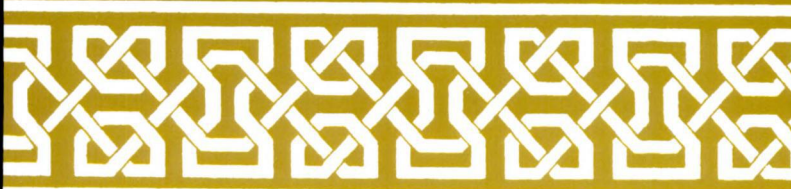# UMBERTO ECO ❦ The Open Work

TRANSLATED BY ANNA CANCOGNI

INTRODUCTION BY DAVID ROBEY

The Open Work

Umberto Eco

Translated by Anna Cancogni

With an Introduction
by David Robey

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Introduction

by David Robey

Umberto Eco's first published book was the dissertation he wrote
at the University of Turin, on problems of aesthetics in the work of
Saint Thomas Aquinas.[1] His first novel, published twenty-four
years later in 1980, continues this early interest in the high Middle
Ages. As so many readers of *The Name of the Rose* can testify, few,
if any, works of fiction have brought the cultural and intellectual
world of this period, or of any other period, so successfully to life.
But medieval studies have been only a minor if persistent interest in
Eco's work as a whole. Since he wrote his dissertation, his remark-
able energies have been mainly directed at the problems and issues
of the present: modern art and modern culture, mass communica-
tions, and the discipline of semiotics.

   This book collects for the first time in English Eco's major "pre-
semiotic" writings on modern literature and art—writings, that
is, which predate the publication in 1968 of his first semiotic
or semiological book (the terms "semiotics" and "semiology" can
be used interchangeably), *La struttura assente* (The absent structure).
Most of them are taken from one or more of the many editions of

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1. *Il problema estetico in San Tommaso* (Turin, 1956); now revised by the author
and recently translated into English as *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cam-
bridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). Much of this introduction ap-
peared in my chapter on Umberto Eco in M. Caesar and P. Hainsworth, eds.,
Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy (Leamington Spa, England: Berg Publish-
ers, 1984), pp. 63–87. Readers are referred to this volume for further information
on the literary context of Eco's writing, and especially to the chapter by C. Wag-
staff, "The Neo-Avantgarde." I am grateful to the publishers for permission to
reprint parts of my chapter here. Some of the material was also previously pub-
lished in the *Times Higher Education Supplement.*

Opera aperta (The open work), published in 1962, the first of Eco's books on a modern topic and the work with which he made his name in Italy. Two chapters of the present volume were originally written after Eco's conversion to semiotics. The first, "The Death of the Gruppo 63," is included here because it deals with an artistic movement with which Eco became closely associated immediately after the publication of *Opera aperta*. The other, "Series and Structure," is of particular interest because it deals with the relationship between the poetics of the "open work" and the structuralist theory which was the starting point of Eco's semiotics.

Since *Opera aperta* first appeared, Eco's thinking has developed in a great many ways. But, as we shall see, there is a substantial and striking continuity between his early and his later writings. More important in the present connection, there is a great deal in *Opera aperta* and in Eco's writings of the same period that has not been superseded in his subsequent development, and that remains of considerable relevance and interest. *Opera aperta* in particular is still a significant work, both on account of the enduring historical usefulness of its concept of "openness," and because of the striking way in which it anticipates two of the major themes of contemporary literary theory from the mid-sixties onward: the insistence on the element of multiplicity, plurality, or polysemy in art, and the emphasis on the role of the reader, on literary interpretation and response as an interactive process between reader and text. The questions the book raises, and the answers it gives, are very much part of the continuing contemporary debate on literature, art, and culture in general.

Opera aperta is a polemical book, in marked conflict with the Crocean aesthetics that dominated the Italian academic world in the early sixties. There are a great many references to Croce in the chapters that follow, testifying to the strength of his philosophical influence on thinkers of Eco's generation; indeed, the hegemony Croce exercised over Italian intellectual life throughout the Fascist period and for the first two postwar decades is probably without parallel in modern European history. The problematic concept of pure intuition/expression, which constitutes the foundation of Crocean aesthetics, is something we need not consider here, but some of the consequences it entails are worth recalling if we want

to understand *Opera aperta* in its original context.[2] Art for Croce was a purely mental phenomenon that could be communicated directly from the mind of the artist to that of the reader, viewer, or listener. The intuition/expression which constituted the essence of the work of art was thus an unchanging entity; it also necessarily possessed unity, which Croce tended to speak of as a dominant lyrical feeling or sentiment. The material medium of the artistic work was of no real significance; it merely served as a stimulus to enable the reader to reproduce in him- or herself the artist's original intuition. Equally, the material historical circumstances in which the artist lived, the artist's biography, the artist's intentions—all were irrelevant to the proper understanding of the work, since they were the concern of human faculties quite distinct from those that generated artistic expression. To all of these principles, *Opera aperta* is completely and radically opposed.

Opera aperta arose partly out of Eco's work on general questions of aesthetics, which was strongly influenced by the anti-Crocean, though still idealist, philosophy of his mentor at the University of Turin, Luigi Pareyson, the subject of Chapter 7 (unless otherwise specified, references to chapters and pages are to those in the present volume). But the immediate stimulus for writing it came from his contacts with avant-garde artists, together with his study of the work of James Joyce, a writer in whom he had a particular personal interest. In fact, the book has the air of a theoretical manifesto for certain kinds of avant-garde art; for the Gruppo 63 (see Chapter 11), which was formed in the year after its publication and of which Eco himself became a member, it effectively served as such.

In *Opera aperta* the idea of the open work serves to explain and justify the apparently radical difference in character between modern and traditional art. The idea is illustrated in its most extreme form by what Eco calls "works in motion" (*opere in movimento*); he cites (Chapter 1) the aleatory music of Stockhausen, Berio, and Pousseur, Calder's mobiles, and Mallarmé's *Livre*. What such works have in common is the artist's decision to leave the arrangement of some of their constituents either to the public or to chance, thus giving them not a single definitive order but a multiplicity of

2. For an introduction to Croce's work, see his *Breviario di estetica* (Bari: Laterza, 1951; orig. pub. 1913), tr. as *The Essence of Aesthetic* (London: Heinemann, 1921).

possible orders; if Mallarmé had ever finished his *Livre,* for in-
stance, the reader would have been left, at least up to a point, to
arrange its pages for him- or herself in a variety of different se-
quences. Works of this kind are for the most part of recent origin,
evidently, and even today are very much the exception rather than
the rule. Eco's point, however, is that the intention behind them is
fundamentally similar to the intention behind a great deal of mod-
ern art since the Symbolist movement at the end of the nineteenth
century.

Traditional or "classical" art, Eco argues, was in an essential
sense unambiguous. It could give rise to various responses, but its
nature was such as to channel these responses in a particular direc-
tion; for readers, viewers, and listeners there was in general only
one way of understanding what a text was about, what a painting
or sculpture stood for, what the tune was of a piece of music. Much
modern art, on the other hand, is deliberately and systematically
ambiguous. A text like *Finnegans Wake,* for Eco the exemplary
modern open work, cannot be said to be about a particular subject;
a great variety of potential meanings coexist in it, and none can be
said to be the main or dominant one. The text presents the reader
with a "field" of possibilities and leaves it in large part to him or her
to decide what approach to take. The same can be said, Eco argues,
of many other modern texts that are less radically avant-garde than
the *Wake*—for instance, Symbolist poems, Brecht's plays, Kafka's
novels.

This is where the analogy with works like Mallarmé's *Livre* ob-
tains: just as Mallarmé's reader would have arranged the pages of
the book in a number of different sequences, so the reader of the
Wake perceives a number of different patterns of meaning in Joyce's
language. In the *Livre* it is the material form that is open, whereas
in the *Wake* it is the semantic content; but in each case, according to
Eco, the reader is in substantially the same position, because in each
case he or she moves freely amid a multiplicity of different interpre-
tations. The same analogy obtains, he argues, between abstract vi-
sual art and mobiles; and between the aleatory music of Stockhau-
sen, Berio, or Pousseur and the serial music of a composer like
Webern (see particularly Chapter 10). All these characteristically
modern forms of art are said by Eco to mark a radical shift in the
relationship between artist and public, by requiring of the public a

much greater degree of collaboration and personal involvement than was ever required by the traditional art of the past.

The deliberate and systematic ambiguity of the open work is associated by Eco with a well-known feature of modern art, namely its high degree of formal innovation. Ambiguity, for Eco, is the product of the contravention of established conventions of expression: the less conventional forms of expression are, the more scope they allow for interpretation and therefore the more ambiguous they can be said to be. In traditional art, contraventions occurred only within very definite limits, and forms of expression remained substantially conventional; its ambiguity, therefore, was of a clearly circumscribed kind. In the modern open work, on the other hand, the contravention of conventions is far more radical, and it is this that gives it its very high degree of ambiguity; since ordinary rules of expression no longer apply, the scope for interpretation becomes enormous. Moreover, conventional forms of expression convey conventional meanings, and conventional meanings are parts of a conventional view of the world. Thus, according to Eco, traditional art confirms conventional views of the world, whereas the modern open work implicitly denies them.

"Ambiguity" is one term used by Eco to represent the effect of formal innovation in art. Another is "information"; Chapter 3 below deals with the connection between the mathematical theory of information and the idea of openness. What interests Eco about this theory, in brief, is the principle that the information (as opposed to the "meaning") of a message is in inverse proportion to its probability or predictability. This suggests to him a parallel between the concept of information and the effect of art, particularly modern art, since the forms of art can be said to possess a high degree of improbability or unpredictability by virtue of their contravention of established conventions of expression. Thus, Eco argues, art in general may be seen as conveying a much higher degree of information, though not necessarily a higher degree of meaning, than more conventional kinds of communication; and the modern open work may be seen as conveying an exceptionally high degree of information, because of the radical contraventions of established conventions that characterize it. Eco's interest in information theory was clearly one of the factors that led him shortly afterward to the study of semiotics. (Readers may notice that in the present

work represents through its formal properties a characteristically modern experience of the world. Like all art, it is an "epistemological metaphor": not only does it reflect aspects of modern philosophy (phenomenology, Pareyson's aesthetics) and modern science (the theory of relativity, mathematical information theory), but what is equally important, through its lack of conventional sense and order, it represents by analogy the feeling of senselessness, disorder, "discontinuity" that the modern world generates in all of us. Thus, although open works are not the only kind of art to be produced in our time, they are the only kind that is appropriate to it; the conventional sense and order of traditional art reflect an experience of the world wholly different from ours, and we deceive ourselves if we try to make this sense and order our own.

What, then, do we gain from art forms that reflect what can only seem a negative aspect of the world in which we live? Eco's essay answers this question through a discussion of the concept of alienation, in which he outlines a position that has remained characteristic of all his activity as an intellectual. In one sense alienation is both necessary and desirable, in that we can say that we are alienated *to* something other than ourselves, and therefore lose full possession of ourselves, whenever we become involved in it. Losing possession of ourselves is not something to be lamented; it is simply part of the back-and-forth movement between self and the world that is the condition of a truly human existence. What we must do is accept our involvement in things other than ourselves, and at the same time assert our selfhood in the face of the world by actively seeking to understand it and transform it. Art, Eco argues, can contribute significantly to this process of understanding and transforming the world, because its function is essentially cognitive. "Art knows the world through its own formative structures," he proposes (Chapter 6), referring to the aesthetics of Pareyson once again. Art represents the world—or more exactly our experience of the world—through the way it organizes its constituents (the *modo di formare*) rather than through what the constituents themselves represent. This representation is a type of knowledge by virtue of the element of organic form: "Where a form is realized there is a conscious operation on an amorphous material that has been brought under human control" (Chapter 6). Thus, the modern open work is a form of knowledge of the world in which we

live, insofar as it constitutes a bringing to consciousness of the nature of the contemporary "crisis." As Eco said in the first preface to *Opera aperta,* contemporary art seeks a solution to this crisis by offering us a "new way of seeing, feeling, understanding, and accepting a universe in which traditional relationships have been shattered and new possibilities of relationship are being laboriously sketched out."[4] Art is therefore political in its own special way; it produces new knowledge that can serve as a basis for changing the world, but it does not necessarily have an explicitly political content.

Together with "Form as Social Commitment," *Opera aperta* contains, if sometimes only in germ, features that are fundamental to Eco's later semiotic theory: the notion of the special function of art; the sense of living in an age of instability and crisis; the theme of the senselessness and disorder of the modern experience of the world; and at the same time the emphasis on awareness, involvement, and the need for change. The book's style of thought has remained characteristic as well: a taste for broad, synthesizing generalizations, and a consequent tendency to stress the similarities between concepts and phenomena at the expense of the differences, and on occasion to neglect local problems in the interests of the overall view. In a more specific, personal, and paradoxical way, also, *Opera aperta* looks forward to Eco's shift of interest to semiotics. A large section of the first edition consists of a discussion of the poetics (*poetica*) of James Joyce, which was removed from subsequent editions to be published separately.[5] As well as providing further illustration of the main theme of *Opera aperta,* this discussion points to a clear analogy between Joyce's artistic development, as Eco sees it, and Eco's own personal history. What interests him in Joyce is the novelist's move from a Catholic, Thomist position to the disordered, decentered, anarchic vision of life that seems to characterize *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake.* Yet Eco also finds in Joyce's mature work a degree of persistence of his youthful faith, a nostalgia for the ordered world of medieval thought that is most notably expressed in the system of symbolic correspondences

4. *Opera aperta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962), p. 9.
5. Now published in English as a companion to the present volume: Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

underlying the surface chaos of *Ulysses; Ulysses*, he suggests, is a "reverse [Thomist] *summa*" (*The Aesthetics of Chaosmos*, Chapter 2). Similarly, as he himself tells us, when Eco began working on his doctoral thesis, he did so in a "spirit of adherence to the religious world of Thomas Aquinas," a spirit which he then lost as he worked on it (*The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, p. i). Yet a nostalgia for the ordered world of medieval thought seems to have remained with him as well, expressing itself not only in occasional excursions to the Middle Ages, culminating with *The Name of the Rose*, but also, much more indirectly, in his interest in semiotics. For Eco's semiotic theory has an ordered, comprehensive, rationalist, architectural character that also bears comparison with that of the Thomist *summae*, though with at least one radical qualification: whereas Saint Thomas's system is metaphysical, Eco's very definitely is not; as we shall see, the urge to system and order is displaced by him from the sphere of being to that of method alone.

But between *Opera aperta* and Eco's first major semiotic text there came another book which pursued a line of interest that has since constituted an important part of Eco's activities: the study of mass culture and the mass media. Chapter 9 below ("The Structure of Bad Taste") is an excerpt from it. Published in 1964, the book had as its title *Apocalittici e integrati* (Apocalyptic and integrated [intellectuals]), the two terms standing for two opposite attitudes to the mass media and their effect on contemporary culture: the apocalyptic view that culture has been irredeemably debased by the mass media, and that the only proper way to treat these is to disregard them; and the wholly positive view of those who are so well integrated in the modern world that they see the nature and effect of the mass media as necessary and even desirable. Eco's own view lies between these two extremes. The mass media, he argues, are such an important feature of modern society as to require the serious attention of intellectuals, and, far from being a necessarily negative influence, they are to be welcomed for providing universal access to cultural experiences previously restricted to an elite. They are not to be accepted as they are, however; the intellectual's task is to analyze their nature and effect and to seek actively to transform them, by criticizing their deleterious features and pointing the way to the improvement of their cultural content.

What this means in practice is shown by the discussion in *Apoca-*

littici e integrati of such things as comic strips, pop songs, and television programs, a discussion which is supplemented by two essays, published the following year, on Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* and on the James Bond novels of Ian Fleming.[6] The main purpose of these essays and of the discussion of specific mass media in the book is to lay bare the ideological implications of different forms of popular entertainment, particularly, in the case of the comic strips and the novels, the relationship between ideology and narrative structures. From the analysis a distinct set of common themes emerges. The kind of entertainment that Eco criticizes, as did Vittorini, is that which is consolatory, in the sense of reaffirming the public's sense of the essential rightness and permanence of the world in which they live. The great fault of the mass media, for Eco, is to convey a standardized, oversimplified, static, and complacent vision that masks the real complexity of things and implicitly denies the possibility of change.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong, Eco suggests, with pure popular entertainment; all of us feel the need to read a James Bond novel or listen to pop music from time to time. The problem is that for most people *bad* popular entertainment has come to be a major part of their cultural experience, and its effect has been to exercise a strongly reactionary influence. The solution, therefore, is not to raise popular entertainment to the level of art—Eco is not saying that the public should be fed on a diet of modern open works—but to work for forms of entertainment that are "honest." This means, on the one hand, entertainment that does not have false artistic pretensions; the concept of Kitsch is discussed at some length in *Apocalittici e integrati,* in the chapter translated below, and is defined as nonart that aspires to artistic status by borrowing devices from true artworks, devices that automatically cease to be artistic when they are used outside their original "organic" context. On the other hand, what is more important, "honest" entertainment is that which is ideologically sound, not in the sense of propagating the dogma of a political party, but by virtue of more widely acceptable qualities: because it acknowledges the complexity, the problematic

6. Now in *Il superuomo di massa* (Milan: Bompiani, 1978), pp. 27–67 and 145–184; and translated into English in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1979).

character of the historical circumstances in which we live, because it allows for the possibility of change and serves as a stimulus to reflection and criticism, because it generates a sense of independence and choice instead of conformism and passivity.

This should help make clear what kind of political commitment Eco expresses in his writings. The emphasis on change, the hostility to conformism and conservatism must mark him as a man of the left. Yet however he personally may vote, there is no recognizably party-political element in his books. This is partly because his intellectual task, as he conceives it, is cultural rather than narrowly political, but more because his values are broadly democratic rather than specifically socialist or communist. In particular, as a writer, he has always kept his distance from the Italian Communist Party. *Opera aperta,* with its insistence on the special function of the modern open work, was in conflict with the view of art at that time favored by the Party. In *Apocalittici e integrati* the emphasis on criticism, debate, and the complexity of things also seems implicitly opposed to the Party line, at least at that period. Eco particularly favors the television discussion program "Tribuna Politica" as a form of "education for democracy" that helped viewers become aware of the "relative" character of politicians' opinions (*Apocalittici e integrati,* p. 351); and in his analysis of the Bond novels (*The Role of the Reader,* p. 162) he argues that the "democratic" man is the one who "recognizes nuances and distinctions and who admits contradictions." Finally, the themes of disorder and incomprehensibility in *Opera aperta,* and the arguments about the limitations of systematic worldviews in his later semiotic works again tend to set him apart from mainstream Marxist ideas. Marxism has been an important influence on Eco's thinking, but this relativism and individualism are major qualifications of his left-wing position.

Eco's shift of interest to semiotics began as he was supervising the translation of *Opera aperta* into French. He was introduced to the structuralism of Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss,[7] and as a result revised sections of the book along structuralist lines (Chapters 2 and 3 below), as has already been mentioned. This contact with structuralist thought was the main source of Eco's semiotics or semiology, and in particular of his first major semiotic work, *La struttura*

7. *Opera aperta,* 3rd ed. (Milan: Bompiani, 1976), pp. v–vii.

fields, but concentrates instead on proposing a theory of signs, or "sign functions," and a related theory of codes that can be applied to all of them. Eco's conception of his subject is avowedly imperialistic; semiotics is proposed as a master discipline which will eventually unite into a single theoretical framework all the different branches of study concerned with culture in the broadest sense.

In its all-embracing, systematic character Eco's general semiotics has more than a little in common, as noted above, with the philosophical system of Thomas Aquinas, the subject of his doctoral thesis. But a major difference between Eco's theory and most philosophical or scientific systems is his distinctive insistence that the theory makes no claim to represent the real nature of things. It is here that we can see the most conspicuous and important connection with *Opera aperta* and its theme of the disorder, instability, and essential incomprehensibility of the modern world. The theme lies behind the title and much of the argument of *La struttura assente* which, while taking over many of the fundamentals of structuralist thought, contains a vigorous criticism of the French structuralism of the sixties—which Eco himself compares (*The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, p. v) to Thomist thought—for what he calls its "ontological" rather than "methodological" character: its conviction that the ordered systems it describes are the systems of the world, a conviction illustrated in its most extreme form in Lévi-Strauss's belief that structural analysis serves ultimately to reveal the perennial laws governing the working of the human mind. Eco maintains that structures are "methodological" in that they are provisional, hypothetical products of the mind, and at most only partially reflect the essential nature of things. The ultimate truth, the structure behind all structures, is permanently absent, beyond our intellectual grasp. The chapter below entitled "Series and Structure," which is taken from *La struttura assente,* illustrates this aspect of Eco's thinking, showing very clearly how his theory of the open work is carried over into his semiotics and gives it much of its distinctive character.

One of the most interesting features of Eco's semiotic theory is this association of order and disorder, of a rationalist explanatory structure with the conviction that nothing, finally, can ever be explained. In a general way it seems to lie behind the broad eclecticism of his approach, his distinctive combination of Continental

and Anglo-Saxon theoretical sources, and in particular the exten-
sive use he has made of the work of the American philosopher
C. S. Peirce, whose current vogue must be due in large part to
Eco's interest in him. More particularly, the association has deter-
mined three central concepts in Eco's theory, the first and last of
which derive from Peirce: *unlimited semiosis, encyclopedia,* and *abduc-
tion.* The principle of unlimited semiosis is, Eco argues, vital to the
constitution of semiotics as an academic discipline. According to
this principle, the meaning of any sign, both verbal and nonverbal,
can be seen only as another sign or signs—its "interpretant(s)," in
Peirce's terminology—whose meaning, in turn, can be seen only as
yet another sign or signs, and so on ad infinitum. Meaning is an
infinite regress within a closed sphere, a sort of parallel universe
related in various ways to the "real" world but not directly con-
nected to it; there is no immediate contact between the world of
signs and the world of the things they refer to. Eco thus frees the
study of signs from involvement with the study of their "real"
referents, and lays the foundations for an autonomous science of
semiotics by justifying the analysis of sign systems in terms specific
to them, without interference, at least in the first instance, from
other branches of knowledge.

The principle of unlimited semiosis thus has much in common
with the Saussurean axiom that meaning is the product of structure
and with the structuralist semantic theories derived from this ax-
iom. Its advantage for Eco is that it avoids the connotations of sta-
bility and organization that the concept of structure carries with it,
and makes greater allowance for the shifting, elusive nature of our
knowledge of the world. For the same sort of reasons, Eco now
prefers the notion of encyclopedia to the structuralist notion of
code, to stand for the knowledge or competence that allows people
to use signs to communicate—though, as we shall see, codes never-
theless figure largely in much of his semiotic theory. The notion of
code implies a view of this competence as a set of one-to-one,
dictionary-like equivalences between expression and content, sig-
nifier and signified. In contrast, the encyclopedia, as Eco conceives
it, is much more complex and variable; it is like a net, a rhizome—
a tangled clump of bulbs and tubers—or a labyrinth, a vast aggre-
gation of units of meaning among which an infinite variety of con-
nections can be made.

With the notion of code, communication becomes simply a mat-
ter of recognizing the one-to-one equivalences. With that of ency-
clopedia, it becomes a matter of tracing out one of all the possible
paths that can be taken through the network, rhizome, or laby-
rinth, and it is for this process that Eco uses Peirce's term "abduc-
tion." The example par excellence of abduction is the act of crimi-
nal detection. Eco's argument is that, just as the detective finds the
author of a crime by postulating certain rules concerning the con-
nections between human motives and actions and physical events,
so in the normal processes of communication we find the meaning
of a sign by postulating certain rules concerning the relationship
between that sign and others. Both cases involve finding one's way
through the labyrinth; in the latter case the rule may be more regu-
larly applied (it may be "overcoded"), but the difference is one only
of degree, not of kind. All forms of communication, interpreta-
tion, and understanding are by their nature, for Eco, tentative and
hazardous acts of inference.

What has been said so far about Eco's semiotics may make it
sound abstruse and unworldly. But it must be emphasized, first of
all, that Eco is not denying that we use signs to refer to the real
world, and still less is he denying that the real world exists; he is
simply maintaining, with the structuralists, that sign systems are
grids which we impose upon reality and in this sense preexist any
use to which they may be put. Moreover, to view them in this way
certainly does not entail cutting semiotics off from history. For Eco
there are two vital ways in which semiotics and the historical pro-
cess are integrally connected. On the one hand, viewing the struc-
tures of sign systems as methodological rather than ontological in
character entails accepting our description of them not only as hy-
pothetical and provisional, but also as the product of history, and
subject to negation by history, as is argued in the chapter "Ser-
ies and Structure." By this means, Eco meets the objection of
a-historicity with which Marxists have often attacked structuralist
thought, and constructs a semiotic theory at least partially reconcil-
able with Marxist historicism. On the other hand, semiotics is itself
an instrument of intervention in the historical process, a powerful
practical tool for cultural, social, and potentially political change.
This is a further element of continuity with *Opera aperta* and *Apo-
calittici e integrati,* and their insistence on social engagement.

Since Eco has told us that his interest in semiotics arose out of his work on art in *Opera aperta*,[13] and since this interest is also closely connected to his work on mass communications in *Apocalittici e integrati*, what changes did his new theoretical framework bring to the ideas of the earlier books? Although his new interests broadened Eco's horizons considerably, it is notable that the subjects of art and mass communications occupy almost half the pages of *La struttura assente*, and could still be said to be a central, if less prominent, object of attention in *A Theory of Semiotics* as well. To begin with the theory of art, it is perhaps surprising how many of the aesthetic principles of *Opera aperta* remain in the later works. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, as in *Opera aperta*, Eco maintains that art produces an essential effect of ambiguity through the contravention of conventions of expression, but that such contraventions are properly artistic only if they are part of a specifically aesthetic form. What the later work does, first, is express these ideas in more wide-ranging theoretical terms; like all other forms of cultural activity, the production and consumption of art is seen as governed by codes, and it is the violation of these codes that is said to be the source of the effect of ambiguity. This new formulation opens the way to a different conception of the function of art; whereas in *Opera aperta* the function was said to be essentially cognitive, in the later books it is explained according to the structuralist principle that the effect of the violation of codes in a work of art is to focus attention first on the structure of the work itself, then on the codes which the work employs, and finally on the relationship between the codes and reality, thus generating in the reader or viewer a renovated perception of him- or herself and the world.

In *A Theory of Semiotics*, also, Eco argues that in art the violation of codes occurs according to a specific structural pattern, a pattern which is said to be the distinguishing feature of artistic form, and replaces the much vaguer notion of "organic" properties in *Opera aperta*. There Eco had argued that the language of poetry is distinguished by its "iconic" properties, a special relationship between sound and sense. Extending and developing this notion, he now suggests that all kinds of art are characterized by what he calls a "super-system of homologous structural relationships" (p. 271);

13. *Lector in fabula* (Milan: Bompiani, 1979), p. 8.

that is, a code is violated not just at one level of a work, but at all of its levels, and between these different violations there is a fundamental similarity of structure. This structural pattern constitutes what he calls the "aesthetic idiolect": just as the term "idiolect" is employed in linguistics to mean the language habits peculiar to an individual, so here it stands for the overall pattern of deviation, the "general deviational matrix" (p. 271) peculiar to and characteristic of each work of art.

The trouble is, of course, that it is very difficult to see how such a pattern might be realized in practice. It is true that there are numerous cases in literature in which the sound seems to be an echo to the sense (though not as many cases as sometimes is supposed), and stylistic analyses such as Leo Spitzer's have shown parallels between the meaning of texts and other levels of expression, for instance syntax. But to suggest, as Eco does, that there is a multiple set of correspondences in all works of art, beginning from their physical substance—to which Eco attaches special importance: in art, matter is "rendered semiotically interesting" (p. 266)—and proceeding down to the various aspects of their content, seems to require a good deal of clarification and empirical verification, neither of which has been adequately provided in any of Eco's works.

The continuity in Eco's aesthetic theory between his earlier and his more recent books also testifies to the continuing influence of Pareyson. For the notion of aesthetic idiolect is not only a revision of Pareyson's notion of organic form but is also strikingly reminiscent of his insistence that it is the "modo di formare," or style, that constitutes the aesthetic essence of any work of art. In another respect as well Eco has remained faithful to Pareyson's principles: in his view that the intention implicit in a work must be the determining factor in its interpretation, a view which in *A Theory of Semiotics* is asserted but not seriously discussed, as in *Opera aperta,* except for the apparent suggestion—the point is far from clear—that it is the aesthetic idiolect by which the intention is manifested. Thus, on these two scores, as on others, *A Theory of Semiotics* shows not only a striking continuity with Eco's earlier work but also the same tendency which we noted in *Opera aperta* to develop broad generalizations at the expense of more specific problems; and in this case, as modern literary theory has shown, the problems are very much a matter of contemporary debate. Although the systematic character

tentative and provisional, as work-in-progress and as part of a continuing public debate.

I have so far concentrated on the theoretical side of Eco's writing. However, much of it has been very far from theoretical in character, although it has been to a significant extent inspired by his theoretical concerns. Four of his books[15] are collections of articles of a more or less journalistic kind, originally published in dailies or weeklies such as the *Corriere della Sera, Il Manifesto,* and *L'Espresso,* as well as in more intellectual or artistic periodicals like *Quindici* and *Il Verri.* Before he became famous as a novelist, Eco was already widely known in Italy as a journalist. Unlike the greater part of his theoretical writings, Eco's journalism is often extremely funny; indeed, humor is a property to which he attaches considerable importance. As well as a number of parodies, *Diario minimo* (1963) contains the well-known "Elogio di Franti" (In praise of Franti), written in 1962, a celebration of the villain of Edmondo De Amicis's sentimental and moralistic schoolboy novel *Cuore.* The infamous Franti, who respects nothing and laughs at everything including his dying mother, is a model of evil for De Amicis's schoolboy narrator, but for Eco his smile is better seen as a healthy assault on the dominant social and cultural order. Laughter, Eco says, is the "instrument with which the secret innovator places in doubt that which society holds to be good" (p. 94), and such an instrument is clearly, for Eco, an important one. This view of laughter underlies much of Eco's journalism, insofar as its humor or wit is usually directed at objects of a wholly serious kind, objects which for the most part belong to the areas of interest explored in his more academic studies.

Most of the articles in the three later journalistic collections were written between the mid-sixties and the early eighties, and can in a sense be described as practical extensions of Eco's semiotic theory. This is not to say that his arguments are conducted at a high level of theoretical sophistication, or that he draws to a conspicuous ex-

15. *Diario minimo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1963), *Il costume di casa* (Milan: Bompiani, 1973), *Dalla periferia dell'impero* (Milan: Bompiani, 1977), and *Sette anni di desiderio* (Milan: Bompiani, 1983). A selection of the work in these books has been published in English as *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Picador, 1987), formerly *Faith in Fakes* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986).

tent on scientific notions that he himself has elaborated; the theoretical work seems merely to have prescribed the area in which for the most part he has worked as a journalist, and provides his journalism with certain simple general principles and simple conceptual tools. Between them the later collections cover a wide variety of topics, almost all of which are semiotic in the broad sense that they concern modes of communication or signification. A number of articles deal with aspects of modern art or Kitsch; others look at forms of popular entertainment, political debates and criminal cases, comics, films, advertising, the press, television and radio, and various public events. All of them are highly topical, or were when they were written, and all of them participate to a greater or lesser extent in a common undertaking, what Eco calls (in *Il costume di casa,* p. 251) the "clarification of the contemporary world." This means analyzing the ideological implications of political, social, and cultural products and events through a "critical, rational, and conscious reading" of their meaning (*Dalla periferia dell'impero,* p. 235); laying bare the confusion, mystification, and manipulation to which the contemporary public is subjected; inculcating in readers a constant attitude of healthy suspicion (*diffidenza*). Eco sees himself engaged in a form of permanent semiological guerrilla warfare (*Travels in Hyperreality,* pp. 135–144) against the mass media and political power, in the cause of an open-minded, tolerant awareness of the complexities, ambiguities, and nuances in life.

Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* is a suitable topic on which to end this introduction. The book cannot properly be termed an open work—in his *Postscript* to it Eco describes it instead as "postmodernistic"[16]—but it contains, in varying forms, most of the major themes of his work, and shows very clearly how far the ideas and concerns of his presemiotic writings have continued to determine his thinking. At the most obvious level it is a return to his original medievalist interests. The measured succession of the monastic life he describes, the geometric layout of the buildings in which it is set, and the striking image of the library, with its maze-like structure and the initially incomprehensible but actually intri-

16. *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

cate and highly organized classification of its books, all can be seen as a nostalgic material correlative of the ordered system of medieval scholastic thought, which Eco initially adhered to and then abandoned early in his career. The connections between the novel and Eco's subsequent, more modern interests are less obvious but, to my mind, equally striking. I say "to my mind" especially because, even if the novel is not an open work, Eco nonetheless insists, in his *Postscript,* that it is capable of a number of interpretations, none of which should be regarded as definitive.

At the very start of Eco's *Postscript* the connection is made clear between the novel's title and the principle of unlimited semiosis, although the point is not spelled out. The reference to the rose in the Latin hexameter with which the narrative ends ("The former rose survives in its name; bare names are what we have") seems to assert for Eco the unbridgeable gap between the world of signs and the world of things. On the other hand, there is also, clearly, a contrast between the picture of instability, disorder, and incomprehensibility offered by Eco's view of semiotics in particular and knowledge in general, and the stable, ordered world of the monastery in which the story is set. Eco himself points out in the *Postscript* that the labyrinth of the monastery library is not the same as the rhizome-like labyrinth or net of the encyclopedia. Far from permitting an infinite variety of possible connections, it is a labyrinth through which there is only one path—a material image, we may take it, of the intellectual world of the books it contains and the monastic community it serves. We can read the burning down of the library at the end of the novel as anticipating, metaphorically, the final destruction of this world, already seriously threatened, as Eco's characters repeatedly observe, by the new culture of the cities and their secular universities.

To say that the Holmes-like William of Baskerville represents the modern world which replaces that of the monastery is to put it rather crudely; but he does display a striking acquaintance with semiotic theory (according to Eco's notes, Franciscan thought of the period shows considerable awareness of the nature of signs) as well as a characteristically modern view, as Eco sees it, of knowledge in general. Not only does he illustrate, through his acts of detection, the essential nature of all semiotic processes according to Eco; he also proposes a theory of detection strikingly similar to

Eco's and Peirce's, repeating verbatim passages from Eco's contribution to *The Sign of Three,* a recent collection of articles on Dupin (Poe's famous detective), Sherlock Holmes, and C. S. Peirce.[17] More generally, he seems to share Eco's view of the essentially unknowable nature of things and of the provisional, hypothetical nature of the structures we find in them.

"Relations," William says at one point in the novel, "are the ways in which my mind perceives the connections between single entities, but what is the guarantee that this is universal and stable?" (p. 207). This doubt is confirmed for him by his discovery, at the end of the book, that the series of murders was not the product of a single design drawn, as he had supposed, from the book of the Apocalypse, but was in large part determined by chance. "I behaved stubbornly," he says, "pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe" (p. 492). His final advice to his pupil Adso of Melk, the narrator, is that the "order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something"; but—and here William quotes a Wittgensteinian "mystic" from Adso's homeland, Austria—"afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless" (p. 492). Unlike his pupil and the rest of the characters in the book, William is aware, as Eco hints in the *Postscript,* that our knowledge of reality is a rhizome-like labyrinth and that no single path through it can be said to constitute the truth.

If William of Baskerville is only partially a semiotic theorist, he wholly shares the broad intellectual and political values that Eco's semiotics carries with it, and that have governed his work from *Opera aperta* onward. In the face of the conflict between the savagely oppressive representatives of the Papacy and the equally narrow and intolerant Franciscan mendicants, not to mention their outlaw offshoot, the revolutionary followers of the renegade Fra Dolcino (the Red Brigades of the fourteenth century), William's attitude is to agree with neither side but to see right and wrong in both, to make distinctions where others confuse issues and see similarities where others see utter opposition. Like Eco, he is a doubter by

17. Edited by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1983).

principle who believes in democracy rather than oppression and in discussion rather than revelation, all in accordance with his theoretical recognition of the impossibility of certain knowledge. He dislikes purity, he says (in a phrase which, we learn from the *Postscript*, Eco is particularly proud of), because it acts in too much haste.

Like Eco, finally, William of Baskerville believes in the salutary power of laughter. As he eventually discovers, most of the murders were caused by the attempt of the blind monk Jorge of Burgos (a name not without reference to that of another writer with an interest in labyrinths) to keep concealed the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which dealt with the subject of comedy. The danger lay in the book's potentially corrupting and subversive effect: it made laughter respectable. William's response is to argue a point that is wholly typical of Eco's view of his practical duty as an intellectual: "Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh,* because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth" (p. 491).

I

The Poetics of the Open Work

A number of recent pieces of instrumental music are linked by a common feature: the considerable autonomy left to the individual performer in the way he chooses to play the work. Thus, he is not merely free to interpret the composer's instructions following his own discretion (which in fact happens in traditional music), but he must impose his judgment on the form of the piece, as when he decides how long to hold a note or in what order to group the sounds: all this amounts to an act of improvised creation. Here are some of the best-known examples of the process.

1. In *Klavierstück XI,* by Karlheinz Stockhausen, the composer presents the performer a single large sheet of music paper with a series of note groupings. The performer then has to choose among these groupings, first for the one to start the piece and, next, for the successive units in the order in which he elects to weld them together. In this type of performance, the instrumentalist's freedom is a function of the "narrative" structure of the piece, which allows him to "mount" the sequence of musical units in the order he chooses.

2. In Luciano Berio's *Sequence for Solo Flute,* the composer presents the performer a text which predetermines the sequence and intensity of the sounds to be played. But the performer is free to choose how long to hold a note inside the fixed framework imposed on him, which in turn is established by the fixed pattern of the metronome's beat.

3. Henri Pousseur has offered the following description of his piece *Scambi:*

> *Scambi* is not so much a musical composition as a *field of possibilities,* an explicit invitation to exercise choice. It is made up of

sixteen sections. Each of these can be linked to any two others, without weakening the logical continuity of the musical process. Two of its sections, for example, are introduced by similar motifs (after which they evolve in divergent patterns); another pair of sections, on the contrary, tends to develop towards the same climax. Since the performer can start or finish with any one section, a considerable number of sequential permutations are made available to him. Furthermore, the two sections which begin on the same motif can be played simultaneously, so as to present a more complex structural polyphony. It is not out of the question that we conceive these formal notations as a marketable product: if they were tape-recorded and the purchaser had a sufficiently sophisticated reception apparatus, then the general public would be in a position to develop a private musical construct of its own and a new collective sensibility in matters of musical presentation and duration could emerge.

4. In Pierre Boulez's *Third Sonata for Piano*, the first section (*Antiphonie, Formant 1*) is made up of ten different pieces on ten corresponding sheets of music paper. These can be arranged in different sequences like a stack of filing cards, though not all possible permutations are permissible. The second part (*Formant 2, Thrope*) is made up of four parts with an internal circularity, so that the performer can commence with any one of them, linking it successively to the others until he comes round full circle. No major interpretative variants are permitted inside the various sections, but one of them, *Parenthèse*, opens with a prescribed time beat, which is followed by extensive pauses in which the beat is left to the player's discretion. A further prescriptive note is evinced by the composer's instructions on the manner of linking one piece to the next (for example, *sans retenir, enchaîner sans interruption,* and so on).

What is immediately striking in such cases is the macroscopic divergence between these forms of musical communication and the time-honored tradition of the classics. This difference can be formulated in elementary terms as follows: a classical composition, whether it be a Bach fugue, Verdi's *Aïda,* or Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring,* posits an assemblage of sound units which the composer arranged in a closed, well-defined manner before presenting it to

the listener. He converted his idea into conventional symbols which more or less oblige the eventual performer to reproduce the format devised by the composer himself, whereas the new musical works referred to above reject the definitive, concluded message and multiply the formal possibilities of the distribution of their elements. They appeal to the initiative of the individual performer, and hence they offer themselves not as finite works which prescribe specific repetition along given structural coordinates but as "open" works, which are brought to their conclusion by the performer at the same time as he experiences them on an aesthetic plane.[1]

To avoid any confusion in terminology, it is important to specify that here the definition of the "open work," despite its relevance in formulating a fresh dialectics between the work of art and its performer, still requires to be separated from other conventional applications of this term. Aesthetic theorists, for example, often have recourse to the notions of "completeness" and "openness" in connection with a given work of art. These two expressions refer to a standard situation of which we are all aware in our reception of a work of art: we see it as the end product of an author's effort to arrange a sequence of communicative effects in such a way that each individual addressee can refashion the original composition devised by the author. The addressee is bound to enter into an interplay of stimulus and response which depends on his unique capacity for sensitive reception of the piece. In this sense the author presents a finished product with the intention that this particular composition should be appreciated and received in the same form as he devised it. As he reacts to the play of stimuli and his own response to their patterning, the individual addressee is bound to supply his own existential credentials, the sense conditioning which is peculiarly his own, a defined culture, a set of tastes, personal inclinations, and prejudices. Thus, his comprehension of the original artifact is always modified by his particular and individual perspective. In fact, the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood. These give it a wealth of different resonances and echoes without impairing its original essence; a road traffic sign, on the other hand, can be viewed in only one sense, and, if it is transfigured into some fantastic meaning by an imaginative driver, it merely ceases to be *that* particular traffic sign

with that particular meaning. A work of art, therefore, is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself.

Nonetheless, it is obvious that works like those of Berio and Stockhausen are "open" in a far more tangible sense. In primitive terms we can say that they are quite literally "unfinished": the author seems to hand them on to the performer more or less like the components of a construction kit. He seems to be unconcerned about the manner of their eventual deployment. This is a loose and paradoxical interpretation of the phenomenon, but the most immediately striking aspect of these musical forms can lead to this kind of uncertainty, although the very fact of our uncertainty is itself a positive feature: it invites us to consider *why* the contemporary artist feels the need to work in this kind of direction, to try to work out what historical evolution of aesthetic sensibility led up to it and which factors in modern culture reinforced it. We are then in a position to surmise how these experiences should be viewed in the spectrum of a theoretical aesthetics.

Pousseur has observed that the poetics of the "open" work tends to encourage "acts of conscious freedom" on the part of the performer and place him at the focal point of a network of limitless interrelations, among which he chooses to set up his own form without being influenced by an external *necessity* which definitively prescribes the organization of the work in hand.[2] At this point one could object (with reference to the wider meaning of "openness" already introduced in this essay) that any work of art, even if it is not passed on to the addressee in an unfinished state, demands a free, inventive response, if only because it cannot really be appreciated unless the performer somehow reinvents it in psychological collaboration with the author himself. Yet this remark represents the theoretical perception of contemporary aesthetics, achieved only after painstaking consideration of the function of artistic performance; certainly an artist of a few centuries ago was far from being aware of these issues. Instead nowadays it is primarily the

artist who is aware of its implications. In fact, rather than submit to the "openness" as an inescapable element of artistic interpretation, he subsumes it into a positive aspect of his production, recasting the work so as to expose it to the maximum possible "opening."

The force of the subjective element in the interpretation of a work of art (any interpretation implies an interplay between the addressee and the work as an objective fact) was noticed by classical writers, especially when they set themselves to consider the figurative arts. In the *Sophist* Plato observes that painters suggest proportions not by following some objective canon but by judging them in relation to the angle from which they are seen by the observer. Vitruvius makes a distinction between "symmetry" and "eurhythmy," meaning by this latter term an adjustment of objective proportions to the requirements of a subjective vision. The scientific and practical development of the technique of perspective bears witness to the gradual maturation of this awareness of an interpretative subjectivity pitted against the work of art. Yet it is equally certain that this awareness has led to a tendency to operate against the "openness" of the work, to favor its "closing out." The various devices of perspective were just so many different concessions to the actual location of the observer in order to ensure that he looked at the figure in *the only possible right way*—that is, the way the author of the work had prescribed, by providing various visual devices for the observer's attention to focus on.

Let us consider another example. In the Middle Ages there grew up a theory of allegory which posited the possibility of reading the Scriptures (and eventually poetry, figurative arts) not just in the literal sense but also in three other senses: the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical. This theory is well known from a passage in Dante, but its roots go back to Saint Paul ("videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem"), and it was developed by Saint Jerome, Augustine, Bede, Scotus Erigena, Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor, Alain of Lille, Bonaventure, Aquinas, and others in such a way as to represent a cardinal point of medieval poetics. A work in this sense is undoubtedly endowed with a measure of "openness." The reader of the text knows that every sentence and every trope is "open" to a multiplicity of meanings which he must hunt for and find. Indeed, according to how he feels at one particular moment, the reader might choose a possible interpreta-

further concept which is of interest to us in the present context. The concept of "pure poetry" gained currency for the very reason that general notions and abstract canons fell out of fashion, while the tradition of English empiricism increasingly argued in favor of the "freedom" of the poet and set the stage for the coming theories of creativity. From Burke's declarations about the emotional power of words, it was a short step to Novalis's view of the pure evocative power of poetry as an art of blurred sense and vague outlines. An idea is now held to be all the more original and stimulating insofar as it "allows for a greater interplay and mutual convergence of concepts, life-views, and attitudes. When a work offers a multitude of intentions, a plurality of meaning, and above all a wide variety of different ways of being understood and appreciated, then under these conditions we can only conclude that it is of vital interest and that it is a pure expression of personality."[3]

To close our consideration of the Romantic period, it will be useful to refer to the first occasion when a conscious poetics of the open work appears. The moment is late-nineteenth-century Symbolism; the text is Verlaine's *Art Poétique*:

> De la musique avant toute chose,
> et pour cela préfère l'impair
> plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air
> sans rien en lui qui pèse et qui pose.

> Music before everything else,
> and, to that end, prefer the uneven
> more vague and more soluble in air
> with nothing in it that is heavy or still.

Mallarmé's programmatic statement is even more explicit and pronounced in this context: "Nommer un objet c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème, qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer . . . voilà le rêve" ("To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which is composed of the pleasure of guessing little by little: to suggest . . . there is the dream"). The important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process. Blank space surrounding a word, typographical adjustments, and spatial composition in the page setting of the poetic

text—all contribute to create a halo of indefiniteness and to make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities.

This search for *suggestiveness* is a deliberate move to "open" the work to the free response of the addressee. An artistic work that suggests is also one that can be performed with the full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter. Whenever we read poetry there is a process by which we try to adapt our personal world to the emotional world proposed by the text. This is all the more true of poetic works that are deliberately based on suggestiveness, since the text sets out to stimulate the private world of the addressee so that he can draw from inside himself some deeper response that mirrors the subtler resonances underlying the text.

A strong current in contemporary literature follows this use of symbol as a communicative channel for the indefinite, open to constantly shifting responses and interpretative stances. It is easy to think of Kafka's work as "open": trial, castle, waiting, passing sentence, sickness, metamorphosis, and torture—none of these narrative situations is to be understood in the immediate literal sense. But, unlike the constructions of medieval allegory, where the superimposed layers of meaning are rigidly prescribed, in Kafka there is no confirmation in an encyclopedia, no matching paradigm in the cosmos, to provide a key to the symbolism. The various existentialist, theological, clinical, and psychoanalytic interpretations of Kafka's symbols cannot exhaust all the possibilities of his works. The work remains inexhaustible insofar as it is "open," because in it an ordered world based on universally acknowledged laws is being replaced by a world based on ambiguity, both in the negative sense that directional centers are missing and in a positive sense, because values and dogma are constantly being placed in question.

Even when it is difficult to determine whether a given author had symbolist intentions or was aiming at effects of ambivalence or indeterminacy, there is a school of criticism nowadays which tends to view all modern literature as built upon symbolic patterns. W. Y. Tindall, in his book on the literary symbol, offers an analysis of some of the greatest modern literary works in order to test Valéry's declaration that "il n'y a pas de vrai sens d'un texte" ("there is no true meaning of a text"). Tindall eventually concludes that a work of art is a construct which anyone at all, including its author, can put to any use whatsoever, as he chooses. This type of criticism

views the literary work as a continuous potentiality of "open-ness"—in other words, an indefinite reserve of meanings. This is the scope of the wave of American studies on the structure of met-aphor, or of modern work on "types of ambiguity" offered by po-etic discourse.[4]

Clearly, the work of James Joyce is a major example of an "open" mode, since it deliberately seeks to offer an image of the ontological and existential situation of the contemporary world. The "Wander-ing Rocks" chapter in *Ulysses* amounts to a tiny universe that can be viewed from different perspectives: the last residue of Aristote-lian categories has now disappeared. Joyce is not concerned with a consistent unfolding of time or a plausible spatial continuum in which to stage his characters' movements. Edmund Wilson has observed that, like Proust's or Whitehead's or Einstein's world, "Joyce's world is always changing as it is perceived by different ob-servers and by them at different times."[5]

In *Finnegans Wake* we are faced with an even more startling pro-cess of "openness": the book is molded into a curve that bends back on itself, like the Einsteinian universe. The opening word of the first page is the same as the closing word of the last page of the novel. Thus, the work is *finite* in one sense, but in another sense it is *unlimited*. Each occurrence, each word stands in a series of pos-sible relations with all the others in the text. According to the se-mantic choice which we make in the case of one unit, so goes the way we interpret all the other units in the text. This does not mean that the book lacks specific sense. If Joyce does introduce some keys into the text, it is precisely because he wants the work to be read in a certain sense. But this particular "sense" has all the richness of the cosmos itself. Ambitiously, the author intends his book to imply the totality of space and time, of all spaces and all times that are possible. The principal tool for this all-pervading ambiguity is the pun, the *calembour*, by which two, three, or even ten different ety-mological roots are combined in such a way that a single word can set up a knot of different submeanings, each of which in turn coin-cides and interrelates with other local allusions, which are them-selves "open" to new configurations and probabilities of interpre-tation. The reader of *Finnegans Wake* is in a position similar to that of the person listening to postdodecaphonic serial composition as he appears in a striking definition by Pousseur: "Since the phenom-

ena are no longer tied to one another by a term-to-term determination, it is up to the listener to place himself deliberately in the midst of an inexhaustible network of relationships and to choose for himself, so to speak, his own modes of approach, his reference points and his scale, and to endeavor to use as many dimensions as he possibly can at the same time and thus dynamize, multiply, and extend to the utmost degree his perceptual faculties."[6]

Nor should we imagine that the tendency toward openness operates only at the level of indefinite suggestion and stimulation of emotional response. In Brecht's theoretical work on drama, we shall see that dramatic action is conceived as the problematic exposition of specific points of tension. Having presented these tension points (by following the well-known technique of epic recitation, which does not seek to influence the audience, but rather to offer a series of facts to be observed, employing the device of "defamiliarization"), Brecht's plays do not, in the strict sense, devise solutions at all. It is up to the audience to draw its own conclusions from what it has seen on stage. Brecht's plays also end in a situation of ambiguity (typically, and more than any other, his *Galileo*), although it is no longer the morbid ambiguousness of a half-perceived infinitude or an anguish-laden mystery, but the specific concreteness of an ambiguity in social intercourse, a conflict of unresolved problems taxing the ingenuity of playwright, actors, and audience alike. Here the work is "open" in the same sense that a debate is "open." A solution is seen as desirable and is actually anticipated, but it must come from the collective enterprise of the audience. In this case the "openness" is converted into an instrument of revolutionary pedagogics.

In all the phenomena we have so far examined, I have employed the category of "openness" to define widely differing situations, but on the whole the sorts of works taken into consideration are substantially different from the post-Webernian musical composers whom I considered at the opening of this essay. From the Baroque to modern Symbolist poetics, there has been an ever-sharpening awareness of the concept of the work susceptible to many different interpretations. However, the examples considered in the preceding section propose an "openness" based on the *theoretical, mental* collaboration of the consumer, who must freely interpret an artistic datum, a

More than twenty years after its original appearance in Italian, THE OPEN WORK remains significant for its powerful concept of "openness" —the artist's decision to leave arrangements of some constituents of a work to the public or to chance—and for its striking anticipation of two major themes of contemporary literary theory: the element of multiplicity and plurality in art, and the insistence on literary response as an interactive process between reader and text. The questions Umberto Eco raises, and the answers he suggests, are intertwined in the continuing debate on literature, art, and culture in general.

This entirely new edition, edited for the English-language audience with the approval of Eco himself, includes an authoritative introduction by David Robey that explores Eco's thought at the period of THE OPEN WORK, prior to his absorption in semiotics. The book now contains key essays on Eco's mentor Luigi Pareyson, on television and mass culture, and on the politics of art. Harvard University Press will publish separately and simultaneously the extended study of James Joyce that was originally part of THE OPEN WORK, entitled *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*.

THE OPEN WORK explores a set of issues in aesthetics that remain central to critical theory, and does so in a characteristically vivid style. Eco's convincing manner of presenting ideas and his instinct for the lively example are threaded compellingly throughout. This book is at once a major treatise in modern aesthetics and an excellent introduction to Eco's thought.

UMBERTO ECO teaches at the University of Bologna and is the author of many books, including *The Theory of Semiotics, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language, The Role of the Reader,* and *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Harvard University Press, 1988).

David Robey teaches Italian at Oxford University and is a Fellow of Wolfson College.