

## Introduction: Interpretation terminable and interminable

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### I

'My only reservation is whether this topic will turn out to be sufficiently about "human values".' Those familiar with the workings of academic committees will recognize the tone. Around the table on this occasion was the Tanner Lectures Committee of Clare Hall, Cambridge. The Tanner Lectures were founded by the American philanthropist and former Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utah, Obert C. Tanner, and they were formally established at Clare Hall on 1 July 1978. (Tanner lectures are also given annually at Harvard, Michigan, Princeton, Stanford, Utah, Brasenose College, Oxford, and occasionally elsewhere.) Their stated purpose is 'to advance and reflect upon the scholarly and scientific learning relating to human values and valuations'. On the occasion in question, an invitation to be the Tanner lecturer for 1990 had been issued to Umberto Eco, and in accepting he had proposed 'Interpretation and overinterpretation' as his topic. It was this topic which led the committee-member quoted above, anxious to anticipate any possible difficulty, to voice his one reservation, a reservation which the committee did not allow to detain it for very long.

It was evidently not a reservation shared by the nearly five

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hundred people who squeezed into one of Cambridge's largest auditoria to hear the lectures. Perhaps some came largely to satisfy their curiosity by seeing one of the most celebrated writers of our time, perhaps others were driven simply by the desire not to miss a show-piece cultural and social occasion, though the fact that this huge audience returned to hear the second and third lectures testifies to other sources of interest as well as to the magnetic qualities of the lecturer. Still less were any reservations manifested by those enthusiasts who next morning queued from the early hours to be able to listen to, and participate in, the ensuing seminar, spurred in this case by the prospect of seeing Eco debate with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose, in a day-long session chaired by Frank Kermode. Discussion was certainly lively, enriched by contributions from a distinguished gathering of scholars and critics, beginning (alphabetically) with Isobel Armstrong, Gillian Beer, Patrick Boyde, and Marilyn Butler, and seasoned by the specially pertinent reflections of other novelist-critics present, such as Malcolm Bradbury, John Harvey, and David Lodge.

Umberto Eco, the principal participant in these proceedings, has distinguished himself in so many fields that he defies easy classification. A native of Piedmont, he studied philosophy at the University of Turin and wrote a thesis on the aesthetics of St Thomas Aquinas. He worked on cultural programmes for the state television network, and subsequently held posts at the universities of Turin, Milan, and Florence, while continuing to act in an editorial capacity for the publishing house of Bompiani. Since 1975, he has held the Chair of Semiotics at the University of Bologna (the first of its kind to be established in any university). He has published over a dozen substantial books, making important contributions to the fields of aesthetics, semiotics, and cultural criticism. Most of these books have

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been translated into English and other languages, though it is an indication of Professor Eco's formidable talents as a linguist that several of his recent works have had to be translated into *Italian*, the originals having been written in English. At the same time, he has been a prolific journalist, writing regular and often very funny columns for several of the major Italian daily and weekly newspapers. But, in the English-speaking world at least, he is known to a far wider audience as the author of *The Name of the Rose*, the novel he published in 1980 and which became an international best-seller. In 1988 he followed this with his second novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, which was translated into English the following year and showered with critical attention.

The present volume includes the revised texts of Eco's 1990 Tanner Lectures, of the papers by the three seminarists, and of Eco's reply. Since the issues disputed among the participants may at times seem rather abstruse or technical to the uninitiated reader, it may be helpful to map out in advance the main lines of division between them and to point to some of the larger implications of an enquiry which lies at the heart of so many forms of cultural understanding in the late twentieth century.

## II

Interpretation is not, of course, an activity invented by twentieth-century literary theorists. Indeed, puzzles and disputes about how to characterize that activity have a long history in Western thought, provoked above all by the enormously consequential task of establishing the meaning of the Word of God. The modern phase of this history essentially dates from the heightened self-consciousness about the problem of textual meaning introduced by the biblical hermeneu-

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tics associated with Schleiermacher at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the centrality of interpretation to understanding all the creations of the human spirit was made the basis of a programme for the complete range of the *Geisteswissenschaften* by Dilthey in the later part of the century.

The distinctive stage the debate has entered in the last two or three decades needs to be understood in the context of two large-scale developments. The first is that an enormous expansion of higher education since 1945 throughout the Western world has given a new significance to issues which affect the general cultural role of such institutions and, more particularly, to questions about the identity and status of the institutionally defined 'disciplines'. In the English-speaking world, 'English' as a discipline acquired in the course of this process a position of peculiar centrality and sensitiveness as the discipline the least insulated from the existential concerns of the lay readers and writers outside the walls – which meant, among other things, that disputes within the profession continued to be the object of intermittent public attention. A simple yet striking indication of the subject's prominence is the fact that in 1970 English was the largest undergraduate department in two-thirds of American universities and colleges.<sup>1</sup>

However, in recent decades both the 'canon' of writings traditionally understood to constitute the subject-matter of the discipline and the methods considered appropriate to its study have come under sharper scrutiny, as the social and ethnic

<sup>1</sup> Richard Ohmann, *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (New York, 1976), pp. 214–15. Ohmann emphasizes the extent to which this expansion rested upon the key curricular role of 'freshman composition'. For a longer historical perspective, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987).

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assumptions on which they had rested no longer enjoyed an easy dominance in the world about them. Added to this, the cultural diversity of American society and the market principles governing individual success in American academic life have helped to make that congeries of second-order reflection now known as 'theory' the central intellectual arena in which reputations are made and battles about power and status are fought out. Focussing on this institutional setting may not go very far towards explaining the actual content of the positions taken up in such debates, but it is indispensable if one is to understand either the apparent disproportion of passion to outcome, or the degree of attention accorded debate on such arcane matters by the wider society.

This points towards the second of the large-scale developments which have thrown a burden of significance onto debates about interpretation, namely the way in which a body of writing rooted in the distinctive preoccupations and manners of proceeding of Continental European philosophy has collided with (any verb suggesting greater mutual understanding or good-will would culpably misrepresent the nature of the encounter) a largely Anglo-Saxon tradition of the critical explication and appreciation of literary works. This development, too, needs to be seen in a longer historical perspective. A defining passage in the unsteady path towards professionalization pursued by literary studies in Britain and America in the course of the twentieth century occurred when the concentration on historical scholarship *about* literature, which had been the legacy of the nineteenth-century attempt to live up to the prevailing conception of 'scientific method', was challenged and very considerably displaced by a critical practice which dwelt with fierce attentiveness on the verbal details of canonical works of 'great literature', a practice associated in Britain with the work of I.A. Richards in 'Practical Criticism'

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(and in more complicated or remote ways with the critical work of T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, and William Empson), and in the United States with that of the 'New Critics', notably John Crowe Ransom, R.P. Blackmur, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and W.K. Wimsatt. This practice eventually generated its own set of justifying doctrines, especially in the United States, at the heart of which was a conception of the work of literature as an aesthetic object – free-standing, autotelic, the dynamics of whose self-sufficient meaning it was the task of the critic to elucidate. A secondary doctrine, derived from this primary dogma, was the repudiation of the so-called 'intentionalist fallacy', the supposed mistake of believing that evidence about the author's pre-textual intentions might be relevant to establishing the 'meaning' of the 'verbal icon' (to use Wimsatt's phrase) that was the work of literature. (In principle, these doctrines were supposed to apply to all literary genres, but it has long been apparent that they were largely developed out of the criticism of, and always least awkwardly referred to, short lyric poetry which abounded in the kinds of 'tensions' and 'ambiguities' whose identification was the particular forte of the leading New Critics.)

The attitudes towards literature and its criticism encouraged by this movement, and which came to have a preponderant though perhaps never monopolistic position in Anglo-American literature departments by the 1950s and 1960s, proved predictably unreceptive to the heterodox ideas about meaning developed within Continental European philosophical traditions, stemming particularly from hermeneutics, phenomenology and structural linguistics. The extension of some of the fundamental ideas of Saussure's linguistic theories, in particular, and their partial congruence with the anthropological theories of Lévi-Strauss, led to the spread across many

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fields of enquiry from the late 1950s onwards of a search for deep structures and recurrent patterns underlying all areas of human activity. When combined with the revived post-Kantian legacy of the transcendental enquiry into the conditions of the possibility of an activity, this issued in the elaboration of very general theories about the nature of meaning, communication, and similar topics. (The semiology, or science of signs, with which Eco himself has been closely associated, formed part of this larger tendency, pursued at least as much by those trained in philosophy and the social sciences as by those whose allegiances were primarily to the study of literature.) The description of a further instalment of such theorizing as 'poststructuralist' is partly just journalism's need for labels, but it does also suggest how Saussure's insistence on the arbitrariness of the signifier has been the starting point for more recent claims, advanced with dazzling virtuosity by Jacques Derrida in particular, about the instability of all meaning in writing.

The upshot of the spread among those employed to teach literature in British and American universities of enthusiasm for ideas derived from this not always well understood cluster of philosophical traditions has been heated, confused, and by now rather protracted controversy about the whole nature and purpose of literary studies. In the course of this debate, the idea that the establishment of 'the meaning' of a literary text might be a legitimate goal of critical enquiry has come in for some pretty rough handling. The attempt to limit the range of relevant meaning-conferring contexts or to halt the endlessly self-dissolving instabilities of writing has been stigmatized as 'authoritarian' – a charge which is itself an example of the readiness with which complex theoretical questions have been linked to wider political attitudes. Conversely, those wary of what they see as a too easy movement between different levels

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of abstraction argue that the point of the Derridean denial of epistemic 'certainty' was dependent upon a tradition of post-Cartesian philosophy and should not be taken to cast doubt upon the possibility of establishing conventionally agreed meanings for written texts of all kinds. They support their point by accusing the poststructuralist critic of 'playing a double game, introducing his own interpretive strategy when reading someone else's text, but tacitly relying on communal norms when undertaking to communicate the methods and results of his interpretations to his own readers'.<sup>2</sup>

In choosing the present topic for his lectures, therefore, Eco was committing himself to staking out a position in a fast-moving international discussion, or group of related discussions, about the nature of meaning and the possibilities and limits of interpretation. Having been one of the most influential in drawing attention, in the 1960s and 1970s, to the role of the reader in the process of 'producing' meaning, he has, in his most recent work, expressed an unease at the way some of the leading strands of contemporary critical thought, especially that style of Derrida-inspired American criticism calling itself 'Deconstruction' and associated above all with the work of Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller, appear to him to licence the reader to produce a limitless, uncheckable flow of 'readings'.<sup>3</sup> Developing this protest against what he sees as the perverse appropriation of the idea of 'unlimited semiosis', Eco's lectures in this volume explore ways of limiting the range of admissible interpretations and hence of identifying certain readings as 'overinterpretation'.

To this end, the first lecture recounts the long history in

<sup>2</sup> M.H. Abrams, 'How to do things with texts', in his *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (New York, 1989), p. 295.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular the pieces gathered in Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (forthcoming).

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Western thought of ideas of 'secret' meanings, encoded in language in ways which escape the attention of all but the initiated few. The thrust of this account is to make contemporary theory seem to be a replay of long familiar moves, almost a further stage in the tortuous history of Hermeticism and Gnosticism, in which the more esoteric a form of knowledge can be shown to be the more greatly it is prized, and in which each peeled layer or decoded secret turns out to be but the antechamber to a yet more cunningly concealed truth. A common psychological element in these traditions of interpretation lies in the attitude of suspicion or disdain towards apparent meaning, its very accessibility and seeming concordance with common sense fatally damning its status in the eyes of the Followers of the Veil.

In his second lecture, Eco distances himself still further from the modern form of this tendency by insisting that we can, and do, recognize overinterpretation of a text without necessarily being able to prove that one interpretation is the right one, or even clinging to any belief that there must be *one* right reading. His argument here is chiefly carried by his amusing exploitation of examples, notably of the obsessively Rosicrucian reading of Dante by the relatively obscure nineteenth-century Anglo-Italian man of letters, Gabriele Rossetti. Eco's discussion, in the same spirit, of the interpretation of a Wordsworth poem by the American critic Geoffrey Hartman is intended to indicate another way of exceeding the bounds of legitimate interpretation, though here there may be more readers prepared to find Hartman's reading illuminating rather than exaggerated. In this argument the provocative notion of *intentio operis*, the intention of the work, plays an important role, as a source of meaning which, while not being reducible to the pre-textual *intentio auctoris*, none the less operates as a constraint upon the free play of the *intentio lectoris*. The nature,

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status, and identification of this *intentio operis* all seem to call for further elaboration, although, drawing upon his own earlier distinctions between the Empirical Reader, the Implied Reader, and the Model Reader, Eco ingeniously construes the notion to suggest that the aim of the text must be to produce the Model Reader – that is to say, the reader who reads it as it is in some sense designed to be read, where that may include the possibility of being read so as to yield multiple interpretations.

Eco's third lecture addresses the related question of whether the Empirical Author has any privileged position as interpreter of 'his' text (a possessive that not all theorists of interpretation would wish to let pass unchallenged). Eco accepts the doctrine, enshrined by the New Critics several decades ago, that the author's pre-textual intention – the purposes that may have led to the attempt to write a particular work – cannot furnish the touchstone of interpretation, and may even be irrelevant or misleading as guides to a text's meaning or meanings. Yet he does argue that, retrospectively, the Empirical Author must be allowed to rule out certain interpretations, although whether they are ruled out as interpretations of what he intended to mean or of what, under any intelligible or persuasive reading, the text could legitimately be made to mean, is less clear. He gives the argument a characteristically personal twist by offering some engaging revelations about the Empirical Author of *The Name of the Rose*, an Empirical Author who in this case, at least, seems also to lay some claim to be the Model Reader.

The papers by the three seminarists each represent responses to Eco's claims grounded in other intellectual traditions and ultimately in different, though at various points interlocking, sets of pre-occupations.

For the past two decades, Richard Rorty ('the most interesting philosopher in the world today' in the opinion of the American critic Harold Bloom) has conducted a forceful and