



**A Correspondence with Umberto Eco Genova-Bologna-Binghamton-Bloomington
August-September, 1982 March-April, 1983**

Stefano Rosso; Carolyn Springer

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A Correspondence with Umberto Eco
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Stefano Rosso
translated by Carolyn Springer

Rosso: The contemporary debate on literature (especially in the United States, but recently in Italy as well) revolves increasingly around the terms “modern” and “postmodern.” There have been numerous attempts to define the term “postmodern”¹ as a “movement” which historically succeeds “modernism,” as a “belated” modernism, as a polarity which has always been present in the internal struggles of culture, as the adjective *par excellence* to describe our contemporary “condition,” etc. What is your understanding of this term and where do you place your criticism and your recent novel (*Il nome della rosa*)² in this spectrum of definitions? Do you think there are relationships among the ways in which the term “postmodern” is used in the areas of 1) architecture (Paolo Portoghesi, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and others); 2) the philosophical, aesthetic and sociological debate which has developed most recently in Italy; and 3) literary postmodernism and narrative theory in the United States?

Eco: All my life I have worked to establish distinctions within the areas covered by umbrella-terms such as iconism, code, presupposition, etc. Naturally I am intrigued by the term “postmodern.” It is my impression that it is applied these days to everything the speaker approves of. On the other hand, there seems to

be an attempt to move it backwards in time; first it seemed to suit writers or artists active in the last twenty years, then gradually it was moved back to the beginning of the century, then even further back, and the march goes on; before long Homer himself will be considered postmodern.

But I believe that this tendency is to some extent justified. I agree with those who consider postmodern not a chronologically circumscribed tendency but a spiritual category, or better yet a *Kunstwollen* (a Will-to-Art), perhaps a stylistic device and/or a world view. We could say that every age has its own postmodern, just as every age has its own form of mannerism (in fact, I wonder if postmodern is not simply the modern name for *Manierismus* as a metahistorical category). I believe that every age reaches moments of crisis like those described by Nietzsche in the second of the *Untimely Considerations*, on the harmfulness of the study of history. The sense that the past is restricting, smothering, blackmailing us. The historical avant-garde (but here too I would consider avant-garde as a metahistorical category, in the sense in which Renato Poggioli helps us to understand it) tries to settle its accounts with the past. "Down with moonlight," the futurist motto, is a statement typical of any avant-garde; you need only to substitute something appropriate for the moonlight, which for the futurists was the romantic tradition. The avant-garde destroys the past, it disfigures it. The *Demoiselles d'Avignon* represent the typical gesture of the avant-garde; then the avant-garde goes even further. Having disfigured the figure, it erases it, finally arriving at the abstract, the informal, the empty canvas, the torn canvas, the burned canvas. The same thing happens in all the arts; in architecture it is the minimal condition of the curtain wall, of the building as funeral stela, a pure parallelepiped; in literature it is the destruction of the flow of discourse, which leads to the Burroughs-style collage, silence, the empty page. In music it is the passage from atonality to noise, and then to absolute silence (in this sense, the early Cage is modern).

But there comes a moment when the avant-garde can go no further, because it has already produced a metalanguage to talk about its own impossible texts (for example, conceptual art and body art). At this point arises the reaction, which is never simply a reversal. That is to say, at least, a conservative reversal is always possible, but is not a dialectical response to the avant-garde; this retrenchment is the normal production of the midcult and of popular art that always continues, indifferent to the tensions of experimental modes, serving the needs of its own unchanging market.

The postmodern response to the modern consists instead of recognizing that the past—since it may not be destroyed, for its destruction results in silence—must be revisited ironically, in a way which is not innocent. For me the postmodern attitude is that of a man who loves a woman who is intelligent and well-read: he knows that he cannot tell her, "I love you desperately," because he knows that she knows (and she knows that he knows) that that is a line out of Barbara Cartland. Yet there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara

Cartland would say, I love you desperately.” At this point, he has avoided the pretense of innocence, he has clearly affirmed that no one can speak in an innocent mode; but he has still told the woman what he wished to tell her—that he loves her, but in an age of lost innocence. If the woman is playing along, she has received a declaration of love just the same. In this case neither of the two interlocutors considers himself innocent; both have taken on the challenge of the past, of the “already-said,” of the bracketed. Both are playing consciously and with pleasure at the game of irony . . . Yet both have managed once again to speak about love.

Irony, metalinguistic play, enunciation to the second power, these are the characteristics of the postmodern. But I might add another. In the case of the modern, anyone who does not understand the game can only reject it. With the postmodern it is possible to misunderstand the game, by taking things seriously. I think this happened with my novel: those who did not catch the citations, the play on narrative itself, read it as if it were an innocent story. Which is of course the nature of the risk of irony. There is always someone who takes ironic discourse seriously. I think that the collages of Picasso, Juan Gris and Bracque were modern: for this reason normal people did not accept them. But the collages that Max Ernst assembled from parts of nineteenth century engravings were postmodern: one might read them as a bizarre short-story, or as the account of a dream, without realizing that they represented a discourse on the art of engraving, and perhaps on the collage form itself. If this is what we mean by postmodern, it is clear why Sterne and Rabelais were postmodern, and why Borges must certainly be: why in one artist the two moments—modern and postmodern—may coexist, or follow each other at brief intervals, or alternate.

Rosso: As your impulse to equate postmodernism and mannerism suggests, you seem to be defining postmodernism as essentially an aesthetic phenomenon, a matter of artistic style and form. Do you see the postmodern disruption of received notions of forms as a *praxis*—an interrogation of the ontological grounds of traditional art and the cultural and socio-political institutions these grounds privilege?

Eco: In the first place, I do not think that mannerism is simply an aesthetic phenomenon. It implies an approach to life, a type of political and religious behavior, a way of constructing one’s psychological and cultural ego. Shakespeare’s characters are mannerist heroes; much of the culture that we call baroque, such as Gracian’s *L’oracolo manual*, exemplifies a mannerist ethics, politics, and praxis. You might say that mannerism is born whenever it is discovered that the world has no fixed center, that I have to find my way through the world inventing my own points of reference. Very disturbing, and naturally “human, all too human.” It is the same thing that is happening with a term like postmodern, which for a philosopher like Lyotard is not just an aesthetic category. I would like

to use a general model like the labyrinth, but perhaps we will get to that later. In any case, I would consider postmodern the orientation of anyone who has learned the lesson of Foucault, i.e., that power is not something unitary that exists outside of us.

People spoke too long of a praxis founded on reason (*Vernunft*) as if there were only one “reason.” Then they discovered that there was not one “reason,” and (in Italy, for example) people began to talk about the crisis of reason (here in America they probably talk instead about epistemological anarchism à la Feyerabend). In any case, there *is* a crisis of reason if we are referring to the reason of Descartes, Hegel, and Marx. But if we accept the premise that our behavior in the world ought to be not *rational* but *reasonable*, then I will say (and with a certain satisfaction) that if there is a crisis of Reason, there is no crisis of Reasonability. The odd thing is that the great philosophers—Aristotle, for example—who were long believed the founders of Reason, actually advocated the more human(e) value of Reasonability. If this admission makes me a postmodern in the area of philosophy, fine. My friend Gianni Vattimo has discussed for some time the notion of a “Soft thought” [*pensiero debole*]³ and I am contributing to a collection of essays that he is preparing on the subject. I trace the origins of this “Soft thought” to the failure of certain “strong” modes of thinking to take hold after Aristotle with the late Greek and medieval theories of language. But it is a long story. In any case, let us say that Guglielmo in my novel is not rational but reasonable. This is why he believes in no single truth.

Rosso: You have been working on Joyce for a long time now. After a period of partial silence following your *Le poetiche di Joyce*, you recently published an English translation (*The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, The University of Tulsa, Tulsa, 1982), in which the parts you added reaffirm your continuing interest in a figure who is considered by some “postmodern” critics as the most significant exponent of “Modernism.” In the United States, in the field generically defined as “postmodern,” there has been an alliance between a literature (“which is the measure of its occasion”⁴) of “open form,” or, as it is alternatively put, of “disclosure” or “de-struction,” and a literary hermeneutics of a Heideggerian type, reread through the French philosophers. Working from these premises, the attack which Heidegger unleashes on “Western metaphysics” (the “logocentrism of Western culture,” as Derrida puts it), is aimed in postmodern literary discussion at authors such as Eliot, Yeats, Proust, etc., and in particular at Joyce, especially the Joyce of *Ulysses*. The Irish writer is accused of retrieving a “will to power over being” in his attitude as “father” of the text, as demiurge, absolute possessor of form, etc. In this perspective, which is inadvertently supported by New Critical readings of his texts, Joyce becomes a philosopher of presence: his metaphysical impulse, which is a desire to “structure,” prevents him from seeing reality as temporal process, being as difference. According to these postmodern critics, only certain contemporary writers (for example,

John Barth, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Stanley Elkin, Joseph Heller, Ishmael Reed, etc., whose “fathers” are Borges, Nabokov and Beckett) manage to break with the tradition of Western metaphysics culminating in Modernism and “construct” texts which are “open” or “dis-closive” in form. You wrote a critical book entitled *The Open Work*.⁵ How would you defend Joyce against the charge that his texts are closed forms? What constitutes the distinction between open and closed? Your novel surprised many people by its excessive structurality (some critics such as Maria Corti have used the term “closure” to describe it)⁶ in an era in which most “postmodern” literature demonstrates instead a deliberate anti-structurality. How would you defend Eco?

Eco: Joyce is a typical example of what I was saying earlier. The *Portrait* is the story of an experiment in Modernism. The *Dubliners*, even though it was written earlier, is more “modern” than the *Portrait*. *Ulysses* is at the borderline. *Finnegans Wake* is already postmodern; at least one could say that it opens postmodern discourse, since to be understood it requires that the “already-said” be not contradicted but reconsidered in an ironic way. But Joyce is a perfect example precisely because he eludes all classification: even in *Ulysses* there is the continual remediation of the “already-said.” In other words, the one thing that I would not do is define Joyce as a typical exponent of Modernism. But I realize, as I say this, that perhaps I use “modern” and “postmodern” in a different sense from that in which you and others use it. Well, this itself seems to me a very postmodern attitude—don’t you agree? The postmodern, even that of Lyotard, tends toward a pluralism of categories.

Having said this, naturally I am perplexed by the critical statements you mention. But if there is one thing that cannot be done, it is to teach an initiate of deconstruction how to read a text. If for certain deconstructionists (but can we speak for all of them? who is handing out the membership cards?) Joyce and Eliot are not “open” and do not see reality as a process and being as difference, that shows that they are reading these authors in a certain way: in a perspective which allows the act of reading to prevail over the texture of the text, what parameter could one use to contest them? On the other hand, do not ask me whether a work is open or closed. I wrote my answer in the preface to the second edition of my *Opera aperta*: I have never seen an open work. I wrote that book not as a critic but as a philosopher. My model was an abstract one: as such it can be incarnated in different ways in different works, but never fully in any single work. It is a way of defining a relationship between a text and its readings. Therefore, by the way, I would be the last person capable of saying whether my own novel is an open work or not. I do not believe, however, that the excessive structurality contradicts the open structure of the work. For example, I have always and clearly considered *Ulysses* to be a book in which the model of the open text plays a major role: but *Ulysses* is extremely structured, it has an iron scaffolding. Apart from the fact that in my book the scaffolding is so

ironclad, so evident, as to leave one suspecting that it may be made of *papier-maché*. Like the facades of Las Vegas, to make a “postmodern” reference.

Rosso: Your equation of structure and openness constitutes a curious paradox, which, however, comes to the verge of making sense in your admission that the iron scaffolding of *Il nome della rosa* is so obvious that it activates the suspicion that it may be made of paper. Are you suggesting that the iron scaffolding of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and of your novel is thus an intertextual de-struction of the iron scaffolding of traditional fictional form?

Eco: Why not? It sounds reasonable. However, I think that in every work of art you need some constraints in order to feel free, to invent some kind of freedom. By the way, recently Harald Weinrich wrote in *Merkur* that my novel is very “open.” Some like it open, some like it closed. That is openness.

Rosso: *Il nome della rosa* appears to be a detective novel but is also a *pastiche* of theological, political, aesthetic and philosophical debates, historical references, moral reflections, private jokes with the reader, etc. At the end of the story the “casualness” of the *denouement* deeply disappoints the reader’s expectation of a detective story logic. In recollecting my reading of the text, I realized that the detective plot faded progressively into the background and that a series of elements emerged which were not strictly related to the plot. Meanwhile I was reminded of a reflection of Guglielmo, the *ante-litteram* detective: “Where is all my wisdom? I have behaved like an obstinate man, pursuing an appearance of order, when I should have realized that there is no order in the universe.”⁷ Your novel has sold more than 50,000 copies in Italy and has been read by a public which is culturally diverse (from academics to detective-novel fanatics).⁸ How would you advise a reader to go about investigating the multi-levelled possibility of reading, of *jouissance* and identification, i.e., everything you call “the textual cooperation of the reader,” generated by *Il nome della rosa*? (I am aware that you usually refuse to become the critic of your own novel.)

Eco: Now, this question of yours contributes to the reply that I was giving on the preceding point. You have caught on well (and I thank you) to the play between the appearance of order and the suspicion that there is no order, or rather (as Guglielmo says at a certain point) that there are many kinds of order, and that all of them must be tried in order to reach some (provisional) solution.

I have tried during the past two years to avoid giving interpretations of my book, to avoid becoming the theorist myself. But if you twist my arm, I will tell you that it is no accident that the book begins like a detective novel (and continues to trick the naive reader until the very end, so that the naive reader may even fail to realize that it is a detective novel where precious little is discovered, and where

the detective is beaten in the end). Now the choice of the detective novel was not accidental. I believe that people like detective novels not because they are full of dead bodies, and not because (as has so often been said) detective novels celebrate the triumph of the final order (intellectual, social, legal, and moral) over the disorder of guilt. It is rather that the detective novel represents a story of pure conjecture. But even a medical detection, a scientific experiment, a metaphysical interrogation are cases of conjecture. After all, the basic question of philosophy (like that of psychoanalysis) is the same one posed by the detective novel: who is guilty? To find out (or to believe that you have found out) you have to conjecture that facts are governed by logic, a logic which has imposed on them a guilty party. Every story of inquiry and conjecture tells us about something we have "dwelt" near forever (do you like my pseudo-Heideggerian quotation?). At this point it is clear why my underlying story (who is the murderer?) branches out into so many other stories, all of them stories of other conjectures, all about the very structure of conjecture itself. One abstract model of conjecturability is the labyrinth. Like any other conjectural space it can be traversed in many ways. Naturally you find your way out of classical labyrinths. But at this point we should specify that there are three kinds of labyrinths. One is the Greek type, that of Theseus. This labyrinth does not allow anyone to lose his way: you enter it and arrive at the center, and then from the center you make your way to the exit. That is why there is the minotaur at the center; otherwise there would be no point, you would just be out for a harmless stroll. The terror comes in because you do not know where you will come out and what the Minotaur will do. But if you unravel the classical labyrinth, you will find a thread in your hands, Ariadne's thread. The classical labyrinth is its own Ariadne's thread.

Then there is the mannerist labyrinth. If you unravel it, you find in your hands a kind of tree, a root-like structure with many dead ends. There is only one exit, but you can get it wrong. You need an Ariadne's thread to keep from getting lost. This labyrinth is the model of the trial-and-error process.

Finally, there is the network, the structure that Deleuze and Guattari call a rhizome. The rhizome is set up so that each path connects to every other one. It has no center, no periphery, and no exit, because it is potentially infinite. Conjectural space is shaped like a rhizome. The labyrinth of my library is a manneristic labyrinth, but the world in which Guglielmo realizes he is living is already structured like a rhizome: that is, it is structurable but never definitely structured.

And now we come to the public's reaction. I said before that postmodern narrative admits the possibility of a naive reading. It may indeed be possible, but it is not remunerative. That is, an innocent reading of irony is no fun. If I say about someone whom I believe to be an imbecile, "he is really bright," those who understand the irony will enjoy it; if on the other hand, you take my statement seriously, you wonder why in the world I said something so obvious. Now, if anyone read my novel as if it were a simple detective novel, the narrative mechanisms probably worked for him, but I can imagine that his

pleasure was minimal. So this innocent reading might explain *how* someone read the novel, but not *why* he read it and liked it well enough to pass the word on, triggering that avalanche of 600,000 copies, which neither the favorable press nor the snobbishly negative reaction can otherwise explain. One seventeen-year-old boy told me that he did not understand a word of the theological discussions, but that they helped to stretch out the spatial labyrinth (like the scary music in a Hitchcock film). I think that something like this did happen: even the naive reader sensed that he was up against a story of labyrinths, and not just spatial labyrinths either. We might say that, strangely enough, the most naive readings of my novel were concerned not with its contents (philosophical, political, or religious), and not with the metalinguistic and metanarrative game of its literary references, but with the bare bones of the story, that is, with the fact that the story was not (as it seemed to less naive readers) “closed” within an iron framework, but rhizomatic in structure. Without any form of mediation, the naive reader came to grips with the fact that it is impossible to tell *one* story. But maybe this is a case of wishful thinking. You should never ask authors this sort of thing, they are such bores. You should let us theoreticians do the talking.

Rosso: How do you account for the “naive” readers getting the “structure” of the novel right and the more sophisticated readers getting it wrong? Does it have anything to do with academically inscribed expectations?

Eco: I never said that there is a way to get my novel wrong.

Rosso: What kind of progression do you think can be traced between *Opera aperta* (1962), *Lector in fabula* (1979) and *Il nome della rosa* (1980)?⁹

Eco: The formulation of the question already contains the answer.

Rosso: On more than one occasion you have claimed that your novel allowed you to talk about “something” (and in “some way”) which you would not have been able to express in your essays. Other writers, on the other hand (for example, Derrida, Deleuze in *Mille plateaux*, not to speak of Blanchot and Lacan) have adopted a style in which the line of demarcation between language and metalanguage is increasingly hard to perceive. What do you think of these two “styles”? Also: you are well-known for the speed with which you write books and essays, but you spent many years writing your novel. How do you explain this fact?

Eco: On this point I have very definite views (which does not mean they are not wrong). Anyone who writes essays must work to reduce the labyrinth. He must impoverish the wealth of the real in order to permit definitions, even provisional ones. He must make an effort to reduce the ambiguity. When you want ambiguity to run free, you write

poetry or fiction. When theoreticians behave like writers of fiction, I do not like it (even though I might admire what they write as if it were a novel). Our brain is divided into two parts: we can use one or the other, but we always need to know which half we are using. Anything else is a Wagnerian dream of merging the arts, philosophy, religion, everything into a single discourse. I am just an average guy, all those schemes are beyond me.

As for the last part of your question, frankly I do not understand. Every page of my essays has been rewritten at least ten times. Just like every page of the novel. It is only to interviews that I reply in a hurry, because they are a "minor" genre.

Rosso: But isn't the essayist's imperative to reduce the labyrinth a manifestation of the will to power over being (over the differences that time disseminates)? Does, in this way, the essayist become a detective (a *policier*) of the always deviant truth?

Eco: I think that here we would have to trace a typology of the different kinds of essay writing. Consider an essay in organic chemistry. The author must find one formula and one only. If he is of a philosophical bent, he knows that reality is richer than his formula, but the contract he has signed with the reader specifies that he must reduce the labyrinth. On the other hand, a physicist who tells us that light can be explained either in terms of waves physics or in terms of quantum physics, suggests that there is more than one way out of the labyrinth. A philosopher of perception is more than one way out of the labyrinth. But in saying this he reduces it, defines it. In any case, even a scientist who elaborates a hypothesis but shows us how it may be falsified, suggests that the truth can be, as you say, "deviant." But in defining the essayist as a "detective of the always deviant truth," are you not yourself trying to establish a principle, a truth? Are you not, perhaps, collaborating to reduce the labyrinth? Let us try to be honest: there is no mode of essay writing that is not assertive. Only poetry, or narrative, or theater, is truly interrogative and leaves the truth hanging in the balance. A novelist has one of his characters say "I am a detective of the always deviant truth." The reader says, "No, that is not true." And the novelist is satisfied anyway. But if you say this sentence in an essay and I say it is not true, you are dissatisfied. The novelist likes even those who do not believe what he says, but the essayist does not. And if the consent of the reader does not matter to him, he is not an essayist at all, but a novelist in disguise. As I have tried to show.

Rosso: For many years now you have been a tenured professor, you live your normal academic life, you direct a specialized journal of semiotics (*VS*), you have published numerous articles and books of essentially academic interest (e.g., *A Theory of Semiotics*). At the same time you are a regular contributor to *L'Espresso*, one of Italy's most widely read weekly periodicals, you have written several satiric articles in a left wing newspaper (*Il Manifesto*), you have written some

books that have become best-sellers (*Il nome della rosa* among them) and now you have decided to collaborate on a movie adapted from your novel.¹⁰ Your interest in both the limited academic culture and the broad phenomena of mass culture makes you a very unique kind of intellectual in the United States, where the above-mentioned fields are always religiously separated. What do you think of the “role of the intellectual” today? In what terms do you see the relation between *theory* and *praxis* in the “postmodern epoch”?

Eco: Let me correct you on one point. I am not collaborating on a film from my novel. Jean-Jacques Annaud is preparing the film. We often discuss it, because he asks me for clarification and advice. It seems that otherwise he has a good understanding of the novel and so I trust him. An author is not the right person to transform his own novel into a film.

Your question as such I find rather naive. All intellectuals do the same thing I do—in Italy, Germany, France, Spain, and Latin America (I have no precise information on India and Malaysia). The only place where there is a division of labor between campus and militant culture is the United States. But that is *your* problem, not mine.

Rosso: Your university training is “hermeneutic” in nature, but in your writings you no longer use this approach. Yet you talk about interpretive processes (‘unlimited semiosis,’ etc.). What is the relationship between your conception of interpretation and that of the phenomenological hermeneutic school of German origin (Heidegger, Gadamer, or in Italy, Vattimo,¹¹ and others)?

Eco: My university training was not a hermeneutic one. I was a disciple of Luigi Pareyson, but the theory of interpretation that he proposed in his *Estetica* of 1954 (the one that influenced me) was not yet hermeneutic in nature.¹² The hermeneutic Pareyson comes later. At that point interpretation was not considered an act of listening to a voice of being but a reading of formal structures. At least that is the way I read it, and that is why I ventured in the direction of *Opera aperta* and through these considerations toward structuralism and semiotics.

But it is clear that a semiotics of unlimited semiosis has something in common with certain hermeneutic techniques. In the book that I just turned in to Indiana University Press, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, some mention is made of these problems. Briefly, I might say that a semiotics of unlimited semiosis is based on infinite interpretation, on conjecture and abduction, and on the interrogation of texts as if they were universes and of universes (including the world of our daily experience and that of science) as if they were texts.

With my friend T.A. Sebeok, I have co-edited, for the same publisher, a book of essays on the methods of Sherlock Holmes (*The Sign of Three*). In that book there is a chapter on the interpretive

methods of Aristotle, Peirce, and Sherlock Holmes, where I try to show that there is no difference between the conjectures of the detective, the philosopher, the scientist, and the reader of a text. But it is equally true that this hermeneutic (if we can call it that) does not necessarily imply in the background a Being that speaks through language. If anything, it is interested in the interpretation of languages as social phenomena. And Being does not speak itself through language because, as Aristotle said, “being is said in many ways.” What does this mean? That there is no Being that *then* speaks. There is a language that speaks Being. And since it says it in many ways, it always speaks through conjectures. What Being might be is always an hypothesis posed by language. Language comes first. But, despite coming first, it is in front of us, with its laws, which are also social laws, conventions, techniques, tactics, strategies. Interpretation is primarily concerned with these mechanisms. Being is only an effect of meaning. Meaning is an effect of culture. The cultural universe is the labyrinth. It is this that we must interpret.

Rosso: Clearly your recurrent word “conjecture” is crucial to your understanding of the interpretive act. I am wondering if you could amplify your understanding of this term by responding to the objection that, say, a Heideggerian or even a Derridean would make to your statement that there is no difference between the conjecture of the detective, the public, the philosopher. Wouldn’t a “postmodern” philosopher like Heidegger or Derrida say that the conjecture of the detective in fact annuls its truly explorative possibilities by being guided by an assumed beginning and end, that conjecture in the detective sense of the word is “calculative” and not truly explorative thinking, that it is truly transitive activity?

Eco: I think that we have to distinguish between detectives in novels and real detectives (who are no different from real scientists). Think of what happens in a Rex Stout novel. Nero Wolfe stays at home, gathers the information supplied to him by Archie Goodwin, and then imagines a “possible world” or “possible state of affairs” that accounts for all the evidence at hand. He is not at all sure that the possible world he has imagined corresponds to the real one. It is only a conjecture. In the last analysis, the world he has imagined is logically satisfying—more so than the one in which the crime occurred. Then he called together all the persons involved in the case, including the guilty suspect, and recounts his possible world as if it were true. If the suspect ever said “This man is mad!,” Wolfe could not be certain that he had guessed the truth. Instead Wolfe lives in the tranquil world that Rex Stout has created for him, and the suspect is induced by Rex Stout to make a gesture or say a word that betrays him. Therefore Wolfe is sure that the possible world he imagined is identical to the world of reality.

For a real detective or scientist it works differently. The detective or scientist imagines an explanation, but can not yet be sure that it is correct. Nothing guarantees that the order of our ideas

corresponds to the order of things (in the sense meant by Spinoza: “*ordo et connexio rerum idem est ac ordo et connexio idearum*”). Peirce said that conjecture is exposed to “fallibilism.” A true conjecture is always a wager, a dare. Besides it has to be proven over and over, and often the proofs are mutually contradictory, and so on. . . . The true conjectures are not the ones in detective novels. Those are just representations of thoroughly successful conjectures, which in real life are extremely rare. In real life we first make a conjecture, then we make the conjecture that perhaps our conjecture was correct, and so on, till the conjecture is squared, cubed, *ad infinitum*. In this sense, in real life as well as in philosophy, the process never ends: there is no closure.

NOTES

- 1 In the United States on several occasions, among which I will only mention here *Par Rapport* (No. 2, 1979), *New Literary History* (Vol. III, No. 1, 1971) and numerous issues of *boundary 2*; in Italy *aut aut* (Nos. 179-80, 1980), *Alfabeta* (Nos. 22, 24 and ff., 1981), *Calibano* (No. 7, 1982) and the collection of essays edited by Peter Carravetta and Paolo Spedicato, *Critica postmoderna americana* (Milano: Bompiani, 1984).
- 2 Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1980); Eng. trans. William Weaver, *The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1982).
- 3 See Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds., *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).
- 4 I am referring in particular to the article by William Spanos, “Postmodern Literature and the Hermeneutic Crisis,” in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 34, No. 2, (1979), pp. 119-31. The sentence cited by Spanos is taken from Robert Creeley and Wallace Stevens.
- 5 U. Eco, *Opera aperta*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1962).
- 6 Maria Corti, “È un’opera chiusa” in *Espresso*, Oct. 19, 1980, p. 108.
- 7 Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa*, p. 495. My translation.
- 8 *Il nome della rosa* sold 150,000 copies in Germany, 120,000 in France, 50,000 in Spain, 300,000 hardcover in the USA (the paperback edition is now coming out). At the end of February 1984 the total of the copies sold in the world was about 1,500,000.
- 9 Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta*, and *Lector in fabula*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1979). Translations of parts of these books appeared in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of the Text* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).
- 10 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976). Eco signed satiric articles in *Il Manifesto* with the name of “Dedalus” from 1971 to 1975. The movie adapted from *Il nome della rosa* will be directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, the well-known director of *Quest for Fire*.
- 11 Among the many works of Gianni Vattimo see especially: *Essere, storia e linguaggio in Heidegger*, (Torino: Edizioni di “Filosofia”, 1963); *Poesia e ontologia*, (Milano: Mursia, 1967); *Schleiermacher filosofo dell’interpretazione*, (Milano: Mursia, 1968); *Introduzione a Heidegger*, (Bari: Laterza, 1971); *Il*

soggetto e la maschera. Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione, (Milano: Bompiani, 1974, 1979*); *Le avventure della differenza*, (Milano: Garzanti, 1980); *Al di là del soggetto*, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1981); in English see: "Bottle, Net, Truth, Revolution, Terrorism, Philosophy" in *Denver Quarterly*, 4, (1982), pp. 24-34. "The Shattering of the Poetic World," in Thomas J. Harrison ed., *The Favorite Malice* (New York: Out of London Press, 1983), pp. 223-35. He was also general director of the *Enciclopedia di filosofia* (Milano: Garzanti, 1981).

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Luigi Pareyson, *Estetica: teoria della formatività*, (Torino: Edizioni di "Filosofia", 1954, 2nd ed. Bologna: Zanichelli, 1960; 3rd ed. Firenze: Sansoni, 1974).