# The limits of interpretation

Umberto Eco.

THE LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION

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# THE LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION

## Introduction

At the beginning of his Mercury; or, The Secret and Swift Messenger (1641), John Wilkins tells the following story:

How strange a thing this Art of Writing did seem at its first Invention, we may guess by the late discovered Americans, who were amazed to see Men converse with Books, and could scarce make themselves to believe that a Paper could speak. . . .

There is a pretty Relation to this Purpose, concerning an Indian Slave; who being sent by his Master with a Basket of Figs and a Letter, did by the Way eat up a great Part of his Carriage, conveying the Remainder unto the Person to whom he was directed; who when he had read the Letter, and not finding the Quantity of Figs answerable to what was spoken of, he accuses the Slave of eating them, telling him what the Letter said against him. But the Indian (notwithstanding this Proof) did confidently abjure the Fact, cursing the Paper, as being a false and lying Witness.

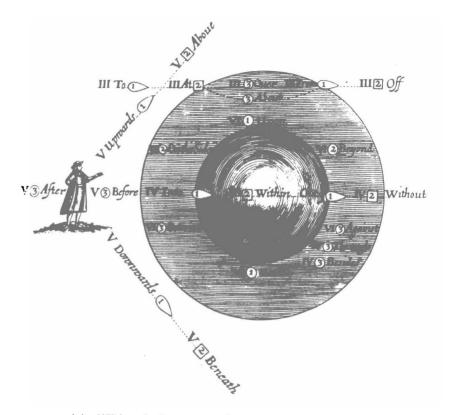
After this, being sent again with the like Carriage, and a Letter expressing the just Number of Figs, that were to be delivered, he did again, according to his former Practice, devour a great Part of them by the Way; but before meddled with any, (to prevent all following Accusations) he first took the Letter, and hid that under a great Stone, assuring himself, that if it did not see him eating the Figs, it could never tell of him; but being now more strongly accused than before, he confesses the Fault, admiring the Divinity of the Paper, and for the future does promise his best Fidelity in every Employment. (3d ed. [London: Nicholson, 1707], pp. 3-4)

This page of Wilkins sounds certainly very different from many contemporary theories, where writing is taken as the paramount example of semiosis, and every written (or spoken) text is seen as a machine that produces an indefinite deferral. Those contemporary theories object indirectly to Wilkins that a text, once it is separated from its utterer (as well as from the utterer's intention) and from the concrete circumstances of its utterance (and by consequence from its intended referent) floats (so to speak) in the vacuum of a potentially infinite range of possible interpretations. As a consequence no text can be interpreted according to the utopia of a definite, original, and final authorized meaning. Language always says more than its unattainable literal meaning, which is lost from the very beginning of the textual utterance.

Bishop Wilkins—despite his adamant belief that the Moon is inhabited—was after all a man of remarkable intellectual stature, who said many things still important for the students of language and of semiosic processes in general. Look, for instance, at the drawing shown here, which appears in his Essay towards a Real Character (1668). Wilkins was so convinced that a theory of meaning was possible that he even tried (not first, but certainly in a pioneering way and by an extraordinary visual intuition) to provide a way to represent the meaning of syncategorematic terms. This picture shows that, provided we share some conventional rules concerning English language, when we say upon we surely mean something different from under. By the way, the picture shows also that such a difference in meaning is based on the structure of our body in a geo-astronomical space. One can be radically skeptical about the possibility of isolating universals of language, but one feels obliged to take Wilkins's picture seriously. It shows that in interpreting syncategorematic terms we must follow certain "directions." Even if the world were a labyrinth, we could pass through it by disregarding certain directional constraints.

How could Wilkins have objected to the counterobjections of many contemporary theories of reading as a deconstructive activity? Probably he would have said that in the case he was reporting (let us suppose that the letter was saying "Dear Friend, In this Basket brought by my Slave there are 30 Figs I send you as a Present. Looking forward . . . ") the Master was sure that the Basket mentioned in the Letter was the one carried by the Slave, that the carrying Slave was exactly the one to whom his Friend gave the Basket, and that there was a Relationship between the Expression 30 written in the Letter and the Number of Figs contained in the Basket.

Naturally, it would be easy to refute Wilkins's parabolic demonstration. It is sufficient to imagine that somebody really did send a slave with a basket, but along the way the original slave was killed and re-



John Wilkins, An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language (London: Printed for S. Gellibrand, 1668), p. 311. Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

placed by another slave, belonging to a different person, and even the thirty figs, as individual entities, were replaced by twelve other figs. Moreover, let us imagine that the new slave brought the basket to a different addressee. We can also suppose that the new addressee did not know of any friend eager to cultivate him and to send him figs. Would it still be possible to decide what the letter was speaking about?

I think that we are still entitled to suppose that the reaction of the new addressee would have been, more or less, of this sort: "Somebody, God knows who, sent me a quantity of figs which is less than the one mentioned by the accompanying letter." (I also suppose that the new Addressee, being a Master, chastised the slave before trying to solve the Riddle: this, too, is a Semiotic Problem, but let us stick to our Main Question.)

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What I wish to say is that, even when separated from its utterer, its arguable referent, and its circumstances of production, the message still spoke about some figs-in-a-basket. I wish also to suggest that, reading the letter, and before questioning the existence of the sender, the addressee was in the first instance convinced that a given Figs Sender was in question.

Let us suppose now (narrative imagination has no limits), not only that the original messenger was killed, but also that his killers ate all the figs, destroyed the basket, put the letter into a bottle and threw it into the ocean, so that it was found seventy years (or so) after Wilkins by Robinson Crusoe. No basket, no slave, no figs, only a letter. Notwith-standing this, I bet that the first reaction of Crusoe would have been: "Where are the figs?" Only after that first instinctive reaction could Crusoe have dreamed about all possible figs, all possible slaves, all possible senders, as well as about the possible nonexistence of any fig, slave, or sender, about the machineries of lying, and about his unfortunate destiny as an addressee definitely separated from any Transcendental Meaning.

Where are those figs? Provided Crusoe understands English, the letter says that there are, or were, somewhere, 30 fruits so and so, at least in the mind (or in the Possible Doxastic World) of a supposed sender or utterer of that message. And even if Crusoe decides that these scratches on a piece of paper are the accidental result of a chemical erosion, he faces only two possibilities: either to disregard them as an insignificant material event or to interpret them as if they were the words of an English text. Once having entertained the second hypothesis, Robinson is obliged to conclude that the letter speaks of figs—not of apples or of unicorns.

Now, let us suppose that the message in the bottle is found by a more sophisticated student in linguistics, hermeneutics, or semiotics. As smart as he or she is, such a new accidental addressee can make lots of more elaborate hypotheses, namely:

- 1. The message is a coded one, where basket stands for "army," fig for "1,000 soldiers," and present for "help," so that the intended meaning of the letter is that the sender is sending an army of 30,000 soldiers for helping the addressee. But even in this case the mentioned (and absent) soldiers should be 30,000, not, say, 180—unless in the private code of the sender one fig stands for six soldiers.
- 2. Figs can be intended (at least today) in a rhetorical sense (as in such expressions as to be in good fig, to be in full fig, to be in poor fig), and the message could support a different interpretation. But even in

this case the addressee should rely on certain preestablished conventional interpretations of fig which are not those foreseen by, say, apple or cat.

3. The addressee, being a critic used to interpreting medieval texts, supposes that the message in the bottle is an allegory, written by a poet: the addressee smells in that message a hidden, second sense based on a private poetic code, holding only for that text. Figs can be a synecdoche for "fruits," fruits can be a metaphor for "positive astral influences," positive astral influences can be an allegory for "Divine Grace," and so on and so forth. In this case the addressee could make various conflicting hypotheses, but I strongly believe that there are certain "economical" criteria on the grounds of which certain hypotheses will be more interesting than others. To validate his or her hypothesis, the addressee probably ought first to make certain conjectures about the possible sender and the possible historical period in which the text was produced. This has nothing to do with researching the intentions of the sender, but it certainly has to do with researching the cultural framework of the original message.

Probably our sophisticated interpreter should decide that the text found in the bottle referred on a given occasion to some existing figs and was indexically pointing to a given sender as well as to a given addressee and a given slave, but that afterward it lost all referential power. The addressee can dream of those lost actors, so ambiguously involved in exchanging things or symbols (perhaps to send figs meant, at a given historical moment, to make an uncanny innuendo), and could start from that anonymous message in order to try a variety of meanings and referents. . . . But the interpreter would not be entitled to say that the message can mean everything.

It can mean many things, but there are senses that would be preposterous to suggest. I do not think that there can be somebody eager to say that it means that Napoleon died in May 1821; but to challenge such a farfetched reading can be a reasonable starting point for concluding that there is at least something which that message cannot positively say. It says that once upon a time there was a basket full of figs.

I admit that in order to make such a statement one must first of all assume that sentences can have a "literal meaning," and I know that such a point is controversial. But I keep thinking that, within the boundaries of a given language, there is a literal meaning of lexical items and that it is the one listed first by dictionaries as well as the one that Everyman would first define when requested to say what a given word means. I thus assume that Everyman would first say that a fig is a

kind of fruit. No reader-oriented theory can avoid such a constraint. Any act of freedom on the part of the reader can come after, not before, the acceptance of that constraint.

I understand that there is a difference between discussing the letter mentioned by Wilkins and discussing Finnegans Wake. I understand that the reading of Finnegans Wake can help us to cast doubt on even the supposed commonsensicality of Wilkins's example. But we cannot disregard the point of view of the Slave who witnessed for the first time the miracle of Texts and of their interpretation.

The essays collected here, except for three (the analysis of Pliny's letter and the essays on drama and Pirandello, written at the end of the 1970s), were published during the last five years. All of them deal, from different points of view, with the problem of interpretation and its limits, or constraints. It is merely accidental, but by no means irrelevant, that they appear a little after the English translation of an old book of mine, Opera aperta, written between 1957 and 1962 (now The Open Work [Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1989]). In that book I advocated the active role of the interpreter in the reading of texts endowed with aesthetic value. When those pages were written, my readers focused mainly on the "open" side of the whole business, underestimating the fact that the open-ended reading I supported was an activity elicited by (and aiming at interpreting) a work. In other words, I was studying the dialectics between the rights of texts and the rights of their interpreters. I have the impression that, in the course of the last few decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed. In the present essays I stress the limits of the act of interpretation.

It is neither accidental nor irrelevant that these essays follow my previous writings (A Theory of Semiotics, The Role of the Reader, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language, all published by Indiana U.P.) in which I elaborated upon the Peircean idea of unlimited semiosis. I hope that the essays in this book (especially the one on Peirce) will make clear that the notion of unlimited semiosis does not lead to the conclusion that interpretation has no criteria. To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object and that it "riverruns" for the mere sake of itself. To say that a text potentially has no end does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy ending.

Even the most radical deconstructionists accept the idea that there are interpretations which are blatantly unacceptable. This means that the interpreted text imposes some constraints upon its interpreters. The

limits of interpretation coincide with the rights of the text (which does not mean with the rights of its author).

Even in the case of self-voiding texts (see the chapter "Small Worlds") we have semiosic objects which without any shade of doubt speak of their own impossibility. Let us be realistic: there is nothing more meaningful than a text which asserts that there is no meaning.

If there is something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something which must be found somewhere, and in some way respected.

Returning to Wilkins, in a world dominated by Übermensch-Readers, let us first rank with the Slave. It is the only way to become, if not the Masters, at least the respectfully free Servants of Semiosis.

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## Two Models of Interpretation

#### 1. Symbol and allegory

Some years ago I examined several senses of the word symbol (Eco 1984). Among them was the well-known distinction between symbol and allegory drawn by Goethe: "Symbolism transforms the experience into an idea and an idea into an image, so that the idea expressed through the image remains always active and unattainable and, even though expressed in all languages, remains inexpressible. Allegory transforms experience into a concept and a concept into an image, but so that the concept remains always defined and expressible by the image" (Goethe 1809:1112–1113). Goethe's definition seems perfectly in tune with the one advocated by idealistic philosophy, for which symbols are signifiers that convey imprecise clouds or nebulae of meaning that they leave continually unexploited or unexploitable.

But we know that there is another sense of the word symbol. If we take it in the sense of logicians and mathematicians, then a symbol is either a signifier correlated to its meaning by a law, that is, by a precise convention, and as such interpretable by other signifiers, or a variable that can be bound in many ways but that, once it has acquired a given value, cannot represent other values within the same context. If we take it in the sense of Hjelmslev (1943:113-114), we find as instances of symbol the Cross, the Hammer and Sickle, emblems, and heraldic images. In this sense symbols are allegories.

Early versions of this chapter were "At the Roots of the Modern Concept of Symbol," Social Research 52 (1985), no. 2; and "Welt als Text—Text als Welt," in Streit der Interpretationen (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag 1987)

Such an ambivalence has its own roots in the Greek etymology. Originally a symbol was a token, the present half of a broken table or coin or medal, that performed its social and semiotic function by recalling the absent half to which it potentially could be reconnected. This potentiality was indeed crucial because, since the two halves could be reconnected, it was unnecessary to yearn for the reconnection. So, too, it happens today that, when we enter a theater with our ticket stub, nobody tries to check where its other half is; everyone trusts the semiotic nature of the token, which in this case works on the basis of an established and recognized convention.

But the present half of the broken medal, evoking the ghost of its absent companion and of the original wholeness, encouraged other senses of "symbol." The verb symballein thus meant to meet, to try an interpretation, to make a conjecture, to solve a riddle, to infer from something imprecise, because incomplete, something else that it suggested, evoked, revealed, but did not conventionally say. In this sense a symbol was an ominous sudden experience that announced vague consequences to be tentatively forecast. A symbol was a semeion, but one of an impalpable quality. It was a divine message, and when one speaks in tongues, everybody understands, but nobody can spell aloud what has been understood.

All the senses of "symbol" are thus equally archaic. When the supporters of the "romantic" sense try to trace its profoundly traditional origins, they look for an honorable pedigree but disregard the fact that the distinction between symbol and allegory is not archaic at all.

When in the Stoic milieu the first attempts were made to read the old poets allegorically, so as to find under the cloak of myth the evidence of natural truths, or when Philo of Alexandria started the allegorical reading of the Bible, there was no clear-cut distinction between symbol and allegory. Pépin (1970) and Auerbach (1944) say that the classical world took symbol and allegory as synonymous expressions and also called symbols certain coded images produced for educational purposes. Under such a linguistic usage was the idea that symbols too were rhetorical devices endowed with a precise meaning, obscurely outlined, but to be precisely found. And the same happened with the tradition of the Church Fathers and medieval culture.<sup>1</sup>

#### 2. Pansemiotic metaphysics

There is, in the patristic and medieval tradition, an idea of symbolism as a way of speaking of something unknowable: in the Neoplatonic line of thought, as represented by Pseudo Dionysius, the divine source of all beings, the One, is defined as "the luminous dimness, a silence which

teaches secretly, a flashing darkness which is neither body nor figure nor shape, which has no quantity, no quality, no weight, which is not in a place and does not see, has no sensitivity, is neither soul nor mind, has no imagination or opinion, is neither number nor order nor greatness, is not a substance, not eternity, not time, not obscurity, not error, not light, not truth . . . " (Theol. myst. passim).

How to speak of such nonentity and nonidentity if not by a language whose signs have no literal and univocal meaning but are "open" to contrasting interpretations? Dionysius speaks, for his negative theology, of symbols that are not translatable allegories. From a Neoplatonic perspective, we must say of the source of the cosmic emanation something which is true and false at the same time—since such a Source is beyond any rational knowledge and, from our point of view, appears as mere Nothingness. This contradictoriness of Neoplatonic symbols seems to share the ambiguity of the romantic symbol.

Nevertheless, the Neoplatonism of Dionysius—and, furthermore, that of his commentators such as Aquinas—is not a "strong" one: medieval Neoplatonist philosophers tried to translate the pantheistic idea of emanation into one of "participation." It is true that the One is absolutely transcendent and infinitely far from us, that we are made of a different "fabric" since we are the mere litter of His creative energy, but He is not contradictory in Himself. Contradictoriness belongs to our discourses about Him and arises from our imperfect knowledge of Him. But the knowledge He has of Himself is totally unambiguous. This is a very important point because, as we shall see, the Hermetic Platonism of the Renaissance maintains that the very core of every secret knowledge is the faith in the deep contradictoriness of reality. On the contrary, for medieval theology both contradictoriness and ambiguity are merely semiotic, not ontological.

Naturally, since we must speak of the Unspeakable, we name it Goodness, Truth, Beauty, Light, Jealousy, and so on, but these terms, says Dionysius, can be applied to Him only "supersubstantially." Moreover, since our divine names will always be inadequate, it is indispensable to choose them according to a criterion of dissimilarity. It is dangerous to name God Beauty or Light, because one can believe that such appellations convey some of His real qualities. We should rather call Him Lion, Panther, Bear, Monster. We should apply to Him the most provocative adjectives so that it be clear that the similarity we are looking for escapes us or can only be glimpsed at the cost of a disproportioned proportion (De coel. hier. 2).

Despite this, such a symbolic way of speaking has nothing to do with

the sudden illumination, with the cognitive ecstasy, with the flashing vision of which modern theories of symbolism speak. The medieval metaphysical symbol is neither epiphany nor revelation of a truth concealed under the cloak of myth. Symbolism must make rationally conceivable the inadequacy of our reason and of our language. Challenged by this difficulty, Dionysius's commentators tried to translate his approach into rational terms: when Scotus Erigena (*De divisione naturae* 5.3) says that "nihil enim visibilium rerum, corporaliumque est, ut arbitror, quod non incorporale quid et intelligible significet," he is no longer speaking of a network of ungraspable similitudes, but rather of that uninterrupted sequence of causes and effects that will later be called the Great Chain of Being.

Aquinas will definitely transform this approach into the doctrine of analogia entis, which aimed at being a proportional calculus. Thus at the very root of medieval pansemiotic metaphysics—which was sometimes defined as universal symbolism—is the Quest for a Code and the will to transform a poetic approximation into a philosophical statement.

#### 3. Scriptural interpretation

Parallel to the Neoplatonic line of thought is the hermeneutic tradition of scriptural interpreters, interested in the symbolic language by which the Holy Scriptures speak to us.

The semiosic process involved in the reading of Scriptures was rather complicated: there was a first book speaking allegorically of the second one, and a second one speaking through parables of something else. Moreover, in this beautiful case of unlimited semiosis, there was a puzzling identification among the sender (the divine Logos), the signifying message (words, Logoi), the content (the divine message, Logos), the referent (Christ, the Logos)—a web of identities and differences, complicated by the fact that Christ, as Logos, insofar as he was the ensemble of all the divine archetypes, was fundamentally polysemous.

Thus both Testaments spoke at the same time of their sender, of their content, of their referent. Their meaning was the nebula of all possible archetypes. The Scriptures were in the position of saying everything, and everything was too much for interpreters interested in Truth (see Compagnon 1972 and the discussion in Eco 1984, ch. 4). The symbolic nature of the Holy Books thus had to be tamed; in order to do so, the symbolic mode had to be identified with the allegorical one.

This is a very delicate point, because without this profound need of a code, the scriptural interpretation would look very similar to our mod-

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ern interpretive theories of deconstruction, pulsional interpretive drift, misprision, libidinal reading, free jouissance.

The Scriptures had potentially every possible meaning, but their reading had to be governed by a code, and that is why the Fathers proposed the theory of the allegorical senses. In the beginning the senses were three (literal, moral, mystic or pneumatic); then they became four (literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical).

The theory of the four senses provided a sort of guarantee for the correct decoding of the Books. The patristic and Scholastic mind could never avoid the feeling of inexhaustible profundity of the Scriptures, frequently compared to an infinita sensuum sylva (Jerome Ep. 64.21), an oceanum mysteriosum Dei, ut sic loquar, labyrinthum (Jerome In Gen. 9.1), a latissima sylva (Origenes In Ez. 4), or of a sea where, if we enter with a small boat, our minds are caught by fear and we are submerged by its whirls (Origenes In Gen. 9.1).

Once again we feel here something which recalls the modern fascination of an open textual reading, and even the hermeneutic idea that a text magnetizes on it, so to speak, the whole of the readings it has elicited in the course of history (Gadamer 1960). But the patristic and medieval problem was how to reconcile the infinity of interpretation with the univocality of the message. The main question was how to read the Books by discovering in them, not new things, but the same everlasting truth rephrased in ever new ways: non nova sed nove.

Scriptural hermeneutics provided the modern sensitivity with a model of "open" reading, but in its own terms escaped such a temptation. This is why at that time symbol and allegory were indistinguishable from each other. In order to consider them as two different procedures, Western civilization had to elaborate a different notion of truth.

There is, however, a point where Christian tradition offered to modern symbolism an interpretive model. It was the way of deciding when, in a text, one can recognize an instance of symbolic mode. Augustine (De Doctrina Christiana 3) was the first to put forth a list of rules for ascertaining whether and when a fact told by the Scriptures had to be taken, not literally, but figuratively. Augustine knew that verbal tropes such as a metaphor can be easily detected because, if we take them literally, the text would look mendacious. But what to do with the report of events that makes sense literally but, notwithstanding, could be interpreted symbolically? Augustine says that one is entitled to smell a figurative sense every time the Scriptures say things that are literally understandable but contradict the principles of faith and morals. Jesus

accepts being honored and anointed by a courtesan, but it is impossible that our Savior encouraged such a lascivious ritual. Therefore the story stands for something else. In the same way, one should smell a second sense when the Scriptures play upon inexplicable superfluities or use literal expressions such as proper names or series of numbers. This eagerness to conjecture the presence of a symbolic mode when facing trivial events or blatantly useless details cannot but recall modern poetic devices such as the Joycean epiphany or Eliot's objective correlative. We look for the symbolic mode, not at the level of rhetorical figures, but at the level of a more macroscopic textual strategy, when a text displays a sort of uncanny liberality, of otherwise inexplicable descriptive generosity.

It must be clear that Augustine looked for symbols, not in the case of rhetorical strategies, but in the case of reported events: since the beginning, scriptural symbolism aimed at privileging the allegoria in factis over the allegoria in verbis. The words of the Psalmist can certainly be read as endowed with a second sense—because the Holy Scriptures resort frequently to rhetorical devices; but what must necessarily be read beyond the letter are the series of "historical" events told by the Scriptures. God has predisposed the sacred history as a liber scriptus digito suo, and the characters of the Old Testament were pulled to act as they did in order to announce the characters and the events of the New.

According to Stoic teaching, signs were above all not words, onomata, but semeia, that is, natural events which can be taken as the symptoms of something else. Augustine received from the classical tradition the rhetorical rules allowing him to decode the allegories in verbis, but he did not have precise rules for the allegories in factis—and, as I have already said, the significant facts told by the Scriptures cannot be "open" to any interpretation.

Thus in order to understand the meaning of the facts told by the Bible, Augustine had to understand the meaning of the things the Bible mentions. This is the reason for which medieval civilization, extrapolating from the Hellenistic Phisiologus or Pliny's Naturalis historia, elaborated its own encyclopedic repertories, bestiaries, herbaries, lapidaries, imagines mundi, in order to assign a symbolic meaning to every piece of the furniture of the "real" world. In these encyclopedias the same object or creature can assume contrasting meanings, so that the lion is at the same time the figure of Christ and the figure of the devil. The work of the medieval commentators was to provide rules for a correct textual disambiguation. Symbols were ambiguous within the paradigm, never within the syntagm. An elephant, a unicorn, a jewel, a stone, a flower

can assume many meanings, but when they show up in a given context they have to be decoded in the only possible right way.

Thus the rise of a scriptural hermeneutics encouraged the growth of a universal symbolism and the real world became as much "perfused with signs" as were the Holy Scriptures. But in both cases one should speak more rigorously of scriptural and universal allegorism. The Middle Ages could not have understood the antinomy outlined by Goethe.

However, the universal allegorism implemented a sort of hallucinatory experience of the world according to which mundane creatures and historical facts counted, not as "these" creatures and "these" facts, but insofar as they were standing for something else. Such an attitude could not be accepted by the Aristotelian naturalism of the thirteenth century.

#### 4. Aquinas

Aquinas was pretty severe with profane poetry and allegorism in verbis. Poetry is an inferior doctrine: "poetica non capiuntur a ratione humana propter defectus veritatis qui est in his" (Summa th. I-II.101.2 ad 2). But since Aquinas was a poet himself, and a gifted one, he admitted that sometimes divine mysteries, insofar as they exceed our comprehension, must be revealed by rhetorical figures: "conveniens est sacrae scripturae divina et spiritualia sub similitudine corporalium tradere" (Summa th. I.1.9). However, apropos of the Holy Text, he recommends looking first of all for its literal or historical sense. When the Bible says that Hebrew people escaped from Egypt, it tells literally the truth. Only when one has grasped this literal sense can one try to catch, through it and beyond it, the spiritual sense, that is, those senses that the scriptural tradition assigned to the sacred books, namely, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical or mystical ones. Up to this point it does not seem that Aquinas is so original with respect to the previous tradition. But he makes two important statements:

1. The spiritual sense only holds for the facts told by the Scriptures. Only in the course of the sacred history has God acted on the mundane events to make them signify something else. There is no spiritual sense in the profane history, nor in the individuals and facts of the natural world. There is no mystical meaning in what happened after the Redemption. Human history is a story of facts, not of signs (see *Quodl*. VII.6.16). The universal allegorism is thus liquidated. Mundane events are restituted to their naturality. If they are meaningful, they are so only for the eyes of the philosopher who sees them as natural proofs of the existence of God, not

as symbolic messages. With Aquinas one witnesses a sort of secularization of postbiblical history and of the natural world.

2. If there is a spiritual sense in the Holy Scriptures, where facts mean something else, there is no spiritual sense in profane poetry. Poetry displays only its literal sense. The statement seems undoubtedly too crude and radical: Aquinas, as a poet, knew very well that poets use rhetorical figures and allegories. But the poetical second sense is a subspecies of the literal one, and Aquinas calls it "parabolic." This sense—the one of tropes and allegories—"non supergreditur modum litteralem" (Quodl. VII.6.16). It is simply a variety of the literal sense. When the Scriptures represent Christ by the image of a goat, one is not facing a case of allegoria in factis but of simple allegoria in verbis. This goat is not a fact that symbolizes future events but only a word that parabolically (literally) stands for the name "Christ" (Summa th. I.1.10 ad 3, and Quodl. VII.6.15).

In which way is the parabolic sense different from the spiritual senses of the Scriptures? To understand this highly controversial point, one must understand what Aquinas meant by "literal sense." He meant the sense "quem auctor intendit." The literal sense is not only the meaning of a sentence but also the meaning of its utterance. Modern pragmatics knows that a sentence such as "It is cold here" is, according to the dictionary, a simple statement about the temperature of a given place; but if the sentence is uttered in given circumstances, it can also convey the actual intentions, the intended meaning, of its utterer, for instance, "Please, let us go elsewhere." It must be clear that, for Aquinas, both sentence meaning and utterance meaning belong to the literal sense, since they represent what the utterer of the sentence had in his mind. From that point of view, one understands why the sense conveyed by tropes and allegories, insofar as it represents exactly what the author wanted to say, can be easily reduced to the literal sense. Why are the spiritual senses of the Scriptures not equally literal? Because the biblical authors were unaware of conveying, through their historical report, the senses that (in the mind of God) facts should have assumed for the future reader able to read, in the Old Testament, the forecast of the New. The authors of the Scriptures wrote under divine inspiration, ignoring what they were really saying (see Eco 1986a and 1956).

It does not seem, however, that Aquinas's proposal was so influential. A first disquieting instance of it is given by the theory of allegorical reading of the *Divine Comedy*, as put forth by Dante in the *Epistula XIII*.

#### 5. Dante

Dante, presenting his poem to Cangrande della Scala, makes immediately clear that it has to be read as a polysemous (polisemos) message. One of the most celebrated examples of what Dante means by polysemy is given by his analysis of some verses of Psalm 113:

In exitu Israel de Aegypto domus barbara de populo barbaro, facta est Judaea sanctificatio ejus etc.

Following medieval theory, Dante says apropos of the first verse of the Psalm:

If we look at the letter it means the exodus of the sons of Israel from Egypt at the time of Moses; if we look at the allegory it means our redemption through Christ; if we look at the moral sense it means the conversion of the soul from the misery of sin to the state of grace; if we look at the mystical sense it means the departure of the sanctified spirit from the servitude of this corruption to the freedom of the eternal glory. (*Epistula XIII*)

Apparently there is nothing in this analysis which contradicts the main lines of the scriptural tradition. But many interpreters felt something uncanny. Here Dante is taking a case of biblical reading as an example of how to read his mundane poem! The most obvious solution, and it has been proposed by some interpreters, is that this letter is a forgery. It "should" be a forgery because Dante was supposed to be a faithful Thomist and this letter contradicts the Thomistic position according to which profane poetry has only a literal sense. Anyway, even given that the letter is a forgery, it has from the beginning been taken to be authentic, and this means that it did not sound repugnant to the ears of Dante's contemporaries. Moreover, the Convivio is certainly not a forgery, and in that treatise Dante provides clues for interpreting allegorically his own poems—even though still maintaining a distinction between allegory of poets and allegory of theologians, which the letter disregards.

In Convivio Dante explains what he intentionally meant in writing his poems. In this sense one could say that he does not detach himself from the Thomistic point of view: the allegorical sense of his poems still is a parabolic one because it represents what Dante intended to mean. On the contrary, in the letter the examples he gives make one think of blatant cases of allegoria in factis. And in other passages of the letter, as

it has been remarked by others, he says that his Divine Comedy is inspired by a "modus tractandis" which is "poeticus, fictivus, descriptivus, digressivus, transumptivus" (all traditional features of the poetic discourse), but then he adds, "cum hoc diffinitivus, divisivus, probativus, improbativus, et exemplorum positivus," and these are features of the theological and philosophical discourse. Furthermore, we know that he had always read the facts told by mythology and classical poetry as if they were allegoriae in factis.

In such terms Dante speaks of the poets in *De vulgari eloquentia*, and in the *Comedy* Statius says of Virgil that he was to him "as the one who proceeds in the night and bears a light, not for himself but for those who follow him" (*Purgatory* XXII.67–69). This means that—according to Dante—Virgil was a seer: his poetry, and pagan poetry in general, conveyed spiritual senses of which the authors were not aware. Thus for Dante poets are continuing the work of the Holy Scriptures, and his poem is a new instance of prophetic writing. His poem is endowed with spiritual senses in the same way as the Scriptures were, and the poet is divinely inspired. If the poet is the one that writes what love inspires in him, his text can be submitted to the same allegorical reading as the Holy Scriptures, and the poet is right in inviting his reader to guess what is hidden "sotto il velame delli versi strani" (under the veil of the strange verses).

Thus, just at the moment in which Aquinas devaluates the poetic mode, poets, escaping from his intellectual influence, start a new mystical approach to the poetic text, opening a new way of reading that, through various avatars, will survive until our times.

What makes Dante still medieval is the fact that he believes that a poem has neither infinite nor indefinite meanings. Dante seems to maintain that the spiritual meanings are four and that they can be encoded and decoded according to encyclopedic conventions. Which means that not even Dante draws a precise line between symbol and allegory.

But if the scriptural interpreters were warranted about their "right" reading of the Scriptures because of a long tradition which provided the criteria for a correct interpretation, what will happen now that the profane world has been devoid of any mystic sense and it is uncertain under the inspiration of whom (God, Love, or other) the poet unconsciously speaks? In a way, the theological secularization of the natural world implemented by Aquinas has set free the mystical drives of the poetic activity.

#### 6. The new paradigm

A relevant epistemological change was to take place in Italy during Humanism. The heraldic world of bestiaries and lapidaries had not fully lost its appeal. Natural sciences were on the verge of becoming more and more quantitatively and mathematically oriented, Aristotle seemed not to have anything more to say, and the new philosophers began exploring a new symbolic forest where living columns whispered, in Baudelarian terms, confused but fascinating words, coming from a Platonism revisited under the influence of the Kabbalah and the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In this new philosophical milieu the very idea of symbol underwent a profound change.

In order to conceive of a different idea of symbol, as something that sends one back to a mysterious and self-contradictory reality that cannot be conceptually expressed, one needs a "very strong" Neoplatonism. The medieval Neoplatonism was not strong enough because it was emasculated—or made more virile—by a strong idea of the divine transcendence. Let us instead call that of the origins "strong Neoplatonism," at least until Proclus, and its Gnostic versions, according to which at the top of the Great Fall of Beings there is a One who is not only unknowable and obscure but who, being independent of any determination, can contain all of them and is consequently the place of all contradictions.

In the framework of a strong Neoplatonism one should consider three basic assumptions, be they explicit or implicit: (i) There is a physical kinship, that is, an emanational continuity between every element of the world and the original One. (ii) The original One is self-contradictory, and in it one can find the coincidentia oppositorum (a Hermetic idea, indeed, but which at the dawn of modern times was reinforced by the philosophical views of Nicholas of Cues and Giordano Bruno). (iii) The One can be expressed only by negation and approximation, so that every possible representation of it cannot but refer to another representation, equally obscure and contradictory.

Then we meet the requirements for the development of a philosophy, of an aesthetics, and of a secret science of symbols as intuitive revelations that can be neither verbalized nor conceptualized.

The main features of the so-called Hermetic tradition that spread from the Renaissance and permeated romantic philosophy and many contemporary theories of artistic interpretation are the following:<sup>2</sup>

- 1. The refusal of the metric measure, the opposition of the qualitative to the quantitative, the belief that nothing is stable and that every element of the universe acts over any other through reciprocal action.
- 2. The refusal of causalism, so that the reciprocal action of the various elements of the universe does not follow the linear sequence of cause to effect but rather a sort of spiral-like logic of mutually sympathetic elements. If the universe is a network of similitudes and cosmic sympathies, then there are no privileged causal chains. The Hermetic tradition extends the refusal of causality even to history and philology, so that its logic seems to accept the principle post hoc ergo ante hoc. A typical example of such an attitude is the way in which every Hermetic thinker is able to demonstrate that the Corpus Hermeticum is not a late product of Hellenistic civilization—as Isaac Casaubon proved—but comes before Plato, before Pythagoras, before Egyptian civilization. The argument runs as follows: "That the Corpus Hermeticum contains ideas that evidently circulated at the times of Plato means that it appeared before Plato." To Western ears, educated on a causal epistemology, such an argument sounds offensive—and it is indeed logically disturbing—but it is enough to read some of the texts of the tradition to realize that, in its proper milieu, this argument is taken very seriously.
- 3. The refusal of dualism, so that the very identity principle collapses, as well as the one of the excluded middle; as a consequence, *tertium datur* (the idea of the coincidence of the opposites depends on this basic assumption).
- 4. The refusal of agnosticism. One should think that agnosticism is a very modern attitude and that from this point of view the Hermetic tradition cannot be opposed to the Scholastic one. But the Schoolmen, even though they were credulous, had, however, a very sharp sense of discrimination between opposites. They certainly did not use experimental methods for ascertaining what was and what was not the case, but they were profoundly interested in determining what was the case. Either a given idea reflected Aristotelian opinion or it did not: there was not a middle way or, if there was a possible reconciliation, as it happened with the typical arguments of Aquinas, the final reconciliation was the final truth. On the contrary, Hermetic thought, being nonagnostic, is Gnostic; it respects the whole of the traditional wisdom because even where there is contradiction between assumptions, each assumption can bear a part of truth, truth being the whole of a field of contrasting ideas.

5. The Hermetic tradition is based on the principle of similitude: sicut superius sic inferius. And once one has decided to fish for similitudes, one can find them everywhere: under certain descriptions, everything can be seen as similar to everything else.

Thus such a new symbolism grew up in the Hermetic atmosphere, from Pico della Mirandola and Ficino to Giordano Bruno, from Reuchlin and Robert Fludd to French Symbolism, Yeats, and many contemporary theories: speaking of the unshaped, symbols cannot have a definite meaning.

So it was that at the very moment in which theology, with Aquinas, was destroying the bases of the universal symbolism and allegorism, and the new science was beginning to speak of the world in quantitative terms, a new feeling was born among poets, Platonic philosophers, religious thinkers, Magi and Kabbalists. It was a new request for analogy and universal kinship, which influenced the new theories or the new practices of poetry and art, as well as new theories of myth, and definitely provided a new religion for many laymen who, in a secularized world, no longer believed in the God of theology but needed some other form of worship. Perhaps we should rewrite the traditional handbooks which tell the story of how, when, and why modern man escaped from the Dark Ages and entered the Age of Reason.

It is interesting that, being so radically different from Christian symbolism, modern symbolism obeys the same semiotic laws. In one case, one assumes that symbols do have a final meaning, but since it is the same everlasting message, there is an inexhaustible variety of signifiers for a unique signified. In the other case, symbols have any possible meaning because of the inner contradictoriness of reality, but since every symbol speaks about this fundamental contradictoriness, an inexhaustible quantity of signifiers always stand for their unique signified, the inexhaustibility of the senses of any text. One witnesses in both cases a form of "fundamentalism." In the former case, every text speaks of the rational and univocal discourse of God; in the latter, every text speaks of the irrational and ambiguous discourse of Hermes.

## 7. Myths and texts

Many modern theories have too strictly identified symbol with myth. If a myth is a tale, then it is a text, and this text—as Bachofen said—is the exegesis of a symbol. Let us take a myth as a text and, metaphorically, as

the paramount instance of every possible text. A text is a place where the irreducible polysemy of symbols is in fact reduced because in a text symbols are anchored to their context. The medieval interpreters were right: one should look for the rules which allow a contextual disambiguation of the exaggerated fecundity of symbols. Modern sensitivity deals on the contrary with myths as if they were macro symbols and—while acknowledging the infinite polysemy of symbols—no longer recognizes the discipline that myths impose on the symbols they involve. Thus many modern theories are unable to recognize that symbols are paradigmatically open to infinite meanings but syntagmatically, that is, textually, open only to the indefinite, but by no means infinite, interpretations allowed by the context.

To recognize this principle does not mean to support the "repressive" idea that a text has a unique meaning, guaranteed by some interpretive authority. It means, on the contrary, that any act of interpretation is a dialectic between openness and form, initiative on the part of the interpreter and contextual pressure.

Medieval interpreters were wrong in taking the world as a univocal text; modern interpreters are wrong in taking every text as an unshaped world. Texts are the human way to reduce the world to a manageable format, open to an intersubjective interpretive discourse. Which means that, when symbols are inserted into a text, there is, perhaps, no way to decide which interpretation is the "good" one, but it is still possible to decide, on the basis of the context, which one is due, not to an effort of understanding "that" text, but rather to a hallucinatory response on the part of the addressee.

#### NOTES

1. Auerbach suggests that sometimes Dante, instead of designing complex allegories, sets forth characters such as Beatrice and Saint Bernard, who stand at the same time as real persons and as "types" representing higher truths. But even in this case one witnesses the presence of a rhetorical device, halfway between metonymy and antonomasia. There is nothing there that may recall the idea typical of romantic symbolism—of an obscure intuition that cannot be translated by a verbal paraphrase. Dantesque characters can be interpreted in the same way as those characters of the Old Testament who, as we shall see later, were intended as figures of the New. Since the times of Augustine this procedure was called allegoria in factis, as opposed to allegoria in verbis, and was later

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called "typology." We shall see later that Dante simply applied to his profane poetry a procedure that was used for the sacred history.

2. I am following the suggestions of Durand (1979). I do not agree with his neo-Hermetic reinterpretation of the whole history of modern thought, but his "identikit" of the Hermetic tradition looks convincing.

2

# Unlimited Semiosis and Drift: Pragmaticism vs. "Pragmatism"

#### 1. Worlds and texts

The double metaphor of the world as a text and a text as a world has a venerable history. To interpret means to react to the text of the world or to the world of a text by producing other texts. To explain the way the solar system works by uttering Newton's laws or to utter a series of sentences to say that a given text means so and so are, at least in Peirce's sense, both forms of interpretations. The problem is not to challenge the old idea that the world is a text which can be interpreted, but rather to decide whether it has a fixed meaning, many possible meanings, or none at all.

Let me start with two quotations:

- 1. "What does the fish remind you of?"
  - "Other fish."
  - "And what do other fish remind you of?"
  - "Other fish."

(Joseph Heller, Catch 22, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1961, p. 290)

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2. Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

Polonius: By th' mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel. Polonius: It is back'd like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or like a whale? Polonius: Very like a whale.

(Hamlet III.2)

#### 2. Two poles

The opposition between these two quotations reminds us that all along the course of history we are confronted with two ideas of interpretation. On one side it is assumed that to interpret a text means to find out the meaning intended by its original author or—in any case—its objective nature or essence, an essence which, as such, is independent of our interpretation. On the other side it is assumed that texts can be interpreted in infinite ways.

Taken as such, these two options are both instances of epistemological fanaticism. The first option is instantiated by various kinds of fundamentalism and of various forms of metaphysical realism (let us say, the one advocated by Aquinas or by Lenin in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*). Knowledge is *adaequatio rei et intellectus*. The most outrageous example of the alternative option is certainly the one outlined above (ch. 1, section 6), that is, the paradigm of the *Hermetic semiosis*.

#### 3. Hermetic drift

I shall call Hermetic drift the interpretive habit which dominated Renaissance Hermetism and which is based on the principles of universal analogy and sympathy, according to which every item of the furniture of the world is linked to every other element (or to many) of this sublunar world and to every element (or to many) of the superior world by means of similitudes or resemblances. It is through similitudes that the otherwise occult parenthood between things is manifested and every sublunar body bears the traces of that parenthood impressed on it as a signature.

The basic principle is not only that the similar can be known through the similar but also that from similarity to similarity everything can be connected with everything else, so that everything can be in turn either the expression or the content of any other thing. Since "any two things resemble one another just as strongly as any two others, if recondite resemblances are admitted" (Peirce, C.P. 1934:2.634), if the Ren-

aissance Magus wanted to find an occult parenthood between the various items of the furniture of the world, he had to assume a very flexible notion of resemblance.

To show examples of flexible criteria of resemblance, let me quote, not the most radical occult and Hermetic theories, but rather some instances of a very reasonable semiotic technique, the one recommended by the authors of the arts of memory. Those authors were neither Kabbalists nor sorcerers summoning spirits. They simply wanted to build systems for remembering a series of ideas, objects, or names through another series of names, objects, or images of objects. Other authors (Rossi 1960; Yates 1966) have studied and described the complex constructions of loci, that is, of real architectural, sculptural, and pictorial structures that those theorists built in order to provide a systematic plane of expression for the contents to be memorized, signified, and recalled. It is clear, however, that these mnemotechnic apparatuses were something more than a practical device for remembering notions: it is not by chance or for decorative purposes that the systems of loci frequently assume the form of a Theater of the World or emulate cosmological models. They aim at representing an organic imago mundi, an image of a world which is the result of a divine textual strategy. Thus, to be semiotically efficient, they reproduce the presumed tangle of signatures on which the Universe as a significant Whole is based. As Ramus (1581) had remarked, memory is the shadow of the order (of the dispositio), and order is the syntax of the universe.

But even though an ars memoriae was conceived as a mere practical device, it had in any case to find recognizable links between a given image and the thing to be evoked. In order to establish such a relationship it was advisable to follow the same criteria that held for the interpretation of cosmic analogies. In this sense these artes tell us something about various socially and culturally established semiotic rules.

It suffices to leaf through the *Idea del Theatro* of the most audacious among the authors of memory treatises, Giulio Camillo Delminio (1567), to see how freely the most varied rhetorical practices come to be grouped together beneath the rubric of similarity. Even in a rapid reading of several chapters, one finds the following:

similarity of morphological traits: the centaur for horse racing, the sphere for astrology;

similarity of action: two fighting serpents for the military arts; metonymy for historical or mythological contiguity: Vulcan for the arts of fire;