Don't explain your author, read him right and he explains himself.   **—Mark Twain**
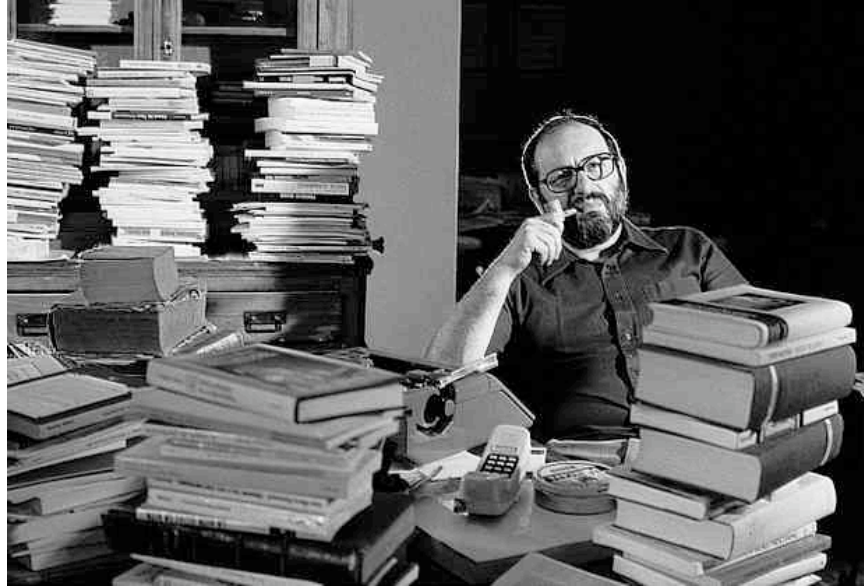
BEWARE OF THE FALLOUT:
UMBERTO ECO AND THE
MAKING OF THE MODEL READER

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This book will perhaps be understood only by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts. It is therefore not a textbook. Its purpose would be achieved if there were one person who read it with understanding and to whom it gave pleasure (Ludwig Wittgenstein, in Kolak, 1998, p. xxxi)

This foreword should perhaps be headed 'Directions for Use.' Not because I feel that the reader cannot be trusted—he is, of course, free to make what he will of the book he has been kind enough to read. What right have I, then, to suggest that it should be used in one way rather than another? (Michel Foucault, 1970, p. ix)

Welcome, dear reader, to this text on Umberto Eco. Let me introduce myself. I am, of course, the text. This statement may surprise you. Perhaps you were expecting me to introduce myself as the author. Let this be the first point made in this discussion of the work and thought of Umberto Eco: authors do not really matter, only texts. Eco (1994a, p. 11) writes: "I'll tell you at once that I really couldn't care less about the empirical author of a narrative text (or, indeed, of any text)" and that "the author should die once he has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text" (Eco, 1983a, p. 7). So forget about the author who created me. He is not here before you now. Only I am. The text. It is I who rests in your hands. And it is I that speaks to you. These remarks concerning my status as a text are not made lightly or randomly. The relationship between a text and a reader is perhaps the central theme that runs throughout the works of philosopher, literary theorist, and semiotician, Umberto Eco. Eco's work has attempted to articulate this relationship through an analysis of the systems of communication and signification which make it possible. Put in more concrete terms, understanding Eco's work is understanding how it is you are able to make sense of this text that you are holding in your hands right now. Consider the following questions:

By what labor was this text produced?

By what labor is this text read and understood?

What does this text mean? In itself? To you? To some other reader?

What are the codes that enable your understanding of these words.

What competence are you relying on to make sense of this text?

How is misinterpretation possible? Or over-interpretation?

How does this text connect with other texts?

Does the meaning of this text reside in these words or as part of a network of knowledge?

What is the nature of this network?

Is the network structured like a dictionary or an encyclopedia?

Is the network a part of an inexhaustible labyrinth?

Where does interpretation start?

More importantly, where does it stop?

What are its limits to interpretation?

Questions such as these, form the heart of Umberto Eco's work in the academic field known as *semiotics*. The word "semiotics" comes from the Greek root *seme*, as in *semiotikos*, an interpreter of signs where a sign is "*everything* that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as standing for something else" (Eco, 1976, p. 16). The term "semeiotics" originally referred to the branch of medical science relating to the interpretation of symptoms (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, Volume XIV, p. 959). Thus red spots "stand for" the measles or swollen neck glands "stand for" the mumps. In its modern usage, semiotics is defined as "the science of communication studies through the interpretation of signs and symbols as they operate in various fields, esp. language" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, Volume XIV, p. 959). The two key terms in both definitions are "sign" and "interpretation." The physician considers the headache and sweaty palms as signs indicating an underlying medical condition. She reads, or interprets, the signs to arrive at a diagnosis and treatment. For the modern academic discipline of semiotics, anything in a culture can be considered as a sign: a text, an image, a building, the design of a car, a hairstyle. These signs are read and a meaning imputed to them. Interpretation allows us to make sense of the objects we encounter.

The words you are reading now are signs. The presence of the words in them-selves is not as important, or as interesting, as the "something else" for which they stand; the content they convey. This much would seem obvious. As a semiotician, Umberto Eco would ask the following questions: How are you able to arrive at this content? How are you able to interpret these signs and make sense of them? Like the doctor looking at the red spots on the patient's body trying to interpret her sickness, so you too must look at these words and interpret meaning from them. How is this possible? By what process are you able to do this?

These are the questions which will drive this discussion of the thought of Umberto Eco. As you can see, this will be not be an abstract discussion of esoteric concepts. Your reading of this text about Umberto Eco and semiotics is also your concrete *engagement* in those very processes that Eco will describe in his theories. Ultimately, this reading of Eco's semiotics will not only lead to an understanding of Eco, but also, and more importantly, to an understanding about you; in particular, of how you read, interpret, understand, and communicate. Further, this understanding will inevitably *change* the ways in which you read, interpret, understand, and communicate. As Eco (1976) writes:

If semiotics is a theory, then it should be a theory that permits a continuous critical intervention in semiotic phenomena. Since people speak, to explain how and why they speak cannot help but determine their future way of speaking. At any rate, I can hardly deny that it determines my own way of speaking (p. 29).

Your engagement with this text and how, as a result, you are able to understand it, forms the heart of Eco's semiotic theory. So, take a deep breath and be prepared to take center stage. This text is not about Umberto Eco at all. It is really about us, and especially about you, the reader. So welcome. It's good to meet you.

Understanding Texts

Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens (Richard Rorty, 1992, p. 105)

So, who are you? Where has this text landed and who has picked it up? Are you an undergraduate student with a course assignment? A

graduate student coming to grips with semiotics for the first time? An English major exploring a new corner of her field? A member of the public who, inspired from reading Eco's (1983b) novel *The Name of the Rose*, wants to know more about the man who wrote it? These questions are important because each reader brings something different to this text: Different backgrounds, education, exposure to European theories of communication, motives, motivation, and so on. Since this text is being written for a wide audience, and for the greatest number of readers possible, these inevitable differences in background, culture, and knowledge will lead to a number of different "readings" of this text even though the actual words and sentences remain the same for all readers. As Eco (1992) describes, this variety is the very nature of the reading experience: "When a text is produced not for a single addressee but for a community of readers—the author knows that he or she will be interpreted not according to his or her intentions but according to a complex strategy of interactions which also involve the readers, along with their competence in language as a social treasury" (Eco, 1992, p. 67). The important concept here is that of "social treasury:"

I mean by social treasury not only a given language as a set of grammatical rules, but also the whole encyclopedia that the performances of that language have implemented, namely the cultural conventions that that language has produced and the very history of the previous interpretations of many texts, comprehending the text that the reader is in the course of reading. (Eco, 1992, pp. 67-68).

There is a textual journey you have taken in order to reach the point where you hold this text in your hands. You are not reading this text at random, but rather in conjunction with other texts that you have read or are familiar. These texts may be Eco's novels: *The Name of the Rose* (1983b), *Foucault's Pendulum* (Eco, 1989), or *The Island of the Day Before* (Eco, 1995); his collections of popular writings such as *How to Travel with a Salmon* (Eco, 1994b), *Misreadings* (Eco, 1993), *Travels in Hyperreality* (Eco, 1986), *The Bond Affair* (Eco, 1965), or *Conversations about the End of Time* (Eco, 2000a); or his theoretical works, especially *A Theory of Semiotics* (Eco, 1976), *The Role of the Reader* (Eco, 1979), *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Eco, 1986), or *Kant and the Platypus* (Eco, 2000b). It may be something as mundane as a syllabus for a college class. Indeed, Eco suggests that it

is not you, the reader, that achieves comprehension, but rather the history of previous interpretations of many other texts that you have read. Your interpretation of this text falls within a system of knowledge comprising of:

  • your knowledge of language as a vocabulary and set of grammatical rules,

  • an encyclopedia of cultural knowledge and conventions, and

  • your history of previous interpretations of other texts, some of which may be related to semiotics, while many others will not.

It is within the framework of this system that your understanding of this text takes place. Thus, although I may intend to convey certain themes and ideas to you, in the last analysis I have no real control as to how these words will come to be read and used. Eco (1983a) has noted "the text is there, and produces its own effects" (p. 7). Michel Foucault (1988) notes of his own writings that "the effects of the book might land in unexpected places and form shapes that I had never thought of" (pp. 333-334). Thus what this text means, the content it attempts to convey, is not simply contained in these words nor in the intentions of its author. As Eco (1992) points out, "the text's intention is not displayed by the textual surface... One has to decide to 'see' it. It is possible to speak of the text's intention only as a result of a conjunction on the part of the reader" (p. 64). So we have me, the text. We have you, the reader. In order to understand me, in order to figure out and understand the intentions that lie behind these words, you must make conjectures, hypotheses, and educated guesses. It is the interaction of your conjectures and my text that produces the meaning you derive. How a text combines with a reader's personal and cultural encyclopedia of knowledge forms the heart of Eco's semiotic problematic.

One of my responsibilities as the text is to create my Model Reader. There is an important distinction between a Model Reader and an empirical reader. The empirical reader is you, the person next to you on the bus, anyone, when we read a text. Empirical readers can read in many ways, and there is no law that tells them how to read because they often use a text for their own reasons

such as escape, entertainment, or killing time on the bus commute. It is impossible to predict with any certainty what the encyclopedia of any empirical reader will be like, how this text will fit within that encyclopedia, and the uses the encyclopedia will make of this text and the meanings it will take from it. One of my duties is to provide you with the rules by which I should be read. You need to recognize and agree to the rules of the particular game I am playing. As a Model Reader, you will agree to abide by the rules I set in order for you to derive a coherent understanding of me. For example, consider the problem posed by the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood." We know as empirical readers with a particular world knowledge that wolves do not speak. However, as Model Readers we have to agree to live in a world where wolves do speak in order for the tale to make sense. As Model Readers, we must agree to abide by the rules of the fairy tale, where animals speak and grandmothers can be swallowed whole and alive by wolves. As Eco (1992) points out, "every act of reading is a difficult transaction between the competence of the reader (the reader's world knowledge) and the kind of competence that a given text postulates in order to be read in an economic way" (p. 68).

This "difficult transaction" between a text and its reader was explicitly recognized by both Michel Foucault and Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his foreword to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault (1970) writes: "This foreword should perhaps be headed 'Directions for Use.' Not because I feel that the reader cannot be trusted—he is, of course, free to make what he will of the book he has been kind enough to read. What right have I, then, to suggest that it should be used in one way rather than another?" (p. ix). Yet Foucault felt compelled to elaborate on how this most difficult book should be read because he sensed, in imagining the encyclopedias of its potential readers, many ways in which his text might be misread. Foucault (1970) writes of his book: "When I was writing it there were too many things that were not clear to me: some of these seemed too obvious, others too obscure. So I said to myself: this is how my ideal reader would have approached my book, if my intentions had been clearer and my project more ready to take form" (p. ix)._Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote his *Tractatus* with the sense that perhaps the majority of its readers would not have the encyclopedia necessary to understand his work and that the number of model readers would be small. In his preface, Wittgenstein wrote that: "This book will perhaps be understood only by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are

expressed in it—or similar thoughts" (Kolak, 1998, p. xxxi). He continues: "Its purpose would be achieved if there were one person who read it with understanding and to whom it gave pleasure" (p. xxxi). This one person who could read the *Tractatus* with understanding and pleasure would be Wittgenstein's "Model Reader;" that reader who is able to recognize and observe the rules of the game laid out by the text, and who is eager and able to play such a game. It is interesting to contemplate the notion that you can understand a text only if you have had thoughts similar to the ones motivating the author. Does this mean that if you have not had these thoughts, the text will be incomprehensible? Well, try to read Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* or Foucault's *Order of Things* and you will see my point! The words do not appear unfamiliar, or the grammar. Both follow the rules of the English language. It is the rules by which the text is to be read that both Foucault and Wittgenstein struggle to articulate and about which they express reservations.

The difficult transaction between the competence of the reader and the competence postulated by the text will be our starting point in this exploration of the work and thought of Umberto Eco. In the biography of mathematician and World War Two code-breaker Alan Turing, the cryptologists at Bletchley Park, England, working on the German Enigma code, would talk of finding a "way in" to the code. The code breakers would attempt to find and isolate a unique message that could be understood. The principles used in understanding the single message could then be generalized to provide an understanding of the code as a whole (see Hodge, 2000). In this text, Eco's notion of the "difficult transaction" between the competence of the reader and the competence postulated by the text will be used as the "way in" to Eco's thought as a whole. In the remainder of this chapter, this idea will be explored further using a number of examples from different contexts.

Beware of the Fallout

Often, when faced with an unknown phenomenon, we react by approximation: we seek that scrap of content, already present in our encyclopedia, which for better or worse seems to account for the new fact (Umberto Eco, 2000, p. 57).

The foundation of Eco's semiotic problem can be seen clearly through examples in which the competence of a reader and the

competence postulated by the text do not match, or match imprecisely. For example, read and consider the following text:

FALLOUT SURVIVAL SHELTER

Maximum Occupancy: 15

Provision limitations, single occupant: 180 days; divide by actual number of occupants. Upon entering shelter, see that First Hatch is securely locked and sealed, that the intruder shields are electrified to repel contaminated persons attempting entry, that the warning lights are ON outside the enclosure...

What does this mean to you? First, we recognize from the words and grammatical structure that the text is written in English language. From our early 21st century encyclopedias, we can make a number of other informed interpretations. The word "Fallout" tells us that this is a shelter to be used in the event of a nuclear war since we "know" that radioactive fallout occurs as a result of the detonation of an atomic bomb. We know that "Fallout" will kill us if we are exposed to it so if people are to survive an atomic war, they will need a specifically designed shelter capable of shielding its occupants from the fallout contaminated environment. In describing what this text "means," we are able to extrapolate a whole discourse which goes beyond the text itself to describe the kinds of situations in which such a shelter would be used, the possible political arrangements which might be in place, what a post-war physical landscape would look like, and so on. We can do this even though we have never personally seen or experienced life in such a shelter, and have certainly never experienced the scenarios in which such a text and the shelters it implies would take center stage in a possible fight for survival. Our descriptions bring into sharp relief the encyclopedias of personal and cultural knowledge that we bring to bear in our interpretation of the text. We can also feel confident that our competence as readers matches well with the competence expected of the text to produce an appropriate interpretation.

What is the source of this competence? Eco suggests that it derives from our personal history of reading and interpreting other texts. Such texts might include historical descriptions (accounts of the bombing of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, perhaps); physics (the nature

of atomic fission and fusion, chain reactions, and so on); environmental science (the nuclear winter, a world without sunlight, food-chains, eco-systems); political discourse (disarmament, the cold war, rogue nations); and depictions of nuclear war found in popular culture (books, television, movies, etc.). Taken together, our exposure to, interpretation, and incorporation of these texts provides the frame from which this new text is to be interpreted. It does not matter that our understanding of these encyclopedic texts may be incomplete or inaccurate. They are the material we have at hand and at our disposal.

Suppose this text were found by a person with a very different personal and cultural encyclopedia? What meaning would this text have for them? Indeed, would it have a meaning? Consider Walter Miller's (1959) novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, from which the description of the fallout shelter was taken. Miller writes about a time several hundred years into the future. Civilization as we know it has been destroyed in a nuclear holocaust which happened sometime in the 20th Century and the surviving population live in a medieval-like society. All historical and scientific records and documentation have been systematically destroyed in a great "Simplification" so that the war cannot be repeated. The Monks have once again become the keepers of the little recorded knowledge that has survived. Brother Francis of Utah is a member of the Order of Saint Leibowitz. He is out on the Great Salt Lake fasting when he comes upon a cave and, inside, finds the text describing the "Fallout Survival Shelter" described above. Brother Francis makes sense of the text in the following way:

The rest was buried, but the first word was enough for Francis. He had never seen a "Fallout," and he hoped he'd never see one. A consistent description of the monster had not survived, but Francis had heard the legends... Brother Francis visualized a Fallout as half-salamander, because, according to tradition, the thing was born in the Flame Deluge, and as half-incubus who despoiled virgins in their sleep, for, were not the monsters of the world still called "children of the Fallout?" That the demon was capable of inflicting all the woes which descended upon Job was recorded fact, if not an article of creed. The novice stared at the sign in dismay. Its meaning was plain enough. He had unwittingly broken into the abode (deserted, he prayed) of not just one, but fifteen of the dreadful beings! (Miller, 1959, pp. 24-25).

Clearly, Brother Francis draws upon a much different encyclopedia of knowledge and, as such, generates a much different discourse about what this text means. The most obvious difference is that Francis conceives "Fallout" as a terrible creature, something like a salamander, "capable of inflicting all the woes that descended upon Job." Francis knows that "Fallout" is dangerous and deadly. However, his conception of what that danger entails is much different. He envisions the "Fallout Survival Shelter" as a shelter for the Fallout creatures and that there could be as many as 15 of them inside the shelter. This may seem absurd to us in the context of our contemporary understandings of these terms but, for Francis, the meaning of the sign is as plain to him as our meaning is plain to us. Are we correct in saying that Brother Francis' interpretation was wrong? Is it absurd? Or does it make sense? And if it does make sense, is it correct, even though it clashes with the interpretations we give it with our encyclopedias? Consider the following example from the work of Thomas Kuhn.

The Absurd Writings of Aristotle

When reading the thoughts of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them (Thomas Kuhn, 1977, p. xii)

Did the great philosopher Aristotle write absurd things? It depends on what we mean by absurd. Thomas Kuhn was a very influential historian of science and author of the seminal treatise entitled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn's theory of the history of science, and how we should understand such a history, owes much to a semiotic view of knowledge. Kuhn's thesis is that the way in which scientists see the world they investigate is made possible by a paradigm, a concept similar to Eco's encyclopedia, a system of prior and taken-for-granted knowledge. How a scientist interprets the world around her is dependent on the encyclopedia she brings to bear, and that encyclopedia is acquired through intensive scientific training. Consider the following:

Looking at a contour map, the student sees lines on paper, the cartographer a picture of a terrain. Looking at a bubble-chamber photograph, the student sees confused and broken lines, the physicist a record of familiar subnuclear events. Only after a number of such transformations of vision does the student become a inhabitant of the scientist's world, seeing what the scientist sees and re-

sponding as the scientist does (Kuhn, 1970, p. 111).

It is only when the appropriate encyclopedia is in place, the appropriate competence mastered, can the student become a Model Reader and read texts such as contour maps and bubble-chamber photographs in ways consistent with the competence required by the text. Without this knowledge, either the pictures are meaningless or the interpretations made are simply inappropriate. Kuhn argues that this "world" is not fixed by the nature of the environment or by the institution of science. The "world" is produced jointly by the environment and the scientific tradition in which the student has now been trained. If the scientific tradition changes, the student must learn to see the world in new ways. In effect, the student learns to see a new world. Kuhn argues: "Paradigm changes... cause scientists to see the world of their research engagement differently. In so far as their only recourse to that world is through what they see and do, we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world" (p. 111). One aspect of the motivation behind Kuhn's approach to the history of science is explained in a personal reflection that appears in the preface to his book *The Essential Tension* (1977). Kuhn recounts a personal "enlightenment" (p. xi) that occurred in 1947 while he was preparing a lecture on the origins of seventeenth century mechanics. In particular, Kuhn was investigating what the precursors of Newton and Galileo had known about the subject and he was led to the discussions of motion contained in Aristotle's *Physica* and related texts. Because of the nature of his training and his personal encyclopedia, Kuhn approached these texts with a professional familiarity with Newtonian physics and mechanics. This personal and professional competence in turn framed the nature of the question he asked of these texts, namely: How much about mechanics was known in the Aristotelian tradition and how much was left for Newton to discover? Kuhn's question were posed in a Newtonian vocabulary and demanded an answer in the same terms. From Kuhn's perspective, the answer to these questions were clear: The Aristotelians had known little about mechanics and much of what they did have to say about it was simply wrong. It could not have provided a foundation for Newton.

Kuhn's answers seemed plain enough, but they proved puzzling to him. In other areas, such as biology and political behavior, Aristotle had been an acute observer and his interpretations had been penetrating and deep. How could he have failed so miserably when

it came to considering motion? How could he have said so many "absurd things" (p. xi). And why were his views taken so seriously by his successors? Kuhn recounts: "The more I read, the more puzzled I became. Aristotle could, of course, have been wrong—I had no doubt that he was—but was it conceivable that his errors had been so blatant?" (p. xi).

Upon reflection, Kuhn arrived at what can only be termed a personal epiphany. He concluded that that the Aristotelian errors were not a problem with the text, but with the *reader*. Kuhn's revelation was that he needed a different way of "reading" the text:

One memorable (and very hot) summer day those perplexities suddenly vanished. I all at once perceived the connected rudiments of an alternate way of reading the texts with which I had been struggling. For the first time I gave due weight to the fact that Aristotle's subject was change-in-quality in general, including both the fall of a stone and the growth of a child to adulthood. In his physics, the subject that was to become mechanics was at best a still-not-quite-isolable special case (p. xi).

With his new interpretive schema in place, strained metaphors now became naturalistic accounts, and much apparent absurdity simply vanished. Kuhn's historical research had shifted from a particular conception of historical texts as consisting largely of facts about the past and the task of the historian being to examine those texts, extract the so called facts, and put them in a chronological order. Now Kuhn considered historical research as the search for the best, or best-accessible, reading of historical texts. His revelation allowed Kuhn to draw two important conclusions. First, he writes, "there are many ways to read a text, and the ones most accessible to a modern are often inappropriate when applied to the past" (p. xii). Consider Brother Francis' "modern" interpretation of the survival shelter notice. Second, "that plasticity of texts does not place all ways of reading on a par, for some of them (ultimately, one hopes, only one) possess a plausibility and coherence absent from others" (p. xii). How is it possible to recognize the most plausible and coherent interpretation? Kuhn offers the following maxim: "When reading the thoughts of an important thinker, look first for the apparent absurdities in the text and ask yourself how a sensible person could have written them. When you find an answer..., when those passages make sense, then you may find that more central passages, ones you previously thought you understood, have

changed their meaning" (p. xii).

If we apply Eco's terms to Kuhn's experience, we can say that Kuhn shifted from being an empirical reader to a Model Reader. Kuhn's initial frame for interpreting Aristotle's texts, that of Newtonian mechanics, was *not* the competence postulated by Aristotle's text just as Brother Francis' reading of the sign at the fallout shelter was informed by a competence not postulated by that text. Once Kuhn adopted the more appropriate competence, once he had learned a different way of reading the same text, the meanings became more coherent and began to make sense. Again, the meaning of any text is not contained within the text, or within the reader, but in the matching of appropriate conjectures and competences between the text and its reader.

Traveling with Background Books

The real problem of a critique of our own cultural models is to ask, when we see a unicorn, if by any chance it is not a rhinoceros (Umberto Eco, 1998, p. 75).

Umberto Eco explores much the same problem as Brother Francis and Thomas Kuhn in his consideration of what it is like to travel abroad, especially to a strange, exotic land. Eco (1998) notes that we travel and explore the world carrying with us some "background books." These are not physical books. Background books refer to the idea that we travel with preconceived notions of the world derived from our cultural traditions. We travel knowing in advance what we are on the verge of discovering because past reading has told us what we are supposed to discover. As Eco explains, "the influence of these background books is such that, irrespective of what travelers discover and see, they will interpret and explain everything in terms of those books" (p. 54).

Eco's famous example of this is Marco Polo's "discovery" of the unicorn, the fabled animal that resembles a white horse with a horn in its muzzle. Medieval tradition had convinced Europeans of the existence of the unicorn and since a unicorn could not be found in Europe, tradition decided that unicorns must be living in exotic countries. When Marco Polo traveled to China, he was probably aware of all the legends current in his time concerning exotic countries and was prepared to encounter unicorns. On his way home, in Java, he did indeed see animals with a single horn on

their muzzles. Because an entire tradition had prepared him to see them, he identified these animals as unicorns. However, Marco Polo was faced with a problem: the unicorns Marco Polo saw were very different from those represented by the tradition. For example, they were not white but black. They had pelts like buffalo and hooves as big as elephants. Their horns were black, instead of white, their tongues were spiky, and their heads looked like wild boars. What Marco Polo had encountered were what we would now call the rhinoceros.

Did Marco Polo lie when he reported seeing unicorns? Was he mistaken? According to Eco, Marco Polo had told the truth as he saw it. Indeed, Marco Polo reported that the unicorns he had found were very different from the gentle white creatures people believed them to be. The alternative action available to him was to report finding a new and uncommon animal. But "rather than resegment the content by adding a new animal to the universe of the living, he has corrected the contemporary description of unicorns, so that, if they existed, they would be as he saw them and not as the legend described them" (Eco, 2000b, p. 28). Like Kuhn's scientists, Marco Polo had made the world conform to his paradigm. Like Brother Francis, he made the unicorn conform to the contents of his encyclopedia. Almost instinctively, Marco Polo tried to identify the animals he saw with a well-known image: "He was unable to speak about the unknown but could only refer to what he already knew and expected to meet. He was a victim of his background books" (Eco, 1998, p. 55).

Animals That From a Long Way Off Look Like Flies

Where could animals that are "frenzied," "innumerable," and "drawn with a very fine camelhair brush" ever meet, except in "the immaterial sound of the voice pronouncing their enumeration, or on the page transcribing it? Where else could they by juxtaposed except in the non-place of language?" (Foucault, 1970, pp. xvi-xvii).

A final, and very famous example, is taken from the preface of *The Order of Things* by Michel Foucault (1970). The opening lines of the book describe Foucault's reaction to a "certain Chinese encyclopedia" described by Argentinean writer Jorge Borges. The mythical encyclopedia described a system for classifying animals, but in manner very different from those classifications we are fa-

miliar with. The Chinese encyclopedia is as follows:

Animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor; (b) embalmed; (c) tame; (d) sucking pigs; (e) sirens; (f) fabulous; (g) stray dogs; (h) included in the present classification; (i) frenzied; (j) innumerable; (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush; (l) *et cetera*; (m) having just broken the water pitcher; (n) that from a long way off look like flies (Foucault, 1966, p. xv).

Reading this encyclopedia was the cause of an enlightenment for Foucault not dissimilar to the one described by Thomas Kuhn. Foucault (1970) remarks that this passage "shattered... all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography" (p. xv). Borges' encyclopedia offered Foucault a glimpse of what it might be like to consider the world through a framework very different from the ones he is familiar with in his own culture. Foucault's reflections on this classificatory system brought into sharp relief the fact that everyday perception and understanding are always shaped by a pre-existing encyclopedia of cultural organization and classification. Foucault (1970) writes: "In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (p. xv). Reflecting on Borges' taxonomy, we understand Marco Polo's inability to see or recognize a rhinoceros. By virtue of his "background books," Marco Polo was faced with "the stark impossibility of thinking that," the impossibility of thinking the rhinoceros. It simply had no place in his encyclopedia.

Each category in the Chinese encyclopedia has a precise meaning and a demonstrable content. Some involve fantastic entities, such as sirens. But because they are in their own categories, their powers and dangers are localized and contained. They have their place in the order of things where we can see which items go together and which do not. What is strange or impossible about this particular encyclopedia is not the propinquity of the things listed, but *the site* on which their propinquity would be possible; that system which organizes the elements yet which itself is not part of the grid. Where could animals that are "frenzied," "innumerable," and "drawn with a very fine camelhair brush" ever meet, except in "the immaterial sound of the voice pronouncing their enumeration, or on the page transcribing it? Where else could they by juxtaposed

except in the non-place of language?" (pp. xvi-xvii). The language of the encyclopedia brings together certain signs. It also keeps other signs apart. It orders and structures the signs which represent the world, and the world takes on the order made possible in non-place of language.

Foucault's analysis of the encyclopedia raises a fundamental question that will persist throughout this book as we consider the work of Umberto Eco: What are the grounds for validating such an encyclopedia? Not just Borges' certain Chinese encyclopedia, but your own personal competence concerning nuclear fallout shelters, or Kuhn's competence in reading the texts of Aristotle, or Marco Polo's competence in recognizing a unicorn. Do these competencies mirror the structure of the world? Do they have a basis in some external reality, which they then reflect? Or is reality, or at least what we perceive to be reality, made possible only by the structure of the encyclopedia? In short, what is the relationship between the encyclopedia and the world? Foucault poses the question as follows: "When we establish a considered classification, when we say that a cat and a dog resemble each other less than two greyhounds do, even if both are tame or embalmed, even if both are frenzied, even if both have just broken the water pitcher, what is the ground on which we are able to establish the validity of this classification with complete certainty?" (p. xix). In addressing this question, we must realize that there are two sides to the order of things. First is the order that is "given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another" (Foucault, 1970, p. xx). We might say that the order of things constitutes or makes possible the structure of our language and classification systems. Our categories somehow "reflect" the nature that is out there. But, as Kant (1965) has already told us in his critique of pure reason, if such a network does exist in nature, we cannot know it in and of itself. Order "has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language" (Foucault, 1970, p. xx). Thus, we might argue that the structure of our encyclopedias makes possible our knowledge of the order of things and that the "hidden network" has no existence *except* in the grids created by our language.

Foucault, like Eco, seeks a middle ground. Both posit a reflexive relationship between world and encyclopedia in which the first element (the world) makes possible the second (the encyclopedia) and the second element (the encyclopedia) makes possible the first

(the world). As Foucault (1970) remarks, "it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there" (p. xx). And yet, at the same time, the hidden network remains "waiting in silence for the moment of its expression"(p. xx). A similar relationship will be invoked in the consideration of texts and readers. Each implies and requires the other. Eco (1992) is quite clear when he states that "a text is a device conceived in order to produce its Model Reader" (p. 64). Yet the text is nothing without the appropriate conjectures of the reader, as both Foucault and Wittgenstein were well aware. Both world and encyclopedia, text and reader, exist in their own right only because of the "difficult transactions" that holds them together in an eternal reflexive relationship.

Introducing Umberto Eco

So I, a voice without body or sex or any history ... invite you, gentle readers, to play my game with me (Umberto Eco, 1994a, p. 25)

Umberto Eco is an element in a particular order of things, waiting in silence for the moment of his expression. Until I, the text, speak, until I place Umberto Eco within the grid of this text, he will remain just a word on a page or a sound you make with your lips. It is time to bring Umberto Eco to life within the transaction between reader and text. Come and help me do this.

I have said already that Umberto Eco is a semiotician. As I bring the words "Umberto Eco" and "semiotician" together, we see the beginnings of the encyclopedia taking shape in which we will be able to make sense of the words "Umberto Eco." What semiotics explores is this encyclopedia which we will create as a result of our transaction in order which will make sense of "Umberto Eco." It examines the elements that this text brings together to create a coherent narrative about this term, and those elements it will not. It also considers our roles as text and reader in the creation of this grid and how we become elements in the grid we have created. During the reading of this text, we will have to be extremely self-reflective about our respective roles as text and reader. This book, like every book, is about us and that which connects us. We are like Brother Francis, Thomas Kuhn, or Michel Foucault trying to apply the appropriate grid to make sense of a problematic text. What we discover in doing so is the existence of that grid and our own existence with respect to it. There is no flesh and blood here,

no objective history, and certainly no definitive account that this book is attempting to discover and uncover. As Umberto Eco (1994a) has already noted, he is "a voice without body or sex or any history." To understand Eco, we must become characters in the game of the text. You must agree to become my Model Reader and agree to play by the rules of my game. Like Eco (1994a, p. 25), I "invite you, gentle readers, to play my game with me." 📖

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