Massimo Leone*
Hi-Fi, Lo-Fi, No-Fi, and Wi-Fi Interpretation

> So spake the Seraph Abdiel faithful found, Among the faithless, faithful only hee; Among innumerable false, unmov'd, Unshak'n, unseduc'd, unterrifi'd [...]
> (John Milton 1667, *Paradise Lost*: 5.896–9)

Abstract: The article seeks to establish a dialog, from a semiotic point of view, with the grand cartography of methods in literary criticism proposed by Prof. Zhang Jiang in his famous essay "Imposed interpretation." While acknowledging that Prof. Zhang Jiang identifies the most crucial weak points of the semiotic methodology, the article nevertheless takes these criticisms as occasions to improve the approach of semiotics, as regards especially the following oppositions: diagrammatic over-schematization *versus* quest for a more judicious application of the method; overenthusiastic adoption of mathematical formulas *versus* cautious cross-fertilization between humanities and scientific thought; frantic pursuance of theoretical uniformity *versus* humble acceptance of literary idiosyncrasies; fundamentalist proclamation of the self-reliance of the text *versus* thoughtful consideration of the evident links between the text and its contexts. This new theoretical approach, wherein traditional semiotics improves itself in dialog with Prof. Zhang Jiang's criticisms, is exemplified with reference to the concept of interpretive fidelity, which is categorized into different levels and dimensions of adhesion between the textual structure and the discourse of the meta-language interpreting it: hi-fi, low-fi, no-fi, and wi-fi interpretation.

Keywords: imposed interpretation; interpretive fidelity; literary criticism; methodology; semiotics; Zhang Jiang

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1 A view from a distance

In one of his poems, 8th-century Tu Fu,[1] among the greatest poets of world literature, sublimely evokes the young soul's longing for an all-encompassing vision of existence. Tu Fu's lines are so subtle that they cannot be properly paraphrased; they must be quoted, albeit in the elegant 2016 revised English translation by David Hawkes. The poem is entitled "*Wàng Yuè*," where "*wàng*" means 'gaze at,' usually at faraway objects, and "*Yuè*" is a word that might specifically refer to one of the Five Great Peaks of China; in this case, "*Yuè*" refers to T'ai-shan, in the eastern region of Shandong. Here is the text of the poem:

> How is one to describe this king of mountains? Throughout the whole of Ch'i and Lu one never loses sight of its greenness. In it the Creator has concentrated all that is numinous and beautiful. Its northern and southern slopes divide the dawn from the dark. The layered clouds begin at the climber's heaving chest, and homing birds fly suddenly within range of his straining eyes. One day I must stand on top of its highest peak and at a single glance see all the other mountains grown tiny beneath me. (Tu Fu 2016: 51)

Interpretations of this poem have accumulated throughout the centuries, yet none has been able to rule out that its lines fundamentally hint at a crucial hope of humankind, at the aspiration that, in the course of one's life, through spiritual exertion, a grand view of existence might be gained. That is also the ambition of young humanities scholars, befuddled by the variety of contradictory stances that they come across in their initial way.

In honoring accomplished scholars, then — as the University of Turin did when, in June 2015, it awarded an honorary degree to Umberto Eco — academic communities admiringly acknowledge that someone, through choosing impervious climbing paths and exerting him- or herself to the utmost, has reached if not the highest, at least a very high peak, from which ideas can be surveyed with superior clarity. It is the sentiment that one gathers in reading the essays of Prof. Zhang Jiang.[2] Centuries of history of attempts at dealing with the meaning of literature are presented as though in a marvelous cartography, which shows not only where the various continents are, but also their evolution and, what is more striking, the direction that is best to take in order to travel forward. It is not surprising at all that such an all-embracing view of the "Western" history of literary exegesis comes from a scholar whose cultural roots

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1 Wade–Giles: Tu Fu; Chinese: 杜甫; 712–770.
2 Vice-President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

are in the "Far East"; one of the privileges of observing from both geographical and cultural distance is, indeed, the gift of equanimity in judgment.

But what greater honor can be bestowed upon a scholar than that of intensely engaging with his or her thoughts? From the point of view of the present-day European semiotician, launching into a dialog with Prof. Zhang Jiang's writings is almost natural, not only because he often mentions, and often criticizes, semiotics, but also and above all because his criticisms point the finger at pitfalls in the history of the discipline that semiotics has long struggled to recognize and deal with.

2 Semiotics under scrutiny

Prof. Zhang Jiang often refers to semiotics in a critical way in several of his renowned essays. One of them, "Imposed interpretation," (2016) consists in a long, dense, and articulate overview of the different approaches to literary meaning. It is a survey that convincingly deprecates the instrumental deformation of literature for the sake of theories, carefully gauges advantages and disadvantages of each critical angle, and judiciously draws the perimeter within which literature should be made the object of refined, enriching, and respectful critical discourse. "Imposed interpretation"[3] pairs semiotics with eco-criticism and geo-criticism as an example of a perspective on literary meaning that frustrates the dignity of literature so as to compress it in the rigid grids of its meta-discourse. The Franco-Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas is mentioned as the inventor of the so-called "semiotic square," a diagram through which literary narratives are analyzed as sequences and transformations of logical positions.

One cannot but agree with Prof. Zhang Jiang's criticism, especially if one considers that, first, Greimas himself actually analyzed very few literary texts, mostly concentrating on a theoretical elaboration wherein literature often features as mere source of exemplification (the most accomplished essay of literary analysis Greimas ever published, *Maupassant* [1976], was indeed a sort of exercise, a virtuoso display of how the method should be applied); and, second, many of Greimas' epigones mechanically aped the master, churning out countless analyses in which literature or other texts were ground in the machine

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3 For a summary in English, Zhang 2016.

of the method merely so as to prove the efficacy of the discipline and affirm one's belonging to the elite of its practitioners.

To be fair, however, this critical assessment, albeit entirely comprehensible in the framework of a rhetoric of stigmatization of constrictive methods of literary analysis, overlooks that many, if not the majority, of Greimas' followers, like Jacques Geninasca (1997) or Denis Bertrand (2000) in literary criticism, Jean-Marie Floch in visual exegesis (1995), or Eric Landowski in social analysis (1989), while being deferential disciples of the master, adopted his method *addito salis grano*, concentrating on the specificity of their corpus, entertaining a fecund dialog with other disciplines, and never failing to amend the original methodology itself when it proved unfit for capturing the subtleties of their objects of inquiry. It should be equally stressed that Greimas himself continuously returned to his theoretical constructions, publishing an essay at the end of his career, *De l'Imperfection* (1987), where the semiotic square is kept only in the background, as a sort of discreet but necessary scaffolding, whereas the foreground is occupied by five elegantly perceptive readings of as many texts by Tournier, Calvino, Cortázar, Rilke, and Tanizaki, five analyses that would certainly satisfy the requirements that Prof. Zhang Jiang prescribes for sensible literary criticism.

In other passages of his essays, the distinguished Chinese scholar deplores that semiotics uncritically borrowed some its analytical devices from mathematics and physics in order to impose sterile formulas on literary texts. Again, this criticism hits the mark not only as regards semiotics but, more generally, as regards a diffused trend of 1980s humanities, which has been somehow also replicated, *mutatis mutandis*, by the 1990s humanists' frenzy for cognitive sciences, their 2000s infatuation for mirror neurons, their 2010s craze for ethology, and so on and so forth. In the groves of academe as in those of life, the temptation of achieving status by uncritically following the latest fashion is hard to resist. Yet, in this case too, one should perhaps distinguish — for that same sake of perceptiveness that Prof. Zhang Jiang advocates for as one of the highest values of literary criticism — the genial cross-fertilization that, for instance, René Thom proposed between semiotics and catastrophe theory (1988), from the risible mathematical analyses of literary or visual texts bombastically carried out by minor epigones.

A third, entirely understandable criticism that Prof. Zhang Jiang advances against semiotics concerns its tendency — which is shared by the whole disciplinary offspring of structuralism — to overlook or even curtail the specificity of texts for the theoretical sake of achieving a comprehensive grasp of the structural uniformities that supposedly underlay the variety of literary imagination. Indeed, the way in which ultraorthodox generative semiotics has

often sought to present the whole culture as resulting from the mere combinatorics of a few elementary constituents has led to unacceptable oversimplifications. However, again, was not the passage from structural to tensive semiotics, wherein discreet semantic oppositions were replaced by continuous semantic tensions, precisely meant to eventuate in a better match between the unfathomable complexity of the human literary creativity and the necessarily schematizing articulations of the semiotic meta-discourse (Zilberberg 2006)?

The same could be said about the fourth critical remark that "Imposed interpretation" makes about semiotics, especially in connection with Roland Barthes' post-structuralist attitude toward the non-referential character of literature (1967) and, more generally, in connection with the structuralist view on the death of the author, a topic to which Prof. Zhang Jiang dedicates another magisterial essay, entitled "Can the author be dead?" (Forthcoming). The obsession of much fundamentalist semiotics for evacuating the reading of the literary text of any extra-textual elements — such as the mind and life of the author, as well as the mind and life of the reader, or the conditions in which the text itself circulates — has often resulted in absurd critical self-censorship. At times, Greimas' witticism according to which "outside of the text there is no salvation" has been so blindly embraced that, in order to save the purity of the discipline, the literary dignity of the text and its existential consequence were disdained. In this case too, nevertheless, internal criticism matched external scrutiny, for instance in the whole new trend of phenomenological semiotics, which exactly reconnects the sign with its corporal descent (Fontanille 2011), or in the analysis of forms of life (Fontanille 2015), which situates literary texts in relation to their existential backcloth, or even in the latest results of Benveniste's analysis of enunciation, wherein emphasis is laid on linguistic structures that only acquire meaning in relation to a specific pragmatic scene (Coquet 2007).

Diagrammatic over-schematization *versus* the quest for a more judicious application of the method; overenthusiastic adoption of mathematical formulas *versus* cautious cross-fertilization between humanities and scientific thought; frantic pursuance of theoretical uniformity *versus* humble acceptance of literary idiosyncrasies; fundamentalist proclamation of the self-reliance of the text *versus* thoughtful consideration of the evident links between the text and its contexts: semiotics is often caught in these and other dilemmas, and often produces creative solutions to them exactly when stimulated by pertinent criticisms such as those advanced by Prof. Zhang Jiang.

3 Moving forward

As a modest proposal to the unfolding of this conversation, the present paper will now put forward a further correction to semiotics. It will be advanced in relation to a Chinese novel that, recently translated for the first time in English, has attracted worldwide attention: *The Invisibility Cloak* [隐身衣], by Ge Fei (2016). The plot of the novel is relatively simple. A man of modest means falls in love and marries a beautiful girl who, after a certain time, leaves him for another man. The process of mourning that ensues entails excruciating introspection, imaginary dialog with a defunct mother who had warned the protagonist about the unsuitableness of the bride, and, above all, exquisite digressions on the technical characteristics of stereo systems, which the protagonist assembles and sells for work.

Both readers and literary critics have marveled at the way in which Ge Fei intertwines meditations on the impermanence of sentiments with incredibly detailed descriptions of the technology of musical reproduction. Here follows, as an example, a passage in which the protagonist expounds on the ideal space where to situate a superb hi-fi stereo built for an ambiguous tycoon:

> In a previous telephone conversation, I had asked Ding Caichen to describe the layout of his living room. The floor-to-ceiling window on the south worried me. As I'm sure you know, glass is terrible at containing sound. Sound waves bounce off the glass to create interference that ruins the final stereo imaging effect. Ding Caichen followed my advice and installed a thick curtain in front of the south wall. As you can see, Ding Caichen clearly seemed to be a reasonable man, open to suggestions. His living room, though spacious, didn't provide a favorable listening environment for enjoying music. Usually the best place to position a speaker would be along the shortest wall of a room. But the shortest walls in this room were on the east and west ends, and they had no empty space. The west wall was occupied by a tower air conditioner, which couldn't be moved easily, and next to it a colossal fish tank, complete with softly undulating water plants and two eel-like animals [...] swimming back and forth. (Ge Fei 2016: 334)

In this and other passages, the author goes on and on about such acoustic requirements, often presenting the reader with long lists of technical names and specifics. The protagonist seems to be after the assembling of the perfect stereo system, where all the components — from CD-player to speakers to cables, without neglecting their ideal positioning in space — contribute to the immaculately faithful reproduction of sounds, without any interference, distortion, or noise. The utopia the protagonist is after — the enthusiasm for which he seeks to instill in his customers — is that of a musical environment in

which all noise is eliminated for the sake of guaranteeing the absolute pristineness of sound reproduction.

However, as the story unfolds, the attentive reader cannot but realize that the protagonist's obsession for musical fidelity — which Ge Fei powerfully evokes through the accumulation of technical details — is a metaphor for another kind of fidelity or, to say it better, for the topic itself of fidelity as it is subtly articulated on the various semantic levels of the novel. The most evident of them is the sentimental one, clearly visible in the main narrative focus of the plot, that is, the infidelity of the protagonist's wife, which has plunged him in solitude and existential despair. Nevertheless, to the perceptive reader, this sentimental infidelity too must appear as the narrative coat of another, more profound and, if possible, even more disquieting kind of infidelity. The writer, a university professor himself, hints at it through a self-satirical depiction of the academic chitchat on the "problems of the world" that the protagonist unwillingly eavesdrops on while he is working in the houses of his rich and sophisticated customers. Here follows an example of this ironic perspective on idle academic small talk:

> The day I brought the machine over, the professor sat, once again, at his kitchen table, this time lecturing his wife the volleyball coach on the awful condition of society. You know: corrupt social morality, destruction of irreplaceable traditions, the spiritual backbone of community broken by egotism and greed, and the rest of that bullshit. He concluded with the nugget of wisdom that no Chinese in today's society could possibly live a truly satisfying life. His wife, obviously tired of listening to him, sat hunched over at the table with her eyes lowered, unresponsive, texting furiously. Embarrassed at being ignored in such a way, the professor fell back on that old rhetorical figure which he still used and which I hated so damn much: "Am I right?" (463)

The futile self-righteousness of such pontificating on egotism; its blatant hypocrisy in being delivered to a working-class man, struggling through life, while he fixes the expensive stereo of the rich customer; the stereotypes that his haughtiness drivels on about: all contribute to present the protagonist with the picture of a world in which not only people are no longer faithful to their betrothed, but ideas themselves are losing their dignity, for they are infidel to reality, turned into the cacophonic distortion of a self-indulgent discourse, reproduced over and over again. Without spoiling to the readers the pleasure of the surprise of knowing how *The Invisibility Cloak* ends, it can nevertheless be revealed that it ends abruptly, with the rebellion of the protagonist, who exactly after the nth of these professorial tirades, snaps at it with what can be considered as the general moral of the novel, a moral that the protagonist has acquired through suffering and, above all, painful reconsideration of his utopia

of fidelity and perfection in human relations (at the end of the novel, he marries a woman with a dubious past, her face entirely disfigured by a local mafia boss).

4 The purpose of literature?

It would be intolerably presumptuous to try to define the "purpose of literature" once and for all; many brilliant minds have attempted at it, without ever being able to rule out alternative and equally convincing hypotheses. In the end, this conceptual object, spanning over millennia of human history, across all of its cultures, and taking sundry disparate forms, must serve several diverse purposes depending on its contexts of production, circulation, and reception. Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that most human beings enjoy literature because it offers to them a fictional representation, and possibly a solution, for the most excruciating conundrums of human life, from the mystery of love to the despair of death to the searing dialectics between friendship and treason. That is the reason for which pondering on how to best interpret literary texts, as Prof. Zhang Jiang does in his profound essays, is essential: learning how to respectfully approach literature is a paramount exercise in view of learning how to respectfully interpret human beings.

As Ugo Volli and other scholars have pointed out, there is a venomous connection between theories that disrespect the text through imposing a preposterous interpretation on it and theories that, in the course of the 20th century, disgraced human beings through imposing upon them racist definitions. Love for the singularity of the artwork and the unique way in which it speaks to us is inseparable from love for the singularity of the person, of his or her unique way of being in the world. Artworks, including literary texts, can be variously classified through different theories, but these should be nothing but a framework precisely meant to exalt what they cannot capture, what remains outside of their grids, i.e., the adorable singularity of each product of the human imagination (Leone 2018). In the same way, people can fall into various linguistic, ethnic, or socioeconomic categories, and yet how dangerous it is when this classification turns into a bureaucracy, and forgets what it is mostly about, that is, again, a framework to better highlight the individuality of each persona! (Leone 2016b)

5 Hi-fi interpretation

Ge Fei's *Invisibility Cloak* invites its readers to a multilayered reflection on the role of fidelity in the reproduction of music, in the reproduction of humanity through sentimental relations, and in the reproduction of culture through ideas and their discourse. As the title of the present paper announces, four different styles can be singled out in all these reproductions; each corresponds to a different philosophy of interpretation. The first is the style of "hi-fi, or high-fidelity interpretation." That is the utopia of the protagonist. It consists in pursuing the ideal of a perfect sound reproduction, without noise or distortions. But what is this perfect reproduction about, if not a way to homage the singularity of each sound, and the way in which it uniquely contributes, by concurring with other sounds, to creating the peculiarity of a musical artwork? It is precisely in order to guarantee the fidelity of the reproduction, its perfect adhesion to the musical idea as it was conceived and expressed by the creator, that the protagonist of *The Invisibility Cloak* assembles his complicated stereo systems.

To this acoustic fidelity corresponds, out of the metaphor, fidelity in human relations, which is, it too, based on the moral commandment of having to adjust one's humanity to the exact humanity of the others, in an unceasing effort where stereotypes and, worse, prejudices cannot but figure as guilty and sometimes violent shortcuts (Leone Forthcoming a). Staying faithful to the uniqueness of the other, to his or her peculiar face, is the highest moral lesson that Emanuel Lévinas endowed us with upon reflecting on the tragedies of the 20th century, most of which exactly stemmed from the sinful abdication of such responsibility (Lévinas 1961). Fidelity, however, is something that one owes not only to art and people, but also to what links them together, that is, discourse, texts as they are circulated in society, including in the refined form of artistic creation.

In literary criticism, then, high-fidelity interpretation is one that does not impose an interpretation upon the text, with an attitude that Prof. Zhang Jiang perfectly characterizes in his articles, and does not use literary texts for purposes they have not been created for, as Umberto Eco first underlined in distinguishing between the interpretation of texts and their use (Eco et al. 1992); it is, on the contrary, an interpretation that, adopting this or that theory to gain a framework in which to operate, does not mistake the text for the framework, but sees the text within the framework, as a painting is seen in a frame. It is an interpretation that accepts perceiving the similarities that the theory points at, in terms of semantic scaffolding, narrative structure, discursive organization,

and so forth, but then goes beyond it, for it is precisely in this "beyond" that the text's contribution to humanity consists. This "beyond" where the singularity of the text lies and hides could not be grasped without sifting the text through the sieve of theory, and yet this "beyond" is the text's most precious content, that which escapes the grids of the theory itself.

6 Lo-fi interpretation

What is, then, a low-fidelity interpretation? Well, it is one in which love for the literary text, and the specificity it enshrines, is replaced by passion for other elements, such as the supposed mind of the supposed author, the sociocultural context in which the text was created, the reception of it in this or that epoch, or the theory that is used to "interpret" it. All these elements are precious, and give rise to insightful approaches to literature (psychoanalysis of literature, sociology of literature, reception studies, deconstructionist readings including feminist and queer approaches), and yet they fall short of grasping the "beyond" of the theory, that singular content that the literary text conceals and discloses only to the most faithful and devoted readers. Each time that a literary text is seen as just another instance of a larger category, such as a genre, or a narrative structure, or an ideology whatsoever, then the specificity of the text is lost, its interpretation admits the noise of personal, historical, or theoretical biases, prejudices distort the text as if it were the thin and malfunctioning cables of a cheap stereo system, and interpretation is, in the end, a low-fidelity one, meaning that the sound of the literary text, its specific and unique sound, could be better heard if more suitable equipment, that is, a better approach to interpretation, were adopted.

7 No-fi interpretation

"No-fi" is a term used to refer to musical creations in which poor technical equipment involving the production of noise and distorted sounds is purposely adopted so as to turn acoustic chaos into the element of a subversive aesthetics, shuffling the criteria of established canons and normative poetics of reproduction. The playfulness of these practices is undeniable, as well as their dependence on mainstream aesthetics. Artists can play with noise only on the background of an orderly world of sounds. The same playfulness can be deployed in the sphere of interpretation. Deconstructionism plays with texts, it

enjoys the cacophonic sounds that derive from the enthusiastic application of a theory to a text, often to the detriment of its intended harmony. In social relations and behaviors, the subversion of traditional roles and normative schemes can be enjoyable too, a source of merriment and existential liberation. In all these cases, however, the aesthetics of noise can emerge only on a backcloth of reasonable reading, in rebellion to which the no-fi interpretation unfolds. There is nothing wrong with these ironic both textual and social games of over-interpretation; delegitimizing them or, worse, censoring them would mean turning a community of interpreters into a dictatorial one, leaving no space for individual impertinence and, ultimately, creative change. At the same time, when no-fi interpretations are presented as hi-fi ones, and pretend not only to play with the established mainstream, but to actually replace it, there the problem arises of a theory that not only cavorts around the text but, by claiming to institutionalize its own impertinence, eventually destroys it together with the text. No-fi interpretations are legitimate and even refreshing, as long as they do not want to preposterously pass themselves off as hi-fi ones.

8 Wi-fi interpretation

A last word must be spent on the fourth concept in the title, that is, wi-fi interpretation. As everybody knows, wi-fi is a technology that allows people and machines to communicate without any wired channel connecting them. The expression did not originally refer to the semantics of fidelity but is often interpreted as doing so. In our typology, wi-fi interpretation indicates a modality of textual reading in which the context that a "real" community provides to the collective establishment of the semantic value of a text is replaced by a "digital" community whose features increasingly diverge from those of any previous "real" community, until eventually the expression "digital community" becomes an oxymoron, for this community actually does not provide any coherent and stable context for reasonable interpretation anymore. Following this technological and sociocultural development, the expression "wi-fi interpretation" too becomes an oxymoron. Is it possible to have interpretations in a wireless world, meaning a world where real social ties are replaced by digital connections?

Throughout his career, Umberto Eco insisted on the possibility of determining certain limits to the process of interpretation (1990). Such limits are given by the structure itself of the text to be interpreted, insofar as this structure precisely constitutes that singularity in adjustment to which the cooperative

interpretation must take shape. However, this hermeneutic solution, which results from a sagacious reading of Peirce's philosophy of signs, is not unproblematic. Who decides, indeed, the morphology of a text's structure? If, according to Eco, what the correct interpretation (or the range of acceptable interpretations) of a literary text is after is its *intentio operis*, that is, the way in which the work itself is planned to be read, as distinguished from the *intentio auctoris* (what the author wished or thought he or she would express through the text), and the *intentio lectoris* (what the reader is persuaded to be able to find in the text when interpreting it), the problem remains of determining who or what ultimately establishes the normative relation between certain semio-linguistic structures and the way in which they should be customarily interpreted. Significantly, Umberto Eco never claimed that the process that, given a text, extracts an *intentio operis* from it, is a rational one; he claimed, instead, that it is a reasonable one (Leone Forthcoming b). The difference consists in the fact that also the relation between semio-linguistic structures and their supposed meaning is not given once and for all but evolves through sociocultural dynamics that another famous semiotician, Jurij M. Lotman, has tried to describe. Thus, what ultimately determines that a certain meaning is attached to a given semio-linguistic structure is not a king or a law, and it is not a linguistic necessity either.

The comparative reasonableness of some interpretative paths in relation to the unreasonableness of some others takes shape in a community of interpreters that share the same semiosphere and, in the long period, systematically interact with each other in order to set the boundaries — or, at least, the thresholds — of their semantic environment. These thresholds are the outcome of a continuous and complex negotiation that, as such, entails that established frontiers might in the long term be replaced by different lines of interpretive reasonableness. What Eco correctly criticized in deconstructionism was not the idea that the patterns of reasonable interpretation might be subject to change, but the idea that such patterns might be overturned upon individual initiatives, for instance, as a consequence of a critic's decision to read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a feminist pamphlet.

Interpretive "rebellions" of this kind are admissible and even welcome as no-fi interpretations, as playful but idiosyncratic ways to engage with the established community of interpreters; it would be quite worrying, however, if this or similar individual over-interpretations or even uses of the text were successfully passed for as hi-fi interpretations and, therefore, taught and learned in schools and universities, presented as the reasonable vulgate interpreting the text, and so on and so forth. That which would be particularly disquieting about this institutionalization of infidelity is that no criteria would

subsist determining which particular idiosyncratic readings should become the norm. Interpretations that are embraced by a community of interpreters as the most reasonable ones, indeed, have acquired their status through a long and complex process of semantic and hermeneutic negotiation, whose processes and final outcome largely bypass and transcend individual interpretive intentionalities. We cannot read literary texts as we please because, simply, they are not only ours. They belong to a community, to a cultural context, and to a history, which are all essential elements in configuring the singularity that emerges from a reasonable reading of the text itself. Every attempt at reading a text, and in particular a literary text, as if it had no specific language, community of interpreters, history of interpretation, etc. is doomed to exert violence on the text itself, disregard its *intentio operis*, and, eventually, produce one of those interpretive abuses Umberto Eco so eloquently talked about, one of those imposed interpretations Prof. Zhang Jiang so effectively writes about in his essays.

But what happens when there is no actual community anymore to negotiate and renegotiate the limits of interpretations? Can we say that the global digital community, with its amorphous language, and amorphous geographical contexts, and above all amorphous history, is capable of expressing a dialectics as complex and conclusive as those emerging from the real interaction of scholars in a symposium, of readers in a book club, or of students in a classroom? On the one hand, one might think that wi-fi communities even epitomize the interactive dynamics that lead to the establishment of interpretive canons in non-virtual communities; Wikipedia, for instance, and the way in which encyclopedia entries are cumulatively and cooperatively written therein by the community of scholars working on them, might be considered as typifying the communitarian interpretive process through which a "final semiotic interpretant" and habit is established (only to be renegotiated as the emergence of new information requires it).

On the other hand, what Eco had in mind when referring to the possibility of determining the limits of interpretation and its ability to grasp the *intentio operis* of a text was not a community of interpreters negotiating the actual content of a text, but rather sharing and contributing to shaping the discursive framework in which the various interpretations of a textual content might then be advanced. The problem of Wikipedia, as well as of other similar digital communities, is that they leave participants the freedom to negotiate the content of their interpretations, but not their framework, which is, on the contrary, a priori determined by an elitist digital bureaucracy, commonly closed to negotiation. In other words, we can easily have an impact on what Wikipedia contains, but we can hardly have an impact on how it contains it. Unfortunately,

this "how" is exactly what Umberto Eco referred to when positing the concept of a "community of interpreters" at the core of its semiotic theory.

Digital communities might seem — and are frequently presented by populisms as such — freer than non-digital communities, but they are not. A democratic state parliament debates both on its laws and on the rules that are chosen as a framework to bring about such laws; digital parliaments, instead, let all — and not only their representatives — discuss everything, except the digital framework of discussion itself, whose inner laws are actually invisible and untouchable to most. Perhaps in the future, digital communities too will express a proper semiotic arena in which not only meaning as content is discussed and negotiated, but also meaning as framework. To be honest, the current evidence about such processes of negotiation is more than discouraging. Digital communities let unreasonableness proliferate through various forms of contagion in which no kind of negotiation has any role (Leone 2016a). The most diriment difference between traditional communities and current digital communities, indeed, is that the latter seem to be completely uninterested — unlike the former — in any sort of community memory. They live in an eternal present that constantly flees toward a future but does not leave any trace if not in some remote servers, unexplored by anyone, or in "time-machines" that produce no collective discourse.

Above all, no ritualization of memory exists in digital communities, as well as no established pattern to transform past interactions into guidelines for future negotiation. A community without a structured memory uneasily gives rise to stable frameworks of interpretive reasonableness, exactly insofar as these frameworks must transcend the individual agency of intentional contributors and emerge, on the contrary, from the holistic functioning of the semiosphere. We do not abide by the grammar of our natural language because someone or somewhat explicitly decided so, but because myriads of micro-interactions, including those of our ancestors, have been deposited and distilled into a configuration that, despite the possibility of micro-variations, change, and playfulness, a community has come to accept as its standard. Unfortunately, at least thus far, such a holistic mechanism of formation of a cultural memory seems not to take place in digital communities, which are constantly swept by the wind of the present.

9 In praise of encounters

Will a new kind of fidelity, and reasonable interpretation, be possible in the digital communities of the future? For the moment, we cannot but cherish the occasion in which a real encounter among people takes place and produces friendship, as well as when the reading of a literary text allows one to meet not only its author, but also the entire community, and the entire geography, and the entire history that has produced its *intentio operis*. Also, as a way to celebrate the fruitful encounter of Italian and Chinese semiotics, of Umberto Eco's and Zhang Jiang's thoughts, it is perhaps opportune to quote another famous poem by Tu Fu, *Zèng Wèi Bā chǔ-shì*, which translates as "*To the Recluse, Wei Pa.*" These delicate pentasyllabic lines describe the moment of recognition that takes place between two old friends who have not seen each other for twenty years and who, nevertheless, as soon as they sit and drink together again, cannot but revel in the fidelity that each feels and exerts in relation to the other:

> "Come, we don't meet often!" you hospitably urge, pouring out ten cupfuls in rapid succession. That I am still not drunk after ten cups of wine is due to the strength of the emotion which your unchanging friendship inspires. Tomorrow the Peak will lie between us, and each will be lost to the other, swallowed up in the world's affairs". (Tu Fu 2016: 341)

This ability to treasure the faithfulness of recognition — of the singularity of a text, of a friend, of a landscape — albeit amidst the bustling of "world affairs," is probably what the highest fidelity of an interpretation is about.

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Bionote

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