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# Intentio Lectoris

## The State of the Art

Umberto Eco

### 1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decades we have witnessed a change of paradigm in the theories of textual interpretation. Within a structuralistic framework, to take into account the role of the addressee seemed like a disturbing intrusion since the current dogma was that a textual structure should be analyzed in itself and for the sake of itself, in an attempt to isolate its formal structures.

On the contrary, during the seventies literary theorists—as well as linguists and semioticians—had focused on the pragmatic aspect of reading. The dialectic between Author and Reader, Sender and Addressee, Narrator and Narratee has generated a crowd, indeed impressive, of semiotic or extrafictional narrators, subjects of the uttered utterance (*énonciation énoncée*), focalizers, voices, metanarrators, as well as an equally impressive crowd of virtual, ideal, implied or implicit, model, projected, presumed, informed readers, metareaders, archireaders, and so on.

As a result, different critical theories—such as the aesthetics of reception, hermeneutics, the semiotic theories of interpretative cooperation, reader-response criticism, up to the scarcely homo-

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geneous archipelago of deconstruction—have appointed as the main object of their research not so much the empirical results of given personal or collective acts of reading (studied by a sociology of reception), but the very function of construction—or deconstruction—of a text performed by its interpreter—insofar as such a function is implemented, encouraged, prescribed, or permitted by the textual linear manifestation or by the very nature of semiosis.

It seems to me that the general assumption underlying each of these theories is: The functioning of a text (including non-verbal ones) can be explained by taking into account not only its generative process but also (or, for the most radical theories, exclusively) the role performed by the addressee and (at most) the way in which the text foresees and directs this kind of interpretative cooperation.

It must also be stressed that such an addressee-oriented approach concerns not only literary and artistic texts, but every sort of semiotic phenomenon, including everyday linguistic utterances, visual signals, and so on. In other words, addressee-oriented theories assume that the meaning of *every* message depends on the interpretative choices of its receptor; even the meaning of the most univocal message uttered in the course of the most normal communicative intercourse depends on the response of its addressee, and this response is in some way context-sensitive. Naturally, such an allegedly open-ended nature of messages is more evident in those texts that have been conceived in order to magnify this semiotic possibility, that is, in so-called artistic texts. I insist on this point because during the previous decades artistic texts were taken as the only phenomenon able to display, provocatively, the still unacknowledged open-ended nature of texts. On the contrary, in the last decades such a nature has been theoretically rooted in the very nature of any kind of text. In other words, before the change of the paradigm, artistic texts were seen as the only cases in which a semiotic system, be it verbal or otherwise, magnified the role of the addressee—the basic and normal function of such a system being instead that of allowing an ideal condition of univocality, independently of the idiosyncrasies of the receiver. On the contrary, in the last decades, semiotic theories have insisted on the fact that—even though in everyday life we are obliged to exchange many univocal messages, hardly working in order to reduce ambiguity—the dialectic between sender, addressee, and context is at the very core of semiosis.

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 2. ARCHAEOLOGY

Undoubtedly the universe of literary studies has been haunted in the last few years by the ghost of the reader. To prove this assumption it will be interesting to ascertain how and to what extent such a ghost has been conjured up by different theorists, coming from different theoretical traditions.

The first who explicitly spoke of an "implied author" ("carrying the reader with him") was certainly Wayne Booth in 1961. After him we can isolate two independent lines of research that, up to a certain point, ignored each other: namely, the semiotico-structural one and the hermeneutic one.

The first line stems from *Communications 8*, where Barthes spoke of a material author who cannot be identified with the narrator, Todorov evoked the couple, "image of the narrator-image of the author," and recovered the Anglo-Saxon theories of the point of view (from Henry James, Percy Lubbock, Forster, until Pouillon 1946), and Genette started to elaborate the categories (definitely dealt with in 1972) of voice and focalization. Then, through some observations of Kristeva (1970) on "textual productivity," certain lucid pages of Lotman (1970), the still empirical concept of *architecteur* by Riffaterre (1971), the discussions on the conservative standpoint of Hirsch (1967), the debate reached the most complex notions of implied reader in Corti (1976) and Chatman (1978). It is interesting to remark that the last two authors drew their definition directly from Booth, ignoring the similar definition proposed by Iser in 1972. The same happened to me as I elaborated my notion of Model Reader along the mainstream of the semiotic-structuralistic line, matching these results with some suggestions borrowed from various discussions on the modal logic of narrativity (mainly van Dijk, Petöfi, and Schmidt) as well as from some hints furnished by Weinrich—not to mention the idea of an "ideal reader" devised by Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*.

It is also interesting to remark that Corti (1976) traces back the discussion on the non-empirical author to Foucault (1969) where, in a post-structuralistic atmosphere, the problem is posed of an author as a "way of being within the discourse," as a field of conceptual coherence, or as a stylistic unity, which as such could not but elicit the corresponding idea of a reader as a way of recognizing such a being-within-the-discourse.

The second lineage is represented by Iser (1972), who starts from Booth's proposal but elaborates his suggestion on the basis of a different tradition (Ingarden, Gadamer, and naturally Jauss—

who in his turn was developing some of the suggestions of the Russian Formalists and the Prague School). Iser was also largely influenced (as is demonstrated by the bibliographical references of *Der implizite Leser*) by the Anglo-Saxon theorists of narrativity (well known to Todorov and Genette) and by Joyce (criticism). One finds in the first Iser book few references to the structuralistic lineage (the only important source is Mukařovsky). It is only in *The Act of Reading* (1976) that Iser tries to reconnect the two lineages, with references to Jakobson, Lotman, Hirsch, Riffaterre, as well as to some of my remarks of the early sixties.

Such an insistence on the moment of reading, coming from different directions, seems to reveal a felicitous plot of the *Zeitgeist*. And, speaking of the *Zeitgeist*, it is curious to notice that at the beginning of the eighties Charles Fillmore, coming from the autonomous and different tradition of generative semantics (critically reviewed), wrote an essay on "Ideal Readers and Real Readers" — without any conscious reference to the above mentioned debates.

Certainly all these author/reader couples do not have the same theoretical status (see, for a brilliant map of their mutual differences and identities, Pugliatti 1985). In fact, the most important problem at this juncture is to ascertain whether such a reader-oriented field really represented a new trend in aesthetic and semiotic studies.

The whole history of aesthetics can be traced back to a history of theories of interpretation and of the effect that a work of art provokes upon its addressee. I consider response-oriented the Aristotelian *Poetics*, pseudo-Longinian aesthetics of the *Sublime*, the medieval theories of beauty as the final result of a *visio*, the new reading of Aristotle performed by the Renaissance theorists of drama, many eighteenth-century theories of art and beauty, most of Kantian aesthetics, not to speak of many contemporary critical and philosophical approaches, namely:

- (a) Russian Formalists, with their notion of "device" as the way in which the work of art elicits a particular type of perception
- (b) Ingarden's attention to the reading process, his notion of the literary work as a skeleton or "schematized structure" to be completed by the reader, and his idea, clearly due to Husserl's influence, of the dialectics between the work as an invariant and the plurality of profiles through which it can be concretized by the interpreter;

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- (c) The aesthetics of Mukařovsky;
  - (d) Gadamer's hermeneutics; and
  - (e) The early German sociology of literature (see Holub 1984:2).

As for contemporary semiotic theories, they took into account from the beginning the pragmatic moment. Even without speaking of the central role played by interpretation and "unlimited semiosis" in C. S. Peirce's thought, it would be enough to remark that Charles Morris in *Foundations of a Theory of Signs* (1938) reminded us that a reference to the role of the interpreter was always present in Greek and Latin rhetoric, in the communication theory of the Sophists, and in Aristotle, not to mention Augustine, for whom signs were characterized by the fact that they produce an idea in the mind of their receivers.

During the sixties, many of the Italian semiotic approaches were influenced by the sociological studies on the reception of mass media. In 1965 at the convention held in Perugia on the relationship between television and its audience, I myself, Paolo Fabbri, and others insisted on the fact that it was not enough to study what a message says according to the code of its senders, but one must also study what it says according to the code of its addressees. The idea of "aberrant decoding," proposed at that time, was further elaborated in my *La struttura assente* (1968). Thus, in the sixties the problem of reception was posited (or re-posited) by semiotics as a reaction against (i) the structuralist idea that a textual object was something independent of its interpretations, and (ii) the stiffness of many formal semantics flourishing in the Anglo-Saxon area, where the very meaning of a term or a sentence was studied as independent of its context. Only later this dictionary-like semantics was challenged by encyclopedia-like models that tried to introduce into the core of the semantic representation also pragmatic elements—and only recently Cognitive Science and Artificial Intelligence have decided that an encyclopedia model seems to be the most convenient way to represent meaning and to process texts (see on this debate Eco 1976, 1984).

In order to reach such an awareness, it has been necessary for linguistics to move toward pragmatic phenomena, and in this sense the role of speech-act theory should not be underestimated. In the literary domain, Iser (1972) was probably the first to acknowledge the convergence between the new linguistic perspectives and the literary theory of reception, devoting as he did a whole

chapter of *Der Akt des Lesens* to the problems raised by Austin and Searle (five years before the first organic attempt to elaborate a theory of literary discourse based upon the speech-act theory; see Pratt 1977).

Thus, what Jauss in 1969 was announcing as a profound change in the paradigm of literary scholarship was in fact a general change taking place already in the semiotic paradigm as well—even though, as I said, this change was not a brand-new discovery but rather the complex concoction of different venerable approaches that had characterized at different times the whole history of aesthetics and a great part of the history of semiotics. Nevertheless, it is not true that *nihil sub sole novi*. Old (theoretical) objects can reflect a different light under the sun's rays, according to the season.

I remember how outrageous sounded to many my *Opera aperta* (1962), in which I stated that artistic and literary works, by foreseeing a system of psychological, cultural, and historical expectations on the part of their addressees, try to produce what Joyce called an "ideal reader."<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, speaking at that time of works of art, I was interested in the fact that such an ideal reader was obliged to suffer from an ideal insomnia in order to question the book *ad infinitum*. My problem was how and to what extent a text should foresee the reactions of its addressee. In *Opera aperta*—at least at the time of the first Italian edition, written between 1957 and 1962—I was still moving in a pre-semiotic area, inspired as I was by Information Theory, the semantics of Richards, the epistemology of Piaget, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, transactional psychology, and the aesthetic theory of interpretation of Luigi Pareyson. In that book, and with a jargon I would not use today, I was writing:

now we must shift our attention from the message, as a source of possible information, to the communicative relationship between message and addressee, where the interpretative decision of the receptor contributes to establishing the value of the possible information. . . . If one wants to analyze the possibilities of a communicative structure one must take into account the receptor pole. To consider this psychological pole means to acknowledge the formal possibility—as such indispensable in order to explain both the structure and the effect of the message—by which a message signifies

only insofar as it is interpreted from the point of view of a given situation, a psychological as well as a historical, social and anthropological one.<sup>2</sup>

All these assumptions sounded pretty polemical in the sixties because the structuralistic orthodoxy was still standing under the standards of the "aesthetic-formalist" third paradigm designed by Jauss (1969). In 1967, speaking in the course of an interview of my book *Opera aperta*, just translated into French, Claude Lévi-Strauss said that he was reluctant to accept my perspective because a work of art

is an object endowed with precise properties, that must be analytically isolated, and this work can be entirely defined on the grounds of such properties. When Jakobson and myself tried to make a structural analysis of a Baudelaire sonnet, we did not approach it as an "open work" in which we could find everything that has been filled in by the following epochs; we approached it as an object which, once created, had the stiffness—so to speak—of a crystal; we confined ourselves to bringing into evidence these properties. (Lévi-Strauss 1969:81)

I have already discussed this opinion in the introductory chapter of my *The Role of the Reader*, making it clear that, by stressing the role of the interpretative choice in the making up of the sense of a text, I was not assuming that in an "open work" one can find that "everything" has been filled in by its different *empirical* readers, irrespective or in spite of the properties of the textual objects. I was, on the contrary, assuming that an artistic text contained, among its major analyzable properties, certain structural devices that encourage and elicit interpretative choices. However, I am quoting that old discussion in order to show how very daring it was, during the sixties, to introduce the interpretative moment, or, if one wants, the act of reading, into the description and the evaluation of the text to be read.

Even though I stressed in *Opera aperta* the role of the interpreter ready to risk an ideal insomnia in order to pursue infinite interpretations, I insisted on the fact that one ought always to question a text as an object, and not on the mere grounds of one's personal drives. Depending as I did on the aesthetics of interpretation of Luigi Pareyson, I was still speaking of a dialectic between fidelity and freedom. I am insisting on this point because if during the "structuralist sixties" my addressee-oriented position (neither



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so provocative nor so unbearably original) appeared so very “radical,” today it would sound pretty conservative, at least from the point of view of the most radical reader-response theories.

### 3. A WEB OF CRITICAL OPTIONS

The opposition between the generative approach (according to which the theory isolates the rules for the production of a textual object that can be understood independently of its effects) and interpretive approach is not homogeneous with the threefold contrast, widely discussed in the course of a secular critical debate, between interpretation as the search for the *intentio auctoris*, interpretation as the search for the *intentio operis*, and interpretation as the imposition of the *intentio lectoris*.

The classical debate aimed at finding in a text either (a) what its author intended to say, or (b) what the text said independently of the intentions of its author.

Only after we accepted the second horn of the dilemma did the question become whether to find in a text (i) what it says by virtue of its textual coherence and of an original underlying signification system, or (ii) what the addressees find in it by virtue of their own systems of signification or their wishes and drives.

Such a debate is of paramount importance, but its terms only partially overlap the opposition generation/interpretation. One can describe a text as generated according to certain rules without assuming that its author intentionally and consciously followed them. One can adopt a hermeneutic viewpoint without prejudging whether the interpretation must find what the author meant or what Being says through language—in the second case, without prejudging whether the voice of Being is influenced by the drives of the addressee or not. If one crosses the opposition generation/interpretation with the trichotomy of intentions, one can get six potential different theories and critical methods.

Facing the possibility, displayed by a text, of eliciting infinite or indefinite interpretations, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance reacted by means of two different hermeneutic options. Medieval interpreters looked for a plurality of senses without rejecting a sort of identity principle (a text cannot support contradictory interpretations), while the symbolists of the Renaissance, following the idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, defined the ideal text as the one that allows the most contradictory readings (see Eco 1985).

Moreover, the adoption of the Renaissance model generates a secondary contradiction, since a hermetico-symbolic reading can

search in a text either for (i) the infinity of senses planned by the author or for (ii) the infinity of senses that the author ignored. Naturally, option (ii) generates a further choice; namely, whether these unforeseen senses are discovered because of the *intentio operis*, or in spite of it, forced into the text by an arbitrary decision of the reader.

Even if one says, as Valéry did, that *il n'y a pas de vrai sens d'un texte*, one has not yet decided on which of the three intentions the infinity of interpretations depends. Medieval and Renaissance Kabbalists maintained that the Torah was open to infinite interpretations because it could be rewritten in infinite ways by combining its letters, but such an infinity of readings (as well as of writings)—certainly dependent on the initiative of the reader—was nonetheless planned by the divine Author.

To privilege the initiative of the reader does not necessarily mean to guarantee the infinity of readings. If one privileges the initiative of the reader, one must also consider the possibility of an active reader who decides to read a text univocally: it is a privilege of fundamentalists to read the Bible according to a single literal sense.

We can conceive of an aesthetics claiming that poetic texts can be infinitely interpreted because their authors wanted them to read this way; or an aesthetics which claims that texts must be read univocally in spite of the intentions of their authors who are compelled by the laws of language and who, once they have written something, are bound to read what they wrote in the only authorized and possible sense. One can read as infinitely interpretable a text conceived as absolutely univocal (see for instance the reading performed by Derrida upon a text of Searle in "Signature, événement, contexte") as well as one can perform psychedelic trips upon a text that cannot be but univocal according to the *intentio operis* (for instance, when one muses oneirically upon the railway timetable). Alternatively, one can read as univocal a text that its author wanted infinitely interpretable (it would be the case of fundamentalists if by chance Kabbalists were right), or to read univocally a text that from the point of view of linguistic rules should be considered rather ambiguous (for instance, reading *Oedipus Rex* as a plain mystery story where what counts is only to find out the guilty one).

It is in the light of this embarrassingly vast typology that we should reconsider many contemporary critical currents that can superficially be ranked, all together, under the heading of response-oriented theories. For instance, classical sociology of liter-

ature records what readers do with a text, and it can remain basically uninterested in deciding on which intention what they do depends—since it simply describes social usages, socialized interpretations, and the actual public effect of texts, not the formal devices or the hermeneutic mechanisms that have produced them. On the contrary, the aesthetics of reception maintains that a literary work is enriched by the various interpretations it underwent along the centuries and, while considering the dialectic between textual devices and the horizon of expectations of the readers, does not deny that every interpretation can and must be compared with the textual object and with the *intentio operis*. Likewise, the semiotic theories of interpretative cooperation, like my theory of Model Reader, look at the textual strategy as a system of instructions aimed at producing a possible reader whose profile is designed by and within the text, can be extrapolated from it, and described independently of and even before any empirical reading.

In a totally different way, 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 interpretative drift.

#### 4. AN APOLOGY FOR THE LITERAL SENSE

Every discourse on the freedom of interpretation must start from a defense of literal sense. In 1985 Ronald Reagan, during a microphone test before a public speech, said *P* (namely: "In a few minutes I'll push the red button and I'll start bombing the Soviet Union," or something to that effect). *P* was—as Linear Text Manifestation—an English sentence that according to common codes means exactly what it intuitively means. If you prefer, given an intelligent machine with paraphrase rules, *P* could be translated as "the person uttering the pronoun *I* will in the next 200 seconds send American missiles toward Soviet territory." If texts have intentions, *P* had the intention to say so.

The newsmen who heard *P* wondered whether its utterer too had the intention to say so. Asked about that, Reagan said that he was joking. He said so—as far as the *intentio operis* was concerned—but according to the *intentio auctoris* he only pretended to say so. According to common sense, those who believed that the sentence-meaning coincided with the intended authorial-meaning were wrong.

In criticizing severely Reagan's joke some journalists, however, tried to make an innuendo (*intentio lectoris*) and inferred that

the real intention of Reagan was to nonchalantly suggest that he was such a tough guy that, if he wanted, he could have done what he only pretended to do (also because he had the performative power of doing things with words).

This story is scarcely suitable for my purposes because it is a report about a fact—that is, about a “real” communicative intercourse during which senders and addressees had the chance to check the discrepancies between sentence-meaning and authorial-meaning. Let us suppose, then, that this story does not concern a fact, but is a pure story (told in the form “Once a man said so-and-so, and people believed so-and so, and then that man added so-and-so. . .”). In this case we have lost any guarantee about the authorial intention, this author having simply become one of the characters of the narration. How do we interpret this story? It can be the story of a man making a joke, the story of a man who jokes but shouldn’t, the story of a man who pretends to joke but as a matter of fact is uttering a threat, the story of a tragic world where even innocent jokes can be taken seriously, the story of how the same jocular sentence can change in meaning according to the status and the role of its utterer. . . . Would we say that this story has a single sense, all the listed ones, or that only some of them can be considered as the “correct” ones?

Two years ago Derrida wrote me a letter to inform me that he and other people were establishing in Paris a College International de Philosophie and to ask me for a letter of support. I bet that Derrida was assuming that:

- I had to assume that he was telling the truth;
- I had to read his program as a univocal discourse as far as both the actual situation and his projects were concerned;
- My signature requested at the end of my letter would have been taken more seriously than Searle’s one at the end of “Signature, événement, contexte.”

Naturally, according to my *Erwartungshorizon*, Derrida’s letter could have assumed for me many other additional meanings, even the most contradictory ones, and could have elicited many additional inferences about its “intended meaning”; nevertheless, any additional inference ought to be based upon its first layer of allegedly literal meaning. I think that Derrida could not but agree with me: in *Grammatology* he reminds his readers that

[without] all the instruments of traditional criticism . . . critical production would risk developing in any direction at all, and au-

thorize itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guard-rail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading. [158 of the English tr.]

I feel sympathetic with the project of opening readings but I also feel the fundamental duty of protecting them in order to open them, since I consider it risky to open in order to protect. Thus, coming to Reagan's story, my conclusion is that, in order to extrapolate from it any possible sense, one is first of all obliged to recognize that it has a literal sense, namely, that on a given day a man said *P* and that *P*, according to the English code, means what it intuitively means.

##### 5. TWO LEVELS OF INTERPRETATION

Before going further ahead with the problem of interpretation, we must first settle a terminological question. We must distinguish between *semantic* and *critical* interpretation (or, if one prefers, between *semiosic* and *semiotic* interpretation). Semantic interpretation is the result of the process by which an addressee, facing a linear textual manifestation, fills it up with a given meaning. Every response-oriented approach deals first of all with this type of interpretation, which is a natural semiosic phenomenon. Critical interpretation is, on the contrary, a metalinguistic activity—a semiotic approach—which aims at describing and explaining for which formal reasons a given text produces a given response (and in this sense it can also assume the form of an aesthetic analysis).

In this sense every text is susceptible to being both semantically and critically interpreted, but only few texts consciously foresee both kinds of response. Ordinary sentences uttered by a layman (like "Give me that bottle" or "The cat is on the mat") only expect a semantic response. On the contrary, aesthetic texts or sentences such as "The cat is on the mat" uttered by a linguist as an example of possible semantic ambiguity also foresee a critical interpreter. Likewise, when I say that every text designs its own Model Reader, I am in fact implying that many texts aim at producing two Model Readers: a first or naive level, supposed to understand semantically what the text says, and a second or critical level, supposed to appreciate the way in which the text says such an utterance. A sentence like "They are flying planes" foresees a naive reader who keeps wondering which meaning to choose—and who supposedly looks at the textual environment or at the circumstance of the utterance in order to support the best choice—

and a critical reader able to univocally and formally explain the syntactic reasons that make the sentence ambiguous. Similarly, a mystery tale displays an astute narrative strategy in order to produce a naive Model Reader eager to fall into the traps of the narrator (to feel fear or to suspect the innocent one), but usually wants to produce also a critical Model Reader able to enjoy, at a second reading, the brilliant narrative strategy by which the first-level naive reader has been designed.<sup>3</sup>

In the light of the above observations, let me now discuss a distinction between two interpretative theories of our time proposed by Richard Rorty in his essay "Idealism and Textualism" (in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 1982). Rorty says that in the present century "there are people who write as if there were nothing but texts," and he makes a distinction between two kinds of textualisms. The first is instantiated by those who disregard the intention of the author and look in the text for a principle of internal coherence and/or for a sufficient cause for certain very precise effects it has on a presumed ideal reader. The second is instantiated by those critics who consider every reading as a misreading (the "misreaders"). For them, says Rorty, "the critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose." In this sense their model

is not the curious collector of clever gadgets taking them apart to see what makes them work and carefully ignoring any extrinsic end they may have, but the psychoanalyst blithely interpreting a dream or a joke as a symptom of homicidal mania. (151)

Rorty thinks that both positions are a form of pragmatism (pragmatism being for him the refusal to think of truth as correspondence to reality—and reality being, I assume, both the external referent of the text and the intention of its author) and suggests that the first type of theorist is a weak pragmatist because "he thinks that there really is a secret and that once it's discovered we shall have gotten the text right," so that for him "criticism is discovery rather than creation" (152). On the contrary, the strong pragmatist does not make any difference between finding and making.

I can accept such a characterization, but with two emendations.

First of all, in which sense does a weak pragmatist, when trying to find the secret of a text, aim at getting this text "right"?

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One has to decide if by "getting the text right" one means a right semantic or a right critical interpretation. Those readers who, according to the Jamesian metaphor proposed by Iser (1976:ch.1), look into a text in order to find in it "the figure in the carpet," a single unrevealed secret meaning, are—I think—looking for a sort of "concealed" semantic interpretation. But the critic looking for the "secret code" probably looks *critically* for the describable strategy that produces infinite ways to get a text *semantically* right. To analyze and describe the textual "devices" of *Ulysses* means to show how Joyce acted in order to create many alternative figures in his carpet, without deciding how many they can be and which of them are the best ones. Obviously, since even a critical reading is always conjectural (see 6, below), there can be many ways of finding out that secret code, but to look for it does not mean that one wants to reduce a text to a univocal semantic reading. Thus, I do not think that the first type of textualist designed by Rorty is necessarily a "weak" pragmatist.

Secondly, I suspect that many "strong" pragmatists are not pragmatists at all—at least in Rorty's sense, because the "mis-reader" employs a text in order to know something which stands outside the text—and that is in some way more "real" than the text itself, namely, the unconscious mechanism of *la chaîne signifiante*. In any case, even though a pragmatist, certainly the mis-reader is not a "textualist." Probably misreaders think, as Rorty assumes, that there is nothing but texts. However, they are interested in every possible text except the one they are reading. As a matter of fact, "strong" pragmatists are only concerned with the infinite semantical readings of the text they are beating about, but I suspect that they are scarcely interested in the way it works.

#### 6. INTERPRETATION AND USE

I can accept the distinction proposed by Rorty but I see it as a convenient opposition between *interpreting* (both semantically and critically) and merely *using* a text. To critically interpret a text means to read it in order to discover, along with my reactions to it, something about its nature. To use a text is to start from a stimulus in order to get something else, even accepting the risk of misinterpreting it from the semantical point of view. If I tear out the pages of my Bible and wrap my pipe tobacco in them, I am using this Bible, but it would be daring to call me a textualist—even though I am, if not a strong pragmatist, certainly a very pragmatic person. If I get sexual enjoyment from a pornographic

book, I am not using it, because in order to elaborate my sexual fantasies I had to semantically interpret its sentences. On the contrary, if—let us suppose—I look into the *Elements* of Euclid to infer that their author was a scopophiliac, obsessed with abstract images, then I am using it because I refuse to interpret its definitions and theorems semantically.

The quasi-psychoanalytic reading that Derrida makes of Poe's "Purloined Letter" in *Le facteur de la vérité* represents a good critical interpretation of that story. Derrida insists on the fact that he is not analyzing the unconscious of the author but rather the unconscious of the text. He is interpreting because he respects the *intentio operis*. When he draws an interpretation from the fact that the letter is found in a paper holder hanging from a nail under the center of a fireplace, he first takes "literally" the possible world designed by the narration as well as the sense of the words used by Poe to set up this world. Then he tries to isolate a second "symbolical" meaning that this text is conveying, probably beyond the intentions of its author. Right or wrong, Derrida however does support his second-level semantic interpretation with textual evidence. In doing so, he also performs a critical interpretation because he shows how the text can produce that second-level semantic meaning.

On the contrary, let us consider the way followed by Maria Bonaparte when analyzing Poe's work. Part of her reading represents a good example of interpretation. For instance, she reads "Morella," "Ligeia," and "Eleonora" and shows that all three texts have the same underlying "fabula": a man in love with an exceptional woman who dies of consumption, so that the man swears eternal grief; but he does not keep his promise and loves another woman; finally, the dead one reappears and wraps the new one in the mantle of her funereal power. In a nontechnical way, Maria Bonaparte identifies in these three texts the same actantial structures, speaks of the structure of an obsession, but reads that obsession as a textual one, and in doing this reveals the *intentio operis*. Unfortunately, such a beautiful textual analysis is interwoven with biographical remarks that connect textual evidence with aspects (known by extratextual sources) of Poe's private life. When she says that Poe was dominated by the impression he felt as a child when he saw his mother, dead of consumption, lying on the catafalque, when she says that in his adult life and in his work he was so morbidly attracted by women with funereal features, when she reads his stories populated by living corpses in order to explain his personal nechrophilia—then she is using and not interpreting texts.



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7. INTERPRETATION AND CONJECTURE

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 intention is not displayed by the Text Linear Manifestation. 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 text intention only as the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text intention.

A text is a device conceived in order to produce its 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 who is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text.

Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result. I am not ashamed to admit that in so doing, I am defining the old and still valid hermeneutic circle.

The logic of interpretation is the Peircian logic of *abduction* (see Eco and Sebeok 1984). To make a conjecture means to figure out a Law that can explain a Result. The "secret code" of a text is such a Law. One could say that in natural sciences the conjecture has to try only the Law, since the Result is under everybody's eyes, while in textual interpretation only the discovery of a "good" Law makes the Result acceptable. But I do not think that the difference is so clear-cut. Even in natural sciences no fact can be taken as a significant Result without our having first and vaguely decided that this fact can be selected among innumerable others as a curious Result to be explained. To isolate a fact as a curious Result means to have already obscurely thought of a Law of which that fact could be the Result. When I start reading a text I never know, from the beginning, if I am approaching it from the point

of view of a suitable intention. My initiative starts becoming exciting when I discover that my intention could meet the intention of that text.

How does one prove a conjecture about the *intentio operis*? The only way is to check it against the text as a coherent whole. This idea, too, is an old one and comes from Augustine (*De doctrina christiana*): any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed, and must be rejected if it is challenged, by another portion of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.

Once Borges suggested that it would be exciting to read the *Imitation of Christ* as if it was written by Céline. The game is amusing and could be intellectually fruitful. With certain texts it could yield new and interesting interpretations. It cannot, however, work with Thomas à Kempis. I tried: I discovered sentences that could have been written by Céline ("Grace loves low things and is not disgusted by thorny ones, and likes filthy clothes"). But this kind of reading offers a suitable "grid" for very few sentences of the *Imitation*. Most of the book submits very reluctantly to this reading. If, on the contrary, I read the book according to the Christian Medieval encyclopedia, it appears textually coherent in each of its parts.

Besides, no responsible deconstructionist has ever challenged such a position. Hillis Miller (1980) said that "the readings of deconstructive criticism are not the willful imposition by a subjectivity of a theory on the texts, but are coerced by the texts themselves" (611). Elsewhere (*Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*) he writes that

it is not true that . . . all readings are equally valid. . . . Some readings are certainly wrong. . . . To reveal one aspect of a work of an author often means ignoring or shading other aspects. . . . Some approaches reach more deeply into the structure of the text than others. (ix)

#### 8. THE FALSIFIABILITY OF MISINTERPRETATIONS

We can thus accept a sort of Popper-like principle according to which if there are no rules that help to ascertain which interpretations are the "best ones," there is at least a rule for ascertaining which ones are "bad." As mentioned above, this rule says that the internal coherence of a text must be taken as a parameter for

its interpretations. But in order to do so one needs, at least for a short time, a metalanguage which permits the comparison between a given text and its semantical or critical interpretation. Since any new interpretation enriches the text and the text consists of its objective Linear Manifestation plus the interpretations it received in the course of history, this metalanguage should also allow for the comparison between a new and an old interpretation.

I understand that from the point of view of a radical deconstruction theory such an assumption can sound unpleasantly neopositivistic, and that Derrida's notion of deconstruction and drift challenges the very possibility of a metalanguage. But a metalanguage does not have to be different from (and more powerful than) ordinary language. The idea of interpretation requires that a "piece" of ordinary language be used as the *interpretant* (in the Peircian sense) of another "piece" of ordinary language. When one says that *man* means "human male adult," one is interpreting ordinary language through ordinary language, and the second "sign"—Peirce observes—is the interpretant of the first one, just as the first can become the interpretant of the second one.

The metalanguage of interpretation is not different from its object language. It is a portion of the same language and, in this sense, to interpret is a function that every language performs when it speaks of itself. It is not the case of asking if this can be done. We are doing it, everyday.

The provocative self-evidence of my last argument suggests that we can prove it only by showing that any of its alternatives is self-contradictory.

Let us suppose that there is a theory that *literally* (not metaphorically) asserts that every interpretation is a misinterpretation.

Let us suppose that there are two texts  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  and that we have submitted them to a reader in order to elicit his/her textually recorded misinterpretation  $\Sigma$ .

Take a literate subject X, previously informed that any interpretation must be a misinterpretation, and give him/her the three texts  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$  and  $\Sigma$ .

Ask X if  $\Sigma$  misinterprets  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$ .

Supposing that X says that  $\Sigma$  is a misinterpretation of  $\alpha$ , would we say that X is right? Supposing, on the contrary, that X says that  $\Sigma$  is a misinterpretation of  $\beta$ , would we say that X is wrong?

In both cases, to approve or to disapprove of X's answer means to believe not only that a text controls and selects its own interpretations but also that it controls and selects its own misin-

terpretations. The one approving or disapproving of X's answers would then act as one who does not really believe that every interpretation is a misinterpretation, since he/she would use the original text as a parameter for discriminating between texts that misinterpret it and texts that misinterpret something else. This move would presuppose a previous interpretation of  $\alpha$  which should be considered the only correct one, as well as a metalanguage which describes  $\alpha$  and shows on which grounds  $\Sigma$  is or is not a misinterpretation of it.

It would be embarrassing to maintain that a text elicits only misinterpretations except when it is correctly interpreted by the warrant of the misinterpretations of other readers. But this is exactly what happens with a radical theory of misinterpretation.

There is another way to escape the contradiction. One should assume that every answer of X is the good one.  $\Sigma$  can be indifferently the misinterpretation of  $\alpha$ , of  $\beta$ , and of any other possible text. But at this point why define  $\Sigma$  (which is undoubtedly a text in its own right) as the misinterpretation of something else? If it is the misinterpretation of everything, it then is the misinterpretation of nothing. It exists for its own sake and does not need to be compared with any other text.

The solution is elegant, but its result a little inconvenient. It destroys the very category of textual interpretation. There are texts, but of these nobody can speak. Or, if one speaks, nobody can say what one says. Texts, at most, are used as stimuli to produce other texts, but once a new text is produced, it cannot be referred to its stimulus.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

To defend the rights of interpretation against the mere use of a text does not mean that texts must never be used. We are using texts everyday and we need to do it, for many respectable reasons. It is only important to distinguish use from interpretation.

A critical reader could also say why certain texts have been used in a certain way, finding in their structure the reasons of their use or misuse. In this sense a sociological analysis of the free uses of texts can support a further interpretation of them.

In any case, use and interpretation are abstract theoretical possibilities. Every empirical reading is always an unpredictable mixture of both. It can happen that a play started as use, ends by producing a fruitful new interpretation—or vice versa. Sometimes to use texts means to free them from previous interpreta-

tions, to discover new aspects of them, to realize that previously they had been illicitly interpreted, to find out a new and more explicative *intentio operis*, that too many uncontrolled intentions of the readers (perhaps disguised as a faithful quest for the intention of the author) had polluted and obscured it.

There is also a *pretextual* reading, performed not in order to interpret the text but to show how much language can produce unlimited semiosis. Such a pretextual reading has a philosophical function, and many of the examples of deconstruction provided by Derrida belong to this kind of activity. It so happened that a legitimate philosophical practice has been taken as a model for literary criticism and for a new trend in textual interpretation.

Our theoretical duty was to acknowledge that this happened and to show why it should not have happened.

### Notes

1. I realize now that my idea of system of expectations, even though built up on the grounds of other theoretical influences, was not so dissimilar from Jauss' notion of *Erwartungshorizon*.

2. In *Opera aperta*, 2d ed., pp. 131-32, I was considering under the headings of "work of art" not only literary texts but also paintings, cinema, television. I am grateful to Wolfgang Iser (1976) for observing not only that some of my remarks on nonverbal arts were also relevant for literature (ch. 5), but also (ch. 3) that my further discussion on iconic signs (Eco 1968) was in support of the idea that even literary signs designate "the conditions of conception and perception which enable the observer to construct the object intended by the sign" and therefore "constitute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate the *instructions* for the *production* of the signified."

3. One could say that, while the semantic reader is planned or instructed by the verbal strategy, the critical one is such on the grounds of a mere interpretive decision—nothing in the text appearing as an explicit appeal to a second-level reading. But it must be noted that many artistic devices, for instance stylistical violation of the norm, or defamiliarization, seem to work exactly as self-focusing appeals: the text is made in such a way as to attract the attention of a critical reader. Moreover, there are texts that explicitly require a second-level reading. Take for instance Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which is narrated

by a character who, at the end, will be discovered by Poirot as the murderer. After his confession, the narrator informs the readers that, if they had paid due attention, they could have understood in which precise moment he committed his crime because in some reticent way he did say it. See also my analysis of Allais's "Un drame bien parisien" (Eco 1979), where it is shown to what extent the text, while deceiving, step by step, naive readers, at the same time provides them with many clues that could have prevented them from falling into the textual trap. Obviously, these clues can be detected only in the course of a second reading.

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