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*Abductive Inference and Literary Theory –  
Pragmatism, Hermeneutics and Semiotics*

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Uwe Wirth

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**Abstract:**

In *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1986) Eco points out that the task of Semiotics is to figure out the relationship between explicit interpretation and implicit intuition. The Semiotician has "to explain why something looks intuitively, in order to discover under the felicity of the so-called intuition a complex cognitive process" (1986, p.9). With this statement Eco establishes an interaction between the semiotic and the hermeneutic approach towards the problem of understanding and interpretation of text and world. However, this move pushes Semiotics between two competing and polarizing paradigms: on the one hand Poststructuralism, Deconstructivism and New Pragmatism, represented by Foucault, Barthes, Derrida and Rorty; on the other hand Hermeneutics and Theory represented by Gadamer and Iser. The trace of this confrontation can be found in Eco's reader *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990) as well as in his lectures on *Interpretation and overinterpretation* (1992), where he tries to defend a "moderate position" and aims at finding a "minimal criterion" for unacceptable interpretations. Eco's account of interpretation is based on the Peircean idea of interpretation as an infinite inferential process, whose first step is abductive or conjectural reasoning. "The logic of interpretation", Eco writes, "is the Peircean logic of abduction" (1990:59) which becomes for him the crucial idea of a semiotic re-formulation of the "old, and still valid 'hermeneutic circle'" (1992, p.64).

**Keywords:** Abduction, Hermeneutics, Pragmatism, Literary Theory, Interpretation, Eco, Rorty, Derrida

## 1. The Abductive Logic of Interpretation

In *The Limits of Interpretation*, and earlier in *The Role of the Reader*, Eco points out that the logic of interpretation is very similar to the logic of a detective's investigation. That is, every successful detective attempts to follow at least three "guiding principles": relevance of observation, coherence of argumentation and economy of interpretation. In order to maximize the effects of his inquiry a detective aims at relating the observed traces and indices to the context of the crime in such a manner that he is capable of deriving provable conclusions. Eco's grasp of the "logic of interpretation" is the same "detective logic" described by William of Baskerville in his novel *The Name of the Rose*:

My dear "Adso," William said, "solving a mystery is not the same as deducing from first principles. Nor does it amount simply to collecting a number of particular data from which to infer a general law (...). In the face of some inexplicable facts you must try to imagine many general laws, whose connection with your facts escape you. Then

suddenly, in the unexpected connection of a result, a specific situation and one of those laws, you perceive a line of reasoning that seems more convincing than others. You try applying it to all similar cases, to use it for making predictions, and you discover that your intuition was right" (1983, p.365ff).

This "detective logic" is nothing but "abductive inference", as Peirce defined it. Interpretation is "the process of adopting hypotheses" (CP 2.777):

"abduction (...) furnishes the reasoner with the problematic theory which induction verifies. Upon finding himself confronted with a phenomenon unlike what he would have expected under the circumstances, he looks over its features and notices some remarkable character or relation among them (...) so that a theory is suggested which would explain (that is, render necessary) that which is surprising in the phenomena. He therefore accepts that theory so far as to give it a high place in the list of theories of those phenomena which call for further examination" (CP 2.776).

In other words: Abduction is inference to the "best explanation". According to Peirce, every inquiry and every interpretation starts necessarily with an Abduction that focuses one aspect and selects it as relevant. But unless this abductive choice is legitimized by practical tests, the hypothesis cannot be reasonably entertained any longer. The most important "guiding principle", however, "the leading consideration in Abduction" is, "the question of Economy, Economy of money, time, thought and energy" (CP 5.600). This "Economy of Research" provides the possibility to prove a hypothesis with minimal effort and with maximal effect. But, of course, economy does not guarantee truth.

If we agree that the semiotic model-reader is a detective, it seems also plausible that the logic of reading is the logic of abduction and of conjectural thinking. Hence, Eco writes: The "intention of the text" is "(...) the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader" (1992, p.64). "To make a conjecture means to figure out a Law that can explain a Result" and "(t)he 'secret code' of a text is such a Law" (1990, p.59). Of course, the reader-detective operates on the border between Semiotics and Hermeneutics, since there is no reading without interpretation and no interpretation without understanding. Thus, the question arises: Where are the borders between understanding and misunderstanding, between reading and misreading, in short: what are the limits of interpretation?

In the Postscript to "The Name of the Rose" (1984) Eco points out that the basic question of philosophy resembles the essential question of a criminal story: Who did it (and when and where and why)? Who is responsible? Eco's answer: everybody! Yet, not everybody has realized it. And actually everybody is guilty in different ways. The detective, however, aiming at finding an answer to all these questions has "to conjecture

that all events have a logic, the logic that the guilty party has imposed on them" (Eco, 1984, p.54). Thus, the detective attempts to discover an underlying internal logic rather than a transcendental, eternal logic. Once we have accepted the detective paradigm as a description of our role as interpreters of text-signs and world-signs, the most important consequence is that the epistemological status of the interpreter is no longer that of a judge. A judge stands outside the discourse, a detective is always in the discourse.

Eco's model of interpretive cooperation ushers the reader into the role of a detective, who discovers that the textual strategy made her become a criminal. But the reader-detective cannot make this discovery until she is changing her point of view. The "enlightening experience" of reading a mystery tale is the experience of change, the switch of one interpretive perspective into another, the transformation from a "naive reader" into a "critical reader". But this "switching" occurs within the discourse. First, the reader becomes part of the author's strategy. The text "pulls" her into its borders, converting her into the author's accomplice. Following the strategy of the text, the reader feels she has become a victim. Now she is both, victim and criminal. And as such she becomes suspicious of herself. What is her role in the game of discourse? The reader's awareness of her "being in the text" assigns the starting point of reflecting critically on her own practice of semantical interpretation. Hence, the reader also becomes a detective, aiming at detecting how, where and when the author's strategy persuaded her to "commit the crime" of writing the story in reading it. All in all, the text enables the reader to take on three different roles: Accomplice, Victim, and Detective. But the reader is never entitled to take on the role of the judge. This role remains vacant. Critical interpretation under "postmodern conditions" discovers that consciousness no longer has the dignity of the "supreme court". Neither the author nor the reader can be presumed innocent.

The detective pattern of interpretation as deployed by Eco would doubtlessly be a promising way to approach a "narrative philosophy" of the kind Richard Rorty wishes to establish. A philosophy without principles, no longer claiming to be "a matter of deductive argument" but "a matter of telling stories: stories about why we talk as we do and how we might avoid continuing to talk that way" (Rorty, 1985, p.134f). Eco might endorse that the logic of interpretation is not deductive but abductive and that the "strategy of using narratives where arguments fail" (Rorty, 1985, p.135) is helpful. But Eco would also argue that the very fact of failing arguments indicates the existence of some logical guiding principles, such as coherence, economy and relevance. Thus Eco's concept is that of a narrative philosophy with principles and for this reason he would

certainly refuse Rorty's statement that the "notion of 'rational grounds' is not in place once one adopts a narrative strategy" (Rorty, 1985, p.135).

But at least in one respect the detective model is not sufficient: A text, unlike a phenomenon in the world, is not only a dissemination of symptoms but also a dialog, attempting to make the reader a participant. For Gadamer interpreting is "the quest for the question the text is responding to", the interpretive logic of Hermeneutics is a dialogic. This presupposes not only the understanding of the antecedental question but also the understanding of the logic of dia-logic - i.e., the discursive rules and "guiding principles". The rules and principles which govern the discourse, or at least the communicative exchange exclude some possible relations between answer and question as irrelevant and incoherent.

## **2. Semiotics, Hermeneutics and Hermetism**

Attempting to alloy the semiotic line of interpretation with the hermeneutic tradition, Eco endeavors "to keep a dialectical link" between the "intention of the text" and the reader's "interpretive freedom" (Eco, 1992, p.63f). In this respect, his lectures on Interpretation and overinterpretation appear as a "Genealogy of Interpretation". They retrace the "archaic roots" of the contemporary debate on textual meaning and conduct us to the surprising phenomenon that "Rationalism" and "Irrationalism" used to interact in a silent dialog since the very beginning. This relationship is mirrored in the fact that in the Renaissance "the hermetic model paradoxically contributes to the birth of (...) modern scientific rationalism" (1992: 34). Eco advances that "being irrational" in the sense of "being unreasonable" reveals a lack of "moderateness", while "being in the modus" assigns, "staying within the limits" and respecting the existing borders. But since our belief in the logical modus (e.g., the "modus ponens") does not provide the recognition of a stable physical order of the world, our obedience of the logical axioms is nothing but a "social contract". Eco infers that the legal standard of a community is the modus and unless these boundaries are recognized, "there can be no civitas" (1992: 27). But this involves the exclusion of everything "outside the modus" and hence, he concedes that "(a)ny way of thinking is always seen as irrational by the historical model of another way of thinking, which views itself as rational" (1992, p.26).

Of course, the "logic of interpretation" has always had two faces. Hermeneutics, by definition, refers to Hermes, the messenger of olympic gods, half god, half human, who's messages are enigmatic and self-contradicting. Therefore it is no surprise that the cult of Hermes can be celebrated in two different, contradicting ways: as Hermeneutics, but

also as Hermetism. Both ways of thinking are concerned with "understanding" the unstableness of the order of the world. Without a pre-theoretical grasp of our "being captured" in a "horizon of understanding", there is not the slightest chance of any theoretic explanation. Hermes is the patron of navigators, who are professionals in dealing with the horizon for computing their own position. But the horizon is no clear and distinct border - it "moves" with us, making it impossible to catch up with.

Neither Hermetism nor Hermeneutics are referring to a formal logic that constrains a single true conclusion. Both are "obsessive strategies" of adopting hypotheses inside the horizon of understanding. Hermeneutics, seeking an acceptable, "economic" and careful interpretation, deploys the idea of "privileged relations", marked and qualified as coherent or relevant. Hermetism, on the contrary, is guided by association of similarity and "universal sympathy" between things. In not assuming that some relations might be less relevant than others, its way of adopting interpretive hypotheses appears as "uneconomic".

Eco's distinction between "sane" and "paranoic" reading, between interpretation and overinterpretation is guided by the discrimination of the hermetic and the hermeneutic strategy of interpretation. Of course, on principle, "everything can become open as well as closed in the universe of semiosis" (Eco, 1979, p.40) and inside this universe everything can have some kind of relationship with everything else. But if these relationships are only minimal we should, instead of "deducing from this minimal relationship the maximum possible" (Eco, 1992, p.48), confine ourselves to pondering carefully the relevance of this minimal relationship in the given context. The crucial question, however, of every theory of recognition and interpretation is: What do we want to know? What is interesting? Which relations are suspect? Eco points out that suspicion, in itself, is not pathological at all, but Hermetism's paranoia is that everything becomes suspicious since everything seems to be related to everything else: "Hermetic semiosis goes too far precisely in the practices of suspicious interpretation," and thus it leads to "overestimating the importance of coincidences which are explainable in other ways" (1992, p.50).

The hermeneutic logic of interpretation resembles the logic of a detective, attempting to solve a puzzle. Behind all interpretive efforts stands the hope that it is - at least on principle - possible to detect a solution. The hermetic logic of interpretation, on the contrary, appears as "spy logic". Hermetism does not want to solve puzzles, it looks for the reveal of a secret. But a secret, once it is revealed, remains no longer a secret. Consequently, Hermetism has to pursue a self-contradicting strategy of interpretation:

simultaneous with the attempt to reveal the secret, there is also the attempt to re-conceal it. Its not just "that everything is secret" - the ultimate knowledge of Hermetic initiation is that only an empty secret is a "true" secret (Eco, 1992, p.32). The Hermetic heritage produces the "syndrome of the secret", it conducts to the conviction "that power consists in making others believe that one has a political secret" (1992: 38). This Hermetic heritage can also be found in many postmodern concepts. Derrida's concept of the "continuous slippage of meaning" for instance, is, according to Eco, a Hermetic idea (1992, p.34f).

For Derrida the process of understanding thus becomes a symptom for the structural impossibility of detecting precisely that question that the text responds to. Every reading is misreading insofar as all attempts of tracing back to the question that "stands behind" the text are condemned to fail. This breakdown of understanding is on the other hand the "condition of possibility" for the textual "openness". Eco shares with Derrida the idea of the "potential openness" of a text for infinite interpretations. But he feels - on contrast to Derrida "the fundamental duty of protecting" texts "in order to open them, since I consider it risky to open a text before having duly protected it" (Eco, 1990, p.54).

Derrida argues against a model of representation which presupposes that signs represent objects and thoughts in a well defined, conventionally coded manner and which determines both the scope of adequate ways of using the signs and the scope of their adequate interpretation. In *Of Grammatology* he writes:

"Peirce goes very far in the direction that I have called the deconstruction of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign. I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified. Now, Peirce considers the indefiniteness of reference as the criterion that allows us to recognize that we are indeed dealing with a system of signs. What broaches the movement of signification is what makes its interruption impossible. The thing itself is a sign." (Derrida, 1976, p.49)

Eco raises the question whether Peirce "would have been satisfied with Derrida's interpretation." The answer to this question is, of course, negative since "deconstructive drift and unlimited semiosis cannot be equivalent concepts" (1990, p.36). Eco's argumentative strategy is to admit, on the one hand, the "openness" of Peirce's concept of unlimited semiosis "for further determination." On the other hand, Eco suggests that Derrida had to refuse the idea of such a determination since the "deferral" of *différance* implies a fundamental "indeterminacy" of the whole dynamics of interpretation, not only

in the past and present, but also in the future. "I am simply repeating with Peirce," Eco (1990, p.39) writes, "that 'an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it (and until this point Derrida could not but agree with this formula), may be conceived to have an absolute object as its limit' (CP 1.339)." Eco claims that the idea of an "absolute object" is incompatible with the deconstructive framework since it implies that "outside the immediate interpretant, the emotional, the energetic, and the logical one — all internal to the course of semiosis — there is a final logical interpretant, that is, Habit" (1990, p.39).

In Eco's theory of cooperative interpretation the text emerges as the question and the reading as the response. The text, which is only constituted by the "act of reading" functions as an instruction, designed to produce multiple effects. The basic instruction given by the text is: "Complete me!" The only interpretive constraints derive from very general dia-logical rules and discursive guiding principles. The interesting point is, that Eco's textmodel synthesizes the hermeneutic dialog-model with a pragmatic account of meaning. According to Peirce's famous "Pragmatic Maxim" defining a term's meaning is equivalent with giving an instruction or a recipe, telling us how to reproduce and derive all possible practical and logical consequences.

"Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (CP 5.402).

The analysis of meaning summarizes the whole experimental practice with the referent. Of course, the term "Practice" means making physical experiments as well as making thought experiments. Rorty is in this respect right, when he claims that recognition qua interpretation is rather a "making" than a "finding" (Rorty, 1989, p.7). The referent is not to be found "outside" practice; but, as Rorty grants, dropping "the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth" (Rorty, 1989, p.8). Instead we could say that truth is not outside the process of interpretation during which the relation between referent and representation, between truth condition and truth value is set up. Peirce called this process of interpretive practice "Semiosis". Semiosis is based on hypothetical reasoning and experimental hypotheses testing; it fuses "making" and "finding", recognition and interpretation. Eco's model of reading is built on this idea of Peircean Semiosis.

Like a score, the text invites the reader to cooperate actively and to "produce" meaning in interpreting the text, rather than to "find" meaning. Since the text requires the reader's supplements to come into life, the main task of the textual strategy is asking

the empirical reader to fulfill his textual role. According to Eco, the "intention of the text" is "displayed on the textual surface" in the sense of the purloin letter. "One has to decide to 'see' it" and the "intention of the text" is

"(...) the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text's intention. A text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader. I repeat that this reader is not the one who makes the 'only right' conjecture. A text can foresee a model reader entitled to try infinite conjectures" (1992, p.64).

Despite the reader's freedom to try infinite conjectures about the intention of the text, a theory of interpretation, even if it assumes that texts are open to multiple readings, "must also assume that it is possible to reach an agreement, if not about the meanings that a text encourages, at least about those the text discourages" (Eco, 1990, p.45). The only way to justify the conjectures about the intention of the text, however, is "to check it against the text as a coherent whole" and to see if the conjectures about one part of the text fit into the network of conjectures about the rest of the text. In claiming that "(...) the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader" (Eco, 1992, p.65) Eco re-establishes the hermeneutic idea of the horizon of understanding as a limit of interpretation.

However, the borders between text and reader are blurred. The "act of reading" converts the "linear manifestation of the text" into hypotheses about the meaning of the text and about its discursive organization. But since the coherence of the text turns out to be a mere interpretive assumption, only evaluated by the consistency of the interpreter's hypotheses about the text, interpreting something as coherent already implies "making" it consistent. Here we can see that along with relevance and economy, textual coherence is the third criterion to help to eliminate unacceptable interpretations. This "Popperian principle" as Eco calls it, is definitely too weak to fulfill the function of a positive interpretive criterion, but it is, as he says, "sufficient in order to recognize that it is not true that everything goes" (1992, p.144). This idea of a "Popper Criteria" is crucial for Eco's distinction between "use" and "interpretation".

### **3. The problem defining the limits**

For Rorty, Eco's distinction between "use" and "interpretation" doesn't make sense, since interpreting can never avoid and escape the dimension of use: "all anybody ever does with anything is use it" (Rorty, 1992, p.93). Thus, interpretation is nothing but the heroic act of bearing the unavailability of using. Rorty rejects the notion of textual relevance or coherence; instead he highlightens the notion of "interpretive interest".

For Rorty it seems simpler to scrap the distinction between using and interpreting, "and just distinguish between uses by different people for different purposes" (Rorty, 1992, p.106). Eco, on contrary, wants to legitimize the notion of "critical interpretation" by referring to a "knowledge oriented interest" and a kind of self-reflective attitude that defines the limit between two kinds of interest: "use" on the one hand, "interpretation" on the other hand. Eco writes:

"To defend the rights of interpretation against the mere use of a text does not mean that texts must never be used. We are using texts every day and we need to do so, for many respectable reasons. It is only important to distinguish use from interpretation" (1990, p.62).

Eco tries to determine the limits of interpretation, in drawing a line between the "intersubjective validity" and the "mere subjective validity". In this respect Eco's semiotic theory of interpretation comes very close to the "Critical Theory" of Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel:

"There is something for Peirce that transcends the individual intention of the interpreter, and it is the transcendental idea of a community, or the idea of a community as a transcendental principle. This principle is not transcendental in the Kantian sense, because it does not come before but after the semiotic process; it is not the structure of the human mind that produces the interpretation but the reality that the semiosis builds up. Anyway, from the moment in which the community is pulled to agree with a given interpretation, there is, if not an objective, at least an intersubjective meaning which acquires a privilege over any other possible interpretation spelled out without the agreement of the community. Peirce makes clear that the community of researchers is independent of what we think (CP 5.405)" (1990, p.40).

The basic problem of interpretation is, to define, of what kind the interplay between the interpretive "subjective intuition" and the "method of finding an intersubjective agreement" is. The notion of interpretation requires according to Eco "something which is very close to a transcendental instance: a community as an intersubjective guarantee of a nonintuitive, nonnaively realistic but rather conjectural, notion of truth" (Eco, 1990, p.39). Apparently the process of interpretation oscillates between the opportunity of subjective conjectures and the obligation to validate these conjectures in intersubjective argumentation.

Here the question emerges, whether Eco is inclined to follow Habermas' attempt to justify rational reasoning as the "better procedure" to reach the "best explanation", which means to ask: what is the criterion for the best explanation? In Peirce's view the most important criterion is certainly the success of the investigation. Everything that guides us to the truth is therefore in this sense justified. Thus, the epistemic justification

of the "guiding principles" of interpretation, such as consistency of argumentation, economy of interpretation and cooperation in communication derive from the hope (and the belief) that the only promising way obtaining truth and understanding is following these principles. However, the "deferral" of a necessary legitimation of the "guiding principles" reminds us that all instances of correction are constructed and therefore mere hypothetical. This is true for the notion of "consens" and "common sense", backed by the authority of a community as well as for "correspondence", legitimized by the authority of experience. And even the seemingly last remaining residue, the consciousness has lost its former authority, it is no longer the "supreme court", the highest instance of critical and pure reason.

As a consequence, the interpreter's consciousness, understood as the capacity for synthetic abductive reasoning becomes an ideal point without expansion, an "Archimedic Pin Point" on the border between inside and outside. Like the point of suspension for a pendulum, the consciousness works "as if" it would stand outside the system. Hence, the interpreter can choose between two interpretive attitudes: either that of a hermeneutic detective or that of a hermetic spy. Interpretation and Overinterpretation are two possible ways of adopting hypotheses; two different strategies of abduction, which produce different results. The careful hermeneutic abduction on the one hand, the daring hermetic abduction on the other hand. In conclusion, the "critical point" of reading and understanding is the discovery that the reader is compelled to be responsible, because he is condemned to have interpretive freedom. Being critical is "thinking the limit" of one's own horizon. Perhaps some of Eco's suggestions, attempting to define the border between "paranoic" and "sane" interpretation are not entirely convincing. Nevertheless one can endorse that in his theory of interpretation he takes into account the presumably most important symptom of interpreting under "postmodern conditions", namely the "paradise lost" for every naive and innocent way of speaking and reading. Against this background, Eco's true achievement is the attempt to escape the obscure alternative of either claiming that anything goes or complaining that rien ne va plus.

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