Chapter 7

Eco's Hermeneutics and Translation Studies: Between 'Manipulation' and 'Overinterpretation'

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Introduction

One of the predicaments of Translation Studies is the lack of hermeneutic sophistication in some quarters. This is why I suggest one should turn to Umberto Eco's thinking, which is particularly well-suited to grasp the complex interpretative process inherent in translation. I shall not deal with Eco's reflections on translation in his most recent book, which deserve attention in their own right. I shall confine myself to arguing that Translation Studies may benefit from Eco's hermeneutics.

Translation is not only (or simply) a form of 'manipulation', or 'ethnocentric assimilation'; it is, first and foremost, interpretation. Translation Studies is the ideal discipline to assess the validity of Eco's hermeneutic theory. As Eco himself points out, 'a translation is an actualised and manifested interpretation -- therefore an important witness'. Eco's hermeneutics, moreover, enables us to evaluate the epistemological rigour of contemporary translation theories.


4 Venuti, 'Translation, Heterogeneity, Linguistics', p.93.

For the sake of concision and clarity, in this essay I shall deal only with the so-called Manipulation School, precisely because it generates certain interesting epistemological contradictions in a way that other approaches do not. However, the observations I make will be relevant to descriptivists and translation historians of all persuasions.

If this essay can be read as an implicit critique of post-structuralist theories of meaning, this is inevitable for two reasons: firstly, Eco’s epistemology, which by and large I subscribe to, is a powerful indictment of post-structuralism and deconstructionism; secondly, the Manipulation School, which I criticise in this article, is influenced by a form of epistemological scepticism that has post-structuralist leanings. Concision and methodological rigour require that a fully-ledged critique of post-structuralism be the object of another article.

Firstly, I shall consider the epistemological problems inherent in the manipulation argument; I shall then describe the general orientation of Eco’s epistemology. The textual analysis, which applies Eco’s categories to translation description, has the purpose of validating my epistemological contention. I will argue that Eco’s theory of interpretation and meaning is an asset to translation scholars, even though it generates a number of problems which must be dealt with in further research. I shall conclude by simply highlighting the three major problems thrown up by Eco’s thinking, at least from the point of view of Translation Studies. Another article is needed to enhance the explanatory power of Eco’s theory.7

Translation and manipulation

A view that holds sway in contemporary Translation Studies contends that all translation is inherently manipulative. Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere and Theo Hermans are commonly associated with this position.8 To their credit, Bassnett


7 A critique of certain aspects of Eco’s hermeneutics that are not discussed here see Edoardo Crisafulli, ‘Antidiceralso ed esoterismo dantesco: la fortuna di Rossetti in Inghilterra e alcune osservazioni sull’ermeneutica di Umberto Eco’, Sotto Il Velame (2), Special Issue: Temi e interpreti dell’esoterismo dantesco (2000), 47-87.

8 See Susan Bassnett-McGuire, Translation Studies (London: Routledge, 1991), p:xvii; André Lefevere, ‘Introduction: Comparative Literature and Translation’, Comparative Literature 47:1 (1995), 1-10; Theo Hermans, ‘Introduction, Translation Studies and a New Paradigm’, in The Manipulation of Literature. Studies in Literary Translation, ed. by Theo and Lefevere sometimes seek a balance: translation or rewriting, they claim, is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain.9

Despite the problematic assumption that translation is, essentially, manipulation, Bassnett and Lefevere acknowledge that translators do not necessarily distort and contain the original. Yet, the gravitational pull of the manipulative argument is so strong that more often than not the scholars of what has become known as the Manipulation School emphasise the distorting nature of translation. In ‘Introduction. Translation Studies and a New Paradigm’, Hermans claims that ‘all translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose’ (p.11). Although much water has passed under the bridge since Hermans made this observation (which appears in a ‘period-piece’ in the anthology of essays aptly entitled The Manipulation of Literature. Studies in Literary Translation), there is no sign that he has changed his general orientation. In Translation in Systems, Hermans writes that ‘translation is of interest because it offers first-hand evidence of the prejudice of perception’. Not only do translators create a slanted or manipulated image of the original: they actually ‘invent’, ‘construct or produce their originals’. Hermans does not consider the possibility that the translator may actualise the original’s meaning potential: ‘it would be only a mild exaggeration to claim that translations tell us more about those who translate and their clients than about the corresponding source texts’ (p.95).

Nor have the other advocates of manipulation toned down the force of their claims. Lefevere contends that ‘rewriters always have some kind of agenda, hidden or not’.10 Translators, he argues elsewhere, ‘have to be traitors, but most of the time they do not know it, and nearly all of the time they have no other choice’.11 Lefevere here suggests that translators are in the grip of powerful (and mysterious) forces that lead them to betray the source text. Distortion is inherent in the translation process, as if translators could not avoid seeing the source text through distorting lenses. This view is in keeping with post-structuralist epistemological scepticism. It is unsurprising that Arrojo, a militant advocate of post-structuralism, claims somewhat naively that unfaithfulness to the source text ‘is every translator’s and every reader’s inevitable fate, it is precisely that which cannot be avoided’.12


9 Bassnett and Lefevere, p.77.


11 Lefevere, Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Form, p.13.

More recently, the manipulation view has been applied to post-colonial translation: ‘translation is a highly manipulative activity [...] it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems’. Along the same lines, the post-structuralist scholar Venuti claims that translation is characterised by ‘asymmetrical relations. Translation can never simply be communication between equals because it is fundamentally ethnocentric’.

This may very well be the case in post-colonial studies of translation, but I suspect that there are indeed significant instances where translation occurs in a relationship of equality between source text and target text – H. F. Cary’s translation described in the analysis is a case in point. At any rate, whatever the relationship between original and translation, any approach to Translation Studies stands to gain if it clarifies its (whether overt or covert) principles of interpretation.

When I set out to analyse H. F. Cary’s rendering of the Divine Comedy, I was deeply influenced by the view that translation is essentially a process of literary and ideological manipulation. My working hypothesis was that manipulations were the visible signs of the translator’s ideological intrusion into the text, that is, distortions – whether intentional or not – of the source text inspired first and foremost by the translator’s religious or political outlook. As I progressed with the analysis of Cary’s translation, however, I started to question the epistemological assumptions of the Manipulation School. For one thing, manipulation – or distortion, or any other semantically related concept – did not seem to account for all the controversial choices Cary makes: the actual instances of manipulation – as opposed to what appear to be cases of legitimate interpretation – seem to be very few in number.

In fact, the emphasis on the manipulative nature of translation is highly questionable, from an epistemological point of view. Bassnett, Lefevere and Hermans hypostatize manipulation and put forward an idealised conception in

which translation is under all circumstances a form of distortion or betrayal.\(^\text{15}\)

Now, it is clear that an epistemologically moderate stance is perfectly compatible with the notion of manipulation – provided, that is, manipulation is not a defining or all-powerful category. Manipulation, conceived of as a descriptive category, may be successfully applied to a limited number of cases, where it is obvious that a translator consciously twists the source text’s meaning to promote his/her politico-ideological agenda.

And yet I believe one should turn to Eco’s self-effacing notion of ‘overinterpretation’ because the strongly evaluative (and politicised) connotations of ‘manipulation’ tend to clash with a descriptive approach to translation. However, something more crucial should attract translation scholars towards Eco’s notion of ‘overinterpretation’. Of course, no scholar can keep politico-ideological bias at bay; and if Eco’s terminology is to be preferred, the reason is that behind the notion of ‘overinterpretation’, ‘text’s intention’ etc. (which I shall describe in the next section) there is a sophisticated hermeneutics, whereas it is not at all clear what conception of interpretation inspires the Manipulation School. It would seem that it reasons along post-structuralist lines: if one claims that ideological misperceptions are inherent in the process of translation, one runs the risk of promoting a form of epistemological scepticism in keeping with post-structuralism, according to which all cognition is ideologically biased or inseparable from error. In actual fact, the notion of manipulation reveals a paradox, or antinomy, because the term itself seems to imply that there is indeed a textual reality that the translator (willingly or fatall?) distorts. But in a post-structuralist perspective, translators can neither distort nor capture the meaning of the source text simply because there is no absolutely ‘true or correct’ original meaning to be grasped or falsified. One could also ask why translators would inevitably distort the textual structures that appear so transparently clear to translation scholars.

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\(^{14}\) Venuti, ‘Translation, Heterogeneity, Linguistics’, p.93. In one of his latest publications, Venuti claims that ‘translating is always ideological because it releases a domestic remainder, an inscription of values, beliefs, and representations linked to historical moments and social positions in the domestic culture’ (Lawrence Venuti, ‘Translation, Community, Utopia’, p.485). Venuti here subscribes to the pejorative view of ideology as misperception or biased cognition that characterises the Manipulation School. But why should translation be inherently ideological simply because it is historically situated? Venuti fails to see that translation is not only a ‘totalizing [...] domesticating process’ (p.468), that is, a violent appropriation of the foreign text which serves domestic purposes; translation is also a (historically determined) process of interpretation which, among other things, actualises the original text’s potential for producing meaning.

\(^{15}\) The existence of non-manipulative renderings of Dante constitutes an unanswerable objection to the proponents of an all-powerful notion of ideology or manipulation. I believe that translators perhaps tend to manipulate the source text, pending a clarification of all the factors (historical, personal etc.) which have a bearing on a given translation project. More fundamentally, I suspect that the concept of manipulation that has gained wide currency in Translation Studies is a sophisticated version of the age-old view epitomised by the adage traduttore traditore. This view emphasizes semantic losses; and, when it does acknowledge gains, tends to categorise them as interpolations which diverge from the original meaning. However, it would be unjust to blame the Manipulation School for a line of thinking that is deeply ingrained in Translation Studies. Douglas Robinson, for instance, laments the fact that scholars of all persuasions tend to approach translators ‘largely in negative ways, in terms of the distortive or disruptive impact of their ‘opinions’, ‘biases’, or ‘misunderstandings’ of the source text’ (Translation and Empire, (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997)). There is no doubt that dubious readings are well-documented in the history of translation practice. Yet the manipulative argument obscures the fact that the translator’s interpretation may also bring the original meaning to the fore.
It is undeniable that if one casts serious doubt on the possibility of producing reliable interpretations of a given text, one is caught in a vicious circle: how can manipulations be subject to empirical investigation if the researcher has no plausible interpretation of the original with which he or she may compare the translator’s policy? If the notion of manipulation or overinterpretation — and descriptive categories such as ‘shift’, ‘deviation’ etc., for that matter — are to have any heuristic value at all, scholars must have access to a restricted range of legitimate interpretations of the source text. The crucial issue, therefore, revolves around the limits of interpretation. If manipulations or distortions are not inevitable why (and how) is the translator capable of producing a reliable interpretation of the source text? Translation scholars seriously need to consider under what circumstances — and to what extent — the target text actualises or distorts the source text’s structures or presuppositions. But in order to do this, one must be able to distinguish between legitimate interpretations, which bring out the meaning potential in the source text, and instances of overinterpretation. This leads us directly into the heart of Eco’s epistemology, which, despite its limitations, I find heuristically valid in its general orientation. In particular, I subscribe to the view that meaning is not arbitrarily constructed by the interpreter.

The limits of interpretation

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse in depth Eco’s thought. I shall only deal with the major ideas that have a direct bearing on Translation Studies. Eco’s central idea is that interpretation is constrained by the text. According to Eco, the text itself ‘tells us which kind of reader it postulates’ (RR, p.10). The Model Author (which is not the empirical author) foresees a Model Reader, who is ‘supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them’ (RR, p.7). The Model Author is, in actual fact, the text’s intention, and the Model Reader represents the interpreter who successfully grasps that intention.

Hermeneutics, Eco argues, has traditionally been concerned with three types of intention: *intento operis* (the text’s intention), *intento auctoris* (the author’s intention) and *intento lectoris* (the reader’s intention). Ascertaining the text’s intention is crucial to Eco’s scheme of delimiting the range of legitimate readings: ‘Between the unattainable intention of the author and the arguable intention of the reader there is the transparent intention of the text, which disproves an untenable interpretation’ (IO, p.78). The text’s intention is, fundamentally, a semiotic strategy within the text that has to be divined: it is not displayed by the textual surface [...] One has to decide to “see” it. Thus it is possible to speak of the text’s intention only as a 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’ (IO, p.64).

Eco preempts the criticism of essentialism by advocating a methodological version of structuralism: the text’s intention is a heuristic concept, a descriptive procedure, not an essential-ontological quality of texts. Interpretation, therefore, is not about discovering a timeless meaning residing in texts. Eco rejects onto-ontological structuralism, that is, the belief that textual structures are objective and independent of the interpreter. Reader response plays a part in constructing textual meaning — which is why a literary text is ‘enriched’ by the interpretations that mark its reception. Yet texts contain structural devices or semiotic strategies that encourage and elicit [certain] interpretive choices. Although the ‘horizon of expectations of the readers’ must be brought to bear on the scrutiny of textual structures, Eco persists in his conviction that ‘the interpreted text imposes some constraints upon its interpreters’ (LI, p.6). Even an open text is subject to the general principle that the text postulates its Model Reader: an open text is a communicative/semiotic strategy characterised by the fact that its Model Reader has been ‘envisaged at the moment of its generation qua text’. An open text displays syntactic, semantic and pragmatic elements ‘whose foreseen interpretation is part of its generative process’ (RR, p.3). An open text, however “open” it may be, cannot afford whatever interpretation’ (RR, p.9).

When the interpreter does not respect the Model Author (that is, the text’s semiotic strategies) and goes beyond the Model Reader foreseen or postulated by the text, s/he produces an aberrant reading — ‘where “aberrant” means only different from the ones envisaged by the sender [or author]’ (RR, p.22). An aberrant reading is a form of ‘overinterpretation’ because it yields a semiotic surplus, a surplus of meaning, with respect to the text’s intention.

Although the discovery of the text’s intention is the central component of his programme, Eco at times seems keen on maintaining some kind of relationship
between the ‘trichotomy of intentions’ (II, p.51). In particular, he appears eager ‘to keep a dialectical link between inten
tio operis and inten
tio lectoris’ (IO, p.64). The relationship between these two intentions would seem straightforward: the reader’s intention either confirms (thereby producing a tenable reading) or contradicts (thereby yielding an aberrant reading) the text’s intention. In Eco’s words, by respecting the text’s intention the reader ‘actualises the discursive structure’ inherent in that text (IO, p.27); and if the reader does not respect the text, s/he produces an aberrant reading. But this is a simplistic summary of Eco’s argument. Ideological readings – which Eco sometimes categorises as forms of ‘ideological overcoding’ – show that the role of the reader is not easy to grasp and encapsulate in a neat formula. Eco moves from the rather obvious observation that the reader brings ideological presuppositions to the text, but the heart of the matter is how to explain the effects of such presuppositions vis-à-vis the text’s intention. There are two possible effects of ideological presuppositions. The first is positive, in that they control ‘the outline of textual ideological structures’; the second is negative, in that they are instrumental in ignoring or suppressing actual textual ideological structures or in positing aberrant ones – that is, ideological structures that are not immanent in the text. The first effect of the reader’s bias justifies a conception whereby translation actualises the text’s discursive structure – that is, brings the source text’s meaning potential to the fore. The second effect allows for the over-interpretative nature of translation and interpretation.

At this point, however, Eco introduces an element of ambiguity and complexity into his thinking that seems to blur the boundaries between these categories. ‘An ideological bias can lead a critical reader to make a given text say more that it apparently says, that is, to find what in that text is ideologically presupposed, un-told’ (RR, p.22). It would seem that the reader does not only set out to discover the text’s ideological structures or the text’s intention (what the text ‘apparently says’). S/he may also produce readings that are not postulated by the text’s structures (what is ‘ideologically presupposed, untold’), and yet are legitimate – or so it seems – insofar as they originate in the text’s meaning potential. This considerably widens – perhaps more than Eco anticipated – the scope of the reader’s response vis-à-vis the text.

Eco cannot lay down precise rules that govern the somewhat elusive relationship between actual textual structures and presuppositions legitimately extrapolated by the interpreter. Assessing the validity of specific interpretations is more complex than it seems at first. The only thing that we can say conclusively is that in some cases there are immanent ideological structures in the text (or, in other words, a core of textual truth) which justify a reader’s claim to legitimacy; but in other cases the process of interpretation is less straightforward: in such cases the scholar has to validate/assess readings whose claim to legitimacy is grounded in the text’s presuppositions. To say more than this would be tantamount to justifying ontological structuralism. Eco would probably add the disclaimer that translation scholars are caught within a hermeneutic circle anyway: they do not have access to unmediated or absolute truth, but interpret someone else’s interpretation: the translator’s interpretation of the source text. Therefore there must be grey areas in the interpretation process. The idea of the hermeneutic circle is far from being a weakness or an escamotage in Eco’s thinking; rather, it shows that he is not an essentialist, or ontological structuralist, in disguise.

I now turn to the relationship between the text’s intention and the author’s intention, which is perhaps the most controversial area in Eco’s epistemology. On some occasions Eco is quite resolute in doing away with the empirical author’s intention, which, he maintains, is ‘radically useless. We have to respect the text, not the author as person so-and-so’ (IO, p.66). On other occasions, however, Eco is more flexible and allows the author’s intention to play a role, albeit a diminished or secondary one.

Eco never wavers in his conviction that ‘the response of the author must not be used in order to validate the interpretation of his/her text’ (IO, p.73). An empirical author’s reflections on his/her work are interesting only insofar as they throw light on the creative process, that is, on the development of textual strategies – and this follows from a distinction germane to Eco’s reasoning: ‘it is important to understand the difference between the textual strategy – as a linguistic object that the Model Readers have under their eyes (so that they can go on independently of the empirical author’s intentions) – and the story of the growth of that textual strategy’ (IO, p.85). Being aware that the author’s intention cannot be brushed aside easily, Eco admits that there are ‘discrepancies’ in the relationship between text and author which are worth investigating (IO, p.73). But one of the problems with Eco’s thinking is precisely that the idea of discrepancies – or contradictions – is not pursued further.

It is fairly clear that Eco plays down the role of the empirical author, who hopelessly remains a secondary actor on the semiotic scene. The flesh-and-blood author may indeed provide us with anecdotal information on how textual strategies came into being, but s/he is somehow a ghostly figure, whose presence is almost completely irrelevant to the process of interpretation. It is difficult to envisage how this model might preserve any kind of relationship – let alone a dialectical one – between text’s intention and author’s intention. But this should be the object of another article.

Eco’s criteria of interpretation

The notion of text’s intention is inextricably bound up with the idea that it is feasible to elaborate methodological criteria to guide interpretation. The fact that interpretation is open and potentially unlimited – it is a process of ‘unlimited semiosis’ – does not lead to the conclusion that interpretation has no criteria (IO, p.23).

The criteria of interpretation are text-internal or immanent and text-external or transcendental. The most problematic are text-internal criteria. These hinge
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upon the seminal notion of internal textual coherence and its attendant ‘identity principle’, according to which ‘a text cannot support contradictory interpretations’ (LI, p.51). Eco clarifies unambiguously what he means by internal textual coherence: ‘any interpretation of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed by, and must be rejected if it is challenged by, another portion of the same text’ (IO, p.65).

Eco also suggests that textual coherence is crucially linked to the limits of interpretation: in establishing textual coherence, the scholar should search for a limited class of causes or principles of coherence and not ‘an indeterminate number of dissimilar causes’ or explanations. What matters is interpretation should operate within limits (a limited class of causes) and should avoid contradiction (causes-explanations should not be dissimilar). The second text-internal criterion, ‘economy’, is fairly uncontroversial: an hypothesis is viable provided what it explains ‘cannot be explained more economically’. This criterion is a safeguard against purely speculative readings that are based on extravagant or esoteric interpretations. To his credit, Eco attempts to bridge the gap between text-internal and text-external criteria; he claims that the researcher’s interpretative hypothesis, founded upon textual coherence and economy, must fit in with other types of evidence, by which he means historical evidence (IO, p.49). ‘Economical criteria’ do not imply that one should consider the text in isolation; it is essential to focus on the period in which the text was produced (IO, p.42).

Text-external criteria emphasise the historical nature of textual interpretation, which must rely on the community of interpreters existing at the time the text was written. Historical-philological investigations yield evidence, or documents, which make certain interpretative conjectures more interesting than others (IO, p.55). For instance, the significance of light to express divine mysteries in the Divine Comedy may be understood by recourse to the ‘theological and mystic tradition’ of Dante’s time (IO, p.59). Linguistic/stylistic analysis, too, is a form of philological investigation grounded in history which assists the scholar in the work of interpretation: textual structures make sense against a definite ‘cultural and linguistic background’ (IO, p.69). The scholar must take into account the semantic meaning of lexis at the time the text was produced – such meaning may indeed be historically relative. In conclusion, the text’s intention and ‘contextual pressure’ exerted on it restrict the potentially unlimited process of semiosis (LI, p.21).

I shall now apply Eco’s categories to specific textual examples taken from The Vision, a translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy produced by the Anglican clergyman H. F. Cary (1772-1844).21

Eco’s Hermeneutics and Translation Studies

The analysis

I intend to assess the validity of Eco’s claim that certain methodological criteria enable us to ascertain which readings are – or are not – sanctioned by the source text. I shall deal with a limited number of extremely significant choices in Cary’s interpretation/translation of the Comedy. Because Cary was an Anglican clergyman, it is reasonable to assume that his interventions originate in his theological views. Cary’s ideological bias creates a number of interventions, ranging from cases of (more or less) legitimate interpretation to instances of unambiguous overinterpretation. In the analysis I also quote the renderings produced by two twentieth century translators of Dante, Charles Sissons and Mark Musa, who tend to adhere closely to the Italian text.22

The first two interventions are influenced by Cary’s belief that Scripture is the only source of faith and therefore contains all that is necessary for salvation. It is important to bear in mind that this is a vital Reformation principle: a large number of controversies between Roman Catholics and Protestants originate in their different attitudes towards tradition: the doctrines of Purgatory, Indulgences etc. upheld by the Roman Catholic Church are rejected by Protestants on the grounds that they are not contained in the Holy Scriptures.23

In the first textual example below Cary does not seem to alter the intentio operis of the original, even though he amplifies it in a subtle way: according to Dante, the Scriptures represent a guide for whoever reflects on the problem of justice. The translator introduces the notion of ‘authority’ – the words of Scripture hold ‘supreme authority’ – which is absent in the source text, and thereby seems implicitly to promote the Protestant doctrine that Scripture (not tradition) is the foundation of Christian faith:

Certo a colui che meco s’assottiglia,
as la Scritura sovra voi non fosse,
di dubitar sarebbe una maraviglia. (Par., XIX. 824; my emphasis)

Certainly for anyone who tries to be clever
There is a marvellous subject for questioning,
If scripture were not there to set you right. (Sisson, p.434; my emphasis)

The man who would argue fine points with me,
If holy Scripture were not there to guide us,
Surely would have serious grounds for doubt. (Musa, vol. III, p.227; my emphasis)


21 The quotations in this essay are taken from The Vision or Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri, trans. by Henry Francis Cary (London: William Smith, 1844) (last edition revised by Cary), and also from The Divine Comedy. The Vision of Dante, trans. by Henry Francis Cary, ed. by Ralph Pite (London: Everyman, 1994), which is based on the first edition of Cary’s translation in 1814.
To him, who subtilizes thus with me,
There would assuredly be room for doubt
Even to wonder, did not the safe word
*Of Scripture hold supreme authority.* (Cary, 1844, p.166; my emphasis)

Cary's Protestant reading is evident, but I would argue that he does not produce an aberrant reading here; rather, he actualises or brings to the fore a textual-ideological structure that is immanent in the text: evangelicalism. Even if one fails to detect an immanent ideological structure in the source text, one might argue that Cary brings to the fore the implicit or untold presuppositions in the text (Protestants readily grasped and appropriated to their cause the evangelical teachings in Dante).

On the other hand, in the following example Cary's Protestantism leads him to interpolate an ideological structure that is extraneous to the source text, thereby producing an aberrant reading:

E ancor questo qua si si comporta
con men disdegno che quando e posposta
la divina Scrittura o quando e torta. (Par., XXIX. 88-90; my emphasis)

And even this incurs less anger here
Than when holy scripture is treated as secondary
Or when it is twisted from its meaning. (Sisson, p.479; my emphasis)

Yet even this provokes the wrath of Heaven
Far less than when the Holy Word of God
Is set aside or misconstrued by you. (Musa, vol. III, p.344; my emphasis)

Yet this, offensive as it is, provokes
Heaven's anger less, than when the book of God
Is forced to yield to man's authority,
Or from its straightness warp'd. (Cary, 1844, p.182; my emphasis)

Dante (the Model Author) is here denouncing those interpreters of the holy scriptures who, being concerned only with their earthly glory, distort the biblical truths. The original 'torta' means 'wrongly interpreted', a sense captured by Cary. But 'posposta' (= literally 'put after', that is, neglected) does not have the meaning Cary interpolates in the target text, whereby the Scriptures are 'forced to yield to man's authority'. Sisson is closer than Cary to the original when he writes that the holy scripture 'is treated as secondary'. 'Posposta', in fact, alludes to those interpreters of the Bible who invoke the work of Aristotle and other philosophers in order to appear educated and end up neglecting the Scriptures. Cary overinterprets the original ideological structure by suggesting that Dante (the Model Author) may have cast doubt on the mediating role ascribed to the clergy in interpreting the Scriptures. Cary interpolates the Protestant-inspired notion that Christians should not force the Scripture 'to yield to man's authority', which, according to Protestants, is precisely what Roman Catholics allegedly do.

Cary's intervention in the following example concerns the question of 'free will' versus 'predestination', which is inextricably linked to the question of the roles of 'good works' and 'grace' in the salvation of man. In the first complete edition of *The Vision* (1814) Cary suppresses an extremely significant word, 'arbitrio', which evokes the notion of 'libero arbitrio' (= free will), a central concept of scholastic philosophy; he also introduces the notion of predestination, which is extraneous to the Italian text ('destin'd' is unmistakably clear; 'lot' = 'what is given to a person by fate or divine providence'). This is an unambiguous instance of overinterpretation: the doctrine of free will is of the utmost importance to Dante's moral philosophy. However, in the post-1814 text, Cary demonstrates that a translator may well put forward a tenable interpretation of the original — or, in Translation Studies jargon, a source-oriented, adequate rendering — which respects the original ideological/textual structures.

Se la lucerna che ti mena in alto
Trovi nel tuo arbitrio tanta cera
Quand'e misterie infino al sommo smalto. (Purg., VIII. 112-14; my emphasis)

So may the light which is leading you above,
Find in your will as much wax as is needed
To bring you right to the enamelled summit. (Sisson, p.233; my emphasis)

'So may the lamp that lights your upward path
Find in your will enough sustaining fuel
To take you to the enamelled mountaintop' (Musa, vol. II, p.85; my emphasis)

(1<sup>st</sup> target text) So may the lamp, which leads thee up on high,
Find, *in thy destin'd lot*, of wax so much,
As may suffice thee to the enamell'd height. (my emphasis)<sup>26</sup>

(2<sup>nd</sup> target text) So may the lamp, which leads thee up on high,
Find, *in thy free resolve*, of wax so much,
As may suffice thee to the enamell'd height. (my emphasis)<sup>27</sup>

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Dante's moral philosophy gives to man total responsibility for his moral choices, thereby representing an uncompromising rejection of any notion of predestination. Perhaps this doctrine would not have been contrary to Cary's beliefs, but one must bear in mind that Purg., VIII. 112-14 is clearly a crucial point for a Protestant interpreter. Dante's words might be interpreted as meaning that man's meritorious works, which require the exercise of free will, lead to salvation. And this interpretation would not have been consonant with a Protestant view of saving grace. Cary probably interpolated the notion of predestination in the 1814 text—thereby producing an aberrant reading—in order to emphasize the role of saving grace. But then, somewhat mysteriously, he decided to respect the text's intention in the subsequent edition of his translation. That the issue of saving grace may have promoted his previous, aberrant reading is shown by the fact that in the revised, post-1814 text Cary intervenes in a footnote to explain that the concept of 'free resolve' (resolve = 'a firm intention, a resolution') does not exclude the role of saving grace: 'May the divine grace find so hearty a co-operation on the part of thy own will, as shall enable thee to ascend to the terrestrial paradise, which is on the top of this mountain'.

The difference between the 1814 and the 1844 texts on a crucial theological point—Cary's replacement of 'destin'd lot' with 'free resolve'—raises a problem: did the instance of overinterpretation in the first complete edition of the target text reflect a phase in Cary's theological thought, in which he was close to the Calvinist idea of predestination? Or was it simply a translation 'mistake' which Cary eliminated from the revised, post-1814 text? In the absence of any other kind of evidence, the only way out of this dilemma is to consider the target text as a whole. If one employs the criterion of internal textual coherence, one may argue that there is textual evidence that Cary did not have Calvinistic leanings and therefore did not deny the role of merit, which depends on man's free will, in salvation; Cary's notion of predestination is in keeping with orthodox Anglicanism in that it does not wholly exclude meritorious works: in all editions he does not overinterpret the other two occurrences of the syntagm 'libero arbitrio' (free will) presumably because they occur in less sensitive parts of the Comedy. It would seem that Cary's overinterpretation in Purg., VIII. 112-14 was caused by a reaction to the idea—perhaps assumed to be implied by Dante's words—that man's meritorious works, which require the exercise of free will, may lead to salvation.

Eco's anti-deconstructionist stance is epistemologically valid and sound. The idea of semiotic/hermeneutic drift, that is, 'the uncontrolled ability to shift from meaning to meaning, from similarity to similarity, from a connection to another' (1, pp.26-7), is to be resisted. Eco's attempts to assert the rights of the text are a step in the right direction. Readers do not arbitrarily construct the totality of the text's meaning.

Eco's framework is perfectible, that is, it has the potential of being revised, because it is grounded on a few valuable principles: methodological (rather than ontological) structuralism, which is a safeguard against totalitarian temptations; awareness of the hermeneutic circle, which foregrounds human limitations; the importance of historical-philological investigations linking text and historical context, which implies that the interpreter's task can never be absolute. Despite its

27 Cary (1844), p. 87.
29 Cary (1844), p.87.
31 Certain textual structures and/or presuppositions in the Comedy were conducive to the needs and purposes of the Protestant interpreter like Cary. There is an immanent reality in the Comedy that facilitated the encounter with the Protestant reader. It is not surprising, therefore, that Roman Catholics and Protestants pursued different textual strategies as regards Dante's indictment of corrupt clergy. Protestants like Cary simply retained, and in some cases emphasised, Dante's indictment. On the other hand, Roman Catholics tended to suppress the passing exhibits of anti-clericalism. The Comedy was put on the index of prohibited books in the sixteenth century — Luciana Martinelli, Dante (Palermo: Palumbo, 1973), p.75; Michael Caesar, 'Introduction', in Dante. The Critical Heritage, ed. by Michael Caesar (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.1-88, pp.31, 36 — with the injunction that three passages attacking the abuses of the Papacy — Inferno, XIX. 48-117; Purgatorio, XIX. 106-18; Paradiso, IX. 136-42 — were to be expurgated from all editions whether with or without commentary (pp.31, 36). The Latin translation of the Comedy by the Jesuit Carlo D'Aguiro, published as late as 1728, was still affected by Counter-Reformation attitudes in that it omitted "all controversial passages" (Werner Friedrich, Dante through the Centuries, Comparative Literature, 1 (1949), 44-54, p.49), in keeping with the Papal injunction.
Illuminating Eco

limitations, Eco's theory provides us with valuable criteria of interpretation, without which textual description would be doomed to failure: it would be a totally subjective and self-validating discourse. The whole point of Eco's epistemology is to argue that, despite human limitations and epistemological constraints, (a) we are justified in our search for some kind of textual truth - albeit conceived of as a relative, fluid and historically variable reality - and (b) we can go some way towards founding a heuristic valid descriptive methodology.

However, further research and thinking is needed to enhance the explanatory power of Eco's epistemology. By way of conclusion, I suggest that it is necessary to tone down its rationalistic leanings; to acknowledge the implications of the (possibly) contradictory nature of the text's intention; and seriously to consider the dynamic/dialectical relationship between *intento operis*, *intento auctoris*, and *intento lectoris*. It is also imperative that one broadens the goals of epistemological inquiry: one cannot be concerned exclusively with identifying the text's intention; it is crucial to unravel what triggers and characterises the process of interpretation, including aberrant readings.

Chapter 8

The Serendipities of Semiotics, or Knowledge as a 'Theory of Next Thursday'

Charlotte Ross

There could be no fairer destination for any theory than that it should point the way to a more comprehensive theory in which it lives on, as a limiting case. (Einstein)

Every solution raises unsolved problems. (Popper)

Eco's parodic phrase a 'theory of next Thursday' appears in his 1964 publication *Apocalittici e integrati*. He uses it to argue the impossibility and indeed the vanity of theorising highly changeable phenomena such as mass media. In his view, this type of theoretical modality is necessarily provisional, or 'conceived in the conditional tense'. Yet much as here he casts aspersions on discussions composed uncertainly of mere 'hypothetical syllogisms', Eco elsewhere implies that all theories and the 'knowledge' they produce are essentially serendipitous. If knowledge is no less, but no more, than 'the sum of what is known', then its value and duration are as provisional as the type of theorising he ridicules above. As I argue below, Eco not only tolerates, but gladly embraces the necessary condition of living in error, fascinated by the 'Fakes and Forgeries' that populate our epistemological heritage. This interest has most recently been consolidated by the publication of *Serendipities*, a series of investigations into how ideas once considered false have been proved right, and vice versa, since 'false beliefs and discoveries totally without credibility [can] lead to the discovery of something true (or at least something we consider true today)' (S, viii).

3 This chapter appears in *The Limits of Interpretation (LI)* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990); *I limiti dell'interpretazione* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990).
4 Serendipities: Language and lunacy (S) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). This volume, a follow up to *The Search for a Perfect Language* (1993) is comprised of
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