

Magazine

False starts

Umberto echo Sydney Brenner



When I began writing these columns I had no idea how they might develop. I had accepted the invitation thinking that I would have time on my hands that I could devote to the written word.

Part of my intention

was to produce pithy, well-chosen comments on contemporary biological research, and to use the opportunity to say all the things one wants to say, but that are excluded from papers by referees and editors on the grounds that they are speculative and unsupported by evidence.

As it happens, I did produce a few semi-serious columns, but luckily my better half took over and I became more interested in the comic aspects of what we do. Parody has always attracted me, and as a student I produced scripts or, more accurately, scribbled notes, for cabaret acts at lab parties. There was a re-enactment of the rediscovery of Mendel's laws to be performed as simultaneous monologues in heavy German accents by three actors disguised as Tschermak, Correns and de Vries. There was the Lives of the Great Composers series, one of which featured Berlioz sitting in a morgue holding the hand of a corpse and singing: "Your tiny hand is frozen...Mmm! I must tell that to my friend Puccini." There were lectures on schizophrenic acid and related phrenane derivatives and a transformation into science of *Les Enfants du Parodies*.

I have enjoyed finding rare examples of problems that by their absurdity allow one to find the truth, and I like the resolution that can be generated from two contradictory cases. My columns on the reconstruction of the present by some future historian's interpretation of surviving fragments involve a careful selection of the fragments to make the spurious theories proposed appear very likely. They are also allegories of how we can go wrong in research when not all the facts are available.

After a few years of writing my monthly pieces, I began to consider myself a man of literary talents, especially when I found that my scientific work was fast being forgotten and I was achieving more fame as a writer. I was in danger of becoming over-impressed by my literary inventions when I was brought to a halt by my discovery that it had all been done before by Umberto Eco in a series of columns he wrote in 1959–1961 for an Italian literary journal. These were translated into English in 1993/1994 as *Misreadings* and *How to Travel with a Salmon*, although they only recently came to my attention.

Umberto Eco is a Professor of semiotics and, notwithstanding the title of one of these books, has very little to say on molecular biology and genetics. I am not sure what semiotics is — it sounds like half an ear to me — but Eco is clearly a literary man, a novelist and a writer on many interesting subjects. I am therefore extremely worried that some future doctoral student in the field of History of Ideas will draw the conclusion from textual comparisons that much of what I have written derives from Eco.

Before I hear mutterings of 'plagiarism', let me assure my faithful readers that I totally deny that charge. But I have to agree that an explanation is required to account for the homologies in the two oeuvres and to explain why Eco's

pastiches of the future, may lead people to conclude that there is some connection between him and Uncle Syd. Fortunately I have been able to discover an elegant theory which explains all and which accords well with the neo-avant-garde aspects of post-modern thought in both science and the humanities.

The more educated of my readers will know that two different geometries were generated by modifying the axiom of parallel lines in Euclidean geometry. I propose to do the same for the central axiom of causality in one particular set of dimensions. This axiom states that if event p causes event q , p must precede q in time. We will allow that even if p follows q in time it can still cause q . "Nonsense", I hear you say. But consider the following: suppose ideas exist in a different dimension from the real world and have their own history and temporal evolution, and suppose they are signalled in the real world only through agents such as Aristotle, Jesus Christ, Karl Marx, Umberto Eco and Uncle Syd. There is no reason to believe that the mapping of the sampling process need to be conserved in the time co-ordinates for the two worlds.

It therefore makes sense to consider such questions as the influence of Marxist thought on Christian teaching. In the dimension of ideas this could well have been the correct causal relation; the fact that the two samplings have an opposite sign in our time dimension is neither here nor there.

This opens up an entirely new approach to studies in the history of ideas, placing the emphasis on the ideas and not on the human agents that sampled them. I am of course sure that Umberto Eco's writings were independent of my own, but his ideas could have been influenced by mine. I can now safely leave the deeper connections between his writings and those of Uncle Syd to a PhD thesis.