

Eco's "latratus canis": A memory of the backstage

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Abstract. The paper describes the collaboration between Umberto Eco and his students Roberto Lambertini, Costantino Marmo, and Andrea Tabarroni resulting in the joint article "Latratus canis" ("On animal language in the medieval classification of signs").

Keywords: history of semiotics; medieval semiotics; Umberto Eco

The first time I personally met Umberto Eco was at the beginning of 1982, at his exam in Semiotics. This was the last exam before my degree in Philosophy at the University of Bologna, where I had been hanging around at the Department of Philosophy for several years in the company of my friends and colleagues Andrea Tabarroni and Roberto Lambertini. We were known as "the three Ockhamists", because of our insane passion for the philosophy of William of Ockham, or "the three musketeers", for our inseparable uni-totality. The Semiotics course of 1980–1981 which we had attended, had Porphyry's *Isagoge* as its subject (Eco was working on his anti-Porphyry essay at that time – see Eco 1983) and this was a great opportunity for us. Eco exempted us from the written examination on his textbook *A Theory of Semiotics* (Eco 1975), while we agreed upon writing three papers on the commentaries on Porphyry by William of Ockham (Andrea), John Duns Scotus (Costantino), and on the linguistic theory of the Modists (Roberto). Eco appreciated these, and they became the embryos of some of our first articles (Tabarroni 1980–1981; Marmo 1981–1982, 1989; Lambertini 1984, 1989).

On 19 November 1982 the three of us graduated with full marks, defending three coordinated dissertations on the relationship between Ockham's "academic" and "polemical" writings – namely those composed before or after 1328, the year

of his flight from Avignon in the company of his General Minister Michael of Cesena. As regards our relationship with Eco, it would have ended then and there, had he not, at that time, received an invitation from the great medievalist Raoul Manselli to contribute to the XXXI Spoleto Week of Studies on the Early Middle Ages, which would be held on 7–13 April 1983 and was dedicated to medieval humans and their relations to the animal world. Eco remembered our papers for his exam (and already this was something extraordinary), somehow got in touch with us, and proposed a collaboration in a collective contribution (something even more amazing for three twenty-five-year-old newly graduated students). In fact, his second reaction to this invitation, after the initial complacency, had been a vague sense of loss: "And now what am I going to tell them about animals?" he had been wondering. Then, as it often happens, a brilliant idea occurred to him: "Let's try to see what talking about the barking of the dog has meant in the treatises on medieval logic", he told us. In fact, he had met the example of the barking dog several times when reading medieval authors and texts: Abelard, Thomas, and many others. Since we were more freshly familiar with medieval texts of logic and grammar, and had more time at our disposal (we were either just waiting for the start of a period of national service, or involved in jobs not entirely suited to a degree in Philosophy – for instance, I was working at the "mechanized" office of the Italian Postal Service of Bologna for a three-month shift at that time), he asked us to collect all the texts that might be of some interest for our topic. Within a month or so, we collected everything possible among the published texts we could find in Bologna's libraries, presented the results to Eco, and discussed them with him during long pizza dinners in various Bolognese restaurants at the end of 1982 and the beginning of 1983. What came out of these meetings was a reconstruction of the history of the classifications of signs from Augustine to Ockham.

But the most extraordinary things were still to come. We agreed upon the general (thematical-chronological) structure of our contribution, and it only remained to write it down. And here his greater experience obviously had the best advantage. For the final draft, he invited us to spend a day at his home in Montecerignone (in the Marche region, almost on the border with Romagna). There, after a short discussion on the essential points to be touched upon and emphasized in the article, Eco retired to his office and after no more than a couple of hours, while we took up the challenge of table tennis, he reappeared with an almost final draft of the article. Stunned by his speed, we re-read everything, suggested a few corrections and prepared (spiritually) to go to the conference. By the way, as Roberto reminded me as I was writing these notes, Umberto told us an interesting story about table tennis. When he was young, he had been a Catholic activist and the local leader of the so-called *Azione Cattolica*, a Catholic

youth organization, and once, together with other colleagues, he was part of a delegation that went to Rome for an audience with Pope Pius XII. He was very excited about it, but during the audience some of them talked to the Pope about ping-pong, that was one of the most practiced games in the Italian Catholic youth clubs in the 1950s. Eco was struck by the fact that Pope Pius XII had never heard about it, so that he had the strong impression that the Pope was living on another planet, far away from the concrete reality of the church. Going back to our main narrative, at the conference, held in the grand hall of Palazzo Ancaiani, Eco read our contribution and when the questions began to flood in, he called one of us (Andrea Tabarroni, who was wearing an ineffable pink sweatshirt) to support him with the answers when further details or more precise references to the texts examined were needed.

Unlike my associates I was not to attend the whole conference, and Eco offered to give me a ride to Bologna. I accepted willingly, though I was panicking inside: the prospect of spending at least a couple of hours alone with the greatest and most famous Italian intellectual was a frightening prospect for a shy young man usually short of good topics of conversation. And, indeed, that ride began for me as one of the most terrifying journeys of that period. Not only, and not so much, for the conversation, which obviously struggled to start, as for Umberto's questionable way of driving: the driving speed too high for my taste, the "not-so-semiotic" use of the turn signals on the highway, the cigarette perpetually lit between his fingers... It was the cigarette and the (in Eco's opinion completely wrong) position of the ashtray in the model of car he was driving that kicked off our conversation. To get an idea of its beginning you can read the following quotation from a short article titled "How to follow instructions" which Eco published about car designers (and compilers of computer manuals) a couple of years later and which was included in *How to Travel with a Salmon*:

For a number of years I drove a car, in many respects, excellent – except for the fact that the driver's ashtray was set inside the left-hand door. As everyone knows, a driver grips the wheel with his left hand, keeping his right hand free to deal with the gearshift and the various knobs and dials. If you also smoke with the right hand, depositing the ashes in a receptacle to the left of your left shoulder becomes quite a complex operation, one requiring you to remove your eyes from the road ahead. And if the car, like the one I am describing, can attain a speed of eighty miles per hour [and I assure you that it could... – C. M.], the few seconds' distraction it takes to knock ashes into the ashtray can mean sodomizing a Mack truck. The gentleman who invented this system was a serious professional who has caused the death of many people, not through tobacco-related cancers, but through collision with a foreign body. (Eco 1994: 138–139)

All in all, I must say, we were lucky. From then on everything went smoothly up to Bologna: indeed I was so absorbed by our conversation that I completely forgot the car, the speed, the turn signals, the cigarettes and the wretched ashtray. Eco told me about his first work experiences at the RAI (the Italian Public TV Company) and the Bompiani publishing house in the early 1960s. I cannot recall all the details, but I do remember I was struck by the fact that, when still at the gymnasium, I had received some formative influence from one of the books to the writing of which Eco had contributed in those years (though it was published under the name of Paolo Villaggio to whom the original idea belonged), *How to Get a Monstrous Culture*. During the boring French lessons my deskmate and I savoured it, splitting our sides laughing at the sublime inventions that it contained in the form of multiple choice quizzes. I was in the seventh heaven. The panic was completely gone.

A few months later, we met to write down the final draft of the article that would later be published in the conference proceedings, with the title "Latratus canis" (Eco *et al.* 1985). At the same time, Umberto had started putting together an issue of *Versus*, his semiotic studies journal, that was to be entirely dedicated to medieval semiotics. The opening article could only be the English version of "Latratus", now entitled "On animal language in the medieval classification of signs" (Eco *et al.* 1984, but actually printed during the following year. It was thereafter reprinted in Eco, Marmo 1989), which opened the way to numerous other studies on medieval semiotics and the history of semiotics in general. The most extraordinary thing, which reveals Eco's generosity is that, despite his being the first author of the article on the barking of dogs (the authors being listed in a strict alphabetical order) and having conceived and actually written it, he wanted the merit for the article to go, equally divided, to the 'three musketeers' (as it says in the first footnote of the article, according to the usage of the Italian academy). Confronted with our timid protests for this unexpected gift, Umberto silenced us with an impeccable motivation: "I don't have to get on. I do not need it. But you certainly do!" And, as always, he was indeed right.

It is from this little exploration, guided by a barking dog in the forest of medieval texts, that our academic careers began: Andrea Tabarroni is now Full Professor of History of Medieval Philosophy at the University of Udine, Roberto Lambertini is Full Professor of Medieval History at the University of Macerata, I teach Semiotics, as a humble successor of Umberto Eco, in Bologna. At the end of September 2015, invited to give the opening lecture at the Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of Medieval Thought, dedicated to food, in Milan, Umberto took all the three of us to have lunch with him, as if sealing over thirty years of intellectual partnership and friendship. I could not imagine then it would be our last meeting, a happy farewell lunch.

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«Latratus canis» Умберто Эко: как это было

В публикации описывается сотрудничество Умберто Эко с его учениками Роберто Ламбертини, Костантино Мармо и Андреа Табаррони, которое привело к рождению статьи «Latratus canis» («О языке животных в средневековой классификации знаков»).

Eco "latratus canis": kulissidetagused mälestused

Kirjeldatakse koostööd Umberto Eco ja tema üliõpilaste Roberto Lambertini, Costantino Marmo ja Andrea Tabarroni vahel, mille tulemuseks oli ühine artikkel "Latratus canis" ("Loomade keelest ja keskaegsest märkide klassifikatsioonist").