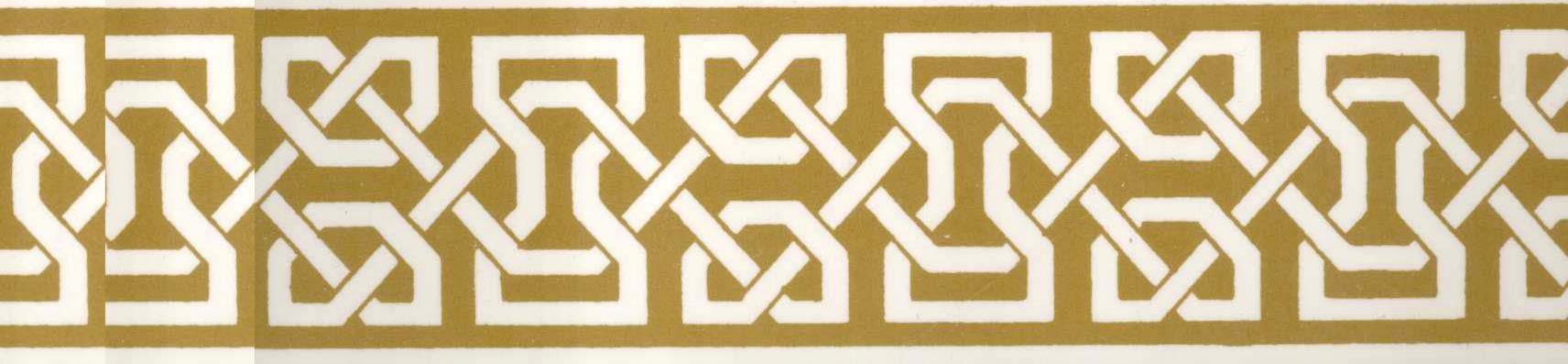


UMBERTO ECO**The Open Work

TRANSLATED BY ANNA CANCOGNI INTRODUCTION BY DAVID ROBEY



The Open Work

Umberto Eco

Translated by Anna Cancogni

With an Introduction by David Robey

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Introduction

by David Robey

Umberto Eco's first published book was the dissertation he wrote at the University of Turin, on problems of aesthetics in the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas. His first novel, published twenty-four years later in 1980, continues this early interest in the high Middle Ages. As so many readers of *The Name of the Rose* can testify, few, if any, works of fiction have brought the cultural and intellectual world of this period, or of any other period, so successfully to life. But medieval studies have been only a minor if persistent interest in Eco's work as a whole. Since he wrote his dissertation, his remarkable energies have been mainly directed at the problems and issues of the present: modern art and modern culture, mass communications, and the discipline of semiotics.

This book collects for the first time in English Eco's major "presemiotic" writings on modern literature and art—writings, that is, which predate the publication in 1968 of his first semiotic or semiological book (the terms "semiotics" and "semiology" can be used interchangeably), La struttura assente (The absent structure). Most of them are taken from one or more of the many editions of

1. Il problema estetico in San Tommaso (Turin, 1956); now revised by the author and recently translated into English as The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). Much of this introduction appeared in my chapter on Umberto Eco in M. Caesar and P. Hainsworth, eds., Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy (Leamington Spa, England: Berg Publishers, 1984), pp. 63–87. Readers are referred to this volume for further information on the literary context of Eco's writing, and especially to the chapter by C. Wagstaff, "The Neo-Avantgarde." I am grateful to the publishers for permission to reprint parts of my chapter here. Some of the material was also previously published in the Times Higher Education Supplement.

Opera aperta (The open work), published in 1962, the first of Eco's books on a modern topic and the work with which he made his name in Italy. Two chapters of the present volume were originally written after Eco's conversion to semiotics. The first, "The Death of the Gruppo 63," is included here because it deals with an artistic movement with which Eco became closely associated immediately after the publication of Opera aperta. The other, "Series and Structure," is of particular interest because it deals with the relationship between the poetics of the "open work" and the structuralist theory which was the starting point of Eco's semiotics.

Since Opera aperta first appeared, Eco's thinking has developed in a great many ways. But, as we shall see, there is a substantial and striking continuity between his early and his later writings. More important in the present connection, there is a great deal in Opera aperta and in Eco's writings of the same period that has not been superseded in his subsequent development, and that remains of considerable relevance and interest. Opera aperta in particular is still a significant work, both on account of the enduring historical usefulness of its concept of "openness," and because of the striking way in which it anticipates two of the major themes of contemporary literary theory from the mid-sixties onward: the insistence on the element of multiplicity, plurality, or polysemy in art, and the emphasis on the role of the reader, on literary interpretation and response as an interactive process between reader and text. The questions the book raises, and the answers it gives, are very much part of the continuing contemporary debate on literature, art, and culture in general.

Opera aperta is a polemical book, in marked conflict with the Crocean aesthetics that dominated the Italian academic world in the early sixties. There are a great many references to Croce in the chapters that follow, testifying to the strength of his philosophical influence on thinkers of Eco's generation; indeed, the hegemony Croce exercised over Italian intellectual life throughout the Fascist period and for the first two postwar decades is probably without parallel in modern European history. The problematic concept of pure intuition/expression, which constitutes the foundation of Crocean aesthetics, is something we need not consider here, but some of the consequences it entails are worth recalling if we want

to understand Opera aperta in its original context.² Art for Croce was a purely mental phenomenon that could be communicated directly from the mind of the artist to that of the reader, viewer, or listener. The intuition/expression which constituted the essence of the work of art was thus an unchanging entity; it also necessarily possessed unity, which Croce tended to speak of as a dominant lyrical feeling or sentiment. The material medium of the artistic work was of no real significance; it merely served as a stimulus to enable the reader to reproduce in him- or herself the artist's original intuition. Equally, the material historical circumstances in which the artist lived, the artist's biography, the artist's intentions—all were irrelevant to the proper understanding of the work, since they were the concern of human faculties quite distinct from those that generated artistic expression. To all of these principles, Opera aperta is completely and radically opposed.

Opera aperta arose partly out of Eco's work on general questions of aesthetics, which was strongly influenced by the anti-Crocean, though still idealist, philosophy of his mentor at the University of Turin, Luigi Pareyson, the subject of Chapter 7 (unless otherwise specified, references to chapters and pages are to those in the present volume). But the immediate stimulus for writing it came from his contacts with avant-garde artists, together with his study of the work of James Joyce, a writer in whom he had a particular personal interest. In fact, the book has the air of a theoretical manifesto for certain kinds of avant-garde art; for the Gruppo 63 (see Chapter 11), which was formed in the year after its publication and of which Eco himself became a member, it effectively served as such.

In Opera aperta the idea of the open work serves to explain and justify the apparently radical difference in character between modern and traditional art. The idea is illustrated in its most extreme form by what Eco calls "works in motion" (opere in movimento); he cites (Chapter 1) the aleatory music of Stockhausen, Berio, and Pousseur, Calder's mobiles, and Mallarmé's Livre. What such works have in common is the artist's decision to leave the arrangement of some of their constituents either to the public or to chance, thus giving them not a single definitive order but a multiplicity of

^{2.} For an introduction to Croce's work, see his Breviario di estetica (Bari: Laterza, 1951; orig. pub. 1913), tr. as The Essence of Aesthetic (London: Heinemann, 1921).

possible orders; if Mallarmé had ever finished his *Livre*, for instance, the reader would have been left, at least up to a point, to arrange its pages for him- or herself in a variety of different sequences. Works of this kind are for the most part of recent origin, evidently, and even today are very much the exception rather than the rule. Eco's point, however, is that the intention behind them is fundamentally similar to the intention behind a great deal of modern art since the Symbolist movement at the end of the nineteenth century.

Traditional or "classical" art, Eco argues, was in an essential sense unambiguous. It could give rise to various responses, but its nature was such as to channel these responses in a particular direction; for readers, viewers, and listeners there was in general only one way of understanding what a text was about, what a painting or sculpture stood for, what the tune was of a piece of music. Much modern art, on the other hand, is deliberately and systematically ambiguous. A text like Finnegans Wake, for Eco the exemplary modern open work, cannot be said to be about a particular subject; a great variety of potential meanings coexist in it, and none can be said to be the main or dominant one. The text presents the reader with a "field" of possibilities and leaves it in large part to him or her to decide what approach to take. The same can be said, Eco argues, of many other modern texts that are less radically avant-garde than the Wake—for instance, Symbolist poems, Brecht's plays, Kafka's novels.

This is where the analogy with works like Mallarmé's Livre obtains: just as Mallarmé's reader would have arranged the pages of the book in a number of different sequences, so the reader of the Wake perceives a number of different patterns of meaning in Joyce's language. In the Livre it is the material form that is open, whereas in the Wake it is the semantic content; but in each case, according to Eco, the reader is in substantially the same position, because in each case he or she moves freely amid a multiplicity of different interpretations. The same analogy obtains, he argues, between abstract visual art and mobiles; and between the aleatory music of Stockhausen, Berio, or Pousseur and the serial music of a composer like Webern (see particularly Chapter 10). All these characteristically modern forms of art are said by Eco to mark a radical shift in the relationship between artist and public, by requiring of the public a

much greater degree of collaboration and personal involvement than was ever required by the traditional art of the past.

The deliberate and systematic ambiguity of the open work is associated by Eco with a well-known feature of modern art, namely its high degree of formal innovation. Ambiguity, for Eco, is the product of the contravention of established conventions of expression: the less conventional forms of expression are, the more scope they allow for interpretation and therefore the more ambiguous they can be said to be. In traditional art, contraventions occurred only within very definite limits, and forms of expression remained substantially conventional; its ambiguity, therefore, was of a clearly circumscribed kind. In the modern open work, on the other hand, the contravention of conventions is far more radical, and it is this that gives it its very high degree of ambiguity; since ordinary rules of expression no longer apply, the scope for interpretation becomes enormous. Moreover, conventional forms of expression convey conventional meanings, and conventional meanings are parts of a conventional view of the world. Thus, according to Eco, traditional art confirms conventional views of the world, whereas the modern open work implicitly denies them.

"Ambiguity" is one term used by Eco to represent the effect of formal innovation in art. Another is "information"; Chapter 3 below deals with the connection between the mathematical theory of information and the idea of openness. What interests Eco about this theory, in brief, is the principle that the information (as opposed to the "meaning") of a message is in inverse proportion to its probability or predictability. This suggests to him a parallel between the concept of information and the effect of art, particularly modern art, since the forms of art can be said to possess a high degree of improbability or unpredictability by virtue of their contravention of established conventions of expression. Thus, Eco argues, art in general may be seen as conveying a much higher degree of information, though not necessarily a higher degree of meaning, than more conventional kinds of communication; and the modern open work may be seen as conveying an exceptionally high degree of information, because of the radical contraventions of established conventions that characterize it. Eco's interest in information theory was clearly one of the factors that led him shortly afterward to the study of semiotics. (Readers may notice that in the present

volume, Eco's chapter "Openness, Information, Communication" contains, as does the preceding chapter, a number of structuralist or semiotic arguments. These were inserted by Eco in later editions of Opera aperta.)

Opera aperta thus proposes an equation between the degree of openness, the degree of information, the degree of ambiguity, and the degree of contravention of conventions in a work, an equation which serves to distinguish traditional and modern art from one another, but which does not in itself tell us anything about the distinction between art and nonart or good art and bad, since the contravention of conventions and the consequent proliferation of possibilities of interpretation are not in themselves a guarantee of artistic value. To distinguish good art from bad, Eco takes over from Pareyson's aesthetics of "formativity" the concept of organic form, which for him as for Pareyson is closely allied to that of artistic intention. Thus he argues, first, that the contravention of conventions in modern art must, if it is to be aesthetically successful, produce "controlled disorder" (Chapter 3), the "organic fusion of multiple elements" (Chapter 4). Second, the interpretation of the modern open work is far from entirely free; a formative intention is manifest in every work, and this intention must be a determining factor in the interpretive process. For all its openness, the work nonetheless directs the public's response; there are right ways and wrong ways, for instance, of reading Finnegans Wake.

The concepts of organic form and artistic intention are important qualifications of Eco's notion of openness, but it must be said that they are qualifications of a somewhat problematic and elusive kind, as modern literary theory has shown. How does one distinguish between organic and nonorganic or "failed" form, especially in a work characterized by a multiplicity of different meanings? How does one identify, especially in a work of this kind, the "intentions implicitly manifested" by the author (Chapter 4), and why in any case should one's interpretation be bound by them? Eco gives no real answer to the latter questions. He gives a partial and not wholly satisfactory answer to the first in his discussion (Chapter 2) on the analysis of poetic language, which, drawing on *The Meaning of Meaning* by Ogden and Richards, the work of the American New Critics, and the theories of the semiorician C. W. Morris, explains the structure of poetic language in terms of an "iconic" function, a

special union of sound and sense; but the explanation seems to create more problems than it resolves. We shall return to this answer, and to these questions, in connection with his later work.

Such difficulties are not, of course, serious grounds for objecting to the thesis of Opera aperta. As Eco emphasized in the preface to the second edition,3 the book is more concerned with the aims of certain kinds of art than with their success or failure, with questions of poetics (poetica: a work's artistic purpose) rather than aesthetics. This claim is anticipated in the essay "Two Hypotheses about the Death of Art," written in 1962 and now Chapter 8 below. Here Eco argues that questions of poetics are central to the discussion of all modern works of art, although their treatment needs to be complemented by acts of aesthetic judgment (in connection with which he once again invokes Pareyson's theory of formativity). This insistence on the importance of poetics is a major part of Eco's, and many of his contemporaries', polemic against the then dominant "aesthetic criticism" inspired by Croce, for whom the act of aesthetic judgment was the essential task of the critic, and questions of poetics of second-order interest.

Nevertheless, much of the impetus of Opera aperta derives from its conception of the special function or effect of the modern open work in relation to the world in which we live, and this conception depends to a large extent on Eco's (and Pareyson's) general aesthetic theory. The conception is most fully developed in an essay published shortly after the book appeared, reprinted in subsequent editions (for example, the second), and now Chapter 6 below: "Form as Social Commitment" ("Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà"). This essay was written for the journal Il Menabò, apparently at the suggestion of its editor, the prominent socialist novelist Elio Vittorini, and appeared in the second of two issues on the relationship between literature and industry; it represents a viewpoint quite closely allied to Vittorini's own. Even more than the first edition of Opera aperta it has the character of a manifesto for certain kinds of avant-garde art, by virtue of the conviction it expresses, characteristic of the Gruppo 63 and of Vittorini, about avant-garde art's special political function.

In this essay, as in Opera aperta, Eco argues that the modern open

^{3.} Opera aperta, 2nd ed. (Milan: Bompiani, 1972), p. 8.

work represents through its formal properties a characteristically modern experience of the world. Like all art, it is an "epistemological metaphor": not only does it reflect aspects of modern philosophy (phenomenology, Pareyson's aesthetics) and modern science (the theory of relativity, mathematical information theory), but what is equally important, through its lack of conventional sense and order, it represents by analogy the feeling of senselessness, disorder, "discontinuity" that the modern world generates in all of us. Thus, although open works are not the only kind of art to be produced in our time, they are the only kind that is appropriate to it; the conventional sense and order of traditional art reflect an experience of the world wholly different from ours, and we deceive ourselves if we try to make this sense and order our own.

What, then, do we gain from art forms that reflect what can only seem a negative aspect of the world in which we live? Eco's essay answers this question through a discussion of the concept of alienation, in which he outlines a position that has remained characteristic of all his activity as an intellectual. In one sense alienation is both necessary and desirable, in that we can say that we are alienated to something other than ourselves, and therefore lose full possession of ourselves, whenever we become involved in it. Losing possession of ourselves is not something to be lamented; it is simply part of the back-and-forth movement between self and the world that is the condition of a truly human existence. What we must do is accept our involvement in things other than ourselves, and at the same time assert our selfhood in the face of the world by actively seeking to understand it and transform it. Art, Eco argues, can contribute significantly to this process of understanding and transforming the world, because its function is essentially cognitive. "Art knows the world through its own formative structures," he proposes (Chapter 6), referring to the aesthetics of Pareyson once again. Art represents the world—or more exactly our experience of the world—through the way it organizes its constituents (the modo di formare) rather than through what the constituents themselves represent. This representation is a type of knowledge by virtue of the element of organic form: "Where a form is realized there is a conscious operation on an amorphous material that has been brought under human control" (Chapter 6). Thus, the modern open work is a form of knowledge of the world in which we

live, insofar as it constitutes a bringing to consciousness of the nature of the contemporary "crisis." As Eco said in the first preface to Opera aperta, contemporary art seeks a solution to this crisis by offering us a "new way of seeing, feeling, understanding, and accepting a universe in which traditional relationships have been shattered and new possibilities of relationship are being laboriously sketched out." Art is therefore political in its own special way; it produces new knowledge that can serve as a basis for changing the world, but it does not necessarily have an explicitly political content.

Together with "Form as Social Commitment," Opera aperta contains, if sometimes only in germ, features that are fundamental to Eco's later semiotic theory: the notion of the special function of art; the sense of living in an age of instability and crisis; the theme of the senselessness and disorder of the modern experience of the world; and at the same time the emphasis on awareness, involvement, and the need for change. The book's style of thought has remained characteristic as well: a taste for broad, synthesizing generalizations, and a consequent tendency to stress the similarities between concepts and phenomena at the expense of the differences, and on occasion to neglect local problems in the interests of the overall view. In a more specific, personal, and paradoxical way, also, Opera aperta looks forward to Eco's shift of interest to semiotics. A large section of the first edition consists of a discussion of the poetics (poetica) of James Joyce, which was removed from subsequent editions to be published separately.5 As well as providing further illustration of the main theme of Opera aperta, this discussion points to a clear analogy between Joyce's artistic development, as Eco sees it, and Eco's own personal history. What interests him in Joyce is the novelist's move from a Catholic, Thomist position to the disordered, decentered, anarchic vision of life that seems to characterize Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. Yet Eco also finds in Joyce's mature work a degree of persistence of his youthful faith, a nostalgia for the ordered world of medieval thought that is most notably expressed in the system of symbolic correspondences

4. Opera aperta (Milan: Bompiani, 1962), p. 9.

^{5.} Now published in English as a companion to the present volume: Umberto Eco, The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

underlying the surface chaos of Ulysses; Ulysses, he suggests, is a "reverse [Thomist] summa" (The Aesthetics of Chaosmos, Chapter 2). Similarly, as he himself tells us, when Eco began working on his doctoral thesis, he did so in a "spirit of adherence to the religious world of Thomas Aquinas," a spirit which he then lost as he worked on it (The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, p. i). Yet a nostalgia for the ordered world of medieval thought seems to have remained with him as well, expressing itself not only in occasional excursions to the Middle Ages, culminating with The Name of the Rose, but also, much more indirectly, in his interest in semiotics. For Eco's semiotic theory has an ordered, comprehensive, rationalist, architectural character that also bears comparison with that of the Thomist summae, though with at least one radical qualification: whereas Saint Thomas's system is metaphysical, Eco's very definitely is not; as we shall see, the urge to system and order is displaced by him from the sphere of being to that of method alone.

But between Opera aperta and Eco's first major semiotic text there came another book which pursued a line of interest that has since constituted an important part of Eco's activities: the study of mass culture and the mass media. Chapter 9 below ("The Structure of Bad Taste") is an excerpt from it. Published in 1964, the book had as its title Apocalittici e integrati (Apocalyptic and integrated [intellectuals]), the two terms standing for two opposite attitudes to the mass media and their effect on contemporary culture: the apocalyptic view that culture has been irredeemably debased by the mass media, and that the only proper way to treat these is to disregard them; and the wholly positive view of those who are so well integrated in the modern world that they see the nature and effect of the mass media as necessary and even desirable. Eco's own view lies between these two extremes. The mass media, he argues, are such an important feature of modern society as to require the serious attention of intellectuals, and, far from being a necessarily negative influence, they are to be welcomed for providing universal access to cultural experiences previously restricted to an elite. They are not to be accepted as they are, however; the intellectual's task is to analyze their nature and effect and to seek actively to transform them, by criticizing their deleterious features and pointing the way to the improvement of their cultural content.

What this means in practice is shown by the discussion in Apoca-

littici e integrati of such things as comic strips, pop songs, and television programs, a discussion which is supplemented by two essays, published the following year, on Eugène Sue's Mystères de Paris and on the James Bond novels of Ian Fleming. The main purpose of these essays and of the discussion of specific mass media in the book is to lay bare the ideological implications of different forms of popular entertainment, particularly, in the case of the comic strips and the novels, the relationship between ideology and narrative structures. From the analysis a distinct set of common themes emerges. The kind of entertainment that Eco criticizes, as did Vittorini, is that which is consolatory, in the sense of reaffirming the public's sense of the essential rightness and permanence of the world in which they live. The great fault of the mass media, for Eco, is to convey a standardized, oversimplified, static, and complacent vision that masks the real complexity of things and implicitly denies the possibility of change.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong, Eco suggests, with pure popular entertainment; all of us feel the need to read a James Bond novel or listen to pop music from time to time. The problem is that for most people bad popular entertainment has come to be a major part of their cultural experience, and its effect has been to exercise a strongly reactionary influence. The solution, therefore, is not to raise popular entertainment to the level of art—Eco is not saying that the public should be fed on a diet of modern open works—but to work for forms of entertainment that are "honest." This means, on the one hand, entertainment that does not have false artistic pretensions; the concept of Kitsch is discussed at some length in Apocalittici e integrati, in the chapter translated below, and is defined as nonart that aspires to artistic status by borrowing devices from true artworks, devices that automatically cease to be artistic when they are used outside their original "organic" context. On the other hand, what is more important, "honest" entertainment is that which is ideologically sound, not in the sense of propagating the dogma of a political party, but by virtue of more widely acceptable qualities: because it acknowledges the complexity, the problematic

^{6.} Now in Il superuomo di massa (Milan: Bompiani, 1978), pp. 27-67 and 145-184; and translated into English in The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1979).

character of the historical circumstances in which we live, because it allows for the possibility of change and serves as a stimulus to reflection and criticism, because it generates a sense of independence and choice instead of conformism and passivity.

This should help make clear what kind of political commitment Eco expresses in his writings. The emphasis on change, the hostility to conformism and conservatism must mark him as a man of the left. Yet however he personally may vote, there is no recognizably party-political element in his books. This is partly because his intellectual task, as he conceives it, is cultural rather than narrowly political, but more because his values are broadly democratic rather than specifically socialist or communist. In particular, as a writer, he has always kept his distance from the Italian Communist Party. Opera aperta, with its insistence on the special function of the modern open work, was in conflict with the view of art at that time favored by the Party. In Apocalittici e integrati the emphasis on criticism, debate, and the complexity of things also seems implicitly opposed to the Party line, at least at that period. Eco particularly favors the television discussion program "Tribuna Politica" as a form of "education for democracy" that helped viewers become aware of the "relative" character of politicians' opinions (Apocalittici e integrati, p. 351); and in his analysis of the Bond novels (The Role of the Reader, p. 162) he argues that the "democratic" man is the one who "recognizes nuances and distinctions and who admits contradictions." Finally, the themes of disorder and incomprehensibility in Opera aperta, and the arguments about the limitations of systematic worldviews in his later semiotic works again tend to set him apart from mainstream Marxist ideas. Marxism has been an important influence on Eco's thinking, but this relativism and individualism are major qualifications of his left-wing position.

Eco's shift of interest to semiotics began as he was supervising the translation of *Opera aperta* into French. He was introduced to the structuralism of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss,⁷ and as a result revised sections of the book along structuralist lines (Chapters 2 and 3 below), as has already been mentioned. This contact with structuralist thought was the main source of Eco's semiotics or semiology, and in particular of his first major semiotic work, *La struttura*

^{7.} Opera aperta, 3rd ed. (Milan: Bompiani, 1976), pp. v-vii.

assente (The absent structure), an "introduction to semiological research," according to the subtitle. This was followed by two less substantial theoretical texts, and, in 1976, by Eco's most advanced and systematic semiotic work so far, which incorporates and elaborates most of his previous thinking on the subject: A Theory of Semiotics, written originally in English and then translated into Italian. This was in turn supplemented by the essays collected in Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language. 11

In discussing Eco's semiotic theory I shall have to treat it as a single system, even though there are important developments from one book to the next. In a general way, however, we can note a difference of emphasis between the earlier and the later semiotic works that seems to reflect something of a shift in Eco's interests and concerns after La struttura assente was written. Whereas the earlier book shows much the same polemical and socially committed character that we saw in Opera aperta and Apocalittici e integrati, such a character is much less apparent in A Theory of Semiotics. This is not to say that Eco has abandoned his earlier view of the intellectual's task, but simply that a clearer separation of functions has come to govern his writing: in his journalism he pursues the line of attack mapped out in *Apocalittici e integrati*, but his theoretical work becomes much more specialized and academic. Eco himself says something to this effect in his preface to The Name of the Rose (p. 5),12 though it is not certain to what extent he is really speaking in his own person; around 1968, he suggests, it was widely held that one should write "only out of a commitment to the present, in order to change the world," whereas now, in 1980, "the man of letters . . . can happily write out of pure love of writing."

This element of specialization and academicism in Eco's writing in the 1970s must to some extent be a consequence of his increasing

- 8. Milan: Bompiani, 1968.
- 9. Le forme del contenuto [The forms of content] (Milan: Bompiani, 1971); Segno [The sign] (Milan: ISEDI, 1973).
- 10. A Theory of Semiotics (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, and London: Macmillan, 1976). In Italian, Trattato di semiotica generale (Milan: Bompiani, 1975).
 - 11. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- 12. Il nome della rosa (Milan: Bompiani, 1980). Translated as The Name of the Rose (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and London: Secker and Warburg, 1983). Page references are to the London edition.

institutional commitment to semiotics as a discipline—founding and editing the semiotic journal called VS, acting as secretarygeneral of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, and occupying the first chair of semiotics at the University of Bologna. But it is also interesting to relate it to the political events of 1968 and the consequent dissolution of the Gruppo 63. Eco himself tells, in his article of 1972 on "The Death of the Gruppo 63" (Chapter 11 below), how the 1968 workers' and students' movements had an outflanking effect on the group's, and Eco's own, position concerning the artist's duty to attack the social system indirectly, through the aesthetic medium, rather than by direct political action. In 1968, according to Eco, artists and intellectuals were confronted, for the first time in years, with the opportunity and challenge to involve themselves directly in politics, an opportunity and challenge which the Gruppo 63 failed to take up, thereby bringing about its own demise. One effect of this crisis on Eco, it would seem, was to reduce his polemical insistence on the special political function of art, though his new interest in semiotics no doubt contributed to the same effect. It is noteworthy, however, that Eco's response does not seem to have taken the form of a more direct involvement in political affairs, at least in his main writings, and that he seems to have moved, if anything, in quite the opposite direction. There may be, in the new specialization and academicism of his theoretical work, signs of a degree of post-1968 disillusionment.

To turn now to semiotics, what sort of subject is it, and what can a theory of it do? Semiotics or semiology is the science of signs, and Eco's theory has been mainly concerned with what he calls general semiotics, the general theory of signs. All forms of social, cultural, and intellectual life can be viewed as sign systems: as forms of communication, and therefore as verbal or nonverbal languages. The task of general semiotics, for Eco, is to develop a single, comprehensive conceptual framework within which all these sign systems may be studied, not because they are all fundamentally identical but because a systematic and coherent approach has intrinsic merits, and because such an approach facilitates cross-fertilization between the different fields that it covers. Thus, A Theory of Semiotics is not principally concerned with the specific features of these different