

UMBERTO ECO

KANT AND THE PLATYPUS

Essays on Language and Cognition

OTHER BOOKS BY UMBERTO ECO

A Theory of Semiotics

The Name of the Rose

Postscript to The Name of the Rose

Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language

Foucault's Pendulum

Travels in Hyperreality

Misreadings

How to Travel with a Salmon

The Island of the Day Before

Serendipities



Translated from the Italian by

Alastair McEwen

A HARVEST BOOK

HARCOURT, INC.

San Diego New York London

1997

Chapter Two

KANT, PEIRCE, AND THE PLATYPUS

2.1 MARCO POLO AND THE UNICORN

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. A classic example of this process is to be found in Marco Polo, who saw what we now realize were rhinoceroses on Java. Although he had never seen such animals before, by analogy with other known animals he was able to distinguish the body, the four feet, and the horn. Since his culture provided him with the notion of a unicorn—a quadruped with a horn on its forehead, to be precise—he designated those animals as unicorns. Then, as he was an honest and meticulous chronicler, he hastened to tell us that these unicorns were rather strange—not very good examples of the species, we might say—given that they were not white and slender but had “the hair of the buffalo” and feet “like the feet of an elephant.” He went on to give even more detail:

It has one horn in the middle of the forehead very thick and large and black. And I tell you that it does no harm to men and beasts

with its horn, but only with the tongue and knee, for on its tongue it has very long spines and sharp...

It has the top of the head made like a wild boar... It is a very ugly beast to see and unclean. And they are not so as we here say and describe, who say that it lets itself be caught in the lap by a virgin girl: but I tell you that it is quite the contrary of that which we believe that it was. (Polo, *The Description of the World*, ed. and trans. A. Moule and P. Pelliot, London: Routledge, 1938)

Marco Polo seems to have made a decision: rather than resegment the content by adding a new animal to the universe of the living, he has corrected the contemporary description of unicorns, so that, if they existed, they would be as he saw them and not as the legend described them. He has modified the intension and left the extension unchanged. Or at least that is what it seems he wanted to do, or in fact did, without bothering his head overmuch regarding taxonomy.¹

What would have happened if Polo had arrived in Australia rather than in China and spotted a platypus along some riverbank?

The platypus is a strange animal. It seems to have been conceived to foil all classification, be it scientific or popular. On the average about fifty centimeters long and roughly two kilos in weight, its flat body is covered with a dark-brown coat; it has no neck and a tail like a beaver's; it has a duck's beak, bluish on top and pink or variegated beneath; it has no outer ears, and the four feet have five webbed toes, but with claws; it stays underwater (and eats there) enough to be considered a fish or an amphibian. The female lays eggs but "breast-feeds" her young, even though no nipples can be seen (the male's testicles cannot be seen either, as they are internal).

We are not wondering whether Marco Polo would have recognized the animal as a mammal or an amphibian, but he certainly would have had to ask himself if what he was seeing (presuming it was an animal and not an illusion of the senses, or a creature from hell) was a beaver, a duck, or a fish, and in any case if it was a bird, sea animal, or land animal. A nice quandary, from which he could

not escape by using the notion of the unicorn; at best he could have fallen back on the idea of the Chimera.

The first Australian colonists to see the platypus found themselves in the same quandary: they saw it as a mole, and in fact they called it the "water mole," but this mole had a beak, and therefore it was not a mole. Something perceptible outside the "mold" supplied by the idea of mole made the mold unsuitable—because to recognize a beak as a beak we would have to presume that the colonists had a "template" for the beak.

2.2 PEIRCE AND THE BLACK INK

Had he come across one, Peirce too would have had problems with the platypus, many more than he had with lithium or apple pie.

While it can be maintained that semiotic processes are involved in the recognition of the known, because it is precisely a matter of relating sense data to a (conceptual and semantic) model, the problem, which has been debated for a long time now, is to what extent a semiotic process plays a part in the understanding of an unknown phenomenon. Any semiotician of the Peircean school is convinced that semiosis lies hidden in the perceptual processes, and not so much because we still have to reckon with the fact that a good part of the psychological-philosophical tradition talks of perceptual "meaning" as because Peirce repeatedly stresses the inferential character of perceptual processes. Once again it should suffice to quote *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities* and the polemic against Cartesian intuitionism: we have no introspective or intuitive powers, but all knowledge derives by hypothetical reasoning from the knowledge of external facts and previous knowledge (WR 2: 213).

Peirce's proposal seems almost to describe Marco Polo's clumsy attempts with the rhinoceros. Polo had no "Platonic" intuition of the unknown animal, nor did he try to construct its image and notion *ex novo*, but cobbled together previous notions, thus creating a new entity starting from some ideas about entities already known. All things considered, the recognition of the rhinoceros appears to

be a far more complex abduction than the canonical ones: first of all, faced with a curious and inexplicable result, Polo guessed that it might constitute the case of a rule and concluded that the animal was a unicorn; then, on the basis of successive experiences, he proceeded to reformulate the rule (the list of properties that characterizes unicorns was changed). I should call this an interrupted abduction.

What did Marco Polo *see* before *saying* he saw unicorns? Did he see something that nonetheless had to be an animal? Note that we are opposing a primary “see” to a “say.” Of course, “to see” is a rhetorical figure, it stands for any other tactile, thermic, or auditory response. But the problem is that, on the one hand, it seems that the fullness of the perception (as the assignation of meaning to the unknown) has been attained by starting from a sketch, a skeleton plan, an outline, an “idea,” if you like; on the other hand, after having brought into play the idea of the unicorn, Marco Polo had to admit that that unicorn was not white but black. This obliged him to correct his first hypothesis. What happened when he said *this* is *black*? And did he say it before or after hypothesizing that the animal was a unicorn? And if he said it before, why did he nevertheless insist on the hypothesis that it was a unicorn? And when he realized that the animal did not coincide with his idea of the unicorn, did he simply admit that what he saw was not a unicorn, or did he correct his idea of unicorns, deciding that the world also contained ill-favored black unicorns?

Umberto Eco: *Signs for This Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997); Norma Bouchard and Veronica Pravadelli, eds., *The Politics of Culture and the Ambiguities of Interpretation: Eco's Alternative* (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 1999); Thomas Stauder, ed., "Staunen über das Sein": *Internationale Beiträge zu Umberto Ecos "Insel des vorigen Tages"* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997).

Chapter One / On Being

- 1 In difficulty, Seneca (*Ad Lucillum*, 58, 5–6) was to translate this *on* as *quod est*.
- 2 "Nominalism vs. Realism," 1868 (WR 2: 145). For analogous positions see also Hartmann (*Zur Grundlegung der Ontologie*, Berlin, 1935): the Aristotelian formula, inasmuch as it starts from the concrete entities but wishes to consider that which is common to all, expresses being, i.e., that for which the entity is an entity.
- 3 Gilson 1984. In scholastic language, at least, "existence is the condition of that which whose being develops from an origin... It is rightly said that if God is, he doesn't exist." Gilson's text contains a wealth of reflections on philosophical lexicography, of which I make free use also in the paragraphs that follow.
- 4 For these oscillations, cf. M.-D. Philippe 1975. For example, in the *De ente et essentia* we have the *quod quid erat esse*, the *esse actu simpliciter*, the *esse quid as esse substantiale*, the divine *esse tantum*, the *esse receptum per modum actus*, the *esse* as an effect of the form of matter, the *esse in hoc intellectu*, the *esse intelligibile in actu*, the *esse abstractum*, the *esse universale*, and the *esse commune*... The permanence of these ambiguities is also discussed in Heidegger 1973, iv B.
- 5 "One, Two, and Three," 1967, WR 2: 103.
- 6 I hope that one day this will be translated into German; that way, in Italy at least, philosophers will take it seriously.
- 7 "On a new list of categories," 1867 (WR 2).
- 8 "Of reality as pure reality it can neither be said that it is because it could be, nor that it is because it could not be: but solely that it is because it is. Reality is wholly gratuitous and unfounded: dependent wholly upon freedom, which is not a foundation, but an abyss, that is to say a foundation that always denies itself as a foundation" (Pareyson 1989: 12).
- 9 In *What is Metaphysics?*, Heidegger reminds us that it is different to grasp the totality of the entity in itself and the sensation of being at the center of the entity in its totality. The first thing is impossible, the second happens to us all the time. And as proof of this he cites the states of ennui (which are applied to the entity in its totality), but also the joy felt in the presence of the beloved being.
- 10 The problem is: Do I draw definitions from the evidence that gives me the sensation (and the subsequent abstraction of the phantasm) or is it the

precognition of the definition that allows me to abstract the essence? If the active intellect is not a repository of previous forms but the pure mechanism that allows me to identify forms under way in the *synolon*, what is this faculty? It is easy to fall into the Arab heresy and say that it is unique for everybody, but saying that it is unique does not mean that it is immutable and universal; it could be a cultural active intellect, it could be the faculty of identifying and carving out the forms of the content. In which case the code, supplied by the segmentation *brought about* by the active intellect, would determine the nature and the exactitude of the reference! In the *Poetics* 1456b 7 (notes Aubenque) it says: "What would discourse have to do if things already appeared by themselves and had no need of discourse?" Aubenque is quoting a page from *On Sophistical Refutations* (1962: 116). Since we cannot bring the things themselves into the discussion but must use their names by way of symbols, we suppose that what happens with names also happens with things; as when pebbles are used as counters. But there is not a complete resemblance between names and things; names are limited in number, as is the plurality of definitions, while things are infinite in number (as their accidents are infinite).

- 11 Gianni Vattimo argues that there is a Heideggerian right and a left (in the same sense as there is a right and a left among Hegelians). The right thinks we should pursue a return to being in the form of an apophatic, negative, and mystical reading; while the left holds that it is a matter of providing a quasi "historical" interpretation of the weakening of being, and therefore of rediscovering the history of a "long goodbye," without attempting to lend it currency again, "not even as a term that is forever beyond all formulation" (1994: 18).
- 12 For a mental experiment in this sense, see my *On Truth: A Fiction*, in Eco et al. 1986 (now in Eco 1990).

Chapter Two / Kant, Peirce, and the Platypus

- 1 Sometimes Marco Polo adds to the zoological universe, and through first-hand experience (or by the reconstruction of faithful accounts) he tells us of a sort of cat (in the Italian version, or a gazelle in the original French) that from a "sore" below the navel secretes "musk" that has an exquisite perfume. Today we know the animal exists, and we have identified it as *Moschus moschiferus*: and while it is not a gazelle, it is not far from one, being a species of deer that, from a pod near the aperture of the prepuce, secretes a musk with a penetrating perfume.
- 2 See the IX Lowell Lecture, 1865 (WR 1: 471–87); "On a method of searching for the categories," 1886 (WR 1: 515–28); and "On a new list of categories," 1867 (WR 2: 49–58).
- 3 With regard to the sin of compulsive triadism, Peirce offers us a good example in the eleventh Lowell Lecture, where he dares to compare the