

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2020.0009

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Eco on Interpreting the Sign: The Limits of Narrating that which Cannot Be Theorized

Abstract:

Eco says that which cannot be theorized must be narrated. What about that which cannot be narrated? What must we do about (and at) the limits of interpretation, especially as (performative) narration. This review essay takes a method from Giambattista Vico and applies it to the interpretation of Laurent Binet's portrayal of Umberto Eco in his novel *The Seventh Function of Language* (2015). Comparing the character of Eco with the thought of the historical Eco we find coincidences and other angles at incidence that reveal some portion of Binet's underlying interpretation of Eco, *and* its limits.

Keywords:

Umberto Eco, semiology, semiotics, Laurent Binet, narration, interpretation, Vico

I take as my dictum for this bit of inscription, Eco's comic turning of Wittgenstein's coda: "Whereof one cannot theorize, thereof one must narrate." Claudio Paolucci (Eco's prize student and designated successor) has wisely punctuated his recent book with this dictum.¹ Since this is not only Eco's motto, but is also true in its way, I will preface this effort with a discussion of some of his *principles*, that is, in the original sense of the word, starting places for thinking. Regarding those I have chosen to reveal, I think that they provide a narrative overview of what cannot really be theorized. It was Vico who said that the truth of his "New Science" would be available

1) Paolucci, *Umberto Eco: Tra Ordine e Avventura*.

only to those who meditated upon its axioms and narrated it to themselves. I will place before us some axioms, then; about knowledge, truth, revenge, and above all, laughter. And we shall discover a few more.

But our axioms come not from the words of Eco *the man*, but from Eco *the character*, the Great Protagoras of the Logos Club in Laurent Binet's novel *The Seventh Function of Language*. Clearly having learned at the knee of a master novelist, Binet exercises our imaginations, authorlessly, narrating what cannot be theorized: the antagonism between a protagonist and the novelist who steps into the text to terrorize him, or, if tables turn, to fall under a subjection to the character. Our Logos Club, the ancient and secret society, has seven levels (of course). In ascending order, they are Speakers, Rhetoricians, Orators, Dialecticians, Peripeteticians, Tribunes, and Sophists (of which there are twelve, naturally). Above this, only the Great Protagoras; and this personage, we learn in the course of the novel, is (for his generation): Umberto Eco. These are the axioms for the limits of narration, mostly spoken by the Great Protagoras:

Axiom I

For communicating, language is perfect; there could be nothing better. And yet, language does not say everything. The body speaks, objects speak, history speaks, individual or collective destinies speak, life and death speak to us constantly in a thousand different ways. Man is an interpreting machine and, with a little imagination, he sees signs everywhere: in the color of his wife's coat, in the stripe on the door of his car, in the eating habits of the people in the apartment next door, in France's monthly unemployment figures, in the banana-like taste of Beaujolais nouveau (it often tastes either like banana or, less often, raspberry. Why? No one knows, but there must be an explanation, and it is semiological), in the proud, stately bearing of the black woman striding ahead of him through the corridors of the metro, in the habit of his colleague's leaving the top two buttons of his shirt undone, in some footballer's goal celebration, in the way his partner screams when she has an orgasm, in the design of that piece of Scandinavian furniture, in the main sponsor's logo at this tennis tournament, in the soundtrack to the credits of that film, in architecture, in painting, in cooking, in fashion, in advertising, in interior décor, in the West's representation of women and men, love and death, heaven and earth, etc.²

Axiom II

Umberto. How is he? (SFL, 129)

Axiom III

Ma, io non parlo mai di politica! (SFL, 159)

Axiom IV

The signified is in everything. [He takes a swig of white wine.] Everything. But that does not mean either that there is an infinity of interpretation . . . it could always be submitted to a rule of falsification, in order to exclude what the context made it impossible to read, no matter what hermetic violence it was subjected to . . . It is impossible to say if one interpretation is valid, or if it is the best one, but it is possible to say if the text refuses an interpretation incompatible with its own contextuality. (SFL, 161)

2) Binet, *The Seventh Function of Language*, 9. Hereafter referred to in the main text as SFL followed by the page number.

Axiom V

The interpretation of clues is not all science, but the semiological moment of all science and the essence of semiology itself. . . . Semiology offers instruments to recognize what science does, which is, first and foremost, learning to see the world as a collection of signifying events. (SFL, 161–162)

Axiom VI

The Athenian city was founded on three pillars: the gymnasium, the theater, and the school of rhetoric. The trace of this tripartition remains today in a society obsessed with spectacle that promotes three categories of individuals to the rank of celebrity: athletes, actors (or singers: the ancient theater made no distinction between the two), and politicians. (SFL, 164)

Axiom VII

For Plato, you know, poetry is not an art, not a technique, but a divine inspiration. The poet is inhabited by the god, in a trancelike state. . . . So the poet is mad, but it is a gentle madness, a creative madness, not a destructive madness. (SFL, 312)

For anyone familiar with Vico's *New Science*, the axiomatic structure is easy to recognize. For Vico, axioms, deriving from the Greek *axiōma* "what is thought fitting," from *axios* "worthy."³ Axioms were "worthy thoughts." But as we know, the geometers added a kind of necessity to what is fitting and worthy. Vico retained this "necessity" *in the ironic mode*. He says:

In order to give form to the materials hereinbefore set in order in the Chronological Table, we now propose the following axioms, both philosophical and philological, including a few reasonable and proper postulates and some clarified definitions. And just as the blood does in animate bodies, so will these elements course through our Science and animate it in all its reasoning's about the common nature of nations.⁴

What follows is 114 axioms, not unlike the seven I have offered above. The necessity of axioms is that of a living body of thought. Vico proceeds to set out⁵ such worthy axioms. The truth of his science depends upon meditating on these principles and *narrating* the science to oneself. This science is the very essence of "necessity," insofar as there is any such thing. We see that Eco does not deviate far from these principles in his axioms, set out above. He retains the idea of essence in his axiom dealing with clues, and in the falsification principle. And the refusal of the text regarding some interpretations incompatible with context, and in the two most important of Eco's axioms, that is Axiom II and Axiom III, we see the limits of interpretation as narrative. Asking "how" of one who does not exist, either because he was not present when Todorov (or, more accurately, the Todorov character) inquired, or because Eco was elsewhere when Binet wrote of Todorov's inquiry, or because Eco *now* does not exist (although he did when the question was inscribed), we see that we are obliged to neutralize ourselves in the presence of this axiom, realizing that an absent fictional Umberto, or an actual Umberto elsewhere when the question is written/asked, or a non-existent Umberto now, as we currently must intend, leaves us unable to settle on the meaning of the word "is" in the axiom, and what modification "how" brings to it. Eco is an echo,

3) See Goetsch, *Vico's Axioms*.

4) Vico, *The New Science*, § 119.

5) *Ibid.*, § 114.

in about every possible sense (a point Binet does not fail to make). The third axiom is a complaint exclaimed aloud by “Eco” when a hippie pisses on him in a bar. As the hippie is being dragged away by the bouncers, he answers Eco “*Appunto!*” Here we hit the limits of narration in the unsaid, the undone, the uncommitted, the “significant absence,” as Barthes calls it.⁶

It is fitting and worthy, even necessary, to look at the limits of narration. Let us take a case from one of Eco’s novels, applying Axioms II and III. For Eco, you can be subjectively wherever you happen to be and the knowledge relation may function as it objectively does regardless of whether *you* are the knower. What others know, or *no one* knows, functions the same in determining you *as* an object regardless of your subjective condition.

Consider the grocery list from *Foucault’s Pendulum*. The novel has its significant action centered around a cryptic piece of paper left in a publisher’s office by a mysterious man (who may or may not have been murdered after his one visit to that office). This piece of paper is what Alfred Hitchcock always called the “MacGuffin” in a story – something that everyone wants for some reason and which motivates the action. The piece of paper contains what seem to be notations about a secret location and what was to be found there. The three main characters come to believe that these “instructions” were written long ago by some people who had hidden the esoteric documents of a secret society (which secret society is an open question). At a crucial moment in the story, the girlfriend of the main character Casaubon snatches the piece of paper (to see what all the fuss is about) and she rather convincingly shows that it is in fact just a grocery list.

I had an opportunity to ask Eco about this. “Was it just a grocery list?” His answer was “I don’t know.” Of course, it was his own creation, as an author, but here we sit, after the death of the author (in two senses of it), and looking at an open work, after all. But I believe Eco (the philosopher and the character, and he was quite a character, could go further and say “*I can’t know*,” on the basis of our axioms. How can narration deal with (1) “I don’t know” as a sincere answer to the query about the Eco’s intentions? and (2) “I can’t know” as a response to the same? It seems to me that there *is* a fact of the matter, *within the story*, as to whether the cryptic piece of paper is or is not a grocery list. Narrative unity demands it. To give up on that claim is to abandon the presupposed history (the unity of action, in Aristotle’s terms) that governs the narrative. *Foucault’s Pendulum* is not science fiction or fantasy or even magical realism; nor is it any other genre that tampers with Aristotle’s three unities. The novel studiously observes all three unities. Hence, that fictional piece of paper (whatever it is) *has* a history included in the story by more than mere reference, that either does or does not include having been a grocery list. In fact, one of the main characters loses his life because everyone believes that this piece of paper holds the key to locating the secret documents of the secret societies. Either these characters have a true belief or a false belief, because the context refuses some interpretations, not by verification but by the three unities. Now invoking Axiom IV, we see here an instance of “hermetic violence,” but at the limit, the limen, the mysterious piece of paper does not refuse its interpretation as a grocery list. That places it beyond the reach of narration. The matter is unknowable in that it can *neither be theorized nor narrated*. To resolve this tension is to erase the story.

But there are clues. Combining Axioms V and I, we see that not everything is *in* the language the narrative uses. One usually assumes that narration is more or less constituted by the language in which it is offered, but not so. Apart from the language itself, there is the *performance* of the telling, whether this is transgressive “sovereign” writing, as Derrida might have called it, or utterance upon an occasion, or semiotic desire, in Kristeva’s sense, or the “interlocution” in Ricouer’s semantic theory (his absence from Binet’s narrative is a significant one), there are in any case “signs” (or something sign-like) involved that cannot be reduced to language, and in these we may find “clues” (to invoke the Axiom). But what is a clue? The most important feature of the clue is

6) Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 76–77.

that it is neither deduced nor induced, it is *abduced*.⁷ And this characteristic turns us to another limit of narration. That is, there is no origin or original, and so (abduced) clues are always “general.” Eco says:

If a fake is not a sign, for modern philology the original, in order to be compared with its fake copy, must be approached as a sign. False identification is a semiotic web of misunderstandings and deliberate lies, whereas any effort to “correct” authentication is a clear case of semiotic interpretation or of *abduction*.⁸

The idea of a semiotic web includes narration as well as theory. If *Foucault's Pendulum* is not a semiotic web, I do not know what is. But, the same may be said of every novel and indeed of every narration. Still, something rises to generality that does not depend wholly upon the language, and in these are clues. In the case of *Foucault's Pendulum*, I was having a private conversation with the author, if there was one, and asking him about the list, Eco did not ask, in response, “so where did you buy your personal copy?” He did not even ask whether I read it in English. Perhaps, after all, the grocery list does not survive translation, or perhaps my personal copy was in a group that had printing errors, and the questions could multiply forever.⁹ These would not be clues, however. The clues are essentially signs which may be in the language and may not be, but as clues, they are *more general than language*. The performance includes the language but is more than the language. The abduced clues can be (indeed, should be) non-linguistic.

Peirce says:

As for the validity of the hypothesis, the retroduction [i.e., abduction], there seems at first to be no room at all for the question of what supports it, since from actual fact it only infers what *may be*: *may be* and *may be not*. But there is a decided leaning to the affirmative side and the frequency with which that turns out to be an actual fact is to me quite the most surprising of all the wonders of the universe. I hope there are few men who are so often deceived as I. They surely cannot be many. Yet I could tell you of conjectures pronounced by me with a confidence I could not comprehend, and that were verified amazingly. I simply should not dare to tell them; I feel my credit would not support such tales.¹⁰

7) See my essay “Eco, Peirce, and the Pragmatic Theory of Signs.”

8) Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 193.

9) In discussion *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* with Eco, I remarked that I had never tried stracciatella gelato before reading the book, but now it was my favorite kind. He said he did not understand my point. I reminded him that stracciatella was the favorite gelato of his protagonist in that novel. He denied it. I said, “then how would I even know about this kind of food if I had not gotten from your book? I did not make this up.” He said it must have been the translator’s insertion. Maybe that was *his* favorite gelato. I went home, looked it up in my Italian copy, and it was right there, stracciatella. I did not mention this later to Eco, but I have not known him to *forget* very many things of this nature. On the other hand, I have not been wholly honest in this narration. The context was: I was pressing Eco on how much his protagonist in that novel was modelled on himself, and Eco hated questions like that. I was being punished for asking, because *he* knew that *I* knew he hated questions like that. His penance for me was to put me in a position to check on the stracciatella, find it was there, and then to have to decide whether to bring it up again. I do not think he would have respected me if I had followed up. But then, maybe he would have actually respected me *more* if I did. Playful people are hard to read sometimes. But the right way to handle the task would have been to bring him a carton of stracciatella on the next visit, without a word, and put it in his freezer when he was not looking, with a note, perhaps, “questo è un pensiero per te, Yambo.”

10) Peirce, *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*, 282.

Thus, as we see in Axiom V, the clue exceeds the tale, the narrative is limited by what one may credibly enounce. Reading nature is still reading, but it is not reading language. The same goes for our human nature, which is still nature, after all, in the sense that we did not make it, even if we do *make it up*. But if we are to bring this narrative to a completion we must see how the clues we have now collected from our Axioms point to the figure of the narrator, as a clue to the “decided leaning to the affirmative side.” At the limits of narration, we do not find a prohibition but a gentle madness and a certain basis for, of all things, celebrity. Paolucci and Privitello can help us make an ending. Paolucci says:

Eco recounts Pareyson’s proposal of the “one idea.” Due to the occasion of a conference on his work in Cerisy, Eco felt courageous enough to give a face to this one idea, saying, “I suspected that the idea had to do with the question of whether the world existed, and (as a consequence) with the other question, *quid sit veritas*.”¹¹

It is interesting how Paolucci chose to phrase this. Eco’s teacher, Luigi Pareyson, had entertained the thought that every philosophy comes down to one idea, and this had a great effect on Eco. He said in many interviews, and also told me personally, that each of his novels had grown from a single *image*. So here is a sign that is not language, but begets language. Obviously, Laurent Binet has also read these interviews. He depicts a moment in a fictional 1980 when Eco has the image that begets *The Name of the Rose* (published in the actual 1983). The characters of Simon Hertzog and Jacques Bayard are the Holmes and Watson of Binet’s detective narrative and this scene occurs in the Bologna train station moments before it is bombed in May of 1980:

“What do you know about the seventh function of language?” In a haze Simon doesn’t realize at first that it’s not Bayard who asks this, but Eco. Simon notices that he is still holding hands with Bianca. Eco gazes at the girl with lightly lustful eyes (Everything seems light.) Simon tries to pull himself together: “We have good reason to believe that Barthes and three other people were killed because of a document relating to the seventh function of language.” Simon hears his own voice but feels as if Bayard is speaking. Eco listens with interest to the story of a lost manuscript for which people are being killed. He sees a man walk past holding a bouquet of roses. His mind wanders for a second, and a vision of a poisoned monk flashes through it. (SFL, 184-185)

So Binet takes credit, as the transgressive writer of the character Simon (surely named for Eco’s main character in *The Prague Cemetery*), for the image which begets the novel that leads to the *celebrity* of Eco – the character *and* the man – and leads to the question: is Eco an athlete, an actor, or a politician. We know by Axiom III it cannot be the latter. He says nothing political. In another scene he identifies with the aesthetes in the Logos Club, as against the politicians. We know from his writings on soccer that it cannot be the first, although I have seen him toss a bocce ball with some skill. Clearly Eco is a kind of *actor*, the sort with a gentle madness whom a god inhabits for a time, and who leaves behind clues, if, like Binet, one is courageous enough to abduce and willing to interpret them. So Binet has Eco say:

If the seventh function of language exists and it really is a kind of performative function, it would lose a large part of its power were it known by everyone. Knowledge of a manipulative mechanism

11) Paolucci, *Umberto Eco: Tra Ordine e Avventura*, 192 (Privitello’s translation).

doesn't necessarily protect us from it – look at advertising, public relations: most people know how they work, what methods they use – but, all the same, it does weaken it. (SFL, 187)

Narration as performance meets the limits of magic when people know how the incantation works. But there is still a willing and even an unwilling suspension of disbelief. People want to believe something; for example, that they are hearing an assessment of Eco's philosophy when they are actually witnessing a review of Binet's novel. I would think you would know a book review from a philosophical exposition. There are plenty of clues. But sometimes it is hard to tell, even for me, in this case. Privitello says: "Paolucci notes that the ideas of Truth, and Essence are enemies of Eco's thought, and can only be used if they pass the test of laughter (a primary laughter?) within which they can be transformed."¹² Hence, whereof one cannot narrate, one must laugh.

12) Privitello, "Umberto Eco's Adventurous Orders," 97; (Paolucci citation is UE, 161).

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