

## *Veritas in Dictum*

### **The Meaning of the Absolute and its Symbolic Expression**

Ugo Mancuso

Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA)

Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones

Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET)

Buenos Aires, R. Argentina

Istituto Italoargentino di Ricerca Sociale (IIRS)

adversus@adversus.org

#### **Abstract**

As we follow and expand Umberto Eco's first reading of Thomas Aquinas, we can notice a prehistory of contemporary semiotics and very particularly of the "opening" theory. Thomas, with his theoretical turn, begins a reconsideration of the theory of significance and meaning, which will be developed in the subsequent centuries. Faced with the affirmation of the existence of an only truth and an only accessible way, he implicitly affirms there may be limitless readings of reality. This *racconto* of Thomas Aquinas' theory of significance also includes all the issues discussed in the opening theory: from the truth of language or the relation between language and truth, to the gnoseologic, logic relation between language and reality, and even a pragmatic justification of art. In short, the concept of "opening" is a ripe fruit of western modernity's textual theory; nearly one of the inevitable conclusions of a secular discussion on the semantic, cognitional text validity, on the pragmatic effectiveness in the implied story and on the limits of explicitness of its undecidable assumptions. Furthermore, it implies the possibility conditions of a subject theory within a potential unified social theory in a signal code.

**Keywords:** Medieval Aesthetics, Openness, Critical Realism, Semiosis, Symbolic Knowledge

#### **1. Introduction**

The communication process underlying all cognitive processes is partial, untransferable, unspeakable (and possibly undecidable) and relatively true because it is partial. Any nomination fulfils the logical and ontological principle (i.e. semiotic) of sufficient reason: pragmatically it is partial but true. Each enunciation is true because it is partial and it is partial because it is true.

Following this reasoning, largely inspired by Thomas Aquinas, the basic elements of a monistic theory of enunciation and the conditions of possibility of "openness" (opening) are presented. If proposed a principle of absolute truth but to some extent incognizable, it is equally true that everything that is said "must be in some sense symbolic, if there is not a literal representation" (MARSHALL URBAN 1939 (1952): 623). No theory of enunciation can escape the thickness, the inevitable presence of the event (cf. et. BACHTIN 1997).

Thomas Aquinas represents, for the tradition of Western thought and Christian culture, a radical change of perspective when replacing the idea of the literality of allegory with the hypothesis of a partial –by convention— symbolic reference about something that cannot literally be recognized but can always be referred to in a certain way. He asserts that human reason -though limited-can know God, denote or refer to trans empirical entities thanks to this symbolizing ability of natural language; the knowledge relation established between the human mind and the things of reality, empirical or trans-empirical, always has a minimum of truth or of sufficient reason. When enunciating, language does not refer to "universal" or total things (things as a whole are not fully

known by any speaker or language as a universal or abstract entity) but to partialities, to focalized perspectives. Cognitive relations are partial but objective.

The dualistic theory of enunciation (Augustinian, even Platonic) which states that life is somehow or other a fiction, that real life is in a certain hereafter, was current for many centuries for the Western and particularly the modern thought. The idea of Thomas Aquinas is Aristotelian, so to say, but taken to its ultimate consequences by asserting a contextual validity of the enunciation, irrespective of any ontological considerations. Knowledge may be valid but is partial, i.e., its partiality is what ensures its validity, its share of truth even if it is not absolute. By this Thomas is not saying that God is partial and absolute but God's knowledge of the cognoscente and enunciative subject will be inevitably and irrevocably partial though not entirely wrong or relative.

For the categories of thought of the Christian Middle Ages, God was a concept that was not discussed or that perhaps symbolized or referred to many more varied and different things than those believed by the spiritualists of the nineteenth century. To the medieval thinker, God was the universe, *ipsum esse subsistens*, God simply "existed", and he irrevocably "was". Thus, the revolutionary Thomas Aquinas, far from the image provided by the fundamentalist reactionaries of the nineteenth century, sets the basis for the empirical disciplines, providing foundations for the contrastive and demonstrative ideology of modern science<sup>1</sup>. That is, despite declaring himself a sincere believer, he is concerned with determining the conditions of possibility for rational, contrastive and quasi-scientific demonstration of the existence of God. Most remarkably, Thomas Aquinas does not enunciate this new vision on the margins of culture, but in some of the most ancient and relevant medieval university centres of knowledge: the Universities of Bologna and Paris (the heart of the philosophical system of Western culture at that time). Proof of this tension is the prohibition that his work will suffer in 1270, to be included in the code of books banned by the Church. The curious thing is that in the late nineteenth century, the encyclical by Pope Pius IX will make his philosophy the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church<sup>2</sup>.

Thomas, in his criticism, is primarily concerned with the scholastics immediately preceding, i.e., the medieval theory of allegory and the resulting conception of language, of art in general, as a useless, redundant ornament, used by a community to fake a communicative accomplishment. For St. Thomas, art or the generically aesthetic manifestations of all /language / s, keep a simultaneous and unstable relation with the current reality and the transcendent truth; they are not free, arbitrary, unannounced or anodyne. As it can be seen, his aesthetic theory has theological, ontological, metaphysical and fundamentally ethical implications.

The discussion about the thickness of the referent's objective reality is the great theme of any gnoseological, epistemological and hence methodological debate of European and Western thought from ancient times to the present. It is the theme of contemporary semiotics and the condition of possibility –moreover, the *raison d'être*- of postmodern deconstruction.

Problems that were marginal become central or they almost disappear; others tenaciously persist and are incessantly expelled but recur with equal tenacity. The latter is what happens with the problematic of "openness". Paradoxically a concept so modern, current and contemporary and even postmodern such as "openness", finds a correlate in the Middle Ages more than in Modernity. This is an observation that is owed to Eco when studying for the first time the problem of openness, from this perspective, in his doctoral thesis entitled *Il problema estetico in San Tommaso* (1956)<sup>3</sup>. The idea that this issue, implicitly treated and even thematized in contemporary artistic works should find its most important and definitive precedent in the Middle Ages, is no less revolting or

---

<sup>1</sup> This is one of the most novel observations that Eco begins to spread in his first treatise on medieval aesthetics (1959), in line with the ideas developed by some of the most prominent neo-Thomists of the twentieth century (Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Cornelius Fabro among others) and whose readings are far from the Thomists of previous centuries.

<sup>2</sup> It is a very interesting point that properly exemplifies the question of the translation or transmission of cultural objects and finally the different reception of the "same" text. This matter was not strange to the many "semiotic folds" and the crucial question of the signic openness of every textual universe.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps an ideological and theoretical clue was already present in Charles S. Peirce's logic-semiotic work.

counterintuitive<sup>4</sup>. That is, from a theoretical aesthetic issue whose object was the medieval aesthetics in general and Thomas Aquinas 'aesthetics in particular (considered as the symbol of the most reactionary and conservative theology during modernity), Eco begins to desalienate and automate a fundamental aesthetic problem: the openness (understood as widely as possible, even with a certain negative connotation) of any aesthetic message.

By 1950, it has already begun to arise among theorists of aesthetics, a redefinition of art as *self-referential discourse* (PAREYSON 1954) and Eco was not unacquainted with this theoretical and methodological shift. The textual background to develop the first version of his theory is secular: Dante as the culmination of a long tradition of biblical and theological hermeneutics; this does not mean there are no immediate precedents in the early twentieth century, but Eco's starting point is medieval aesthetics, subject of his graduation thesis in 1954. It is precisely, part of the analysis of a fundamental chapter of the *Summa Theologiae*: the one referring to "The Names of God", a *problema*, though until then exclusively theoretical (exquisitely theoretical), was central to any theory of language and any theory of knowledge. The question was how human language could name God, i.e., the infinite; in other words, how the finite (a logical-semiotic finite system, the language, representable for instance by Aristotelian-Thomistic categories) could somehow name or refer to the infinite.

Modern, as well as classic logic, naturally assumed the existence of a non-textual referent, which was objective or at least intersubjective: *rea*, extra linguistic. The solution for medieval aesthetics and the theory of language before Thomas Aquinas – Eco recalls- was allegory: to speak of God, to name him allegories had to be used. That did not mean that those who used allegory believed or should have to believe that that enunciation was God, or his reference, it was only a partial picture, a *name* of the infinite divinity. If we replace the word "God" by "reality", "culture", "world", the *problema* is clarified. That is, we talk about things, but what is said *of* things has nothing to do with things. Things are "other things". This theory of language and reference (rooted in the Augustinian theology and other variants of dualism) ultimately posed an incognizable *noúmeno*: God was a mystery, reality was a mystery and language was a wall that divided us from ultimate reality. Basically, God was a mysterious, mystical, undescrivable experience. It could be known - at most - through a loving, sentimental relation, but not through a rational one.

For Thomas, God exceeds us; its truth is infinite but not completely inaccessible to the human mind that can know something. In this line of interpretation his conclusion certainly was disturbing to the more "orthodox" medieval spirit. For the Thomistic critic realism, the truth of an enunciation is so because it is partial, because it is not absolute. In other words, it is so because it is a practice i.e. a focused enunciation and a consequent partial reading and in perspective with that enunciation. Obviously, what St. Thomas ultimately asserts, is that human language cannot be literal. The literal knowledge (total and essential) of the world or of God, as humans, is barred to us; the knowledge of the whole, unlike the omnipotent Cartesian assertion, is not possible because it exceeds us. The only thing that can be reached is a partial knowledge, which Thomas calls "symbolic" and which has a partial relation, not arbitrary though historical (although eventually unmotivated) with the object. The Thomist *cogito* can know some aspects of things, but not the whole or their absolute essence.

The artist expresses just truths; partial, even *quasi* individual experiences (cf. CROCE 1901). The artistic work shares the idea of beauty, *shares*, does not exhaust it. His relation is unmotivated but not totally arbitrary because that participation, *hic et nunc*, is historical.

---

<sup>4</sup> If we were to make a graph (PEIRCE 1905) of this issue, we would notice that the "democratic and egalitarian" Modernity, daughter to the Renaissance and the French Revolution, curiously tended to dramatically reduce the pragmatic possibility of openness (on behalf of some universal, that was ultimately always transcendental, and a referent that was also universal and above all "objective") and eliminate any discussion of the variability of meaning. Moreover, what unfolds in the course of Modernity is a concept just opposed to openness, based on a referential theory of truth always verified by an exclusive or predominant criterion of correspondence. The concept of openness, beyond any conscious or clear intention, precisely undermines (irreversibly) the logic-referential theory of Modernity: Universalist, objectivist and realistic.

Thomas anticipates a Peircean conclusion: the sign denotes a final Interpretant that is not absolute, but definite at a certain intersection of space-time coordinates of the unlimited and always exceeding semiosis (cf. PEIRCE 1987).

Thus, the artistic object, the enunciation in general, is modelled in the context of a triadic and unstable textual relation with culture and reality. That triad is – in Thomistic language- the symbolic world, the historic-cultural imaginary anchored in a particular view, true but partial, of reality. The implicit consequence of such statement is that all artistic work, all aesthetic message, any linguistic manifestation is ultimately – apart from symbolic- a translation. In other words, *every artistic reception is an adaptive translation and never a simple decoding.*

It is no coincidence that during the Middle Ages the term "reading" was preferred (curious coincidence with contemporary semiotic terminology) rather than "interpretation". The emphasis is on divine exceedance, in the always possible *difference* between enunciation and reception. Therefore, any communication process, particularly the artistic one, is a process of translation. The hypothesis of communicability of the enunciation and its reception is a hypothesis of translatability among possible interpretative worlds. And this was not only for St. Thomas; for Saint Augustine the thesis is similar even though he insists on the dimension of exceeding mystery:

When Augustine was planning to write a book on the Trinity, he took a walk on the beach one day and saw a boy who had made a small hole on the beach, and was drawing water from the sea with the help of a snail shell and pouring it into the hole. When Augustine asked the boy what he was doing, the boy answered he intended to drain the sea with the snail shell transferring the water to that hole. As Augustine explained that that was impossible and laughed at the occurrence, the boy replied that it was easier to accomplish his idea than to explain the mystery of the Trinity, as Augustine intended to do in his book *Acta* (Aug VI (1773) 357 s.).

Thus, understanding the mystery of the Holy Trinity exceeds human textual logic and it can only receive a faint symbolic reading of its symbol. But even for Augustine that mystery is no *noùmeno*, totally incognizable but symbolically legible. The Thomist notion however goes further and asserts itself in spite of this: St. Thomas, using the same St. Augustine's image, seems to say that despite the immensity of the sea, some water remains at the bottom of that hole dug on the beach, a little bit of *sea water and not just a casual or allegorical image of it*. That hole, *in strictu sensu*, does not stop being something of the sea. It is not asserted here the incommensurability of knowledge but its partiality; but that knowledge, even though partial, has something to do with the so-called nominated reality. Otherwise, another possible perspective is the Platonic one and, consequently, the wide genealogy of textual and cognitive dualisms, namely the world of *doxa* and the world of wisdom. This subdivision of reality in ontological and hence declarative levels is determined by the normally implicit stipulation of both veritative meta-languages.

When the medieval logic-semiotic hypotext is thus reconsidered, there prevails a radical epistemological reformulation of the condition of possibility of modern science. A careful rereading of Galileo Galilei's *Il Saggiatore* (1623), which largely summarizes the core of modern methodology gives evidence, beyond appearances, of the effective continuity between Thomas Aquinas' logic-semiotic (or semiotic-epistemologic) approach in Galileo's experimental method and the foundation of positive scientific experimentation. The coincidental thesis can be expressed in the following terms: it is impossible to have humanly or even scientifically a definitive knowledge, though partially true, of the relative conditions of experimentation. Human knowledge, in a certain sense, is based on facts, it does not end with them, and it cannot ignore them, at least in its indexical dimension (i.e. symbolically). The modern paradigm replaced the theological and abstract concept of God by the modern concept of "nature". The scientific knowledge of nature is not complete because it can never stop being cumulative and perfectible, but simultaneously; it is somehow founded empirically and indexically. It is not an allegory or a free, dull occurrence

without empirical control: it is signic-communicative, expandable, and contrastable<sup>5</sup> (Mancuso 1999).

Even when it seems undeniable that Saint Thomas critically accepted the logic-ontological principle of universal essence, it is also undeniable that the performance (historical-discursive) of that universality is always particular and symbolic<sup>6</sup>. The symbol always enables us to apply the semiotic principle of plurality of readings as the ultimate horizon of the unique hypothetical universal truth; universal neither a priori nor synthetic but as a possible final enunciative interpretant. Universal truth is not simply the sum of the particularities of different readings, but the ultimate tension among them. Universal truth is precisely the possibility of hosting different readings of that universality or the recognition that at a certain point of reality, certain meanings can be recognized as universal (Cf. et. PEIRCE (1987), LOTMAN 1984).

This assertion, based on Thomas' ideas, enables simultaneously a) to affirm the unavoidable thickness of the "real"; but b) to overcome a simple, vulgar inductivist nominalism; and c) not to deny the universal (absolute or historical). The Thomistic conclusion can be summarized as follows: the affirmation of the (a) universal from the particular/finite. Therefore, what can be said of the universal is not an absolute and total conclusion. It is a particular one, but it is neither aberrant nor inappropriate: it is relative to its context of enunciation and in particular to its context of reception. This process of enunciation / reading in context is the way in which somehow, the partial can account for the universal.

St. Thomas overcomes nominalist reductionism, which is why this problematic is reduced to a formal question of distinction of both levels of reading. He was interested in saving the principle by which language has a *minimum* of truth, thereby ensuring the exclusion of radical and naive scepticism. He possibly did not consider the consequences of what he was thinking; maybe this strange mixture of relativism and significant commitment was what did not go unnoticed to the ecclesiastical inquisition, precisely because of the inherent character of the messages, particularly the aesthetic ones.

What he was interested in, let us repeat, was to consider that language was, in a certain way, true; thus, man had a knowledge that could be true to a certain extent. This knowledge was partially universalizable (could be universalized) rather than universal. And the fact of not being understood showed there were differences among human beings, sometimes impossible to overcome. At this point the key question is: Why is Eco so much interested in St. Thomas' work? It is clear that his interest is due to the theory of the "symbol": the symbolic dimension and the reference or enunciation of an extra textual reality. For San Thomas, in Eco's reading - and others' as Marshall Urban (1939) - language is not allegoric but symbolic; i.e. language does not speak about or refer to something that the human mind does not know ( for being excessive or inaccessible) with other words that are not literally exact, but language is symbolic because it is partially true (true communicative and referential action) when participating in the same dimension of nominated reality; i.e. the truths of language are partial, they are in perspective.

And this quality of language (its immanent perspectivism) is best manifested in artistic objects. Moreover, aesthetic objects are those defined by their possible change of enunciative perspective<sup>7</sup>.

From the beginning Eco is interested in this apparently anomalous phenomenon (read from the theories of truth by correspondence) of aesthetic openness and, in general of any significant openness because (in this theoretical co-text) it is precisely when the boundaries between aesthetic

---

<sup>5</sup> The universalist and dogmatic conclusion of positivism should not be seen as a necessary conclusion of the experimental model of Galileo's physics, but rather as an extreme development of the conclusions of the solipsistic Cartesian cogito, a continuation of the Platonic realism more than the Thomistic critical realism, radically fallibilistic for its strong "partialism".

<sup>6</sup> The understanding of this issue was clear for Peirce; the starting point of his theory of signs and semiosis, complex and simultaneously antinomialist, critical realist and anti-Cartesian.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Peirce: a sign is a sign when it can be expressed into another larger sign containing it (PEIRCE 2.228).

and non-aesthetic messages disappear. Openness is imposed as a "problem" of human communication in general and of artistic communication in particular. And this will be an almost obsessive question for Eco (and then, for all the deconstructionist criticism) during the following thirty years.

The concept of "openness" is ultimately, a ripe fruit of Western Modernity's textual theory; nearly one of the inevitable conclusions of a secular discussion concerning the semantic and cognitive validity of the text, the pragmatic effectiveness of the implied narrative and the limits of explicitness of their undecidable presuppositions. Moreover, the possibility conditions of a theory of the individual within a potential unified social theory in signic code (MANCUSO 1988, 1991, ROSSI-LANDI 1961).

As we follow and expand Umberto Eco's first reading of Thomas Aquinas, we can notice a prehistory of contemporary semiotics, very particularly of the theory of "openness". Thomas, with his theoretical turn begins a reconsideration of the theory of significance and meaning which will be developed in the subsequent centuries. Faced with the affirmation of the existence of only one truth, accessible in a unique way, Thomas shows -despite his undeniable orthodoxy- that what does not fit that perspective of truth, is not necessarily complete fantasy or falsehood: he implicitly states that there may be limitless reading perspectives of reality.

In this *racconto* of Thomas' theory of meaning, all the issues discussed when debating the theory of openness are also present: the truth of language or the relation between language and truth, the gnoseologic and logic relation between language and reality and even *a pragmatic justification of art*.

## 2. The Theory of Openness

The concept of openness, as understood in semiotic literature and in contemporary aesthetics, was undoubtedly the major Eco's contribution to the recent theory of art. It has however, enlarging and loosening its concept, remote precedents that could be traced back to Dante Alighieri and his already classic definition of the four meanings of poetry (*Epistle*, XIII); but as an accurate pragmatic technicism, it begins to become popular in the second half of the twentieth century, after the publication of *Opera Aperta* (ECO 1962) that, thanks to its accomplished title, allows for the diffusion of one of the fundamental theoretical terms of semiotics and of contemporary textual criticism.

In the early versions of the theory this concept was applied to artistic work fundamentally and primarily in a rather ambiguous way; but gradually it acquired different connotations until it was used by extension and for further formulations, *tout court*, for all texts.

The first Eco's approach to the issue in the late fifties was troublesome: that is, it was necessary to account for the "problem of openness" of the multiplicity of meanings of the artistic work and its non-univocity of meanings.

The common theme in these studies is the reaction of art and the artists (the formal structures and the poetic programs that guide them) to the provocation of Chance, of the Indeterminate, the Probable, the Ambiguous, the Multivalent (...). In short, we propose an investigation of several moments when contemporary art is in the need of Disorder. Which is not the blind and incurable disorder or the obstacle to any possibility of order but the fruitful disorder whose possibility Modern culture has shown us: the breaking of a traditional order that the Western man believed immutable and definitive and identified with the objective structure of the world (...)? This notion has been dissolved through a secular problematic development, in methodical doubt, in the establishment of historicist dialectics, in the hypothesis of indetermination, of statistical probability, provisional explanatory models and variables. So, art has done nothing but to accept this situation and try – following its vocation – to *give it shape* (ECO 1962 (1984: 30-31).

Openness is not seen as an immanent quality, inevitable or (*quasi*) essential to the work, but as a "simple" problem of communication, of its reception, due to some degree to heterogeneity or asymmetry between sender and receiver.

The original concept of openness, present in Eco's early work, mainly referred to a certain degree of ambiguity in the communicative information of the artistic work rather than to a sense of incompleteness of its meaning accessible in the receptive act. But on the other side, from the beginning Umberto Eco says that apart from being a theoretical concept, the concept of openness is thematized in the artistic expressions of the twentieth century. That is, Eco feels, since the very first formulation of the theory, that the concept of openness is not only the basis of a theory of art or a metatheory of language, but that it precisely appears as the subject of many artistic works of the XX century. Indeed, the theory of textual openness is quickly overcome and encompassed by a theory of cooperation of the reader. Many terms similar to openness begin to be used from the second half of the twentieth century in the field of literature oriented to general semiotics, post-structuralism and deconstruction. Theoretical terms such as "reader's cooperation", "dissolution of text structures", "deconstruction", "free drift", "structural incompleteness", "reader", "and textual enjoyment" and many others are eagerly circulating in the specialized bibliography. But not all of them -perhaps none- are absolutely equivalent (even if they respond to a common paradigm). However, in this conceptual and ideological diversity, when it comes to openness or open work, we are necessarily always talking of a *theory* or *aesthetics of reception*. In other words, we are considering issues that are primarily of pragmatic order and focus the study of general semiotics *on* or *from* pragmatics as the ultimate determinant of meaning: how the artistic work or message is ultimately received.

This is very important because it shows, apart from a theoretical change, a radical, Copernican, methodological change, in the study of art in particular and language in general.

It is already possible to anticipate a key conclusion: *the different conceptions or theories about openness will be determined by the concept we have of the referent*. The impossibility to see the openness of the artistic work and in general, of any text as something more than a problem, is due to the inability to denaturalize its referent, to the uncritical acceptance of a work that communicates, denotatively, something his mystified author - as its first owner- wishes to communicate and that the reader, according to an implicit and tacit agreement, should necessarily listen to and accept as a condition not to betray the meaning of the work. It is in this theoretical co-text, assuming alienately these premises, that the first, tentative versions of a theory of openness are developed and will become one of the most solid theoretical foundations for the subsequent deconstruction.

But how is it that we can epistemologically relate the main late medieval argument to one of the leading theoretical terms of contemporary semiotics? It so happens, as it can already be sensed, that the concept of openness is very ambiguous, as stated by Eco's work and other contemporary culturological studies. It is interesting to note how the concept is changing throughout the twentieth century and acquires different meanings more or less realist or nominalist, dialogical or monological, monist or dualist<sup>8</sup>. The theoretical concept of openness itself is a good witness to this and it also serves as an observational contrastive enunciation of such evolution: i.e. born as a theoretical and metatheoretical concept, focused primarily on problems of reception, it ends up (*a posteriori*) as a concept about the inherence of aesthetic production, or inversely, art semiotics (following the path already covered by classical poetics) had to account for an epistemological transformation, thematized on the artistic work, as explicit text reading instructions<sup>9</sup>. "Openness" then, from being (*i.e.* from being read as) a defect becomes valued as an inherent element of aesthetic production.

---

<sup>8</sup> It is obvious for both nominalists and realists, that nominalism is monological, but not so as to be dualistic too.

<sup>9</sup> This hypothesis, not present in these terms in Eco's texts referring to openness, should deserve specialized treatment given the fundamental importance of its theoretical and pragmatic implications, even though it is beyond the scope of the present chapter. It does find certain correlate in Culler's work (1982).

### 3. Epistemological Perspectives in Textual Studies

A historiography of the criticism of textual studies could reduce its history according to two basic perspectives, eventually complementary: one, more widespread, hegemonic and almost exclusive, *author-centered*, and the other (less practiced and almost exclusive of contemporary literary semiotics)<sup>10</sup>, *reader-centered*.

The traditional *author-centered* criticism embodies a paradigm more or less explicitly "structural" or "formal", because its discourse almost inevitably focuses on constructive aspects of the artistic work (its formal structure, its deep structure, the dynamics of its characters, allegorical or mythical meanings thereof, etc.) or on "historical-philological" issues (fonts, background, influences, among others) that would ultimately explain how that work was developed, produced and materialized.

But when we suggest *reader-centered* studies, based on the reading of the work or on its reader, we are considering how it was received, receptioned, read or welcomed, even though we are not necessarily saying that the meaning of the work should be complemented in the receptive instance (something that could only happen when basic theoretical postulates are accepted, as the concept of limitless semiosis or interpretant). What actually always does happen, in a centered perspective or one that privileges reading, is a movement, a translation of a theoretical and also methodological type.

Making a quick *racconto* of the history of the theory and the aesthetic practice it is easy to contrast that, beyond the differences and the more or less implicit art philosophy, traditional aesthetics always tried to understand what art was what its essence was or how artistic works were produced and the meaning they conveyed. For centuries, in any artistic orientation -literary, musical, plastic- the problema of aesthetics, of the theory of art, was only the desire or intention of the author: what he wanted or would have wanted to say, how he had thought or how he conceived the theme, what was his attitude towards the problematic thematized in the work, etc.; almost no critic worried about how that work was transmitted, which were its receptive problems or whether there existed or not any problem of asymmetry, or at least of heterogeneity between the author and the reader. We should go back to Plato to find, for example, the serious concern about the actual receptive effects that an artistic work could have on the readers of the ideal Republic.

That is, none of these aesthetics (which moreover did not perform, in the majority of the cases, any specific analysis of artistic works or authors) raised the question of the reception, not even in terms of receptive "error" (as indeed will do, in a much less original way than intended, the School of Constance). Over many centuries, particularly since early Modernity, the problema of reception did not practically exist, it was not even proposed as a possible topic of study. This was based on the assumption, implicit in the majority of the cases, that there was not any problem between what was emitted and what was received, between what was said and what was heard.

The question is not obviously for free and it implies a determinant epistemological perspective: *author-centrism* presumes a concept of truth fairly universal, whatever that truth is; when reception problems begin to arise, what is being recognized -even though implicitly- is that perhaps there is not a concept of truth universally accepted, acceptable or generalizable. To some extent, this is the consequence of the somewhat mediated acceptance of an *ideology of linguistic relativity* (ROSSI-LANDI 1968) or at least the hypothesis, that there are problems to recognize something as socially "true".

---

<sup>10</sup> This does not prevent the recognition of a proto History of reader-centered criticism in texts such as *Ars Poetica* of Horace, or fail to acknowledge that Verlaine had already anticipated the problems of literary work reception and the sensitive question of the author's non-property of the literary text.

#### 4. The Veracity of the Referent and the Problem of Reception

Few theorists, before and after Thomas Aquinas (despite their limitations), raised the problem of reception in an explicit way<sup>11</sup>. There was no doubt that what had to be accepted was a unique truth, though not always there was coincidence in what that truth was; it was possible to reach a discussion about the value of certain truths (the roundness of the earth, the heliocentric theory, the free interpretation of the Gospels; the evolutionary theories, the racial superiority) even when discussing them could lead to terrible consequences. It is not that there were not semantic or pragmatic issues regarding the *veracity* of the referent, but the dominant theory almost never discussed that matter.

The first Modernity was leaving the idea of an aesthetics of reception and was concentrating on other problems; some sort of knowledge or concept of the "fine arts" was gaining ground, but some discussions, that were proper of the Middle Ages about the reality of the referent were relegated to a second place. One of these (possibly the main logical-semiotics issue), the opposition between the universal and the particular, the opposition between realism and nominalism were drastically reduced by a nominalist naturalization of the referent: it simplified the matter in what had to be understood as true or not, as true or false of an indisputable natural referent.

This problematic becomes relevant especially during the late Middle Ages, when the problem of the reception or the validity or the different meanings of the messages appear.

According to Dante (*Epistle XIII*) any artistic work, all poetry, could have four interpretations, four readings, four messages. But this plurality of meanings was not only already present *a-priori* in the work but it also corresponded, with both objective referents, to who had the socio-pragmatic competence to read, even its hidden meanings: one literal, one allegorical, one ethical and one anagogical (today we would call it ideological). Dante, reproducing ideas already present in Thomas Aquinas' critical realist aesthetics (cf. ECO 1956), was quite aware of the fact that any message, especially if it was artistic, transmitted multiple meanings implicit in certain codes or sub codes present in the work. The text contained, however objective absences theologically infinite, initially unreachable for the reader

The aesthetic conception of critic realism, as opposed to medieval and modern nominalism, implied an alienated conception of the audience, to a certain extent more homogeneous or homogeneizable. Moreover, the Thomistic discourse did not consider, *strictu sensu*, the problem of the homogeneity of the audience, since if the differences in readings were not due to an inadequate contextualization of one or more of the four possible directions, they should be –ultimately— because of a problema of misunderstanding of an infinite referent and only disclosable to the limited human mind in a very tiny portion.

Despite this potential disproportion, unrecognized, between the reader and his referent, there was ultimately an absolute symmetry between the reception and the production which determined that what it had to be understood, was the artist's discourse about that infinite referent that was mediated in that message. That is, if there was a receptive problem, especially in the religious or philosophical- theological artistic work, it was a problem concerning the proper interpretation of the referent even when knowing that there could be multiple meanings, because the whole denoted was infinite. To understand the deep meaning that the artist had wanted to give to his work, would reflect the true reading of those facts, because it finally was reflecting the fragment of possible and enunciable truth of the sacred history or the infinite reality of the world.

In the aesthetics or theories of knowledge before the twentieth century, the concern was not on the receiver because it was not admitted as possible that there could be any problems about truth. The

---

<sup>11</sup> In a certain sense, this problem was always implicitly present, because there was always a concern about what should be considered speakable and enunciable in a society; nevertheless, it was not explicitly raised as a cultural problema well until the twentieth century.

only recognizable issue was why the common man did not gladly accept truth, ultimately disclosed or disclosable by some hermeneutics. This non-acceptance could be due to problems related to method (Descartes) moral, ethics or valoration. At most, art philosophers could admit that truth was cumulative, perfectible, gradually revealed and even mutable, but there was no doubt that there existed a concept of truth universally recognizable as such or as future, utopic *desideratum*. Truth was a "real" cognitive object somehow.

By the late nineteenth century, that concept of truth begins to be in trouble with the first post Hegelian approaches and as a result of the profound change in the material conditions of society at the turn of the century. But there is one aspect that should not be left aside when studying the appearance of the concept of openness: the problem of reception is related to the emergence of a "mass art" and it is also the result of the globalization of the European culture in the context of the great nineteenth-century Imperialism.

The historical context is defining: before 1850, to 90% of the population of scriptural cultures were illiterate (illiterate, *in strictu sensu*, at writing as the inability to write and read). But we can also speak of an illiteracy spread over other arts, as the non-reader or the reader neither educated nor accustomed to certain genres, types or styles. In this sense many arts had no public or an extremely limited one<sup>12</sup>. Obviously there have always been mass or at least collective artistic manifestations: Athenian tragedy, medieval games, Gothic cathedrals, Elizabethan theatre, the symphony or bourgeois opera. But artists conceived their work envisioning a model reader that was not the mass; particularly in some forms of literature, especially poetry, and academic music and to a lesser extent and for different reasons, in plastics.

The central issue lay in determining the degree of circulation of artistic goods. Some of them had a public purpose (e.g. a mural in a church or at a town hall or dramatic and musical plays performed in the public square, Gregorian Masses, troubadour couplets or epic songs), but mostly, in ancient times or the Middle Ages there were products that were not so public: the portrait of the Lord, the small concert, lyric poetry, among others. Then, despite a significant tendency to public art, the artistic work was closed: not only for its limited circulation but also for the implicit conception of the model reader and his role in the communication process

It is not only a quantitative matter (based on the amount of receptors) but also a qualitative one, in terms of the establishment of a hegemonic and high ideological homogeneity relationship between the author and the reader, against the fact, easily testable, that author and reader participated in a universe of discourse more similar than in mass art, where the relationship between both is largely determined by the heterogeneity and potential communicative entropy. That is, between the potential emission of a "popular" Athenian tragedy from the V century B.C., or a fresco in a Gothic church and its effective "massive" reception, there was a universe of discourse much more homogeneous than the one verifiable between a nineteenth century naturalist novelist or a plastic vanguards of the early twentieth century and their effective potential readers, mainly because of a heterogeneity (diastaticas, diatopic and diaphasic) thereof, as a consequence of an increasingly intense, wide and unlimited circulation of aesthetic products.

When art becomes a mass art, the entropy pursued and imposed by the author consciously increases. It is not that there was no entropy in the precedent reception: it has always been hypothetically possible for an atheist or a heretic or a foreigner, someone from a completely different culture, to

---

<sup>12</sup> This problem shows the pertinence and justification of the accomplished term "model reader" - introduced by Eco in the specialized literature since the publication of *Lector in fabula* (1979) - as well as how it conditions the social function of the art critic as the only or privileged interpreter of the artistic work's truth. It is no coincidence, then that the first crisis of Western hermeneutics was the invention of the printing press (Reform, Counter-Reform and the question of self-interpretation of the Gospels) and the second hermeneutics crisis appeared in the context of mass literacy and the consequent emergence of the feuilleton, the comics, photography, films, graphics, the phonograph and other techniques of unlimited reproducibility of the written word, music, image and various mixed genres, all of a markedly hyper realistic tendency.

enter a Gothic cathedral; or during the Middle Ages for a captured Saracen to enter a church and try to read from his own universe of discourse, a message open to multiple interpretations or *misreadings*, beyond the degree of cultural difference. But obviously, the highest probability was that whoever went to a church could share – or believed he could share to a certain extent- that universe of discourse, and that code, predominantly not-open, of enunciation and reading, i.e. (auto) modelled and monological.

Plastics and music begin to reproduce themselves economically and massively with the gramophone and intaglio; workers and peasants become readers of anarchist manifestos or adventure feuilletons, massively edited by proletarian newspapers. The nineteenth century, due to this syntagmatic and paradigmatic extension of readers - consequence of the modern printing press and the mass literacy- irreversibly heterogenized the receiver of the artistic work that now has become a massive aesthetic product and a victim of a growing cultural gap between the ideological substrate of transmitter and receiver.

Probably this heterogenization will be more dramatic in the artistic work and this, as an epistemological metaphor (ECO 1962), will begin to thematically account for such diversity that is now epistemic and methodological

"Openness" is thus updated, deepened and unavoidable with mass art or aesthetics or, more strictly, with the largest and most massive diffusion of cultural products, among which those typical of a mass aesthetics *ad-hoc*; that is cultural and artistic products designed specifically for large audiences, for its instruction, indoctrination, education, homogenization and even for possible consensus.

The process presents an original inflection in the second half of the nineteenth century, *when the first true form of mass art appears*. A brief analysis reveals the difference: the second Eight hundred bourgeois literatures are not only massive but also prone to massification because of its diffusion and reproduction; and it is expandable and militant. It is not only *to* but *for* the mass, in favour of the mass (or pretends to be so); it is becoming a quantitatively mass art (it is published in newspapers, in magazines, weekly papers, economic and less objectionable). People learn how to read and this literature is spreading over all areas of society, the reading public is extended and potentially universalized and democratized. A first moment of massiveness in reading arises in Europe and there appears a certain kind of narrative: of adventure, melodramatic, sleuthing, urban, that teaches the domain method of reality practice. But this literature rooted in the early Modernity of the fifteenth century, related to the discovery of America, also has and produces an unsustainable heterogenization of the reader: illiterates start reading, as well as their children, and foreigners, immigrants or conquered, because it is the literature of the empire, the great empire that moved millions of conquerors, colonizers and immigrants all over the world. The great colonial empire of the second capitalism will ignore frontiers and will have to recognize, to its own regret, the right of signic enunciation to a whole contradictory cultural universe, never before a *quasi*-hegemonic sender, never before a receiver of an explicit artistic discourse of hegemony. The literature of the nineteenth century is the first mass literature because of its radical massiveness; but it is also the first massively heterogeneous literature, with the consequent phenomena of cultures in contact and the inevitable mutual misunderstandings.

The process not only moves into the twentieth century, but it also sharpens and deepens, spreading itself over the entire artistic production, until it establishes styles or genres determined by expressive channels that are only and exclusively massive, such as the movies or very especially the radio and the television: unthinkable forms of intimism communication; artistic forms (if they are) are only possible if they are of massive communication. Obviously the aesthetic concept expands and extends to a transversal pattern; it is no longer the old concept of artistic work produced in cenacles, not even as class Hegelian ideology, nor is it the absence of a constant redirection of common sense for the expressive forms of hegemony. There exists, first and foremost, a quantitative increase -and therefore qualitative - of the artistically active agents, favouring a constant and ongoing creolization, now militant, conscious and indefinite.

### 5. *Veritas in dictum*

The logic-semiotic principle derived from some of Thomas' criticisms of the previous scholastics, can be summarized in the words "*veritas in dictum*" ("truth said" = The Truth is said). *Truth* (not total or absolute or dogmatic) *immanent* (pragmatic) in *what is said*. In other words, there is a sufficient *minimum* of reason (enunciative) in any assertion. Conversely, there are meanings, many meanings, beyond the explicit awareness of what is being said<sup>13</sup>. From this point of view, when applying the principle of "truth said" it could even be possible to reformulate the semiotic model of meaning. That is, when enunciating something about something, the one who enunciates supposes that his assertions *are*, partly or totally "true". Therefore, in a semantic model reformulated under these terms (ECO 1975), one could replace the word "truth" by "meaning" or yet even better by "process of meaning".

The principle of "*in dictum veritas*" and its consequent pragmatic corollary that there are many more meanings in what is said than in what it is believed to be said, is essential for the acceptance of the theory of openness or at least for the possibility to describe the phenomenon of first-degree openness (ECO 1994), ie: when I say something, I believe I'm saying one thing and the other/s listens / an/other / thing /s (depending on who enunciates or listens ) it can be certain, uncertain, true, false, nonsensical or absurd. It is assumed that meaning is to some extent true. The great presupposition of our language is that what we say is true, as perfectible as hypothetically it might be. We suppose "truth" is said, that is why it is said (it is "my" truth, but generally this provision remains hidden or implicit when it is not performatively explicit, even it's contrary). This is a quasi-universal communicative presupposition. It is the first presupposition of the enunciation and the only needed for the semantic narrative construction. The acceptance of this principle will derive in pragmatic effectiveness.

When laying it is assumed that the other believes or pretends to accept that truth is being said (textual). Moreover, the one who lies does so with the pretention of telling the truth (referential or at least referential textual), because otherwise to lie would be pointless, it would be a simple set of universal assumptions or presuppositions *in abstracto*. That is why the semiotic definition found in the introduction to Eco's *Treaty of General Semiotics* is so profound and yet so simple: «(...) semiotics is in principle the discipline that studies everything that can be used in order to lie» (ECO 1975 (2000): 22). In short, *a theory of the lie is a theory of the truth or a subtle definition of it*. Lying presupposes that there is something "true" that you want to *hide or limit* (i.e. the desire to limit the possible readings of the presupposed text). There is an attempt to increase communicative symmetry and reduce the entropy of natural communication, hiding certain kind of information in order to cause, induce and / or limit certain practices. Every time something is enunciated, it is always assumed that there is a referential true because it is pragmatic; it is not possible to escape from a concept of truth understood as a "real", suitable, useful or convenient meaning<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> To what extent does psychoanalysis not start from a similar observation? Cfr.v.gr. "Qu'on design oublie (...) derrière ce qui se dit dans ce qui s'entend" (LACAN 1975:20).

<sup>14</sup> Here comes a key question for the understanding of the critical point of/ against Postmodernism: the lie thus understood, is but a hidden stipulative definition (Cf. WITTGENSTEIN 1953). The quid is that if we do not accept a transcendental, revealed or ontologically proven truth, all what is said is a lie (or truth) because all what is said is a stipulation (explicit or implicit). From here it would also be possible to establish a differentiating principle between what could be considered fiction genre and "diction" genre, namely: *fiction* is explicit stipulation, *diction* is the implied stipulation and even the hidden one. Another question inevitably arises: the gender "science" (especially social contemporary) as defined in Greimas (1976), when consciously explaining its assumptions: Is it a generic third type or a variant of any of the others? Obviously, these are not minor topics in the discussion raised here.

We can pragmatically define "truth" as a sign enunciated in a given context that means something to someone, when it has some sense. That meaning is true in that context<sup>15</sup>.

But let us contextualize in turn Thomas' brief and accurate assertion "*veritas in dictum*" and extract the ultimate consequences. Consciously or not, intentionally or not, this claim was enunciated considering a potentially universal audience. Thomas assumed that humanity was unique and divine, but as a critical realist he was also part of the illustrious and ancient southern tradition (the same that will be developed, not without significant consequences - in Vico (1744) and Croce). So he acknowledged that that abstractly universal public, was very different, unlimitedly heterogeneous and sinful, and this was not a circumstantial or irrelevant fact, but an irrefutable fact of reality. Then to assert "truth said" ("*truth is said*") meant to recognize the conditions of possibility of the historical and irrevocable plurality of possible readings; it implied accepting, beyond his Universalist teologism that truth is empirically partial and elusive as a whole. Potentially each one could have his own reading of that truth, in this case of God himself. Heresy was, for example, partially and truly heretical and not a simple and innocuous or unexpected occurrence.

For all that language is not, cannot be, and should not be understood as literal - which would be the equivalent to total - but partial hence symbolic. Claiming that language is not literal implies denying its passive, naive referentiality (Wittgenstein 1953: § 1-18). If language were literal, it might be sometimes erroneous and sometimes true; asserting its literality involves affirming error and Truth, heterodoxy and an objective (objectified) orthodoxy. That is, if it is assumed that language is literal, human communication can only be understood as a redundant process of transmission of universally true closed meanings or as a pedagogical program of dogmatic imposition (WITTGENSTEIN 1953: § 18-35).

The communication model of literality, the model of presence's core, in addition to its gnoseological, epistemological and ethical implications, fails to account for how language works in everyday communicative processes: they are neither literal nor perfect or absolute<sup>16</sup>. That is why the model of presence must turn to the postulation of allegory to minimally explain in a metaphoric way the limits of referentiality. But the use of allegory, of metaphor as a substitute or degradation of the reference, leads to another paradox: "what is said is universally true but *my* saying or the *way* it was said, is referential and literally false." Thus allegory, in its different variants to save its universal truth, introduces the pedagogical fable so as not to recognize the partiality and historicity of the enunciation. "It is not so, but almost", "it is not precisely what it is meant "or "it is not so but it is on the path of truth" are some formula variants of the principle of literalism. So, is always postulated a truth that cannot be revealed, not because of its exceedance but because of its essential ineffability. All dualism dwells on these forms of unconscious or transcendental enunciation without exhausting them.

Thus, it is postulated an enunciative principle of incommunicability, an anti-pragmatic principle that is ontological and metaphysical by definition. Ontological transcendentalism is not content with "reality" and that leads to its denial by mystification (i.e. justification by contempt). Reality appears as dispensable, irrelevant, tautological, vain, and insignificant. Mysticism allows for worldly evil, because evil does not exist hereafter. That is why what is "here" does not matter. What really does matter is in another dimension that cannot be accessed.

These fairly transcendentalist's conceptions are implicitly and explicitly refuted by Thomas Aquinas who is interested in defending a pragmatic-empirical principle of reality and of the responsibility of human actions. The error moves away from fatalism when considering it a

---

<sup>15</sup> But the enunciative use of the concept of truth, always assuming that when enunciating the / a truth is said, cannot escape from any ontology. It seems that we are doomed to some kind of relation with the Self.

<sup>16</sup> Both models, however, could be considered, sub specie semioticae strict or even meta-semiotics and as absolutely alternative theoretically, but contradictory performatively.

historical event though not relative for its partiality. The incognizable is thus translated as not cognizable only for its exceedance and not for its transcendental essentiality.

For the medieval critical realism, fully represented by Thomas Aquinas' work, the assertion that language is not literal, involves affirming the real existence, though partial, of the world. On the contrary, to assert the literality of language, leads to a certain denial of "reality", of existence; for if it is said "the / my language is (potentially) literal (i.e. complete, comprehensive, definitive)" what is textually asserted would be initially *literally* true. But if it were relatively false, its *dis-sensus* or pragmatic refutation (almost the inevitable fate of any real historical enunciation), one might perforce conclude that *nothing* is certain because nothing is absolutely true.

This is the common conclusion of all dualistic models: abstract objectivists, but also mystics and / or irrationalists: from the mystic Christian (Augustinians, Gnostics) and Sufis to the multiple variants of Buddhism, and the dogmatists and extreme essentialist. Everything that is said or done is (potentially) false because it should be literal, but it is never definitively so: then this life does not matter or it is superficial or it is a faint, imperfect even unworthy copy of the hidden ideal. This model repudiates in some way the world, the existence; ultimately it repudiates earthly life which is conceived as fiction or fall.

Thus, paradoxically, it is possible to conclude that, language being false and unable to account for the transcendental, does not account for anything. It is a simple sum of names, *flatus vociis*, sometimes loaded with esoteric meaning (as in the case of Kabbalah) but without historical, social or empirical value. Nominalism, alleged extreme empiricism, claims however for a reactionary ideology<sup>17</sup>, as extreme and as socially regressive as its counterpart, the essentialist dogmatism, to empty the language of its value and historical sense and its immediate social thickness.

From a general pragmatic theory, the empiricist-nominalism theses and the essentialist-dogmatism theses are both logically equivalent. For them, the scope of language is in the field of the blind facts of the *doxa*, it is neither the episteme nor the idea.

Everyday life is superficial but also dangerous: no matter what we do in this life of appearances or surface structures, all that matters is the afterlife (for the mystic) or the essence (for rationalist). For both it is possible to grasp truth but not verbally: by irrational revelation (for the mystic), by pure reasoning, preferably logical-mathematical (for the rationalist). These numerous variants of anti-linguistic nominalism represent an unblemished tradition of anti or pre-semiotics of human thought, with the inevitable performative consequences of its discourse: the inevitability of the "real", the closed meaning of the dimension of the world. The naturalization of the reactionary univocity of semiosis.

For nominalism to live is to speak and to speak is to lay, hence the exaggerated cult of silence of metaphysicians and mystics in general and their praise of death that marks the end of personal enunciation. To live is to allow for the lie, to prolong suffering and the proliferation of evil. Death is preferable to silence, silence to enunciation, monologue to dialogue. In general, critical realists and pragmatists distance themselves from this implicit principle precisely because our interest is, in some way, in the actions of the praxis, they cannot be totally indifferent to us. But they are partial. Because they are partial, they are not literal. Because they are partial, they are partially true. They are true. They are not universally real.

Thomas also faces another discussion, interwoven with the previous one (that also has some current contemporary echoes), that will reappear during the Reform in the sixteenth century and that is precisely the consequence of the assessment of praxis: Do deeds matter for the salvation of the soul? In the thirteenth century, the dispute was centered on the controversy between the Franciscans and non Franciscans (especially the Dominicans, the order St. Thomas belonged to), between the papacy and the secular clergy and, subsequently after, in the sixteenth century, sharpened and deepened, between Protestants and Catholics. This was not an irrelevant or minor issue for the late

---

<sup>17</sup> The term "reactionary" is understood here in the most neutral possible way, namely, as a denial of reality, i.e. of plurality, of the openness of the real (semiosis).

medieval and premodern Christendom and it was closely connected to matters related to the *empiria* domain and the type of political practice derived from such assumptions. So, are deeds important or not? Who and what are they for? Obviously, a determined ethics and a consequent moral will be derived from the answers to these questions.

All that is done is done in the field of partial truth or partial lie. Is this observation sufficient enough to undermine all its importance? The dimension of theological dispute about the justification of charity obviously exceeds the limits of our object. However, it is clear that the possible answers to the question are directly related to the level of hostility or acceptance conferred to *empiria* and the assessment of the level of social commitment and the recognition of the reality of the otherness

It becomes evident its unavoidable importance when the dispute is moved to the context of the social struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and of the validation of theories and of contemporary social discourses. On the other hand, *if a particular practice is partial that does not invalidate its thickness of reality precisely because of the practical consequences of those acts (enunciative)*. The partiality of the act is its immanent justification, even whether any eventual transcendentalism is accepted or not<sup>18</sup>. In Thomistic terms, deeds are a *dictum*, partial as any enunciation, but containing a sense of truth because of its very immanent partiality<sup>19</sup>.

As mentioned before, the focus of Thomas Aquinas's criticism is *adversus* to the theory of language as literality. In the thirteenth century he presents a responsive theory of language as "adversary" to some preceding or subsequent enunciations (cf. BACHTIN [1979]). In fact, to propose language as literality (literally true, universally valid), was to accept that what is said is *totally* false or conversely, "irresponsibly" true.

This Thomistic criticism to significant literality allows discovering a central paradox of medieval and modern nominalism and rationalism, since if there exist a totally true knowledge, it will be totally universal and radically excluding doubt or difference. If it is not verified, the above said is either superficial or tautological. Empiricism, in both cases, is always meaningless. The paradox lies in that the practical consequence of that significant extremism was contrary to what was asserted.

Thomas' partial empirical world sails between the radical extremes of rationalism and empiricism and places itself in a redefinition of the relation between world and subject by means of a particular relation (Triadic?) with common language<sup>20</sup>. In Saint Thomas' Meditations the world is what it is (even in its possible transcendental dimension); the human being is what creation allowed him to be (fallible, perfectible and partly divine) but language is inevitably always here as first and final relation, producing, textually and enunciatively, its own effects, always beyond its temporality, precisely because of its partiality, its historicity, its universal and totalizing non-literality.

That is why Thomas defends the reality of the empirical world, the relation of that empirical world that he assumes (let us suppose that he believed it was real and transcendental) and the partial awareness of that relation between the empirical and the transcendental world: an eternal God that nevertheless is in need of that textual relation for his revelation. Beyond the principles he accepts "by the light of revelation", his emphasis is on the textual relation that, as a theologian, would finally prevail, in order to minimally explain the mystery of revelation by the symbolic quality of the natural language that can overcome the limits of the enunciative immediacy.

If it is not possible to enunciate literally, when enunciating, it is done symbolically. Any text inevitably embodies a principle of sufficient textual reason, a particular interest in context. From

---

<sup>18</sup> This is precisely the argument used by Eco in his article "De consolatione Philosophiae", in which he explains the apparent paradox of how the philosophical practice of Zeno of Elea, Parmenides' disciple and defender of the immutability of the Self, could be the main cause of Syracuse's fearsome and cruel tyrant Dionysus (ECO 1986). From a pragmatic point of view, the value of a text focuses on the practical consequences of its enunciation in a given context, even when that text considers that the Self is transcendental and truth is unique and universal. It is the context and its use that valorizes the enunciation.

<sup>19</sup> At this point it is quite evident that the background of the dispute is admirably thematized and not by coincidence in *The Name of the Rose* (ECO 1980).

<sup>20</sup> This fact became evident to Charles S. Peirce, as he explicitly acknowledges it.

this perspective, a particular enunciation could never be considered totally "wrong". Every enunciation, being idiosyncratic, has its "reasons" and the Thomistic symbolism lies precisely on the particular relation mind / world that every text untransferable proposes. This enunciative procedure is also presenting its own mechanism of textual verification, which again raises the question about the relation among the various partialities. The very text tends to guard itself from possible interpretations far from its intentionality and its enunciative intensionality<sup>21</sup>.

Readings (i.e. textual productions induced by inevitably previous texts) are recognized as potentially unlimited, even semantically plural but not as pragmatically equivalent. There are innumerable readings, innumerable textual productions of each particular enunciative relation between mind/world, but those readings are not all equally valid for their own sustainability and pragmatic consequences. Moreover, modern science will particularly insist on this since the reintroduction of the principle of verifiability -not enunciative but hermeneutic- which was a resource for the pre-Thomistic scenario, though moving the issue from the semantic-enunciative moment to the pragmatic-responsive one. That is, before Thomistic semiotics, the problematic, the Gordian knot was the literality of what was said; modern positive science, from the generalization of the Galilean experimental method, admitting the Thomistic principle of the non literality of any enunciation, will similarly emphasize the pragmatic verification of what is said and its empirical foundation. This modern neo-nominalism tempered by the recognition of Thomistic semiotics, would enable the plurality of what is said provided the hermeneutic justification or legitimization of the enunciation. Truth is recognized as a *quasi*-objective affirmation, legitimized by the social, historical and not individual but collective acceptance of the text and its immanent and hegemonic textual series<sup>22</sup>. The partiality and the difference of the enunciation, its inevitable openness, adjust into the scope of what is socially acceptable. It is clearly recognized and in a practically irreversible say, the character of textual *constructo* as the ultimate horizon of all possible enunciation.

From the potentially unlimited universe of the plurality of enunciations / readings arises the universe of texts (enunciations / readings) socially acceptable, semantically and pragmatically durable, *and i.e.* true. From Modernity on and despite the dogmatic tendencies of various scientificisms it is acknowledged that even if not all enunciations / readings are equally "true", they are equally possible or at least inevitable though not justifiable or socially convenient.

The irreversible tendency toward textual tolerance also raises a metaphysical, theoretical or scientific explanation of the plurality of enunciations and reading perspectives. The plurality of readings can be explained, at least factually, by human plurality, which is in turn sustained by human's partiality<sup>23</sup>. Semantic valuations crumble down and they are replaced by explicit pragmatic restrictions of plurality, despite the recognition of the holistic dimension of all enunciations.

The enunciation implies a universe that is true, as a whole *sub specie textualis*. The plurality of enunciations / readings is irrevocable but there are some enunciations / readings more likely than others, statistically considered as more acceptable, more useful, more suitable, more ethical or moral

In the Thomistic theology, and even more in the different variants of pragmaticist realism, everything is contained in the All, in the one, in that universal one (neither identical nor unique) that in fact exists. From the same principle ("what is not literal is in a certain way symbolic ") it is possible to understand the symbolic as the presuppositions and implications in relation to the acts of

---

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps it is a way of controlling the implicitly subversive side of the application of this theory in certain contexts, which is what modern science precisely does in a certain way. From our perspective an inevitable consequence of Thomistic semiotics.

<sup>22</sup> It is impossible not to think of the Machiavellian theory, masterfully reinterpreted, deconstructed and extended by Antonio Gramsci. That is a very curious phenomenon from Wittgenstein's point of view: there are situations in which obedience is total. How is it possible to arrive to that total obedience? How it is that language has that power? How is it possible to get to such level of consensus in daily practices?

<sup>23</sup> Obviously, the process is not unrelated to the experiences of the first European colonial expansion from the sixteenth century.

the sender by means of which he would be guided by or predisposed to encourage certain readings and discourage others. In this way the sender, each concrete sender and not the sender portrayed by the abstract objectivism, performatively validate, authorize, a resulting theory of reading. But the textual awareness of each concrete sender, despite his competence, has necessarily always, a limit: he cannot (and / or want to) either foresee all the pragmatic consequences of his discourse or explain all his presuppositions

Historically, Modernity restricted, exclusively and militantly, the universe of legibility after proposing a theory that legitimated the plurality of readings. In the field of factual knowledge, it specifically, privileged, in a reductive way, the discursive universe of physiochemical and natural sciences, from a radically empiricist gnoseological model based on a criterion of truth by correspondence. This epistemological turn, finally accomplished in the Positivism paradigm, will obviously be neither ideologically neutral nor absolute or unique, but hegemonic.

The existence of a hegemonic textual tendency does not imply that there have not been other tendencies. But the pragmatic problem is the condition of possibility for identifying those other possible textual tendencies. The pragmatic mechanism of acceptance of certain hegemonic texts and their subsequent more probable readings is extremely subtle and labile. The readings are constantly changing, some are massive and hegemonic, others are relegated or forgotten but they never completely disappear. There is always a textual tendency, but in a given context because every reading, as every sign, that is also the reading, is symbolic. That is why no text / reading disappear completely. It always maintains its discursive actualization possibilities, at least in determined contexts, even if their effective pragmatic consequences are limited.

That is another interesting phenomenon where Thomas Aquinas' reading shows a great interpretative capacity: readings (which as all signs are symbols) never completely disappear. If they apparently do, they reappear at some point of semiosis. This has other important pragmatic consequences. If readings multiply, sum up, spread militantly and the hegemonic tendencies of probability of its occurrence can change, but apparently never disappear, widespread partialities can also be changed although they are not universal in the sense of unique but plural.

In a certain sense, art is something negative or superfluous for any theory of the significative literality. It is no coincidence that in Plato's ideal Republic or in the Edenic Paradise (where all languages would have been literal without any significant residue) art or literatura did not prove as necessary, in other words, there would be no theoretical, gnoseological, epistemological or ethical justification for art to exist.

St. Thomas' theory of the symbol justifies, *per se* and implicitly, the existence and the need of art. This theory states that there cannot be a culture without manifestations that we could generically call artistic. Or better yet, aesthetic. For Thomas, as for Vico and Croce, the only way of expression is aesthetic, everything we do has aesthetic or artistic implications, because it is symbolic, because it is precisely partial. Art must not be justified because *there cannot be any art if there is communication*. In communication, any language is artistic in some way. Language history, art history gives testimony of it in the *perennial dialectic between conservation and renewal* of meanings, stylistic-syntactic forms and receptive habits. This dialectic could be understood as one between the symbolic and the literal by the use of allegory. Because if knowledge were literal, it would definitively be immediate and absolute and so communication would not be necessary or justifiable. Communication understood as an unyielding mediation, like art in any of its forms, i.e. as a *request of consensus* and not as a reflection of reality.

To understand language and art as mediations and the expression of truth in its partiality means that it will always be expressed in what is said. The theoretical, methodological and epistemological bases are thus founded for a theory of communication, a theory of multiple meanings and even a theory of the unconscious meanings. None of which could have been developed without presupposing the Thomistic prehistory of the theory of openness and its relationship with the medieval theologies and logic.

## References

- BACHTIN, Michail M. 1952-1953 [1978], «Problema rechevyj zhánrov» in *Literatúrnaia Uchioba*, I, Moscow, pp. 200-219.  
[1997] *Hacia una filosofía del acto ético. De los borradores*, Barcelona: Anthropos.
- BACHTIN, Michail, M. / MEDVEDEV, Pavel N. 1928, *Formal'nyi metod v literaturovedenii: Kriticheskoe vvedeniie v sotsiologicheskuiu poetiku*, New York, Olms.
- BACHTIN, Michail M. / VOLOSHINOV, Valentin 1929, *Marksizm i filosofia iazyka*, Leningrad, Universitete.
- CULLER, Jonathan 1982, *On Deconstruction*, Ithaca, Cornell Univ.Press.
- CULLER, Jonathan 1997, *Literary theory: a very short introduction*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press.
- CURRIE, Mark 1998, *Postmodern narrative theory*, New York, St. Martin's Press.
- DE MAURO, Tullio 1982, *Minisemantica dei linguaggi non verbali e delle lingue*, Roma, Laterza.
- EAGLETON, Terry 1996, *The illusions of postmodernism*, London, Transitions.
- GRAMSCI, Antonio [1975], *Quaderni del carcere*, Torino, Einaudi, 4 vol.;
- HARTMAN, Geoffrey H. 1981, *Saving the text: literature, Derrida, philosophy*: Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- MANCUSO, Hugo R. 1987, *La semiotica e la teoria letteraria italiana contemporanea*, Roma, Bonacci.
- MANCUSO, Hugo R. 1995, «Significado, comunicación y habla 'común'. La cuestión de la alienación lingüística en Ludwig Wittgenstein y Antonio Gramsci» in AMBROSINI & MANCUSO & RIVERA (comp.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Nuevas lecturas*, Buenos Aires, UBA.
- MANCUSO, Hugo R. 2005, *Palabra viva. Teoría textual y discursiva de Michail M. Bachtin*, Buenos Aires, Paidós.
- MILLER, J. Hillis 1987, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, Benjamin*, New York, Columbia UP.
- PEIRCE, Charles Sanders [1931-58], *Collected papers*, (Vols. I-IV ed. By Ch. Hastshorne & P. Weiss, Vols. VII-VIII ed. by A. W. Burks), Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- PEIRCE, Charles Sanders [1958], «Letters to Lady Welby» en *Charles Peirce: Selected Writings (values in a Universe of Chance)*, Wiener Philip (recop.) Nueva York, Dover Publications, 1958, Cap. 24.
- RORTY, Richard 1991, *Objectivity, relativism and truth*, Cambridge, University Press
- ROSSI-LANDI, Ferruccio 1961, *Significato, Comunicazione e parlare comune*, Padova, Marsilio; nuova ed. aggiornata, introduzione di Augusto Ponzio, 1998<sub>3</sub>.
- ROSSI-LANDI, Ferruccio 1968, *Il linguaggio come Lavoro e come Mercato*, Milano, Bompiani.
- ROSSI-LANDI, Ferruccio 1968b, «Ideologie della relatività linguistica» in *Ideologie*, 4<sup>o</sup>, pp. 3-69, (1972 (1979<sub>2</sub>)), pp. 117-88.
- ROSSI-LANDI, Ferruccio 1972, *Semiotica e Ideologia: applicazioni della teoria del linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato*, Indagini sulla alienazione lingüística, Milano, Bompiani, 1979<sub>2</sub>.
- ROSSI-LANDI, Ferruccio 1985, *Metodica Filosofica e Scienza dei Segni: nuovi saggi sul linguaggio e l'ideologia*, Milano, Bompiani.
- SEBEOK, Thomas 1972, *Perspectives in Zoosemiotics*, The Hague, Mouton.
- SEBEOK, Thomas 1991, «¿En qué sentido el lenguaje es un sistema modelizante primario?» in *Ad-Versus*, 2-3, julio-diciembre, pp. 23-31.
- WILLIAMS, Raymond 1989, *The politics of modernism*, London-New York, Verso tr.esp. *La política del modernismo*, Buenos Aires, Manantial, 1997.