uncertainties that hover around semiotics. It is undeniable that the very uncertainties that should, and could, and do entice scholars to examine those details, shifts, and inconsistencies that used to fall between the cracks of the system—thus foregrounding what was left unnoticed and why—also serve as an excuse for sloppy work. But what's new about that? I don't think that an important insight has to be dismissed because its consequences are not always desirable. The predicament of semiotics is also its strength: without theoretical skepticism we would not know what we do not know, and that is perhaps the most valuable form of knowledge.

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