Eco & Ricœur: Perspectives in Narrative Theory

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This paper explores affinities of Umberto Eco's narratological writings with the hermeneutic tradition: comparison with Paul Ricœur shows these extending well beyond early debts to Luigi Pareyson and marginal jousts with Gianni Vattimo into one of the main avenues of Eco's thought. The paper compares Ricœur's and Eco's use of Aristotle's *Poetics* as the foundational text of a modern hermeneutic narratology, and their respective interpretations (with Gadamer's assistance) of narrativity as a principle of human identity. In both these areas Eco precedes Ricœur. Also considered are their common interest in complementing the theory of narrative identity with one of objective textual meaning, for which Eco is better known and which the critical literature has tended to censure. The effect of the comparison is to emphasize the way Eco's different texts in this area complement each other, constituting a whole greater than the sum of its parts, and whose originality and fertility have not been widely recognized.

KEYWORDS narrativity, narratology, hermeneutics, semiotics, identity, Eco, Ricœur

The originality and fertility of Eco's narratology have been somewhat obscured by the fragmentary style of his theoretical writing, by a frequent lack of correspondence between English-language and Italian publications, and by a dearth of focused critical attention. This tendency will be countered here by comparison with Ricœur, selected for this purpose as an acknowledged pioneer in narrative theory, but someone who proves, on inspection, to have trailed Eco in several respects by years or even decades. Ricœur's thinking, too, is complex, and changes over time: a necessarily brief outline of it will be based on an essay of the mid-1980s where he himself synthesizes work on or related to narrative theory covering roughly the previous twenty years (section I).

This will be followed by three sections elucidating Eco's narratology as it develops through three phases (sections II–IV). The first phase has gone largely unrecognized, and the second been reductively misinterpreted; the third exploits earlier results, but

moves in directions that tend to be obscured when the critical literature neglects this intricate pattern of chronological succession and thematic overlap. Other illuminating approaches to the comparison of Eco with Ricœur (for instance, emphasizing differences of religious background and reaction to it, or critical responses to various types of philosophical idealism) would intersect with the one adopted here; but attention to these will be minimized in order to focus to the fullest extent possible on clearly delimited questions of narrative theory.

I

Ricœur's principal work on narrativity is the monumental three-volume study *Time and Narrative* (1984–1988), but our focus will be on a later, briefer essay, 'Life: a Story in Search of a Narrator' (1991: 425–37).[1] This combines the earlier work's 'basic hypothesis', that 'between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity' (1984: 52), with the conception of 'narrative identity' outlined there and developed further in *Oneself as Another*. The essay also has the advantage of positioning these thematic nuclei in relation to earlier work on structuralism, and hermeneutics.

Ricœur sets out to re-formulate a received, dichotomous view that 'stories are told and not lived; life is lived and not told' (1991: 425–26). Echoing the Socratic maxim that an unexamined life is not worth living, he identifies the examined life as one whose story has been told. Acknowledging the limited range of genres (epic, tragedy, and comedy) known to Aristotle, but claiming for the *Poetics* a degree of abstraction sufficient to allow modern adaptations, Ricœur adopts the Aristotelian concept of 'mythos', meaning both an imaginary story and 'composition' or 'emplotment'. This is not a static structure, but a process completed not even in the telling, but by the audience for the story told. The process in question is a 'synthesis of the heterogeneous' in three different senses. First, it combines multiple incidents into a single intelligible whole, identifying them as significant events. Secondly, it brings together components as various as contingent circumstance, actions deliberately undertaken or passively undergone, interactions occurring by accident or design and ranged along a spectrum between conflict and cooperation, means adopted that are more or less appropriate to the ends in view, and outcomes that correspond to those ends more or less closely. Thirdly, emplotment derives a configuration enduring through time from a succession of events in time, although this summary flattens almost beyond recognition the argument of *Time and Narrative*. There, a reading of chapter XI of Augustine's *Confessions* brings out disparities between the concept of time as succession and the experience of time viewed always from the standpoint of the present, before this account of discordance predominating over concordance is juxtaposed with that of concordance predominating over discordance inherent in Aristotle's conception of *mythos* (1984: 5–87).

The essay next develops its ethical theme via a sketch of the relation established in *Time and Narrative* between *mythos* and a three-stage process of *mimesis*. Having proposed that configuration of the plot is completed by its audience, Ricœur postulates a (Gadamerian) 'fusion of horizons', such that the reader's subjectivity comes to belong to the work rather than takes possession of it, and is reconfigured, together

with the reader's world, in and by the act of reading. This 'fusion of horizons' is the third and final phase of the mimetic process whose second consists in the operation of emplotment, and whose first Ricœur brings into focus by insisting that the life reconfigured in the third is always already intrinsically meaningful. Its intrinsic meaningfulness is established by arguing that human action is from the outset defined by a semantics specific to it, including such concepts as those of project, means, goal, and circumstance; that it is mediated by symbolic systems which determine the relative significance of different actions, and the degree to which they merit being narrated; and that it has characteristic temporal configurations. According to Ricœur, all these are factors in lending human life an intrinsically 'pre-narrative' character, and none of them necessarily depends on a 'fusion of horizons' with stories already circulating in the social environment. To the contrary, there is a common experience of being involved in stories as yet untold, such as is brought to light in psychoanalysis, but also in courts of law. Viewed in this light, emplotment is an essential instrument of self-knowledge.

Subjectivity is now redefined as the 'narrative identity' or the pattern of 'discordant concordance' that may be discovered in a life, so that personal identity retains a degree of continuity without being condemned to remain unchanged over time: this is key to the vein of ethical reflection that ensues in *Oneself as Another*. At this point evoking his own mediation between Aristotle and Augustine in *Time and Narrative* to argue the 'basic hypothesis' already quoted, Ricœur proposes that narrative identities, like plots in general, are informed by tradition, but can both re-shape it and be re-shaped by reference to it. In closing, he presents this conception of selfhood as an alternative to that of the narcissistic ego: 'in the place of an ego enchanted by itself, a self is born, taught by cultural symbols, first among which are the stories received in the literary tradition. These stories give unity — not unity of substance but narrative wholeness' (437).

This reference to a Freudian concept of narcissism echoes work of the 1960s, where psychoanalysis is embraced as a challenge to the narcissistic certainties or illusions of consciousness, as well as to religion (1970; 1974). More closely still, it echoes similar references in essays of the 1970s where interrogation of received concepts of subjectivity by reference to the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (associated with Freud but also with Marx and Nietzsche) begins to find a reconstructive sequel in Gadamerian hermeneutics (1981). Conversely, there is no Freudian reference of this type in *Time and Narrative*, where the arguments concerning *mythos* and *mimesis* are most fully set out, or in *Oneself as Another*, where narrative identity features as an important component of Ricœur's ethical reflection but alternative conceptions of selfhood are presented in terms borrowed from analytical philosophy. Yet if the essay is anomalous in appealing so late to psychoanalytic concepts, it seems more typical in its subordination of structuralism to hermeneutics.

As in *Time and Narrative*, structuralist narratology is presented here as a 'second-order' rationalization of the principles of emplotment, analogous to conceptualization of the language system, Saussure's *langue*, in structural linguistics. Conversely, emplotment is conceived in terms of lesser abstraction as discourse, characterized by its functions of communication with others, reference to the world, and self-reflection.

In a slightly different perspective, emplotment is also compared directly with meta-
phorical discourse: both are modes of verbal creativity, articulating new meanings
and new realities. Ricœur outlines this conception of discourse in the 1960s (1974),
and develops it in ground-breaking work on metaphor in the 1970s (1977), before
grafting it onto hermeneutics in a sense of the term now fully informed by Gadamer
and the German tradition preceding him (1981).

   Several essays of the 1970s explore the conditions of what Ricœur calls the act of
'appropriation' on the part of a subject which brings about a 'fusion of horizons' with
the work, in particular exploring the implications of Gadamer's recognition that this
is typically mediated by historical distance rather than by a relation of immediate
mutual belonging. After repeatedly proposing that this distance might be bridged by
methodologies of structural (in one instance narratological, and in another 'stylistic')
analysis, describing this as an 'analogical' application above the level of the sentence
of concepts designed for purposes of linguistic analysis below that level (1981: 145–64;
131–44), Ricœur increasingly argues that effects of 'distanciation' (from any particu-
lar social or psychological context), sufficient to guarantee transmissible meaning,
are intrinsic to discourse and textuality (182–93). This question is effaced in *Time
and Narrative*, and does not come back into focus in 'Life: a Story in Search of a
Narrator'; but we shall find it addressed in the second phase of Eco's narratological
research, after reviewing affinities with Ricœur that emerge in the first.

II

Eco came to prominence in Italy in 1962 with a volume of essays on the avant-garde
arts that included an essay (from the second edition of 1966, two essays) on narrative
practices and forms (1989: 105–22; 123–57). An introductory essay presents Eco's
conception of the avant-garde *opera aperta* ('open work'), whose sense consists in
soliciting audiences' participation in forming it and giving it meaning, reflecting and
developing a questioning sensibility appropriate (in Eco's view) to modern societies
(1–23). Yet in other essays, Eco's advocacy of modern and contemporary music,
sculpture, writing, and painting repeatedly deviates into fragmentary exposition of a
train of thought on the boundaries of aesthetic theory and cognitive psychology (24–
83). This leads him to view cognition in general as an interpretative process, and
conclude that the same must be true of the experience of artworks by their audiences,
whether artists exploit this only to a minimal degree, or choose in contemporary
works to play on it to a maximum. His dichotomous classification of narratives as
either 'open' or 'closed' is therefore a somewhat special case.

   From the outset, Eco (like Ricœur two decades later) adapts Aristotle to conceptu-
alize narrative and narrative identity in contemporary contexts. The *Poetics* is associ-
ated with the aesthetics of Eco's mentor Luigi Pareyson and with John Dewey's
theory of aesthetic experience to emphasize that the coherence of a sequence of nar-
rative events is an interpretative construct, and with the *Rhetoric* to assign a key role
to audience expectation in determining what will be intelligible as a plausible and
coherent narrative. Eco considers a broader range of factual as well as fictional
genres than Ricœur (including TV news and sports reporting, classical realist and
contemporary popular fiction and cinema, and personal testimony) to establish an

embryonic conception of narrative identity anchored in the commonplace need to interpret and communicate everyday experience in a familiar and accessible way. The use made of Dewey's concept of experience to explain the possibility of formulating a coherent story in real time during live TV broadcasts (rather than retrospectively as in more traditional genres) also lends Eco's argument a circular structure comparable to Ricœur's three-phase account of *mimesis*. Whereas Ricœur's concept of narrative identity functions as an alternative to a more static sense of identity resistant to change, in Eco's argument this 'closed', Aristotelian model of narrativity is itself the dominant and relatively static term in a binary pairing.

The alternative is an avant-garde 'open' model of narrativity exemplified by fictions of Woolf, Joyce, and Robbe-Grillet and experimental films of the late 1950s and early 1960s by Antonioni (*The Night*, *The Eclipse*), Rosi (*Salvatore Giuliano*), and Godard (*Breathless*), whereas the contrary 'closed' models are provided by Balzac, Manzoni, Visconti (*Rocco and His Brothers*), and John Ford's classic 1939 Western, *Stagecoach*. 'Open' works simulate an uninterpreted field of data, challenging expectations of narrative coherence and requiring active interpretation. In some cases (Antonioni and Robbe-Grillet in particular) the succession of events is sufficiently disrupted or obscured to provoke an embryonic meditation on time to which Eco will return, albeit less systematically than Ricœur, in the third phase of his narratology. In these ways, 'open' works stimulate a questioning attitude towards dominant interpretations of contemporary reality (*c*. 1960), and in particular towards received conceptions of personal identity and its continuity and stability through time. While the later of the two essays on this topic privileges open narratives over closed ones, the earlier one acknowledges that each type serves different purposes, contexts, and audiences, according to whether expectation is to be questioned or confirmed.

Eco speculates here as to the possibilities of education in the significance of open forms and experimentation in their wider use, but he also recognizes in the slightly later essay that experimental forms in various genres are subject to rapid domestication once they are marketed as cultural goods, leading to cycles of further innovation and normalization whose logic is more economic than cognitive or aesthetic. This already implies that the differential significance of 'closed' and 'open' forms may be as much or more determined by response (and by cultures of response) to them than by intrinsic factors. In fact, the alternation and mutual complementarity of open and closed forms remains an important point of reference in the third phase of Eco's narratological investigation; yet so it is too, articulated in slightly different ways, for other writers up to the present (Tambling, 1991; Fulton et al., 2005: 300–06), whose contributions therefore tend to suggest that cultures of response are spaces of continual negotiation and renegotiation rather than of simple, cumulative, and unidirectional change.

An untranslated essay only slightly later than those discussed so far gives more detail in proposing adaptation of Aristotle's *mythos* and *mimesis* to modern narrative genres (Eco, 1964: 187–218). This argument appears to be informed by a reading of Gadamer, possibly mediated by material from the early 1960s collected in *Poesia e ontologia* (Vattimo, 1967), in the first place because it focuses on the prospect of readers' ethical dilemmas being illuminated and recast by identification with those of fictional characters as they arise from the events of the plot: quite contrary to

some apparent emphases of the later narratological semiotics, Eco's argument here is that readers' subjectivity may be transformed in contact with the narrative work. Secondly, the quality of 'typicality' held to make this effect possible is carefully distinguished from the term's previous usage, primarily by Croce and by Lukács, in a manner which echoes Vattimo's differentiation of Gadamerian aesthetics from the (contemplative) Kantian and (historicist) Hegelian traditions. Amongst abundant examples of 'typicality', the most prominent (destined to be revisited) is Stendhal's *Scarlet and Black* (contrasted with Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*, where artful emplotment does not in Eco's opinion form the semantic and artistic unity with character, setting, and language which he considers a necessary condition of the effect his argument seeks to elucidate).

This assists interpretation of the essay added to *Opera aperta* in 1966, which after some diplomatic discussion of Hegel and Marx improvises its own concept of 'alienation', consisting in a passive relation of subjectivity to physical and semiotic objects that then determine its thought, feeling, and behaviour. As presented, this is chiefly a matter of co-option into contemporary social life by cultural forms Eco considers anachronistic, including classical music and popular songs of love and loss as well as 'closed' forms of versification and narrative. Yet 'alienation' is considered an anthropological constant which contemporary societies merely intensify, and it is a factor of subjection alternately and sometimes simultaneously with empowerment. A key example in this respect is the motor car, while the avant-garde arts no less than more traditional ones are held to rely on 'alienation' for their prestige and effects. Nor is there any clear explanation of the process by which the subject passes from an 'alienated', passive relation to a relatively anachronistic set of data to one with objects and materials that are less so and have corresponding cognitive and practical advantages. Whilst Eco's 'alienation' therefore has complex resonances, the most pertinent to an artwork or narrative would appear to be with the relation of belonging, identified by Gadamer, which makes possible the 'fusion of horizons' then invoked by Ricœur.

These early engagements with Aristotle and Gadamer precede *Time and Narrative* by roughly two decades; and Eco's conception of narrative identities negotiated and re-negotiated in a variety of non-fictional and fictional narrative genres and forms seems in these respects (if not in philosophical detail) to exceed the range of Ricœur's argument. Yet like much of Eco's theoretical work this hermeneutic model of narrativity has been left undeveloped and unexploited, its implications and fertility (and indeed its existence) almost entirely neglected in the specialist critical literature and beyond.

III

Whereas Eco's early ventures in semiotic theory (from the mid-1960s up to *A Theory of Semiotics*) extend and further develop the concept of openness with a view to producing or validating alternative or subversive decodings, often of mass media messages (1968b; 1976), the next phase of narratological work focuses on the relatively restricted question of how meaning can be assigned to texts at all, whether by casual readers or more formally as a preliminary to critical response. This phase is in some respects heralded by a piece which in practice works on a much lower level of

abstraction than, for example, Barthes's 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', with which it is sometimes associated (Eco, 1979b: 144–72; Barthes, 1977: 79–124). Rather than focusing on putatively universal features of narrativity, Eco's essay on Fleming's Bond novels concentrates on the formulaic method employed by an individual author in a series of narrative works. The material published as *Lector in fabula* (1979a) moves on from this to develop a 'text semiotics' whose central concept is that of 'textual strategy', as this coordinates the interactions of the Model Reader and Model Author inferred from the text.[2] These parties are now clearly distinguished in principle from their empirical counterparts, as is the text from anything either empirical party may intend or understand by it. This material (and some that follows it) has nonetheless met with sustained criticism of its alleged collusion in residual idealist ideologies of monological literary meaning (de Lauretis, 1980: 62–76; 1984: 35, 55, 177; Caesar, 1999: 121–24, 151–57; Francese, 2003: 161–62), although this might more persuasively be held against the earlier piece widely viewed, approvingly or otherwise, as an exhibit of structuralism (Caesar, 1999: 42; Easthope, 1988: 23–33; Frow, 1995: 132–33).

Eco sets out to theorize the semantic activation (in a precise technical sense of the term, the 'interpretation') of written texts as a process of 'interpretative cooperation' with instructions inferred from them, privileging narrative ones, fictional or otherwise, because of the relative complexity of the semiotic problems they pose (1979a: 69–71; 1979b: 11–13). This argument initially canvasses a purely explanatory theory of textual meaning, but it takes on methodological force because 'interpretation' is identified as a necessary preliminary to many types of aesthetic, ideological, or psychoanalytical criticism, legitimate in themselves but (it is argued) less so when unsupported by this preliminary operation (1979a: 178–84; 1997b: 43–52). These come under a broad, neutral heading of 'use', together with other types of response which may appear less legitimate if they do not pass through the phase of 'interpretation' (although it is also acknowledged that many types of 'use' may in practice stimulate 'interpretation').

This necessary mutual entanglement of 'use' and 'interpretation' may be somewhat obscured (but should ultimately be underlined) by Eco's diversification of (model) readers and their readings into two categories, repeatedly invoked hereafter: the naive (elsewhere, 'semantic', or 'first-level') and the 'critical' or 'second-level', the first (in the case of narrative texts) seeking to discover the facts of the story, the second how the first may be cognitively or emotionally manipulated while doing so. Caesar seems to be distracted by some of Eco's phrasings from the degree to which this must be a theoretical distinction rather than an empirical description of reading practices (1999: 124; 156–57), yet this obscures a key point: Eco acknowledges that only some (self-focusing) texts directly invite critical reading,[3] and this in turn implies two distinct categories of 'critical' readings, one a sub-category of 'semantic' readings and the other a sub-category of 'use', further eroding the widespread understanding of 'interpretation' and 'use' as mutually exclusive categories.

In any event, criticism has tended to stress Eco's relative lack of interest in exploring the range of possible response to textual meanings once they are established, apparently mistaking the limited range of his argument for an attempt to legislate against such response. Eco's case may also have been obscured by his intensive use

of examples from a single work of Alphonse Allais, by his dauntingly idiosyncratic diagrams and formulas, and because the key text 1979a has been published in English only in fragments, misleadingly decontextualized. Another complicating factor is that the narratological writings have not in general been clearly distinguished from those on other aspects of semiotics, nor this second phase from the third (here discussed in section IV). Yet measured reading of Eco's *Lector in fabula* (1979a) finds a second model of narrativity, distinct from (and complementary to) the one developed in the early 1960s, but also like it in being exploratory, tentative, incomplete, under-exploited, and largely unrecognized.

Eco's semiotic perspective is avowedly eclectic; but interesting for its omissions as well as its inclusions. Much of the first half of *Lector in fabula* (1979a) explores processes of contextual and circumstantial selection amongst alternative lexical meanings (for written texts, according to genre and period), their amalgamation within and between sentences, and the semantic coherence of texts (indicated by the concept of 'isotopy' developed by Greimas).[4] In making this passage from lexical to textual meaning, Eco enters the area designated 'hermeneutics' by Ricœur, while himself retaining the term 'text semiotics'. Only now he introduces the narratological distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, story and narrative discourse, acknowledging the Russian Formalist and French Structuralist schools. At this stage, his primary interest is in the interpretative passage from textuality to *fabula* (understood as an isotopy): there is scant discussion of whether narrative discourse need be further differentiated into separate levels of textuality and storytelling, or of the inflection of story by storytelling technique.

Eco proposes that 'interpretation' of narrative texts proceeds by inference from what has occurred already to prediction of what may be expected to occur, and from confirmation or contradiction of these expectations to further predictions. These predictions refer to a repertoire of stereotyped situations, designated 'frames' in recognition of debts to 1970s research in artificial intelligence and cognitive processing, but conceptualized by reference to an eclectic range of theoretical precedent, including among others Peirce, Greimas, Fillmore, and Kenneth Burke.[5] Each frame has its characteristic participants, actions, and other associated features, and whenever a particular prediction is born out, various immediately relevant features of the corresponding frame are likely to be specified, and the degree of stereotyping correspondingly reduced, consistent with the genre and communicative strategies of the text. Frames are classed as 'intertextual' (in a narrow sense, associating the frame with an identified text), or 'common': these commonplaces of the narrative tradition (and of intertextuality in the broad sense) are for the most part 'regole per l'azione pratica' (1979a: 84).

Eco's argument accounts well for *mimesis*, for *mythos*, and for the traditionality of plots as Ricœur conceives them; but having introduced frames to account for the possibility of interpreting narrative texts, he allows the concept's narratological potential to remain understated, and pursues it in some very different directions, increasingly hereafter conceptualizing the meaning of terms in general by a frame representing events in which the relevant entity is typically involved, or by which it may be produced or presented for inspection: a sample of lithium is produced by certain procedures or an apple pie made in a certain way, an umbrella lends itself to

certain operations, a tiger exhibits certain behaviours, an oak emerges from an acorn (1984: 70–73; 1990: 219–21; 1994: 129–30; 2005: 251–54). This is one among a number of types of semantic representation that progressively diminish Eco's commitment to structural semantics, and whereas his involvement with structuralism is subject to the criticism that it is a 'culturalist' idealism (Deely, 1976), arguments along these lines reflect his increasing interest in establishing ontological linkages between meaning and the events that produce it. In this sense, narrativity is key to his negotiation of differences with idealism, but not only because of points in common with Ricœur.

What may be foreseen by readers and then either realized or not is the structure of a 'possible world', although Eco claims his debt to modal logic is terminological rather than conceptual (1979a: 125). Despite hailing his concept as a breakthrough, Ryan engages more closely with the way his analysis of Allais's story conceptualizes the inferences into which its Model Readers are led, and the frames to which they appeal in doing so (1991: 4, 169–73). The two modes of conceptualization are like opposite faces of a single coin: 'possible worlds' are semiotic constructs, each entertained by a narrative, a character within it, or a Model Reader (prompted by the narrative, sometimes misleadingly); they are defined by their correspondences and differences with each other and with the 'real' world (likewise conceived for methodological purposes of comparison as a cultural construct, variably defined from time to time). An elaborately diagrammed vein of 'structural' analysis shows correspondences and differences between 'possible worlds' emerging from the combinations of 'properties' attributed in each to the 'individuals' (human or otherwise) they contain, insofar as these are relevant to the development of the *fabula*. The effect is to indicate agreements but also differences, some of them irreconcilable, among characters, or between characters and the world they inhabit, or between that world as it develops in the course of a story and readers' expectations of it or of the one they themselves inhabit. As Eco associates the concept with characters, it challenges more familiar naturalistic concepts such as point of view. Since he associates it with readers, it goes some way towards translating into a new idiom the Gadamerian conception of a 'fusion of horizons' adopted by Ricœur. Yet since it is also closely associated with the concept of the 'frame', arguments now proliferate for the truth or 'typicality' of narrative works: one is illustrated by *Scarlet and Black* and one by *The Three Musketeers* (previously antithetical to the 'typicality' of Stendhal's novel), while *Oedipus Rex* is analysed in terms subsequently presented as the bases of a third (1979a: 47–49, 167–68, 170–72; 1979b: 197–98, 241–42, 243–45; 1990: 73–74).

'Interpretation' is the constitution of a complex semantic object, aiming (in its more formalized, methodological version) to identify the (textual) conditions of the fullest possible range of experiences (or 'uses') of a narrative work, but not to describe such experiences in themselves. Among others, the range of such 'uses' should in principle include the formative or transformative experience on the part of reading subjects envisaged by Eco's first (hermeneutic) model of narrativity developed in the 1960s. The experiences privileged in the first model would then seem to correspond to 'interpretation' broadly in the way Ricœur's 'appropriation' corresponds to the preliminary, enabling functions identified during the 1970s as his demand for structural 'explanation' modulates towards one for objectifying 'distanciation' of the work from its original social and psychological contexts. In a third phase, however, Eco combines his two earlier models in more than one way.

IV

During the 1980s, Eco extends the methodological claims of 'interpretation' beyond narratology (1990; 1992): his chief sparring-partner here is Richard Rorty, and literary theory an exemplary ground on which to confront fashionable relativisms by arguing the 'limits of interpretation', thereby attracting some enduring controversy (well illustrated by Birchall, 2004). Yet Eco does also develop comparable arguments, not all of them adequately translated, on other terrain. From the 1950s to the mid-1970s, he had swung between the opposed hazards of a quasi-Platonist metaphysics successively diagnosed in Pareyson, and then in Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and the later Heidegger (1968a; 1968b), and an 'idealist' reaction diagnosed by an influential American reviewer of *A Theory of Semiotics* apparently unaware it is supported in *La struttura assente* (1968b) by a compound of references to Nietzsche and to Dewey (Deely, 1976). We have already seen how this alternative is challenged by Eco's attempts from the late 1970s to develop an ontologically grounded semiotics; and in time a programmatic exploration of limits to the interpretability of the world draws on resources provided by Peirce, by the earlier Heidegger, by Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and (in the Italian text) by Pareyson, now read in a less inquisitorial key (1997a: 1–42; 1999a: 9–56).

The essays in hermeneutic methodology are therefore part of a broader (and open-ended) investigation whose methodological and ontological dimensions communicate with each other, as they do with its more subdued ethical one (2001; 2005). We have seen that earlier phases of Eco's theoretical work have yet to be fully assimilated; all the more is this true of more recent ones, and it is difficult to characterize the relations of inter-dependency or constraint between these distinct yet connected strands of enquiry. We can, however, say that factors of human embodiment, mortality, and time assume a thematic significance in Eco's theoretical writing perhaps no greater than previously, but certainly more explicit. This is of course characteristic of the entire hermeneutic tradition since Heidegger, who like Pareyson is in all phases more regularly cited by Eco, whether positively or negatively, than are Gadamer or Ricœur. In its third phase of development, narratology is repositioned within this constellation of problems.

In *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, the concept of possible worlds is used primarily as a means of exploring the distinction between fictional and non-fictional narratives, and there are pages on the role of narrativity in perception, cognition, and individual and collective memory which would support more substantial discussion of personal and social identity than Eco attempts (1994: 130–31). This is, in other words, the richest narratological text of the third phase. There is also a complex proposal as to the relationship between the two models of narrativity developed previously. Reverting to the first model, Eco again construes 'closed' narrative forms as exemplary attempts to impose order on the putative chaos of the world, and 'open' ones as artistic simulations of it, reiterating a claim of *Opera aperta* that 'life is more like *Ulysses* than *The Three Musketeers*', but that we 'are all more inclined' to think the reverse (117). Yet this proposal is now introduced by sketching a further complex analogy between the pursuit of various types of metaphysical, religious or superstitious certainty amongst the complexities of the world, and that of narrative coherence (of various types, identified with the discourse of an 'empirical' or Model Author, or a narrator) in the relatively very limited worlds of fictional works (115–16).

This knots together two complex trains of thought, and might be submitted to interrogation more extensive than is possible here. Nonetheless, Eco's formulation indicates that the predominant function of fictional narrative is to be a consoling source of certainties, but that this may happen in more than one way, and that the certainties found in a disciplined 'interpretation' (focusing on the textual strategy of the Model Author) are more reliable (in a functional rather than factual sense) than those (perhaps spuriously factual ones) of which the text informs us directly (in the voice of a narrator) or those based on external sources of information about it (be it the empirical author). Eco connects these considerations with 'the paramount function of myth — to find a shape, a form in the turmoil of human experience' (87), but also (on the same page and again subsequently) with a further analogy, again complex, between the function of children's play, insofar as it rehearses adult activities, and that of fictional narrative: 'fiction has the same function that games have. In playing, children learn to live, because they simulate situations in which they may find themselves as adults. And it is through fiction that we adults train our ability to structure our past and present experience' (131). Caesar questions this last analogy (1999: 134) without exploring the way Eco repeatedly couples it with problems concerning fictional time; yet this, and the inflection of story by storytelling, are central to Eco's principal demonstration of 'interpretation' since his engagement with Allais, focusing (as does much of *Six Walks*) on Nerval's *Sylvie* (2005: 28–61), a work in various respects both exceptional, and exemplary.

Eco works with the critical tradition since Proust as well as the record of his own reading and teaching over five decades to argue that Nerval's use of past tenses so blurs the order, pace, and duration of narrative events that they can only be reconstructed analytically and cannot be held in view or in mind while reading or rereading the story. In thus focusing on past-tense verbs marking multiple flashbacks-within-flashbacks, these discussions move onto a conceptual terrain of narrative time and storytelling technique different from that of *Lector in fabula* (1979a). As Eco describes it, *Sylvie* imposes on its reader the oneiric confusions of the first-person narrator's recollections of his previous experience. Emphasis falls on a correspondence between fictional experience and the experience of fiction which seems to supplement previous arguments for the truth of fictional works at the same time as reopening a case for the 'use' of 'open' ones, since Eco also considers Nerval to have attempted the construction of a fictional world comparable to that of *Ulysses* in being 'as complex, contradictory, and provocative as the actual one' (1994: 117).

Yet this is a test case in other ways too. In the first place, the riddling effect of Nerval's storytelling throws into confusion the hierarchy of 'semantic' and 'critical' interpretations (1994: 43): this is simply effaced from Eco's principal text on *Sylvie* translated into English (2005: 28–61), although a more extended Italian version takes this opportunity to concede that the hierarchy cannot be understood as a chronological sequence (Eco, 1999b: 97). Secondly, since the argument is that a critical 'interpretation' of the story cannot be held in mind simultaneously with undertaking a semantic one by (re-)reading it, this also seems to illustrate the mutual inextricability in practice of semantic 'interpretation' and a particular form of 'use'; or, in Ricœur's terms, of 'distanciation' and 'appropriation'. Thirdly, this is probably also Eco's closest point of contact with Ricœur on the relation between narrativity and

the human experience of time: *Sylvie* appears to illustrate the thesis of 'narrative identity', but negatively, by presenting a case of its disruption. If anything (and as Eco seems to recognize), the story recounts the narrator's arrival at the point where he not only needs to start establishing a coherent narrative of his past, but also may at last be able to do so.

*   *   *

The slightly muffled virtuosity of Eco's writings on *Sylvie* should not distract attention from light shed by comparison with Ricœur on the relationships of mutual complementarity between different narratological texts by Eco which have otherwise appeared somewhat disconnected from each other. Another corresponding result is to bring out their thematic richness. In the current climate of adulation for Eco as popular novelist and pundit, and of reactive cynicism about this, it is doubly important to highlight the originality and theoretical significance of the material studied here, since it may otherwise risk being entirely lost to view.

Notes

1 A different translation appears in Wood, 1991: 20–33. I have not been able to trace the French text: it does not for instance appear in the 'systematic bibliography' to Hahn, 1995. For ease of access, Ricœur is cited in English throughout, as is Eco wherever this is possible and does not obscure the argument. For an accessible and stimulating rendition of the significance of Ricœur's work on narrativity, see Kearney, 2002.

2 A compressed version of Eco, 1979a appears, with some much earlier material, in 1979b: 3–43, 175–99, and 200–60. Excluded sections of chapters 5 and 9 appear as 1997b.

3 Eco, 1979a: 194–95 (corresponding to 1979b: 204–05) could be considered glossed by 1990: 54–57 (although this is not strictly speaking a narratological text).

4 English-language readers, see 1979b: 3–43, and for 'isotopy' 1997b: 34–43.

5 On Burke, see Jameson, 1981: 81, and 1988: 137–52 (dated 1978): since Eco, 1979a acknowledges assistance received from Jameson in other respects (9), beginning in 1975, the reference to Burke may be due him too.

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