

Gary P. Radford

The Mysterious Flame of Umberto Eco

INTERVIEWER

Many of your novels seem to rely upon clever concepts. Is that a natural way for you to bridge the chasm between theoretical work and novel writing? You once said that “those things about which we cannot theorize, we must narrate.”

ECO

It is a tongue-in-cheek allusion to a sentence by Wittgenstein. The truth is, I have written countless essays on semiotics, but I think I expressed my ideas better in *Foucault's Pendulum* than in my essays. An idea you have might not be original – Aristotle will always have thought of it before you. But by creating a novel out of that idea you can make it original... I simply believe that at the end of the day a story is always richer – it is an idea reshaped into an event, informed by a character, and sparked by crafted language. So naturally, when an idea is transformed into a living organism, it turns into something completely different and, likely, far more expressive. (The art of fiction, 2008).

Let me tell you a story. While in the process of preparing my contribution to this volume, I found myself traveling back in time to 1983 and 1984 when I was a Masters student in the Department of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIUC). I took four courses with Dr. Richard Lanigan who introduced me to the teachings of Michel Foucault (1972), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Umberto Eco (1976). In doing so, he exposed me to terms such as semiotic phenomenology and the human science of communicology (see Lanigan 1992).

I must confess that, at the time, I had little to no idea what any of this material was about. My Bachelor's degree in communication, earned at Sheffield City Polytechnic in the UK, had nurtured me on a steady and rich diet of social psychology and linguistics, where communication was about one brain transmitting ideas to another brain, and where sender-message-receiver was not a theory of communication, but a description of what communication really was. Dr. Lanigan also claimed to be talking about “communication,” but it was no communication I had ever heard of. At many times during my year at SIUC, I felt that Dr. Lanigan was speaking a different language, which, looking back, I realize that he was. Like Umberto Eco's (2005) character of Yambo awakening from his coma in *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, I felt like I was wandering in a dense discursive fog, struggling to make out discernible features which I might use to guide myself through this foreign landscape.

Gary P. Radford, Fairleigh Dickinson University, USA

DOI 10.1515/9781501507144-037

Brought to you by | De Gruyter / TCS
Authenticated
Download Date | 9/22/17 4:34 PM

“And what’s your name?”

“Wait, it’s on the tip of my tongue.”

That is how it all began.

I felt as if I had awoke from a long sleep, and yet I was still suspended in a milky gray. Or else I was not awake, but dreaming. It was a strange dream, void of images, crowded with sounds. As if I could not see, but could hear voices that were telling me what I should have been seeing. And they were telling me that I could not see anything yet, only a haziness along the canals where the landscape dissolved. (Eco 2005: 3).

At the time, I constantly told myself that there was something extremely profound and interesting lying beyond the surface of all the milky gray language, hearing voices telling me what I should have been seeing, but yet I could not. If only I could understand it! I was waiting for that magical day when the language would click, the fog would lift, and the landscape of semiotic phenomenology and the human science of communicology would appear to me in all its intellectual majesty and coherence.

That day never really arrived during my Master’s Program. I did well in Dr. Lanigan’s classes, but only because I had the skills necessary to manipulate the language and craft some presumably articulate papers. Like the hypothetical person in John Searle’s (1984) Chinese Room, I could move the symbols around to produce an output that seemed to resemble a meaningful discourse. But I never really grasped those ideas. I never really made them my own.

It’s been over thirty years since I had those experiences at SIUC, and I have spent the bulk of those years trying to avoid having experiences like those again. However, those experiences came rushing back in 2005 when I was invited to give the response to the Top Papers in Semiotics and Communication panel being presented at the annual conference of the National Communication Association held in Boston, MA (Catt 2005; McHugh 2005; Williams 2005). Reading those top papers, I felt Yambo’s fog licking at my window frames once again, especially when I encountered sentences such as this one, from Professor Catt’s top paper entitled *Embodiment in the Semiotic Phenomenological Matrix of Discourse*:

The habitus through which we experience our lives is in ontological complicity with the fields to which we belong, because we make investments in our disciplinary games. The illusion takes over and we are susceptible to a doxic sleep wherein we no longer notice the rules by which we play. In fact, the more competent we become, the stronger the isomorphic collusion between field and habitus. (Catt 2005: 4).

I am sure sentences like this are perfectly transparent to everyone reading this book, and certainly to everyone on the Top Paper panel. But for me, I found myself experiencing the same anxiety I felt back in Dr. Lanigan’s classroom. I had that same sense that something very interesting was being said, and wishing that

I also could talk like that. Preparing those remarks in response to the Top Papers, I found myself back in Searle's Chinese Room faced with the prospect of having to articulate a discourse that would give my audience the appearance that I knew what I was talking about. The response I ultimately gave said more about me than it did about the actual Top Papers, but, as good semioticians, we also know that this must always be the case in any act of reading and any interpretation of texts and signs.

So there I was, back in the fog. We must realize, of course, that Yambo's fog is not a literal fog. It does not refer to some failure of the brain resulting in the "fogging up" of the mind in the same way that the windshield of your car might get fogged up. Yambo's fog is a textual fog. It represents a condition where all of the key texts in Yambo's history have become unmoored and disconnected from each other. Yambo has signs, but no codes with which to order them. His experiences in the present spark associations with texts from the past, but he has no ability to order these associations into a coherent pattern.

Yambo's doctor attempts to explain the situation this way: "It's as though you remember all the things you read in a book somewhere, or were told, but not the things associated with your direct experience. You know that Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo, but try to tell me the name of your mother." (Eco 2005: 13) To which Yambo replies: "I suppose I had a mother, since I know it's a law of the species, but ... here again ... the fog." (Eco 2005: 13) Eco's novel is a wonderful exercise in describing Yambo's quest to reconstruct the connections amongst his textual associations in order to find his place within his collection of texts and signs. It is an engaging and very accessible parable on some central themes of semiotics. Reading this book also offered me a semiotic way to understand my own failure to understand semiotics back in the 1980s. Perhaps Wittgenstein said it best in his introduction to his *Tractatus*, where he wrote that his book: "Will perhaps be understood only by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it – or similar thoughts. ...Its purpose would be achieved if there were one person who read it with understanding and to whom it gave pleasure." (Kolak 1998: xxxi) Well, as one who had been deeply ingrained in the social psychological view of the world, it was clear that I had certainly not shared any thoughts at all with Merleau-Ponty and Dr. Lanigan and there was certainly very little pleasure being gained from the experience.

Like Yambo, my exposure to unique textual experiences, such as trying to read Merleau-Ponty or listening to Dr. Lanigan lecture, could only result in the most random associations with texts I had from my own experience. But these connections had no shape and no system. They were signs without a language. It took me many years to realize and understand that I wasn't learning something about the world, or about the nature of people, or even about the nature of lan-

guage. I was not being faced with an ontological question. Instead, I was being asked to learn a new language: a set of signs and a code by which to use them. And by learning a new language, I was to discover a new world, and a new relationship of ourselves to that world. As Professor Catt (2005: 9) points out: “Reality exists. Signs symbolize it, lending it structure; indexically reference it; and iconically resemble it. But, a signifying relation is all we may ever know of reality. If we could experience primordial reality ‘in the raw,’ so to speak, we would have no recourse to signs, nor reason to speak. In short, reality is constructed in semi-osis.”

Reading those Top Papers in Semiotics in 2005, I was happy that Eco’s story of Yambo and his experiences provided me with at least a few chinks of light in my textual fog where my associations could hang together in more or less appropriate ways. Yambo might refer to this desire to reach out to such chinks of lights as a “Mysterious Flame” (Eco 2005: 66–67) as in this conversation with his wife Paola:

But the next morning, as I was waking up and making coffee, I found myself singing “Sola me ne vo la citta” [In Search of You] The melody came of its own accord. And my eyes teared up.

“Why that song?” Paola asked.

“Who knows? Maybe because it’s about searching for someone. No idea who.”

“You’ve crossed the barrier into the forties,” she reflected, curious.

“It’s not that,” I said. “It’s that I felt something inside. Like a tremor. No, not like a tremor... As if someone were to come here from the fourth dimension and touch us from the inside – say on the pylorus – gently. What does it feel like when someone tickles your pylorus?¹ I would say ... a mysterious flame.” They would feel something they’d never felt before, and they wouldn’t be able to say what it was.”

It might be considered somewhat ironic that Yambo’s invocation of a “mysterious flame” here to make sense of his feeling is itself the result of a mysterious flame experienced by the author, Umberto Eco, about a comic entitled “The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana.” As Eco (n. d.) explains in an interview:

As for the mysterious flame, I must say that when thinking of this novel, before starting writing it, I decided that its title should be *The Mysterious Flame of the Queen Loana*. Why? Because I remembered the title of that old comic book, only the title, not the story, but that title evidently fascinated me when I was a kid. Once I stated that that had to be the title of

¹ The pylorus is the region of the stomach that connects to the duodenum. The pyloric sphincter, or valve, is a strong ring of smooth muscle at the end of the pyloric canal and lets food pass from the stomach to the duodenum.

my book, it came as a natural consequence that Yambo, when feeling the strange sensation of recognizing something of his past, thinks of that sensation as a sort of flame.

And further:

... what fascinated me was the title and the same happens to Yambo. Having preserved only his cultural and public memory, he is obsessed by words; he has lost things (including the story of Loana) and has remained only with words.

So we have the mysterious flames experienced by Umberto Eco (he remembers the title of a comic book and concludes that he must have found it fascinating, even though he cannot remember the story) providing the inspiration of the mysterious flames experienced by Yambo (he tears up upon hearing “Sola me ne vo la citta” so it must have some significance for him) which, in turn, inspire the mysterious flames of myself attempting to make sense of my own experience reading these Top Papers (Dr. Lanigan said something of great importance in 1983. I don’t know what it was, only that it has stuck with me these many years, and is being reactivated again in this moment, even if I cannot articulate it). Eco (2000: 57) wrote that: “Often, when faced with an unknown phenomenon, we react by approximation: we seek that scrap of content, already present in our encyclopedia, which for better or worse seems to account for the new fact.” The trick, of course, is to be able to understand and articulate my mysterious flames in ways that I, and my audience, might understand. Such a task, of course, is the quest embarked on by Yambo throughout the entire novel.

My task of addressing these mysterious flames was frustrating, no doubt, just as it was frustrating for Yambo. But it also served to foreground my love of the way reading and interpretation are fragile and human exercises. There is always uncertainty and danger in the rationalization of a mysterious flame. It is though our reading is always subject to unpredictable and uncontrollable currents. I have the texts of these Top Papers before me, but my reading of these texts remains unknown until I actually engage in the act. Creating meaning from a text is like opening a present on Christmas morning. There is always a sense of anticipation and excitement of revealing something unknown. Maybe this will be best text I have ever read that will change my life forever. Who knows what other text or scrap of content will be invoked as I read? What past lives will be made real again as I read this text? Eco (2005: 117) captures this experience in Yambo’s experience in the attic:

I did not read everything word for word. Some books and magazines I skimmed as though I were flying over a landscape, and as I did as I was aware of already knowing what was written in them. As though a single word could summon back a thousand others, or could

blossom into a full-bodied summary, like those Japanese flowers that open in water. As though something were striking out on its own to settle in my memory, to keep Oedipus and Don Quixote company. At times the short circuit was caused by a drawing, three thousand words for one picture. At times I would read slowly, savoring a phrase, a passage, a chapter, experiencing perhaps the same emotions sparked by my first, forgotten reading.

And so I think back to those remarks I made in 2005. How did I come to form those particular remarks from reading these particular papers? Did I know that these were the remarks I was going to make? Absolutely not. They opened up like Eco's Japanese flowers almost of their own volition; language spawning language, text creating text, signs creating signs.

My remarks that day described my struggle to articulate my mysterious flames and to finally conclude, maybe as something as a cop out, that the mysterious flames invoked by my act of reading the Top Three papers and my consequent reflection on this act were also the key themes that united the Top Three Papers in Semiotics! For example, Professor Catt (2005: 3) wrote: "Semiotics and phenomenology are inseparable. Consciousness is always consciousness of something, and that something is nothing other than a sign embedded in a code." Reading this against the textual backdrop of *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, I could understand Catt's claim in terms of Yambo's predicament of trying to reconnect consciousness through the recovery of a code. Yambo's consciousness is constructed entirely through signs and codes and nowhere is this better expressed than in the final sections of the novel where Eco writes of Yambo's experiences within a comatose state. At this point, Yambo's experience is completely structured by texts and relationships between texts since he no longer has any access to the so-called real world. Through Yambo's condition, I came to realize that there is no experience without text and, at the same time, no meaning without experience. Does this mean I have finally grasped the meaning of semiotic phenomenology?

Mary Ann McHugh's (2005) paper addressed the struggle surrounding the appropriate meaning of the veil worn by Islamic women. She explored the question: What is the code in which the meaning of this sign, the veil, is to be read? Who decides what that code should be? We know that changing the code can change the meaning of a sign. But can changing the meaning of a sign change the structure of the code such that it will change the meaning of other signs, or even of a whole culture? According to McHugh's reading of Frantz Fanon, this was the goal of the French administration of the 1930s that were committed to a destructuring of traditional Algerian society by launching a direct assault on the meaning and the status of the veil. McHugh (2005: 4) writes:

As a conspicuous sign of adherence to the values of Islam, this ‘symbol of the status of the Algerian woman’ presented a strategic target for a colonial campaign waged in the assimilation.’ If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and where the men keep them out of sight.

For the French, unveiling the Algerian woman was framed as enlightened, emancipatory action. McHugh (2005: 4) writes: “Converting the woman, winning her over to foreign values, wrenching her free from her status, was at the same time achieving a real power over men and attaining a practical, effective means of destructuring Algerian culture.” McHugh writes eloquently of the very real struggles waged around the right to claim the code against which the veil is to be read. It emphasizes in wonderful concreteness the claim that all meaning is created out of a perpetual struggle of competing codes. Yambo wrestled constantly with the problem of competing political codes in *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, especially in those chapters where Eco describes Yambo’s discovery and reading of his pro-Fascist school books and other propaganda from 1930s Italy. Encountering such material from a post-Fascist world, Yambo attempts to reconstruct his own experience of knowing a world through the codes and signs of a pro-fascist discourse: “How did I experience this Schizophrenic Italy? Did I believe in victory, did I love Il Duce, did I want to die for him? Did I believe in the Chief’s historic phrases, which the headmaster dictated to us?” (Eco 2005: 205)

Yambo’s questions also served as means to understand Kevin Williams’ (2005) paper, whose driving questions are: “How is it that advertising persuades even well educated people?” and “How is it that ads work to foster a social reality that functions even when people poke fun at them?” Williams is addressing essentially the same questions that Yambo posed in response to his discovery of his pro-fascist schoolbooks. How do sane and normal people assimilate the essentially absurd and self-contradictory messages of consumer advertising (or pro-fascist literature) and make them a normal part of the way they see themselves and the world?

Trying to understand what the authors of these Top Papers were trying to say is obviously important when preparing a response to them. However, of more importance and insight were my own reflections on the act of reading those papers and how I attempted to articulate an appropriate response to them. It also brought into sharp relief how my position as a unique reader brings meanings to those texts, and on how it is that if I had read these same papers five years ago, or maybe five years in the future, the remarks I would give might be totally different. In 2005, all of my interpretations were filtered through *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. Five years earlier than that, it might have been *Foucault’s Pendu-*

lum (Eco 1989) or *The Name of the Rose* (1983). Who knows what I will be reading five years in the future? All this tells me that interpretation and meaning is a very dynamic and changing experience. As Michel Foucault (1972: 25) famously observed in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*:

We must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden, far from all view, in the dust of books.

We are all like Yambo, seeking a meaning and an identity that will never stay still long enough for us to say, “This is it. I have arrived at the answer. I have arrived at the meaning.” Even if we do fool ourselves into believing such a thing, our interpretation of that answer will inevitably shift as our own exposure to new and different texts, possibly a new Umberto Eco novel, constantly changes the ground from which we will interpret that meaning.

There’s no end to this process within our lifetimes. The ultimate answer can only come when our acts of interpretation through texts ceases, and that moment can only arrive at our death. At that point, all reference points are fixed. There is no future to move into. We will know and understand everything with complete clarity since there will be no more future experiences to make our present understanding ambiguous. It is no coincidence, then, that death plays a key role in Yambo’s own revelations about his life and of himself at the conclusion of Eco’s novel. Similarly, The Knight of Malta, a character in Eco’s (1995: 208) novel *The Island of the Day Before*, asks Roberto, the main character:

Perhaps it would be right to die now ... Are you not seized by the desire to hang from the mouth of a cannon and slide into the sea? It would be quick, and at that moment we would know everything.” Roberto replies: “Yes, but at the instant we knew it, we would cease to know.” And with that “the ship continued its voyage, moving through sepia seas.

In listening to my remarks, I am sure many of my audience wanted know what I thought about the Top Three Papers in Semiotics. Well, what did I know? What do I know today? What will I know tomorrow? Following the logic of the Knight of Malta, I could have told them, but to make it certain and unambiguous, I would also have to kill them. So it was enough to say that I enjoyed the papers immensely, and to let my audience leave the room alive.