Umberto Eco and Semiotics
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Author's Note

This paper is based on reading of three novels from Umberto Eco: Foucault's Pendulum, The Name of the Rose, and The Prague Cemetery. Because one of my goals is to inspire others to read his work, while I will be covering a vague outline of the plots, I am being careful not to give any plot spoilers for those who have not yet read the books.

"Brunellus? How did you know?"

This simple question opens The Name of the Rose, Umberto Eco's inaugural foray into an eventual half-dozen novels exploring a set of concepts surrounding truth and meaning. We'll return to this in a moment, but first, our question needs an answer.

In the novel, which is set in a Benedictine monastery in Italy in the middle ages, we meet William, a wise man travelling with the book's narrator, who, upon his initial entrance to the outskirts of the monastery, sees a search in the forest. "Brunellus," it seems, is a horse who has gone missing, and William asks the status of the search. Because the monks have never met William, as he has never been to this monastery, they are quite curious as to how he derived not only the nature of the search, but the very name of the horse which the monks sought.

What follows is a detailed linking together of seemingly irrelevant context clues which feels reminiscent of a Sherlock Holmes solution. William quickly recounts several observations he has made in his approach, such as the fact that a search of this magnitude implies that something of importance was lost; he then combines them with some anecdotal and historical knowledge of how monasteries often operate, how "Brunellus" is a common name for a horse, and lays the evidence out in such a practical and obvious looking manner that we immediately understand why his reputation precedes him.

The rest of the novel, and indeed, many of Eco's other works, takes the idea underlying this simple encounter, and demonstrates the fragility of our notions of evidence and truth. This serves as the foundation for what we call "semiotics". As with many other topics, a simple glance at the Wikipedia page for the term is underwhelming, even for a secondary source. From it we can learn that semiotics finds its origin in the Greek words for "signs" and "observing." There is also a list of various contributing philosophers such as Saussure and Peirce, although it leaves out rather significant ideas from Freud, Jung, and others. The simplest way to explain the concept: an observation and consideration of signs (or words, or symbols) and how we infer meaning from them.

On the Nature of Words

This brings us to ask another question: what is the purpose of words? In some cases, we use words in a functional sense. Perhaps the most well known examples of this are biblical. In Genesis, God *says* words, using them to create the world. Following this, Adam uses words to name the animals, thus, in some sense, having some power over them. Further along, when Cain is mad at and preparing to kill Abel, God attempts to negotiate with him, using the Hebrew word "timshel." John Steinbeck explores this passage extensive in East of Eden, engaging in a deep study to uncover the meaning and context, and thus the power of that word.

Words can also be descriptive. We see this frequently in ancient Greek texts. Consider the Iliad's long list of ships preparing to battle against Troy, or the endless counting of Persian soldiers that Herodotus tells us King Xerxes sends to battle in Athens. Or we can borrow a more analytical approach and look at how Aristotle, an accomplished botanist, navigates a myriad of descriptive labels in Categories.

More to the point, the use of words– or signs– is a major way that we interpret reality and thus seek truth. Once we have determined the meaning of a given word or set of words, we can then use those meanings to learn what truth is.

However, words are not a distinct key-value pair. One word could have multiple meanings, and a word spelled the same in one language could have a wildly different meaning in another language. And words also encounter semantic drift, where the meaning of a word will change over time. If we attempt to visit this using an Aristotlean approach, then we have two extremes: one in which a word has one meaning and only that meaning, and nothing else shares the same meaning; and one in which a word is semantically disconnected from its meaning to the extent that language is nothing more than a haphazard bubbly goo that somehow manages to make sense most of the time. Clearly both of these views are wrong, and therefore, the answer must be somewhere in between.

A brief examination of these properties can help provide clarity. To find a word with multiple meanings, we can simply open a dictionary and notice that some words have many more entries than others. For linguistic differences, there are false friends: in English the word "gift" means a present for someone; the exact same set of letters in German means poison. And we can see semantic drift in many languages: Shakespeare for English, Goethe for German, Dante for Italian, and so on. These authors are readable to present day native speakers, but some assistance will be required to correctly interpret them.

How Words construct Truth

If, as it seems, there is a bit of fuzziness between a word and its meaning, then this must also apply to the words from which we inherit our concepts of truth– and it is this fuzziness that Eco loves to exploit. When we examine a historical record, especially pre-photography, the overwhelming majority of the record is composed of words, be it books, scriptures, memos, personal letters and so on which have survived. And this extant record presents the body of evidence that we use to determine what transpired in the past, and why.

When we use evidence to convey an idea, what happens when someone takes the exact same evidence and reinterprets the words or statements within to come to a vastly different idea? And even more important, if we rely on these words to make determinations and draw conclusions, then how can we say for sure that our conclusions are valid?

In Foucault's Pendulum, we see this approach by way of conspiracy theories, diving headfirst into the Knights Templar. Eco benefits from time (as most original sources are from the Middle Ages), lost works surviving in reference only, and historical lacunae, to take us on a roller-coaster ride– and then forces us to ask how much of our conclusions resulted from following bread crumbs, and how much were from following a path we liked and imagining that bread crumbs were there. While it is true that the scientific method employs a notion that we need to rely on evidence to form conclusions, when there is a gap between the conclusion we found and the conclusion we want, it is far too easy– and human nature– to come up with theories to explain away the difference, especially when something

rides on the outcome.

Eco takes a different approach in The Name of the Rose. Rather than following the path of a truth seeker, we find ourselves amid Benedictine Monks, who have devoted their lives to the imitation of Christ. But then questions arise, such as what kind of a person Christ was, and what precisely does it mean to imitate Him? For example, if Christ did not own property, then is owning property inherently sinful? And is it ok to laugh, even though we have no evidence from the Gospels that Christ himself laughed? A large subplot of the book revolves around what Aristotle may have written in his lost second book of Poetics, and asks us to examine the nature of a student. If we (in persona monachorum[1]) are to be disciples of Christ, are we allowed to question what he says? And if not, then does this same rubric extend to people like Aristotle, who, while not a Church Father, very clearly heavily influenced them? And why is it that we would grant such infallible authority to evidence, when we recognize the shortcomings of the senses we use to collect and observe it?

Finally, in one of his later works, The Prague Cemetery, Eco takes on the concept of propaganda. In this book, every character is a real person except for the narrator. Through tiny gaps in chronology and source attribution, Eco is able to, through his invented protagonist, completely flip the historical narrative into a mirror image of his own crafting. The story explores how propaganda can influence people and politics, and it is executed through the description of at times extremely anti-Semitic statements. Set in late 19th century France, Eco gives an alternative explanation for the origins of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," an infamous text claiming to reveal a Jewish conspiracy for world domination. We can all appreciate the significance of this message, as it played a large role in the rise of Nazi Germany and the subsequent Holocaust. Whereas in Foucault's Pendulum, we were following breadcrumbs, in The Prague Cemetery, we are *creating* them.

Interpretation of Evidence

Eco's philosophy, as manifested through his works, seems to suggest that when trying to ascertain the truth, we must seriously and critically examine the means by which we came to our conclusions. Even if we are not swept away by confirmation bias or some propagandist working to manipulate us, we must still validate that we interpret what we have found correctly. This is a difficult task, and potentially impossible. Additional roadblocks impede us: translation and tonality, and context.

While the use of words is a lossy process, as a word can never fully capture an intended meaning, translation makes it lossier yet. Consider major legal cases whose arguments rest on establishing the meaning of a word, or how the meaning of a word can change based on whether it is being used "legally," "technically," or in some other manner. Now, take all of this and transpose it into another language which may not have a complementary word. Or, taking a note from Eco, slightly rephrase things in the second language to fit a narrative or guide towards a desired outcome. Perhaps when we pick the word (or phrase) in the second language, there are two possible choices which seem like equally valid candidates, but the chosen one contains some elements which aid the translator. Although this seems subtle and innocuous at first, a careful propagandist could, through hundreds of these tiny selections, subliminally craft a message with hidden meanings.

Next, tonality matters. It's no secret that Italians have produced more operas than Germans; one argument to explain this is that the Italian language is inherently melodic, and can sometimes sound to a non-Italian like singing. Germans, known for structure and discipline, speak a language filled with

[1] This is Latin for "in the person of the Monks", both suggesting we take the viewpoint of the monks, and also a joking reference to "in persona Christi" in Christian theology.

sharp words like “jetzt” and “genau” which can be off-putting to foreigners based on the sounds alone. The French, on the other hand, are known for their language of love. Imagine if the poetic words of Cyrano de Bergerac were delivered in a monotonic fashion by a disenchanted court reporter. As spoken Latin is currently enjoying a renaissance, there are a few people who, speaking fluent Latin, claim that one cannot fully understand Cicero’s speeches unless they are delivered in the original tongue; the same would likely be said of Demosthenes.

And lest we forget, context is king. Even if we assume that a set of words is chosen appropriately, or that they are written or spoken in a form that best captures their meaning, without knowing the manner and situation of their writing, our interpretations are often simply grasping at straws.[2] Similar to a well produced play or movie with a twist at the end, Eco’s stories will often introduce a key element that rips away a veil of ignorance we didn’t even know existed. And while ancient scriptures are generally considered to be “settled,” each new archeological discovery, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Enuma Elish, threatens to disrupt centuries or more of traditional wisdom with the possibility of new details which could change how we must interpret scriptures.

The Ethical Questions

Setting aside for a moment the question of whether truth is obtainable, we should ask two additional questions: first, is there a way to separate truth from propaganda, and second, if false propaganda leads to a better outcome, is it not better to maintain it than to disrupt a healthy equilibrium? Put another way, could we make the argument that Eco’s novels should be banned because they encourage people to question what they consider to be true?

While there is no clear answer to either of these questions, we can at least attempt to address them. The first assumes there is such a thing as truth, and that it differs in some way from propaganda. If we define propaganda as crafting a message to deliberately lead the audience away from the truth, before we can answer to its ethical validity, we must determine the author’s intent. Compare a well known 20th century political dictator who used propaganda to create horrors that left a stain on Europe, to Orson Welles, whose 1938 “War of the Worlds” broadcast lead to mass panic. If someone mistook a fictional radio broadcast for a real news report because they missed the opening disclaimer, should Welles have been held accountable for any malice that followed?

Based on our previously established nature of words, it is not possible for the speaker or writer to control how the words are received. However, if one ensures the tonality and context are appropriate, and, if necessary, includes a disclaimer to manage the setting, we could argue they have taken reasonable actions to not unreasonably disturb the social peace.

Another response might suggest that one way to separate truth from propaganda is time. For many years, some outlier religious and cult groups claimed that, based on the Mayan Calendar, the world was going to end in 2012. We saw countless news articles, books, videos, and speeches claiming this, warning that volcanoes would erupt and earthquakes would swallow major cities. A glance at the calendar today proves that this did not happen. But before 2012, was there any way to know for sure? No matter how many scientific papers or experts we would present, those groups would cling to their claims. However, once the doomsday deadline passed and the world continued as usual, the strength of those groups deflated, and those who did not abandon ship factioned off with civil wars of competing

[2]Two quotes come to mind. The first is attributed to Cardinal Richelieu: “If you give me six lines written by the hand of the most honest of men, I will find something in them which will hang him.” The second was penned by G.K. Chesterton: “Don't ever take a fence down until you know the reason it was put up.”

narratives explaining away their prophetic failures.

This then leads us into the second question, that of how to maintain civil order. We could argue that the answers to the first question also apply here. After all, if Eco or anyone else writes a book that could disrupt the social order, leading to looting, murders, and worse, then don't we have a duty to contain it? In fact, we could imagine this exact question with different wording being posed at the highest levels of the Soviet Union when they saw their controlled economy disintegrating. Perhaps borrowing a bit from Socrates' Noble Lie, Stalin and others fabricated a narrative against which opposition was punishable by decades in the Gulag work camps. While this approach did technically maintain a social order, with time, nobody could argue that the social order was healthy, any more than they could point out that the Emperor was naked. And it is worth noting that the Soviet practice of banning books lead to an underground railroad of sorts to distribute works by Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, and others.

The Conclusion

And now we come back to the core question: how much do the words impact whether something is true? Do words construct our reality completely, to the extent that a change in a words meaning could change the meaning of truth itself? Here is where Descartes threw the baby out with the bath water. Just because we change what we call something, does not change the nature of the thing itself. For example, if you have a terminal illness, changing your diagnosis on the medical form and walking out of the hospital is only going to promote a timely death. And if a little boy is hungry, telling him he has already eaten if he is starving, is tantamount to child abuse.

While words may impact our *perception* of truth, they do not push aside or dismiss what is objectively true. When Thucydides comments on the changing of the meanings of words during the Corcryan civil war, although the meanings of the words changed, they reflected the reality of how civil disorder was growing; therefore, we could argue that words change their meanings to follow truth, not the other way around. And, thus, authors like Eco are doing us a great service, by finding potential holes in our understanding to help us recalibrate our own words and narratives to be correctly tuned to the truth.