Review: Eco and His Model Reader
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ECO AND HIS MODEL READER

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It has become customary in recent literary criticism to transfer responsibility for critical "readings" to a mysterious, omnipresent and infinitely flexible "ideal" reader. Phenomenological ontology of the aesthetic object has been often invoked as the theoretical justification of this transfer: literary work (unlike literary text) does not exist otherwise than in the readers' "concretizations"; the reader is a necessary co-producer of the aesthetic object. We could argue, however, that the focus on the reader is a result of historical, rather than ontological factors. Casting a quick glance at the critical trends of modern times, we can observe that, successively, every component in the chain of literary communication has been elevated to the central, pivotal object of theoretical attention. The classicist poetics is focused on the norms (rules) of literary genres and forms, i.e., on the literary "codes"; the Romantic "expressionist" criticism centers on the concept of the creative personality of the poet, i.e., on the "encoder"; for the 20th century avant-garde conceptions, the literary text, i.e., the "message," with its poetic properties is the prime focus of attention; finally, our time has discovered the last, up to now sadly neglected component of literary communication — the reader ("decoder"). While "expressionist" criticism reflected the spirit of the "elitist" Romanticism of the 19th century, the reader-oriented criticism is a manifestation of the *fin-de-millennium* "democratic" Romanticism which rejects the idea that artistic creativity is a privilege of a few geniuses; everybody (at least around the campuses) is a creative individuality and as such is able to make his own literature (or art). The position of the "ideal" reader in the literary communication scheme fits perfectly for such an individuality: the "ideal" reader does not have to write, to produce literary texts; he is just expected to "appropriate" the existing texts by his readings and interpretations. Although he is not a Hesse, a Kafka or even a Dickens, he can satisfy his creative aspirations by creating *his own* Hesse or Kafka or...
Dickens. And reader-oriented literary criticism, in a truly Neo-Romantic spirit, can again challenge the primacy of literary texts without being easily exposed to the objection of pure subjectivism and arbitrariness.

In this situation, which threatens to throw literary criticism back into pure amateurism, it is refreshing to meet a literary critic whose Model Reader has a perfect awareness of his epistemological limitations. These limitations have been, in principle, formulated in Eco's well-known book *A Theory of Semiotics* (Eco, 1976). Here, Eco has emphasized that the receiver (addressee, reader) is not essential for the process of signification. Signification is made possible by the code, i.e., by the "system of signification" that is "valid for every possible addressee even if no addressees exist or ever will exist..." The addressee's actual perception and interpretive behavior are not necessary for the definition of a significant relationship as such" (Eco, 1976:8). Deprived of his power to assign meaning, the reader (addressee) can find his place in the process of communication which is, after all, a process of information transmission between (human) individuals. However, even here, the reader is subject to severe restrictions, laid down by the primacy of signification over communication: "A signification system is an autonomous semiotic construct that has an abstract mode of existence independent of any possible communicative act it makes possible. On the contrary (except in stimulation processes) every act of communication to or between human beings — or any other intelligent biological mechanical apparatus — presupposes a signification system as its necessary condition" (1976:9). In this semiotic framework, the reader seems to be necessary only as a witness of his own burial; he loses his individualistic and psychological characteristics and becomes a metonym for the set of interpretative norms which have to be applied at the output of the communicative chain in order to recover the semantic (and aesthetic) properties of literary texts.

In his new book, *The Role of the Reader*, Eco maintains in principle the semiotic position. It is clearly revealed in his effort to purge the concept of the reader (as well as that of the author) from any psychological content. These concepts, we are told, are nothing more than "textual strategies"; the term "author," being "a mere metaphor for ‘textual strategy’," is discarded. Similarly, "the Model Reader is a textually established set of felicity conditions (Austin, 1962) to be met in order to have a macrospeech act (such as a text is) fully actualized" (11). Discussing then a concrete example, a portion of Wittgenstein's text, Eco remarks: "According to this text Wittgenstein is nothing else but a philosophical style, and his Model Reader is nothing else but his capacity to cooperate in order to reactualize that philosophical style" (11).

These and similar statements leave no doubt that Eco's Model Reader is a semiotic concept. Why then, we may ask, the lopsided treatment of the concepts of "author" and "reader"? While the term "author" can be discarded, the term "reader" is not only preserved, but even foregrounded by appearing in the title of Eco's new book. At first sight, we could suspect in this unequal treatment of the two metaphors for "textual strategies" a concession to the contemporary spirit of "democratic Romanticism." We could even point to certain statements in Eco's "Introduction," which seem to indicate a shift from the semiotic to the phenomenological position. However, if we consider the basic thrust of the "Introduction" and, especially, if we relate its general statements to Eco's critical praxis demonstrated in the following essays, we come to a different conclusion: Eco's aim is not to undermine the fundamental assumptions of a semiotic text theory, but to break out of the rigid determinism of the communication model in order to accommodate within the semiotic framework the specific properties of literary communication. A semiotic theory of literary communication has to recognize the active role of the reader, while, at the same time, re-asserting the essential control of the text and
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its codes over the reader's interpretations. Such a theory presupposes the "objective" existence of the literary text, an assumption clearly formulated by Eco: "Any interpretation implies an interplay between the addressee and the work as an objective fact" (50). This "realistic" ontology of the literary text is made especially explicit in Eco's discussion of a special case of this interplay — the relationship between the world of the fabula and the world(s) of the reader (dealt with in the last essay of the book): The belief-worlds of the Model Reader ($R_w$) are placed under the control of the world of the fabula ($W_f$) "imagined and asserted by the author." While at various stages of his reading the Reader constantly constructs his belief-worlds, ultimately, they are "approved" or "disapproved" by "the states of the fabula in $W_f$" (235f.).

If Eco's theoretical framework has assigned a relatively modest (and, I would say, the proper) place to the Model Reader, we must still ask what role he (it?) can fulfill as an operational concept, i.e., as a tool of literary analysis. Before we follow Eco's critical praxis in the particular essays, let us make two general points: 1. The essays of the collection were written over a long span of almost twenty years (between 1959 and 1977). It would be surprising if they were completely homogeneous and unitary in their analytical strategies, originating, as they do, from an author so sprightly, versatile and innovative as Eco. Although Eco claims that all the essays are dominated by "the problem of the role of the reader in interpreting texts," I have the impression that this aim was imposed on some of them post festum by the "Introduction." 2. The basic organization of the book is not given by a classification of the possible roles of the reader, but by Eco's famous division of texts into "open" and "closed." Eco has emphasized that there exists a fundamental connection between the character of the text in terms of this classification and the presumed role of the reader. "Today," Eco is inclined to see the "categorical polarity" of open and closed texts as "a special case of a more general semiotic phenomenon: the cooperative role of the addressee in interpreting messages" (vii). I see no reason, however, why from a semiotic point of view we could not argue that the required degree of the "cooperative role of the addressee" is a function (or necessary consequence) of the polar differentiation of texts into open and closed. Such a view seems to me much more consistent with the general principles of Eco's semiotics and, especially, with his "realistic" text ontology, which I have mentioned earlier.

Let me now survey the basic topics and problems of the particular analytical essays, with a special consideration of the role of the Model Reader in Eco's critical strategy. (I am leaving aside the essay on Peirce's semiotics — Chapter VII — which is a general contribution to the problem of "openness" and "closedness" of texts in the framework of the Peirce-Eco idea of "unlimited semiosis"; the essay can be read as an appendix to A Theory of Semiotics.)

In the first analytic essay of the book — "The Semantics of Metaphor" — the Model Reader is kept very much in the background and, in fact, seems completely redundant. Using primarily examples from Joyce's Finnegans Wake, Eco explains metaphor as a special phenomenon of signification arising in the process of "unlimited semiosis." This process transforms factual contiguity into cultural contiguity (i.e., contiguity in the code), producing metonymies en masse. Metaphor is then nothing else than a "short-circuit" connection of two language elements (senses), established in the "uninterrupted web of culturalized contiguity" (78). In other words, metaphor is based on metonymy, since metonymic relationships are given in the code. Clearly, this is a purely semiotic theory which explains even the most striking and commonly cited phenomenon of verbal creativity from a basic property of the code. It reminds me strongly of Karcevskij's explanation of semantic transpositions made possible and, indeed, necessary by the basic
property of language, its “asymmetrical duality” (see Karcevskij, 1929; Steiner, 1978). It is to be regretted that Eco did not enrich his interpretation of the metaphor by reference to Karcevskij’s work; what is, however, especially surprising is the fact that Eco failed to confront his theory with Jakobson’s famous explanation of the opposition between metaphor and metonymy (Jakobson, 1956). This confrontation would be certainly most instructive due to the fact that Jakobson based his conception on two different semantic operations, while for Eco metaphor is only a special case of the general metonymic operation.

The hero of the next essay — “On the Possibility of Generating Aesthetic Messages in an Edenic Language” — is definitely not the reader, but the speaker, the Edenic “inventor” of poetic language. In this charming semiotic apocrypha, Eco demonstrates his legendary stylistic talent and truly poetic imagination, but the aim of the “story” is strictly scientific: to set up “a small-scale working model of aesthetic language” (91). The semiotic theory of poetic language (and poetry in general) is demonstrated in an extremely lucid, systematic and convincing way; the essay should be required reading for all students of literature. As in the analysis of metaphor, the source of aesthetic structures is located in the language code, this time in its absurd, but absolutely essential correlation between material form and mental meaning. The discovery of new meanings through the invention of new forms and the assignment of new forms to newly required meanings — this is the essence of poetry. Thus, the “aesthetic language game” is played in accordance with, or, at least, against the background of the basic properties of language structure, rather that against them. The Model Reader (and, indeed, any reader) is left here in the wings to watch and wonder at the magic performance.

While the two essays just discussed could be placed in the tradition of structural poetics represented by the Prague School — although Eco does not refer to that tradition — the following three essays dealing with closed texts are quite explicitly placed in the framework of French structural poetics. One of these essays, “Narrative Structures in Fleming,” appeared (in an incomplete version) in the pioneering volume of French narratology, Communications 8 (1966). Eco is within the French structuralist tradition in the selection of his material — works of popular, mass literature, in his analytic strategy — search for “deep” structures of narratives, and in his demascation of the ideological role of the modern “myth.” As far as the role of the reader is concerned, it is minimal in this theoretical set-up; the exclusion of the reader can be explicitly justified by the nature of the closed texts which “seem not to call for cooperative activity on the part of the reader” (vii). Later, it should become apparent how Eco resolves this contradiction between paraître and être of the reader’s participation.

The critique of the modern “mythologies” is most penetrating in “The Myth of Superman” (107–124), where the force of Eco’s structural explanation of ideological effects is comparable only to the great demascating exercises of Barthes. Eco reveals the absurdity of the myth by pointing out the inexplicable discrepancy between the hero’s virtual omnipotency and the small-scale field of his operations. Considering the possible tasks which Superman could accomplish, his activities are “a paradoxical waste of means” (123). But this paradox is inevitable, if the myth is to carry its basic ideological message: “Superman must make virtue consist of many little activities on a small scale,” because he is “a perfect example of civic consciousness, completely split from political consciousness” (123). Such an ideology requires a specific narrative structure for its expression, while, on the other hand, this particular narrative structure is perpetuated by the underlying ideology. In this connection, Eco discusses at some length one of the most significant problems of structural narratology, the iterative narrative scheme discovered
by Propp. While Eco has much to add to our understanding of this significant cultural phenomenon, the most original part of his analysis is his treatment of narrative time in the iterative scheme. In the serial iterative structure, the very concept of time "breaks down." Instead of the standard description of time as a continuous flux, the serial represents time as "an ever-continuing present."

With acute insight, Eco perceives an analogous "disintegration of temporality" in many "sophisticated" works of modern literature and art (Joyce, Robbe-Grillet, the film Last Year in Marienbad), This analogy would seem to endanger the validity of the opposition between closed and open texts. Eco wants to counter this difficulty by introducing a distinction between "conscious" and "unconscious" readers (116), thus assigning to the reader psychological properties \textit{par excellence}. For the first time in this book, the concept of the reader is invoked to perform a significant theoretical role. However, instead of the semiotic Model Reader, the common-language concept of the reader makes its appearance with all the well-known pitfalls implied by the usage of this concept. It seems to me absolutely impossible to explain the difference between, say, the serial of the Superman and the novels of Robbe-Grillet by reference to two different types of presupposed readers. Eco himself does not press this explanation too hard; implicitly, he suggests a different solution which, to my mind, is much more promising. At a closer inspection it becomes apparent that iterative schemes offer the possibility of "infinite variations of the theme" (119). Discussing the specific case of the detective novel, Eco points out: "Each crime has new psychological and economic motivations, each time the author devises what appears as a new situation" (119). In this way, a strangely deceptive poetics of the closed text is generated, satisfying not only the "hunger for redundancy," but also the need for novelty. In other words, the poetics of the closed text, not unlike the poetics of the open text, is based on the tension between structural invariants and textual variability. Could it be that it is only the emphasis, the focus on one of these poles — motivated by historical and generic factors — that represents the criterion for distinguishing closed and open texts?

Eco's further contributions to the poetics of the closed text could be read, in my opinion, as descriptions of this unstable dialectic. In "Rhetoric and Ideology in Sue's Les Mystères de Paris" (125–143) the problem is posed as a contrast between the invariant "sinusoidal structure" of the serial novel and Sue's stylistic innovation which consists in his inventing "a Kitsch for the poor" (135). Interestingly enough, a much more recent writer, Fleming, whose Bond cycle is analyzed in "Narrative Structures in Fleming" (144–172), relies on a very similar strategy. While the narrative structure of the cycle is perfectly iterative (invariant) (see especially Eco's description on pp. 156–161), Fleming's "mastery" consists in his ability to foist "a clever montage of déjà vu" as "a stylistic invention" (163). Inventing or, rather, reinventing the Kitsch for the modern reader, Fleming, who repeats the same story again and again, can be also numbered "among the cleverest exploiters of an \textit{experimental} technique" (168) (italics — L.D.). In particular, Eco deals with descriptive digressions in Bond novels which best reveal the secret of Fleming's stylistic "mastery." With an intense attention to detail and verbal embellishment, Fleming's descriptions elevate his texts to the level of Literature (the capital letter is Eco's).

These and similar observations about the "dosing" of invariants and variability in closed texts have serious theoretical implications: they confirm the most significant property of closed texts, uncovered already by Propp: While in their basic story (action) structures popular narratives reveal an iterative stability, in their other aspects, especially those of descriptions, they offer a "field of freedom" for the story-teller, where he can
display the power of his imagination, his art of improvisation and his stylistic mastery. As
Propp observed, it is the “attributes” of the characters, i.e., variable elements, that
“provide the folktale with its brilliance, charm, and beauty” (Propp, 1969:79). In other
words, the dialectic of invariants and variability in popular narratives seems to be
distributed in such a way that the story structures are strongly schematized, while the
“accessory” elements, such as the characters’ physical properties and appearance, the
natural and man-made environment, etc., are the domain of variability, available for
cultural, historical and individual “experimentation.”

These and similar hypotheses have to be tested by structural and stylistic analyses of a
variety of popular narrative texts from many cultures and historical periods; the concept
of the Model Reader seems to be of little or no assistance here. However, it is exactly in the
essays dealing with closed texts that the specific function of Eco’s Model Reader becomes
apparent. The first traces of this function are such phrases as “what appears as,” “the
reader is not aware of,” “the reader loses track of,” “the reader is comforted,” “the reader
did not grasp the implications,” etc.; furthermore, in the Fleming essay, the term
“sophisticated reader” makes its appearance, without being made explicit and related to
the concept of the Model Reader. These and other indications suggest that the Model
Reader has a special role in Eco’s theoretical framework: When reading Sue, Siegel or
Fleming, the Model Reader has to succumb to the pseudo-charms of their texts, without
realizing that he is being manipulated. In contrast, the “sophisticated” reader (especially
the critic or analyst) will reveal the devices and the goals of the manipulation by
uncovering the iterative schemes, rhetorical devices, Kitsch-like style and ideological
“message.” We are beginning to realize that the concept of the Model Reader is, in fact, a
rhetorical figure for describing texts as traps, i.e., for distinguishing between what the text
appears (or “pretends”) to be and what it actually is.

Not surprisingly, the role of the Model Reader becomes most prominent in the
description of a text (A. Allais, “Un drame bien parisien”) whose very structure is
identical with setting a trap. In the analysis of this text, the Model Reader moves from the
relatively modest position he has occupied in the preceding essays to the foregrounded
position expressed already in the title of the essay: “Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy
in a Metanarrative Text” (200–266). The title of this last and latest essay is thus a
miniature reflection of the title of the whole book. This “sign” is highly significant in the
work of a master semiotician: it indicates the transition to a new phase in the development
of modern poetics, a phase which has been often called “post-structuralist.” It is
extremely interesting and instructive to observe what this phase means in the work of a
scholar who, as I have suggested, has gone through the two preceding phases of
structuralism. Eco remains a structuralist in the post-structuralist age; that means that he
continues developing an explicit, exact and systematic poetics without being dogmatically
tied to any particular epistemology or model. Eco is willing and able to learn from new
developments in the broad range of semiotic sciences, thus expanding both the
problématique and the epistemological equipment of structural poetics; but he is too wise
to renounce the basic theoretical accomplishments of structuralism in the study of
literature.

Eco’s “post-structuralist” phase has enriched structural poetics in two fundamental
theoretical and methodological aspects:

1. The introduction of the concept of the Model Reader makes it possible to develop
simultaneously a double interpretative strategy resulting in different (or even
contradictory) interpretations. The Model Reader, manipulated by a complex text (like
that of Allais) and its apparent structure, offers interpretations ranging from a complete
null
Raoul is such a S-necessary property of these two individuals in the world of Allais's story. Eco's search for these identifying properties would be probably less intense if he had taken into account the role of proper names as "rigid" denominators (Kripke, 1972). c) I have the feeling that Eco has weakened the effectiveness of possible-world semantics in literary theory by imposing the requirements of two-value logic on the range of possible worlds (233). Eco concedes that narrative worlds based on a non-standard logic exist (for example, in science fiction or in avant-garde texts), but is reluctant to give them "full" status: "They undermine the world of our encyclopedia rather than build up another self-sustaining world" (234). In my opinion, modern literature, not unlike modern logic, has been engaged in constructing systematically worlds which do not conform with two-value logic and, consequently, with "the world of our encyclopedia." In such worlds — as I have indicated elsewhere (Doležel, 1980) — the basic assumptions of our standard logic and semantics are questioned and, consequently, the domain of sense is radically expanded.

These and other problems of a narrative semantics based on the concept of possible worlds have to be discussed in depth. Eco's contribution to this discussion is indispensable not only because of his conceptual contribution, but also because of his "pedagogical" ability; Eco makes the difficult concepts of possible-world semantics accessible to many literary scholars and humanists who would find them otherwise impossible to handle.

Concluding his book with an essay which takes as its material a very tricky and "obscure" text and as its methodology a difficult formal theory, Eco demonstrates again that he is always ready to meet new challenges and to break new ground. Eco is not only a modern scholar, he is a true representative of modern culture which survives only because it is in the state of constant progress. Operating at the frontiers of scholarship is a risky and difficult task; but it is the only mode of modern scholarship which is truly exciting and fascinating.

REFERENCES

Fun Tales are the first readers offered from the homeschooling curriculum, Sonlight.