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POWER, DANGERS AND RESOURCES OF FORGERY, FROM
THEORY TO NOVELS

Abstract
The subject of this contribution concerns the evolution of Eco's thought on the problem of the false, from the first writings (in which the sign is just what can be used to lie) to the reflections of the late 1980s on the strength of the false, in a more culturological perspective. The essay will therefore trace an evolution that establishes in Eco's theory a continuity between reflection on falsehood, reflection on falsification and the theory of fiction, while in a second time it will retrace all of Eco's narrative going to highlight how all novels have to do with the false, or at least with the non-verifiability of the true. From this point of view, it will be argued that novels are the best place for Eco to affirm the strength of the false, for the nomothetic power of fictions.

The subject of my contribution is the theme of falsification in Eco's work, a central, structuring theme for many decades (perhaps a lifetime) by admission of the author himself (see the final autobiographical conclusions in Eco 2000).

The hypothesis that I would like to support here is that this very theme is the basis of the dialectical relationship between narrative and philosophy, acting as a pivot to a double activity – the narrative one and the semiotic-philosophical – allowing both a kind of unity (what revolves around the same pivot, in fact, can only be somehow unifying) and a different trajectory for each.

I am certainly not the first to deal with the centrality of this issue in Eco's reflections (just to mention only those most important for me, see Musarra-Schroder 2017a and 2017b, Paolucci 2016 and 2017, Pegorari 2016), nor the first to see it as a junction that provides an opportunity to reflect on the relationship Eco sets between narrative and philosophy. As we will see, however, I will frame the theory-narrative relationship in quite different terms, trying to outline both similarities and differences found in Eco's work between the two *parallel* genres of writing, I would like to clarify right away what I mean by

parallel paths: "parallel" doesn't mean independent, but rather, contemporary and corresponding, like two tracks that run together, with similar joints. I do not believe, however, that there is *any mutual need* between them, one does not complement the other. Rather, I believe that each path follows its own specific modalities, which – although dealing with the same issues – lead to different outcomes.[1]

It is not so much a question, in my view, of seeing Eco's narrative as a completion or refinement of essay writing (whereby Eco would say through narrative what he cannot express through philosophy) but rather of showing i) how the theme is articulated according to similar priorities and convictions in the two areas, but ii) how the narrative is far more powerful than essay when it comes to these themes, because it manages to overcome the contradiction of "telling the truth about the false" and the paradox of the liar with an effective virtuous circle: novels are the best way to deal with the problem of forgery, as well as the best way of understanding forgery is to understand the strength of a novel.

Let's begin with Eco's theory.

My impression is that problems for Eco always arise first and foremost in theory…

1. *The Sign and the Possibility of Lying*

There is no doubt that the question of falsification has been a theme dear to Eco since his first semiotic reflections. The theme, as we shall see, has taken various forms. At the beginning it emerges as the problem of *lie*, then as a question of *falsification*, and finally as a horizon of *fictionality*. If in the lie the false is a potentiality of the semiosis and the structure of the sign, in the falsification it is a strategic and intentional product of the communicative exchange, while in the fictionality it is in some way a resource of certainties, with an almost oxymoronic result that – as we will see – is even more explicit at the narrative level.

It is in 1971, with *Il segno*, that the question emerges, in regards to the problem of lie. Eco wonders about the problem of the meaning of the statements: what does a given meaning depend on, what is its relationship with the reference plan and empirical determinations? He is strongly convinced that a logic of meanings as intentions should be separated from a logic of truth values, and that is why he begins to draw attention to cases of meanings linked to entities that do not exist (or do not necessarily exist on an extensional level, or that cannot be verified on an empirical level at least). The example he sets is that of the Eucharist. A good theory of meaning must be able to explain why mean-

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[1] About the relationship between narrative and philosophy in Eco, see also Lorusso 2021.

ings can be articulated in natural languages regardless of whether they refer to actual situations or to existing things, and how one can tell legends and lies in an acceptable and persuasive way. Because it is evident that even if, according to many, the sentence /in the Eucharist the body and blood of Christ are manifested under the species of bread and wine /although, is a lie, nevertheless it is significant, understandable, and it has produced and produces speeches and historical events.

Eco is reflecting here on the fact that the point in the diatribes about meanings and their truth, is not the verification with the referent, but the fact that, even when the comparison with the referent does not provide certainty or confirmation, some meanings continue to circulate, assuming understandable semantic contours and producing significant interpretative and social practices. In short, empirical comparison and verification are not decisive in defining the nature and effectiveness of the signs: something may not correspond to the facts (think of any fake news today) but can be equally effective on a communicative or cultural level, and therefore, in this sense, endowed with meaning. This means that signs are defined on other bases than reference: they can lie and yet they can continue to function.

Two years later, these reflections are taken up again in *A Theory of Semiotics.*[2] In § 2.5.2. Eco now states with certainty: «To say that a sign-vehicle necessarily corresponds to an actual object is a distinctly naive attitude and one that even a theory of truth-values is none too eager to accept. The objection to it is well known: there exist sign-vehicles which refer to non-existent entities such as "unicorn" or "mermaid". In these cases, a theory of truth-values prefers to speak of terms with "null extension" (Goodman, 1949) or of "possible worlds" (Lewis, 1969)».[3]

Eco has now focused on the fact that meanings can only be adequately understood as cultural units, i.e. elements of a system that finds its *raison d'être* in its systematic nature (i.e. in its overall dimension) and in its sociality (as a product of productive practices and an instrument of communication practices). Such a system is not an ontology in the traditional sense, it does not find correspondence in an extensive world but this is not a reason for weakness; on the contrary, it is precisely this autonomy that gives authority to the systems of meaning. And the fact that it exists and makes sense regardless of the relationship with a factual plane, is what theoretically legitimizes the lie: something that does not correspond to anything is not only able to exist, but can "make sense", create meanings and worlds.

For this reason Eco, with a formula that could seem quite provocative, says that a sign is such if it allows one to lie and «semiotics is, in principle, the

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[2] Eco 1976.

[3] *Ibidem*: 61.

discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie».[4] With these words Eco is not excluding the fact that there are extensively verifiable signs and statements, nor is he excluding the notion that a series of linguistic acts takes on meaning in the effectiveness of certain reactions. Rather he is only highlighting how being able to create meaning regardless of the correspondence to states of fact is *a condition of possibility* of semiosis. At the core of his semiotic theory, there is the idea (that Eco recovers primarily from the Stoics) that each sign is based not on the model of equivalence (the sign / dog / corresponds to the referential entity "dog") but on the model of referral (the sign / dog / refers in the system of cultural meanings to a content area where the recipient-interpreter can select the meaning "animal", or "component of a firearm" or as metaphor "good-for-nothing person"). And as *A Theory of Semiotics* shows, the most interesting way to look at meanings is to look at their place within the system (which will later become the encyclopaedic network) of culture: what portion of content they select, or what they make people think. [...] Actually, for Eco, recognizing the legitimacy and importance of the lie therefore means recognizing the legitimacy and importance of a semiosis that wants to be based on the systematic nature and autonomy of culture, aware that meaning can build effective masking or practices that, although not based on any empirical basis and extensive verification, do not for this reason have no communicative power or cultural significance.

One of the more interesting points, then, is to investigate (from an almost Foucaultian perspective) the *regimes of truth*, that is when and why the statements – regardless of the extensive checks – are considered to be true. Eco writes:

Given two sentences as |Napoleon died at Sant'Helena on May 5 1821| and |Ulysses reconquered the kingdom by killing all the Proci| it is irrelevant to a code theory to know that *historically speaking*, the former is true and the latter is false. This does not merely mean, as Carnap would say, that the analysis of intentions must precede the verification of their extensions. From the point of view of a code theory, what matters is that (a) in our culture there exist codes such as that through which the first sentence is understood, is studied in schools and connotes 'historical Truth'; (b) in classical Greek society there existed codes such as that through which the second sentence was understood, was studied in school and connoted 'historical truth'. The fact that for us the second sentence connotes 'legend' is semiotically analogous to the fact that it could yet be proven in some future civilization, on the basis of as yet unknown (or false) documents, that Napoleon died in a different place on a different day (or that he never existed). *Semiotics is mainly concerned with signs as social forces.*[5]

[4] *Ibidem*: 7.

[5] Eco 1976: 65.

In short, once the capacity to lie (or rather to construct convincing and effective worlds that do not correspond to empirical reality) has been identified as a constitutive possibility of meaning, the problem for Eco becomes a genealogical and political one. After separating the epistemological verification of the truth of the evidence from the semiotic verification of its cultural necessity, it is a question of understanding the degree of codification of a certain statement, and identifying and unmasking the logic of systems of truth that have identified certain judgments as judgments of truth.

1.2. Counterfeiting Practices

If in the first years of his semiotic reflection, Eco focuses on the possibility of lying as a condition of possibility of the sign, in the following years his attention shifts to the modes of conscious falsification.

As he often does, he first draws on the Middle Ages to reflect on the issue, starting with his beloved Thomas Aquinas. The way in which Thomas revises the attribution of *De Causis* clarifies for Eco how different the criteria of authenticity, originality, "truth", (and therefore falsehood and falsification) can be. The concepts of falsifying and authenticating did not have the same meaning in the Middle Ages, as they have in contemporary culture, where what is handed down, *vox populi*, news, needs verification and documentary evidence. For the Middle Ages, the only reference is to the Holy Scriptures. Anything that can be "produced" (even *ad hoc*) to demonstrate the Scriptures is legitimate.

Here we can see, at the end of the 1980s, and with reference to the Middle Ages, a critical reflection not so much on the potential of the code (as in *A Theory of Semiotics*), but on the potential limits and criteria for distinguishing an acceptable interpretation from an unacceptable one.[6]

This theme is central to the *Limits of Interpretation*.[7] As we know, Eco provides negative parameters to guide interpretation (we can say with certainty what cannot be good, but the list of what can be good is infinite) and, through the indication of incorrect modalities, he identifies (§ 2.4.2.), first and foremost, the hermetic semiosis.

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[6] The theme of the "code" is an absolutely central theme in Umberto Eco's theory which, especially in the first part of his semiotic reflection, places it at the center of his position on the sign. Not surprisingly, an entire section of *Theory of Semiotics* (Eco 1976) is entitled "Theory of Codes", but the theme remains widely present in Eco (1984). The central point for Eco is the *instructional* dimension of the code: a code, that is, does not fix automatic equivalences (A corresponds to B) but on the basis of social conventions it fixes the instructions for correct correlations (if you have A, then you can mean B, but also B1, B2, C etc. depending on the context).

[7] Eco 1990.

Hermetic semiosis is an example of the construction of falsehoods that requires a lot of semiotic work and a systematic construction of correlations. The judgments of truth on which hermetic semiosis is based are not naive "oversights", but the outcome of a systematic vision of the world based on the homologation of different phenomena and on a distorted transitivity, which sees causes and effects where, at most, there are partial similarities (but the similarities are never complete, they always and only concern some few aspects), and which mistakes effect for the cause.

Through hermetic semiosis, Eco reflects on a series of "tactics" that are functional to the creation of false truths, false judgments and world views. Eco is no longer reflecting on how semiosis works in the abstract, no longer within a theory of meaning and its conditions of possibility and functioning (i.e. within a theory of codes); he is now fully immersed in semiosic processes, in which interpretation plays a crucial role. In this phase he is now interested in what can be done with the potential of the semiosis that he had previously identified: since the systems allow you to lie, the point is *how* you can lie. The problem is not semantic but interpretative (and it depends on the processes, not on the semiotic systems), because it is a matter of constructing correlations or chains of correlations that seem true.

These reflections on hermetic semiosis, i.e. on practices of falsifying interpretation, lead Eco to question the category of forgery *tout court*. Forgery and lie are not, for Eco, quite the same thing: forgery is based on the possibility of exchanging an object with another with which it shares common traits, whereas the lie is a judgment that may not be based on falsehood, but claims "simply" a consideration in the states of fact of what is stated. (All forgeries are therefore lies, but not all lies are forgeries, as demonstrated by an affirmation such as "Today is Christmas" said the Easter Day: though this is certainly a lie, it is not based on a forgery in the way that arguing "This is a Guercino" in front of a picture that Guercino is). Falsification practices are therefore those that construct similarity plans that can 'justify' identity deception. Forgeries are not fakes in themselves; that is, there are no internal textual characteristics of the statements that make them fake. Fakes are such as a result of a falsifying strategy; as such, they involve an intentionality not of production (I can produce something identical to something else even without any intention to deceive, or as a joke) but of claim: the fake is such if there is a claim to truth, it is knowingly deceptive.

Thus Eco (1990) rightly points out in § 3.4:

Presumably the *Constitutum Constantini* (perhaps the most famous forgery in Western history) was initially produced not as a fake document, but as a rhetorical exercise. Only in the following centuries was it taken seriously by naive or fraudulent supporters of the Church in Rome (De Leo 1974). While it was not initially a counterfeit, it later became one, and was then challenged as such by Valla. Something is therefore not false because

of its internal properties, but because of a *claim to an identity*. As such, counterfeiting is first and foremost a pragmatic problem.[8]

Eco's objective is therefore to clarify a series of misunderstandings about forgery: i) that forgery does not depend on characteristics within the texts, but on practices of forgery. ii) The problem is not in the intention of the textual producer-enunciator, but in the intention of whoever interprets, who by basing their interpretation on a number of aspects and similarities between the original and the 'double', makes absolute and generalizes those similarities, building an identity upon them. iii) Fakes are not necessarily "bad". There are fakes (such as diplomatic ones) that are sometimes appropriate, and that in any case draw their *raison d'être* from the desire to confirm and strengthen something that is already considered true.

Very interesting, in this regard, the distinction that Eco makes between historical false and diplomatic false (where we could think, as a case of historical falsehood, of a document containing false information, while a case of diplomatic false has to do with a document created ad hoc to justify decisions):

While the latter is a case of infringement (see section 3.4.4.3.1), the former is simply a lie. Historical fake occurs when an original document, produced by an author who has the right to do so, is proclaimed to be something different to what it actually is. A false historian is not unlike a fake and tendentious piece of news published by a newspaper. In this case (see section 3.4.5), the phenomenon affects the content but not the expression of the sign function. […]
While a historical fake concerns a formally authentic document that contains false information (as happens with an authentic confirmation of a false privilege), a diplomatic fake offers a false confirmation of supposedly authentic privileges.[9]

The problem on which Eco invites us to reflect, therefore, is that of the reasons and ways of falsehood. A forgery is a fake because it is claimed to be such according to certain criteria which are not always trivially malicious and polemical. The crucial issue is to understand the criteria for establishing whether the original is authentic, and this leads him to a critical examination of the practices of falsification, which is not limited to comparing a version A and a version B, but wonders how and why version B was built in that way. If it is crucial to know on the basis of which criteria version A is considered good, it is equally necessary to understand which strategies and within which logic version B was able to be passed off as version A.

The point is, as Eco himself underlines, that the reflection on these objects tells us how hazardous our general criteria for identity are, and how much concepts

[8] Eco 1990: 221.

[9] *Ibidem*: 222.

such as Truth and Falseness, Authentic and False, Identity and Difference are defined in circularity with each other.

In this critical question about the criteria and ways of falsification practices, a crucial role is played by the community. The Peircian inspiration of Eco's semiotics (I mean first of all the fact that it is based on the centrality of interpretation and, as a consequence, that it always looks for limits of interpretation) is clearly very present in this aspect and continues to be so until *Kant and the Platypus* (1997).

What kind of guarantees can a community give with regard to truth telling and adequate unmasking of targeted counterfeiting practices?

According to Eco, the community has a role above all as a "vector" of conjectures that have proved to be statistically productive. Eco quotes Leonardo in this regard (in *Interpretation and Over-interpretation*) recalling that the Community at that time was reasonable in judging it absurd for someone to jump from the top of a hill with a pair of artificial wings, given that Icarus had already tried and had been wholly unsuccessful. Certainly, when it comes to flying time has proved Leonardo right, but at that time, Leonardo's plan was undoubtedly inadequate.

Therefore, the Community is a guarantor of the assumption of principles that have worked up to that moment; it is the operator of a consensus that is historical, progressive and revisable. It does not provide unshakeable certainties but can, however, offer authoritative proof. It can offer certain evidence as authoritative and other proof as not, on the basis of the hierarchies of knowledge that have already been consolidated in the past, knowledge that has been confronted with experience and has already conformed to an experiential "hard core".

Sometimes, though, the community does not seem to be enough. In a chapter that I would describe as impressive given its ability to expose the deceptions of our civilization – "The Force of False" in *On Literature* (2002) –, Eco shows how many false beliefs have oriented and moved the world. Christopher Columbus' belief about the size of the earth was erroneous, but it was precisely this error that led him to undertake his enterprise. Many maps of the medieval and fifteenth century world were imaginative and inadequate, the Letter of Prester John was an invention, but both – maps and letter – fed projects and enterprises to distant lands. The Donation of Constantine was a fake; the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, to which Eco, as we shall see, dedicated the novel *The Cemetery of Prague*, are also fake.

Each of these "fakes" that have moved the world share a number of features: a great narrative force (the construction of convincing worlds) or the ability to confirm convictions already structured and consolidated (as in the case of the Donation of Constantine or the Letter of Prester John). In any case, Eco says, the Community has reviewed these "truths", verified them and so falsified them. No single person has succeeded in dismantling them, but on a collective level a new paradigm has gradually, sometimes very slowly, been imposed.

Truth, in fact, for Eco is always such within a system of convictions, asserts and values of which the community is the bearer and guarantor. It is within this system that the practices of falsification (in the double sense of construction of the false and deconstruction of false claims true) must confront one another.

1.3. The Unamendable Nature of Fiction

Having made it clear that forgeries are not fakes in themselves but because someone sets them up as real, in the following years Eco seems to take a step further, shifting attention to those worlds set up as real which are novels, fictional inventions. Of course, there is no claim to truth in the fictional worlds; no novelist claims that their own narrative world, exactly as they have written it, exists. We all know about the fictional pact and the suspension of credulity.

However, as Eco notes, in fictional worlds something strange happens (and it will be with these reflections that his thought will increasingly shift): the author has no intention of deception, we as readers know we are reading about fictional worlds, yet we are willing to believe in them, and sometimes to entrust ourselves to them.

These fictional worlds clearly demonstrate how the judgment of truth is not linked to a judgment of reality, but how it feeds on a component of trust that, in reality, although differently dosed and conscious, is always present, not only in the fiction (if I believe in the "truth" of a diagnosis is it not perhaps because of trust rather than the effective competence regarding how correct that diagnosis might be?).

Eco writes: «We believe that, so far as the actual world is concerned, truth is the most important criterion, whereas we tend to think that fiction describes a worlds we have to take as it is, on trust. Even in the actual world, however, the principle of trust is as important as the principle of truth».[10]

In the fictional worlds, therefore, nothing radically heterogeneous happens with respect to what happens in the interpretation of the real worlds, but it is as if some of the interpreter's attitudes were more extreme and thus guarantee more strongly the holding of those worlds: I consciously rely on a certain novel's story, I immerse myself in it, I suffer and laugh at what happens in it, I get excited, I make comparisons with my own world, I see differences and similarities with the real world, and in this complex activity of immersion and projection, I do not question the development envisaged by the novel, I know that I cannot force it, I know that if a certain story goes in a certain way and its protagonists prove to be false, naive, good or bad, so it is. Stories have an alethic and ontological privilege: they offer worlds that we may like or not but that are like

[10] Eco 1994: 88.

that: enunciated truth and *de facto* (fictional) truth correspond. Therefore, in fictional texts the rules of interpretation do not change (interpretation remains instructed and guided by *intentio operis*, the reader's inferential walks are wide but not infinite, interpretative movements obey a negotiation principle that seeks to attribute meaning to what he reads) but what changes is the reader's propositional attitude towards truth. If the latter, in ordinary life, can hope to act on states of fact, change the course of things and establish truths more appropriate to the world than those declared up to that moment, in reading fictional texts he is pleased to accept that things (told) are in a certain way: the world enunciated is invented, fictional, but incontrovertible: if Anna Karenina died under a train, we must accept it (although we can interpret it as a gesture of despair, or of rebellion, or of autonomy).

One of the reasons novels live by this privilege is their systematic and self-sufficient nature: a novel's statements are justified within the system of the novel, while statements of any other kind – scientific, historical, legal, empirical – need to "make a systemic sense" with a complex world of statements and assumptions consolidated at an encyclopaedic level. On a fictional level, a science fiction statement is true, because in the possible world of a monkey planet, even monkeys can aspire to control the world.

There is a narrative force of fictions, of falsifications *tout court* (evident in the already mentioned chapter "The Force of the False" in Eco 2002), which is one of storytelling and mythology: the ability to build a good story that is convincing, articulated, full of characters, based on values that seem out of the question. It is a story that is *adoptable*,[11] which, in its consistency, explains many things.

The truth – Eco goes so far as to say – is mostly a reasonable simulation effect. And when is a simulation reasonable? When it is coherent in itself and capable of explaining many aspects of the universe to which it refers.

For these reasons, the truths that seem most trustworthy, most plausible, unquestionable, seem to be the fictional truths, in an oxymoronic short circuit in which it is the fiction that becomes truth, and reality that becomes a space for possible amendment.

It is in this short circuit that narrative takes on, in the production of Eco, a *sui generis* space: not a simple expression of the theories expressed in the essays (novels with a thesis, therefore), not a simple fulfilment and integration of the theories expressed in the essays (novels able to say what the theory fails to say), not a simple space for intellectual exercise (postmodern repertoire of quotations) but a *mise en abyme* of the theories expressed in the essays, a *mise en abyme* so radical as to make something new happen. By *mise en abyme* I mean that novels are for Eco what a laboratory simulation can perhaps be for a scientist: putting into action, indeed in inter-action, the various elements of the cultural

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[11] Thanks to Angelo Guglielmi for the idea that Umberto Eco liked *to adopt* his own novels.

system of an era (both the Middle Ages of the *Name of the Rose*, the 1600s of the *Island of the Day Before* or the 1800s of *The Prague Cemetery*) what happens? Does the action course actually follow the expected dynamics? So, for example, a false document can move history, can a conspiracy build a non-existent enemy, can a rhetorical principle, like Aristotle's theory of laughter, make deaths? It is something more than a fictional translation of a theory; it is the testing and the apotheosis of a theory, between demonstration, verification and celebration.

Let's see, then, how the question of the false is given in the narrative.

1.4. From Certainty to Uncertainty

As several authors have pointed out,[12] the theme of fake is one of the main threads that runs through all of Eco's novels. I would like to go further: it is the theme that *inspires*, *nourishes and guides* Eco's narrative, like an obsession. Moreover, as Eco says in his speech at the conclusion of the conference dedicated to him in Cerisy La Salle, if he is to identify the question around which all his reflection revolved, this can only be in the philosophical question par excellence: *quid est veritas*.[13] And in it, the question seeks an answer *per via negationis*: what is not truth, how to build alternative truths, how to falsify that which is true.

It is easy to go through his novels with this lens:

– *The Name of the Rose* (1980) presents itself as *a novel on truth* and on the deception and coercion of those who would like to control it to their advantage. William of Baskerville visits the Monastery to resolve an ecclesiastical dispute that should establish who is, between Rome and Avignon, the ecclesiastical authority par excellence, the divine one legitimated to decide the Truth. He is forced to once more confront the past that he left behind (that of the Inquisition – the court appointed to distinguish between the truth and the heretic). He is above all called to investigate the true facts of the world: the disturbing sequence of crimes that take place in the monastery, guaranteed by a widespread silence, which is not that of prayer and retreat into oneself, but the silence of those who wish to opportunistically take advantage of that silence.

And in the face of these different challenges to identify the truth – the "true" truth, regardless of the truth that is declared or coercively affirmed –, while taking many false turns, William manages to discover the engine of the criminal facts, providing the young Adso with proof of a successful investigation,

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[12] See Pegorari 2016; Danesi 2017; Musarra 2017a and 2017b; Paolucci 2017; Traini 2021.

[13] Puletti 2000 speaks about Eco's novels, and the *Pendulum* in particular, of a "metaphysics of interrogation".

however bumpy and "demanding", and evidence of unmasking the false truth, the obscurantist one that blinds (in the literal sense, as the blind man, Jorge, is its main exponent) and feeds on fears. William is brave; that is why he knows how to find the "true" truth and how to laugh about it.

– *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988) seems to overturn this perspective: no longer a novel about truth but *a novel about how fantasies can become reality and truth*. The fantasies here are those of a Templar and Rosicrucian plot: told, feared, investigated, "verified". These are shared fantasies, not individual paranoid delusions. They are fantasies that, told by one (Casaubon), are assumed by others, even the most sceptical (Belbo and Diotallevi).

The 'Plan', the great Rosicrucian conspiracy, seems to provide an explanation to everything, to every possible question, and for this reason, from the obsession of a single man and the fantasy of a group (the Rosicrucians, of course), it succeeds in becoming the reference point for understanding the world used by many others. A surrogate for the truth, it meets people's need for credible stories: «People are hungry for plans, if you offer them one you throw yourself on it like a pack of wolves. You invent and they believe. We must not arouse more imagination than there is».[14]

– *The Island of the Day Before* (1994) apparently makes the theme of truth and falsehood less central, but it is clear that it is by no means far from the surface. Roberto de la Grive, shipwrecked on an unknown island, is in fact in search of knowledge and certainties: certainties of the perception and categorization of the world (what are the things around and that he sees for the first time in life?). The Narrator, for his part, is looking for certainties about Roberto, whose story is reconstructed from the diary he leaves, but in which much is the result of fantasy, if not delirium (is the beloved woman to whom he writes real or imaginary? Is the invention of his brother Ferrante pathological or a joke?). In this novel of discovery and exploration of the world, the danger of falsification is always looming, while there is no trace of a self-evident or easily accessible truth.

– This brings us to *Baudolino* (1999), which instead of the false is a triumph of its inevitability, of its opportunity, of its irresistibility, I would say. If his next book, *The Prague Cemetery* – another homage to forgery – is a novel that expresses all the potential drama of forgery, *Baudolino* instead tells of an almost euphoric triumph. Baudolino is the protagonist and whatever he says is taken for granted. He has a talent for credible invention, for convincing stunts. He knows that what makes the statements true is not their correspondence to the real, to the existing, but their proper placement in a real and plausible frame.

[14] Eco 1988: 678.

Even if dramas do happen (and the novel tells of personal and historical events: from the siege of Alexandria to the betrayal of most trusted friendships to the death of parents, wife and children), the novel actually tells a success story: the success of a man – Baudolino – who manages to find a place in History by deceiving many people, always on the boundary between true and false, between credibility and incredible. A man, in short, who unlike William of Baskerville is not successful in restoring the truth, but in inventing a fake that takes the place of the truth, that inverses the fantasies and desires of others. If one is a hero of knowledge and unmasking, the other is a hero of deception and incredibility, almost required to be such by the world around him. How many times is Baudolino asked to invent something? His lies often seem to be nothing more than generous yielding to the needs of others.

– With *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004) we return, as in the *Island*, to the space of investigation and research and construction of certainties. If in the *Island* we sought certainties and forms of the world, here we seek certainties and forms of ourselves. The truth that is missing is the autobiographical truth, while there are many truths about the world. The protagonist Yambo constantly lives the risk of deception: he has to rely only on what others tell him about himself, he finds no confirmation in his memory. And so, like all the protagonists in Eco's novels, he must decipher clues and, starting from those, reconstruct the truth about himself. It is not, therefore, that *The Mysterious Flame*, in its auto-biographical vocation, takes an unprecedented path with respect to Eco's writing and its typical themes: the memory of the world, encyclopaedic knowledge, are interrogated here as clues and evidence, in an investigation whose stakes are not the truth about a murderer or a plot, but about a life and its loves.

– Certainly, however, it is with *The Prague Cemetery* (2010) that the themes of forgery and the questioning of truth reach their dramatic peak. Here the objective is focused on the power of forgery and the risks (personal, national and historical) that certain inventions may have. The tragedy of the *Prague Cemetery* is, as is well known, the tragedy of anti-semitism, the tragedy of an invention that has been consolidated over the generations and throughout countries, satisfying different fears and needs, but on each occasion drawing only new life to strengthen and feed on details. The falsehoods that traverse the *Cemetery* are falsehoods in which fictionality, slander, conspiracy, self-defensive trick co-exist and support each other, in a progress that is increasingly articulated, and precisely for this reason increasingly credible. We readers know how it ended for the Jews; unlike other novels, in which the long-term consequences are not known or are not given, not even imaginable, here the effects of the fake are clear to everyone, and it is from this that the novel draws all its drama. While Baudolino could still make us smile, here we know that it is not possible to laugh. One can only be astonished at the harvest of inventions that have made history.

– This brings us to his last novel, *Numero Zero* (2014), where Eco's parable arrives at the modern day. This novel is also a triumph of lies: the editorial staff of the newspaper "Il Domani" is false, the name of the newspaper around which everything revolves is false; the blackmail with which the newspaper wants to threaten its predestined victims will be based on nothing (that is, a non-existent power to ruin the potentates of the moment); the scoop by which Braggadocio is obsessed is most likely false. But here is the point: I said "likely". It's about an uncertainty in fact that starts and ends with *Numero Zero*: its protagonist does not know if the leaking tap, at the beginning of the novel, is proof that someone has broken into his house, certainly not with good intentions. It is not known whether Braggadocio really died because he had come too close to an uncomfortable truth (and therefore his obsession was not delirious but true). The novel makes us imagine that this is actually the case, but we have no proof. Only suspicions.

1.5 The Truth of the Inventions

I wanted to quickly go through Eco's novels not only to highlight how they all revolve around the question of truth and falsehood, but also to highlight the evolution apparent within them. If Eco's first novel finally saw the affirmation of truth (though not as a triumph in full light, not as a mystical revelation, but as the result of a very demanding ascertainment, in human and cultural terms), the last novel seems to arrive instead at uncertainty, in a world where the truth is no longer ascertainable, where there are no more Williams to make criticism and discovery.

Through subsequent stories and dramas, Eco seems to pass from the *force of truth* to the *inevitability of uncertainty*, passing through the *force of false* – a false that is not a pure affirmation of lies, but a resource that sinks its potential into a constitutive confusion between what is document and what is pure invention. This is the dramatic contradiction of the real: the real is also part of the false; there is no equation between reality and truth.

Through a series of themes that are recurrent in all novels (the opportunity of incredulity and mistrust; the opportunity of reasoning that knows how to read the clues that are available, that knows how to build inferences and make hypotheses), Eco's narrative makes an uncomfortable displacement: in the stories we read the documents are almost always false, unreliable, or unverified or verifiable. That is, they are the texts that we usually consider a guarantee and proof of the space in which manipulation and falsification take place. What is true, what is real, what corresponds to the facts? Mostly the inventions we are told: the letters invented by Roberto de la Grive (which are invented but true), the lies of Baudolino, the forgeries by Simonini in the *Prague Cemetery*, the fake book written by the protagonist of *Numero Zero*. If there is a truth, it does not, in short, belong to the sentence (*enoncé* in french), but to the *enunciation*; it does not belong to what is declared, but to the act of declaring. The falsifications are

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true (like discursive acts), but they evidently consist in producing *false* contents (at the enunciative level). In this frame, truth and false are not properties that have to do with the correspondence between discourse and reality, but rather with the implication between discourse, interests and expectations, and with the awareness of the "impurity" of any discursive claim.

The problem of false leads Eco to the problem of ideologies. All Eco's novels are as anti-ideological as many of his essays: they show how partial and self-serving worldviews can develop into absolute and supra-personal truths, hiding their own partiality and contradictions: partial views can falsifie reality and pretend to be objective.

But this is not the only meaning of Eco's narrative: it is not that the novels merely show an anti-ideological attitude on the falsifications of the world, as he had already argued in philosophical terms. As I said from the beginning, I do not see Eco novels as simply showing what he has already said theoretically, nor do I see them as indicative of what the theory could not say. I have never read a word in Eco's work that would make one think of a theory of the ineffable. Eco, as a language scholar, was well aware that there are different kinds of discourse and that each has its own strategies, its own objectives and its own discursive pacts.

Eco runs through the two spaces of writing – narrative and essay – in parallel and the two paths are reflected, with similar themes. They revolve around the same pivot as I said at the beginning, which can be largely traced back to the problem of the false (and we have seen him retracing both his theoretical reflections and his narrative worlds).

As he himself says several times, in theory he must construct coherent argumentative paths, which lead to the unravelling of problematic knots; in the narrative he can stage those knots, without necessarily having to choose a demonstrative path.

But the most essential point is the discursive pact that the two kinds of writing presuppose. I do not have *to believe in* a theoretical essay, I have *to be convinced by* it, and for this reason the rhetoric of proof in essay writing is structuring. On the contrary, I have to believe in the narrative world that is proposed to me, I have to take the well-known suspension of disbelief and enter it if I want to follow the narrative path. This means that I can (and must) adhere to the novels, assuming their data, their unchangeability. If an author invents a world in which bees laugh, I must accept it, assume it, whether they wants to "enjoy" that world in terms of the Barthesian pleasure of the text or whether they simply want to know or understand something about it, as an encyclopaedic cultural given.

It is this creative and nomothetic force of the narrative (of which, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, Eco is absolutely aware) that also gives the treatment of the problem of the false a particular power, in a fictional sense. The world of Simonini and the *Prague Cemetery* is extraordinary because we cannot question its existence: that is, we cannot question that the Protocols are an invention. *Baudolino*'s world is disconcerting because it forces us to assume that

the Letter of Prester John was utter nonsense, knowingly constructed. *Numero Zero* makes us look at the world of information in a different way because it adds a newspaper – "Il Domani" – to our mental panorama of newspapers.

It is not about showing; *it is about belief*. It is not that there is something that cannot be said; it is that in one domain something must be proved, in the other it is simply to be assumed.

By this I do not mean that the fictional matter is not the object of interpretation and discussion, but that the interpretation works on how the facts are narrated (questions of style, plausibility, effectiveness), what the facts mean (in all hermeneutical practices that question the second meanings of what is narrated), the effects that those facts can provoke (in all empirical analyses by the reader); that is, *the facts* (the events invented and narrated) are taken as a starting point. It is as if the work of fiction were to construct – to put it in Peirce's words – new Dynamic Objects: elements *a quo* the interpretative work is unleashed. We can reword *Baudolino* in a thousand different ways, and build a thousand interpretations, but the liar Baudolino is a starting point, unattainable in its originality and yet a starting point.

This is the *unamendable nature of narrative* and this is the extraordinary creative and nomothetic force of the work of art, which Eco affirms theoretically in a very clear way in his *A Theory of Semiotics* (where he speaks of radical invention, that is, aesthetic invention) and he never abandons it, instead reasserting it once more, in his reflections on Being (in *Kant and the platypus* and elsewhere).

And it is this that gives Eco's treatment of the false by narrative a particular force: the invention is the only place where the facts are unchangeable. The novel does not solve the paradox of the liar but confirms the liar: it does not say "it is true that we are all liars" giving the value of the sentence to its undecidable nature, but it says "I'm pretending, I'm inventing, and for this you have to believe me".

This is the new, the specificity of novels with respect to essays, even if they show a substantial correspondence to theory. If you want to assert the indisputable falsehood of the *Protocols* (to give just one example), you have to build a novel, as this path is infinitely more powerful than any philological study on texts. Just as if you want to rethink the end of Mussolini (as Braggadocio does in *Numero Zero*) you have to make it part of a plot, and so make it exist. And so give the time of eternity Baudolini and Simonini of all stripes. Forever unquestionable forgers, under everyone's watchful eye.

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