

# Book Reviews

Michael Wilding, *Social Visions*, Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies In Society and Culture, 1993.

*Social Visions* is a collection of critical essays on works of prose fiction from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The works examined are Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Meredith's *Beauchamp's Career*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's *Nostromo*, Alan Sillitoe's 'political novels', principally *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Key to the Door*, and the trilogy, *The Death of William Posters*, Milan Kundera's *The Joke*, and Isaac Singer's stories collected in *The Image*.

Wilding's book is published in the series, 'Sydney Studies in Society and Culture', a series which now comprises ten titles, and which, if one is to judge from this volume, appears to need a general editor. The essays in *Social Visions* were all originally published elsewhere. The books and journals which provided the original places of publication are mentioned in the preface, but are not all listed in the bibliography. Moreover, the separate essays are not referenced to their original places of publication, so one has to guess how old each essay is. I happen to know that the essay on Swift was published in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. II (ed. R. F. Brissenden) in 1973; one can deduce that the essay on Kundera must have been published after the English translation of *The Joke* in 1982 (this translation is not listed in the bibliography), and the essay on Singer after the publication of *The Image* in 1986; but when the other pieces were published remains to me a mystery. I feel this is a pity, because *Social Visions* contains some of the most impressive and challenging criticism that I have read for a long time, and I would like to be able to consider how Wilding's opinions and critical methods have changed or evolved over a period of what must be presumably about twenty years during which these essays were written. Even without dates of original publication I think I can detect some trends, but I should prefer to have some definite reference points.

In the preface Wilding says that *Social Visions* is concerned with novels that specifically deal with issues of society and politics, and that he is attempting to restore the political dimensions to the reading of 'classic' and contemporary authors. He thinks that academic literary criticism has tended to absorb literary works into the 'dominant ideology' of society, and against this tendency he opposes the idea of a 'radical' criticism which is to emphasise 'the problematic socio-political features' of the classics, and to restore works excluded from the canon 'to attention'. While I sympathise with this programme of repoliticising literary criticism, which has tended to be aligned with moral judgment rather than socio-political, it seems to me that Wilding's statement of it belongs to the conjuncture of the 1970s, and that, while Wilding's project remains valid and necessary, it does not take account of the transformation of that conjuncture in the 1980s. Wilding writes as though the ideological domain were still divided between conservative capitalist ideology on the one side, and radical Marxist ideology on the other. This may have been true of the 'hot years' between 1968 and 1976, but since the end of the 'seventies we have seen the installation within the academy, and within society generally, of an ideology that offers to transcend the capitalist-socialist division. Within the academy at least, this new ideology has become dominant. Wilding faces the problem of the rise of the 'social movements'—feminism, gay lib., post-colonial critique, and so on—but he does not address it. To a

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Marxist the social movements present a contradictory character: on the one hand, a legitimate drive to abolish social inequalities suffered by particular non-class-based groups, and on the other, because of their very nature, a powerful revival of the bourgeois ideology of equality—a revival that has effectively displaced Marxism from the centre of 'radical' politics. How are socialist intellectuals to relate to these movements? by negotiation, critical support, opposition, or what? Wilding must be as aware as anybody of the problem, but it is not mentioned in his preface. This is disappointing, especially since in some of the essays that follow he does engage with issues of sexual politics, and gives ample evidence of the possibility of connecting socialist and feminist critiques (and implicitly other social critiques as well).

To an apolitical reader all this may seem remote from literary criticism. But it is not. Wilding does not substitute political criticism for literary criticism. He writes literary criticism that is politically informed (and morally informed as well). At its best Wilding's criticism convincingly demonstrates the connexion between a judgment on a literary work in terms specific to literary art, and political understanding relevant to the content of the work.

That Wilding responds to literary works as a literary critic and not merely as an ideologue can be seen from the manifest virtues of his commentary. He will focus sharply on the immediate impression that a work must make upon a sensitive reader, evoking that impression in a precise and complex description, and then move to the necessary qualifications that must be made from a more reflective, more analytical reading. Of Singer's stories he writes: "The same personality runs through all of them. ... It is tempting to write "genial" of the personality but that would be to disregard the sometimes rebarbative note that reveals itself. For beneath the unpretentious, effortless seeming surface of these stories is a firm, calculated attitude of mind". And then Wilding begins to explore the nature of this calculated attitude, moving with assurance between the stories and relevant external data.

Wilding also exhibits that mark of the good critic, the ability to quote well. He will seize upon a theme essential to a writer's project, state it in summary form, and then proceed to unfold all its implications over half a dozen pages, using in the process a series of substantial quotations that both illustrate the idea of the theme, and demonstrate its inherence in the text in question.

But literary critical technique is not just a formal matter. In the essay on *Heart of Darkness* Wilding uses minute linguistic analysis to reveal the ironic ideological implications in Conrad's descriptions of both the African river and the Thames. In the essay on *Gulliver's Travels* he shows how Swift uses his fictions, symbols and dialogues to depoliticise politics, and to naturalize his own conservative ideology. And by comparing episode with episode Wilding brings out the contradictory nature of Swift's Toryism, that mixture of conservatism and mystification in relation to domestic politics, and a genuinely radical attack on foreign imperialism. In the essay on *Beauchamp's Career* he traces out the contours of Meredith's 'anatomy of the establishment', and shows how the incidents and changing pattern of relationships between the characters construct a vision of the solidarity of the English ruling class around 1870 in a particular socio-political crisis. In the essay on *Nostromo* Wilding mischievously, amusingly and, in my view, convincingly turns F. R. Leavis's criteria of 'realisation' and 'placement' against Leavis's own approving judgment on Conrad's novel. Wilding integrates Leavis's criteria with a Lukacsian concern for 'realism'. He convicts Conrad of offering to write about a subject which he did not understand, namely, capitalist imperialism in Latin America, and of producing a work which

conceals the real social forces determining the lives of the characters, which mystifies a capitalist social formation behind the phenomena of pre-capitalist societies, and which, instead of realising the nature of the the society in the activities, sufferings and relations of the characters, relies on token gestures and vague symbolism. In this way Wilding shows how criteria of artistic construction need to be combined not only with psychological and moral understanding, but also with political and economic understanding. In the essay on *The Joke* Wilding criticises Kundera for indulging in an unplaced sexism of the most odious kind, and notes that Western liberal critics have been willing to tolerate this for the sake of Kundera's anti-communist politics.

In general the excellence of Wilding's criticism seems to me to derive from three conditions. First, it is *criticism* and not just interpretation. Wilding is concerned with whether a novel is a good novel or not, and his criticism shows both the necessity of asking this question, and the ways by which it may be answered. Second, Wilding's ultimate criteria for judgment are truth and human well-being, and he shows how these abstractions can become relevant specific concerns in relation to novels whose stories belong to concrete historical situations. Third, Wilding writes criticism as a practitioner of fiction. The author of twelve fictional works himself, he has a sympathetic concern with the practical problems of writing fiction. And this concern gives him an inwardness that can produce brilliant articulations of insights that other critics may only have sensed vaguely, for example, Wilding's discussion of the distinction between the realistic novel and the moral fable on the ground that the realistic novel is (or ought to be) self-validating by the convincing truthfulness of its realisation of characters and events, while the moral fable that uses its characters and events as counters to illustrate a thesis remains to be validated by external evidence (see pp. 78-79 of *Social Visions*, and compare Leavis's unsatisfactory remarks on the moral fable in *The Great Tradition*, ch. 5). His insight into Singer's fiction is clearly powered by a shared concern with the question, how is it possible to write realist fiction after modernism?

It is both courageous and dangerous to republish together essays that were originally published separately, since inconsistencies will emerge, and the very virtues of some essays will light up the defects of others. I have to record some reservations.

Wilding's essays on the bourgeois writers, Swift, Conrad, Kundera and Singer, are much stronger than those on the 'radical' writers, Meredith and Sillitoe. Wilding displays more justice in attack on his political opponents than in defence of his political allies. The explanation for this seems to be connected with the vagueness with which Wilding uses the term, 'radical': this has to cover a range of very different political positions, and sometimes this vagueness can lead Wilding into what I take to be misreadings. For example, Wilding sees Meredith as a radical writer in *Beauchamp's Career*. This seems to me to be only half true. The negative attack on the Victorian landed class and its professional ideologues is radical enough, but this seems to be balanced by Meredith's giving all the political realism to the Tories, and subverting Beauchamp's political enthusiasm as a Quixotic idealism unfitted for this world. Wilding suggests that Meredith's attitude to Beauchamp is one of radical criticism, but I find no evidence for this in the text of the novel. On the contrary, Meredith seems to use Beauchamp's quixotry in order to displace the interest of the novel from political reality to moral idealism. Moreover, the radical political programme for which Meredith seems to have some sympathy (although he seems to regard the idea of its early implementation as impossible) turns out to be that of 'social democracy', that is, the preservation of capitalism, the preservation of the class structure, the democratisation of the suffrage, and measures of economic regulation and social welfare. This

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programme, radical in the 1870s, was the 'dominant ideology' of the 1950s and '60s, and Wilding himself denounces it in his essay on Sillitoe. It seems to me that Wilding is so intent on constructing a radical tradition of fiction that he does not pay enough attention to the specific political content of the different radical positions as he moves through history.

I cannot help describing the essay on Sillitoe as 'special pleading'. At the beginning Wilding tries to defend Sillitoe from the hostile criticism of both establishment and left-wing critics, who have condemned Sillitoe's fiction for expressing a futile and stupid rebelliousness and nothing else, and for a corresponding formlessness of construction. Momentarily, Wilding abandons the Leavisite and Lukacsian criteria that he deploys so powerfully against Conrad and Kundera, and suggests that Arthur Seaton's unplaced spontaneous rebelliousness in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is politically valuable, and that formlessness is appropriate to proletarian fiction. But in the rest of the essay where Wilding discusses Sillitoe's other novels he takes it all back again, and makes the same sort of criticisms as he previously rebutted. Moreover, Wilding defends Sillitoe from the same charge of sexism on which he convicts Kundera. I find Wilding's defence of Sillitoe on this point wholly unconvincing.

There is one place where Wilding seems to me to be led astray by his preoccupation with politics. He rejects Leavis's criticism of the ending of *Heart of Darkness* for not realising the evil toward which Conrad is gesturing, and substitutes the criticism that Conrad fails to proceed to an analysis of imperialist exploitation for which he has been preparing with Marlowe's voyage upriver. This seems to me to miss the point. Kurtz's evil is designed to place the whole political-commercial world that Marlowe has described, and to place it by invoking a dimension of human experience that the political-commercial world has forgotten, or is too stupid to recognize. Wilding sees Conrad's shift of interest as a displacement from the novel's real subject, but it is not. It struck me as I read this essay that Wilding wrongly sees a displacement in *Heart of Darkness*, and misses the one that is actually present in *Beauchamp's Career*.

Over the whole book one gets no definite sense of what Wilding's own politics are. His orientation is clearly socialist, but whether it is Marxist, social democratic, or 'socialist anarchist' (as with Sillitoe's characters) is difficult to say. I cannot help feeling that this vagueness is connected with the misreadings. Wilding's insights seem to be sharpest where his commitment is clearest and strongest.

Two more points: Singer's interest in the occult is presented by Wilding without criticism as part of Singer's realism. This seems very odd coming from a critic who generally appears to be a materialist. Moreover, Singer's sexism is only mildly criticised where Kundera's is strongly attacked. This difference seems to arise from Wilding's finding Singer an ally for literary realism in post-modernist times. That Wilding should seek such an ally in a writer who is firmly anti-communist is perhaps an index of how hostile the world has become for socialist intellectuals since the early 1970s when Wilding wrote his demystifying essay on Swift.

*David Brooks*

Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

If there are people who still think that 'tragedy' is a univocal term with a more or less constant meaning across the centuries, this book will bring an end to their innocence. There may of course be descriptions of tragedy that include virtually everything that writers throughout history have called by that name—a good example is Aristotle's description of tragedy as 'an imitation of serious action'—but these descriptions are too general to be very enlightening. Anyway, I think that most of those who are likely to read Kelly's monograph will already have abandoned the view that there is a single comprehensive and informative definition of the term. For Kelly presupposes a highly educated audience, one that has enough knowledge of Latin and medieval history, and enough interest in tragedy to be patient with a meticulous survey of both the familiar and the obscure. And such an audience must have recognised that 'tragedy' is equivocal. Nevertheless, Kelly's readers may be surprised to discover how radically equivocal he thinks the term is.

Kelly examines the views of medieval scholars, commentators, and lexicographers who inform us about tragedy (these views he calls *ideas* of tragedy) as well as the handful of medieval works that claim to be instances of tragedy (the *forms* of tragedy). His goal is to show that historical ideas and forms of tragedy are too various to admit of any harmony, and he pursues that goal relentlessly across a thousand years and over two hundred different authorities. Indeed, Kelly's erudition reminds me of a comment that Cervantes makes about Don Quixote's sage, Cide Hamete Benengeli, that he was 'a very exact historian and precise in all his details.' Readers can expect from this book no less and no more than they would from an exact historian. It is an impressively researched and detailed catalogue of opinions about tragedy, from which, however, we are entitled to draw our own conclusions. There is little doubt as to the conclusion Kelly thinks must be drawn—for an epigraph he chooses a remark from Nietzsche's *The Wanderer and his Shadow*: 'All words are pockets into which now this, now that is put, and sometimes many things at once.' Nevertheless, if it were possible to draw a different conclusion (as I would like to do), that would do nothing to undermine the usefulness of this book as a source.

To write an exact or scientific history of tragedy, as Kelly does, is obviously only one way to approach the subject. One could, alternatively, look at the past with discrimination, from a point of view that presupposes understanding of what tragedy essentially is. In that case the story of tragedy in the Middle Ages becomes a tragedy itself: misfortune, confusion and decay conspire to obliterate knowledge of a great and noble form of art. Kelly steadfastly resists this more poetic approach to his subject. He seems to expect that we should begin without preconceptions and then attempt to derive an understanding of tragedy from the total range of views about it. Moreover, Kelly mostly resists making judgements about the superiority of any one medieval view of tragedy to another. He is meticulous in uncovering sources, and he will often surmise that one author's view approximates to the classical understanding of tragedy far more nearly than any of his contemporaries (e.g. John of Salisbury), but his tone is consistently descriptive rather than evaluative.

Is tragedy, or art in general, best understood according to a scientific history, as the sum of a series of descriptions? Or must the understanding of art by means of art, or perhaps philosophy, be intellectually prior to its history? Aristotle himself says, 'Poetry is more philosophical and more weighty (*spoudaioteron*) than history, for poetry primarily concerns the universal, whereas history concerns the particular' (*Poetics* I.9,

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1451b5-7). It may be a paradox of history that the more authentically it represents the past, the more seamless, and consequently the less intelligible, it becomes. A history that concerned itself exclusively with particulars would be incoherent. Kelly, for his part, clearly recognises this, and so in his conclusion he attempts to organise, as well as can be done, the diverse parts of his history of tragedy. He even ends on a poetic rather than a historical note: 'O Fortune, where is thy sting! Sad to say, tragedy, the chronicle of ever occurring disasters, remains with us. But the best-expressed tragedies have given us much solace and comfort' (p. 222). One has the impression that this conclusion sits uneasily with the plan of the book (so much must be excluded and obscured!). Yet I am more in sympathy with Kelly's Aristotelian conclusion than his Nietzschean history. If 'tragedy' is a pocket into which many ideas have been put, still we want not only to know how so many ideas came to rest there (what Kelly admirably demonstrates), but to be able to say that some things belong there and others ought never to have been put there at all (e.g. Isidore's idea that 'theatre' is another word for 'brothel' or Bernard of Utrecht's wildly ignorant syllogism: The prize for a winning tragedy was a goat, goats are vile animals, therefore the essence of tragedy lies in its portrayal of vile deeds). The approach to tragedy by way of history is incomplete, even as an account of tragedy in the Middle Ages; in that lies my chief and practically my only criticism of this book.

I say all this prior to giving a summary of the book's contents precisely because any such summary must distort the book's intent and accomplishments. I shall therefore restrict myself here to a general overview and a few comments on particular episodes in the history of tragedy. The scope of Kelly's investigation is the interval between Aristotle and Chaucer, with discussion concentrated on four periods: Late Classical, Early Medieval, the twelfth-century, and the high Middle Ages. The history of tragedy in each of these periods is marked at the beginning by a significant development or conception that exerts a continuing influence on successive generations of commentators. For example, Roman alterations to classical performance of tragedies—which turned fully dramatised plays into pantomimes, dances and solo readings (or singings)—probably ought to be seen as a development rather than a mere corruption or attenuation. But later writers, who no longer had knowledge of classical performances (indeed no first-hand knowledge of any performances of tragedies), derived an extremely impoverished idea of tragedy from the brief descriptions contained in Roman sources such as the *Ars Poetica* of Horace and Boethius' *Consolations of Philosophy*.

Apart from Horace and Boethius, there are few writers whose discussions of tragedy were widely influential, directly or indirectly, throughout the Middle Ages; the most important of these is Isidore of Seville. Isidore includes in his *Etymologies* brief descriptions of various aspects of tragedy, from poetic composition to theatre construction to the attire of tragic actors, but his core idea is the view that tragic poems depict the 'evil and sorrowful deeds of evil kings' (*Etymologies* 18, Kelly's translation). It is from Isidore's unfavourable descriptions and little else that writers from the seventh to the twelfth century derived their ideas of tragedy. This is a very bleak period for tragedy, so bleak that it is not clear whether to prefer the fragmented and imaginative views of the tenth and eleventh centuries, or the roughly two hundred and fifty year silence from Isidore to Remigius.

In the twelfth century, thanks largely to the influence of William of Conches, we find a renewed emphasis on the Boethian view that tragedies depict the unexpected fall of a great person or kingdom. In many writers this view is accompanied by Isidorian prejudices—the fall is deserved, the kings corrupt—but on the whole we have little

reason to suppose that there is a common idea of tragedy in this period. Here we find some of the most imposing evidence for Kelly's equivocality thesis. As he puts it, 'The different meanings and nuances of the word "tragedy," whether explicit or implied, that we have seen in this section are interesting in showing the varied changes that can be rung on a term because of the diverse reading backgrounds of individual authors and their respective limited exposures to traditional usages' (p. 78). If we had only the resources of the seventh to the twelfth century it would almost seem possible to comply with Ernest Renan's ludicrous thought experiment: *S'imaginat qui la tragedie n'est autre chose que l'art de louer ... [Averroës]*.

The high medieval period brings us a bit more into the light, even though the Latin West mostly fails to take advantage of important rediscoveries, most notably of Aristotle's *Poetics* and the tragedies of Seneca. Seneca's plays, however, were influential among the Paduan prehumanists, particularly Albertino Mussato, who was infused with enough enthusiasm to compose a tragedy of his own, *Ecerinis* (named after Ezzelino da Romano, tyrant of Padua). This is a fascinating episode in Kelly's history. On the one hand he shows how much difference the possession of actual tragedies made to a small but intellectually vibrant group of scholars (Mussato's composition of the *Ecerinis*, for example, briefly issued in a sort of literary and dramatic revival at Padua), on the other hand he shows how insulated the rest of Europe was from this revival, and how much it remained under the influence of scholastic inertia. For example, even Dante seems not to have been aware of the rediscovery of Seneca, though he was well acquainted with some of the Paduan scholars.

Kelly closes the book with some observations about developments and renewed interest in tragedy in England, France, Italy, and Spain during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. His survey here is somewhat more cursory than in previous chapters, and awaits a separate study. But he does look closely enough to conclude that, 'in spite of the currency of ideas of tragedy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, even where Seneca's tragedies were known, there was little impulse to contribute original compositions to a genre of tragedy ... and little generic idea of "the tragic," in the sense of exemplifying a typical emotion or reaction of tragedy (however understood)' (p. 221).

This much ought to suffice to give an idea of the contents, though as I said, Kelly's book hardly wants or tolerates a summary. I will close with two brief comments. The first concerns ideas of tragedy in the classical period. Kelly could have perhaps said more about this period (there is only a summary of Aristotle's *Poetics*, pp. 1-5), since already by the time of Aristotle the genre exhibited a tremendous variety. It is for that very reason that Aristotle uses such a generic description as 'an imitation of serious action.' He recognises that tragedies may have endings that are happy or sad, that tragic calamities may strike the noble or base; he even seems to recognise that poetry is not essential to tragedy (though his official definition precludes it) because he says that though Empedocles wrote hexameters he is a physicist all the same, and that Herodotus would be a historian even in verse. Obviously the converse could be applied: Plato is a poet in prose. In fact, as any reader of the *Symposium* knows, Plato himself was well aware of this, just as he knew that tragedy and comedy are not intrinsically opposed. The essence of tragedy (and comedy) lies not in the verse or the plot, but rather in nature and human nature. And this brings me to my second comment, which concerns the difficulty that medieval scholars had in comprehending tragedy. It is astonishing and edifying to see how much the understanding is corrupted by focussing one's attention on the accidents of a genre. Never has there been so much speculation about tragedy

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in terms of buskins, goats, and shady little houses on the stage as there was in the Middle Ages. But we can be sympathetic: imagine that two hundred years from now the motion picture industry is defunct, completely forgotten except for a few scattered references to 'studios' and 'Oscars.'

I found Kelly's book illuminating and engrossing, exemplary in its scholarship, and most of all a work that one could wrestle with, think about and admire.

*Eugenio Benitez*

**Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose, edited by Stefan Collini, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Paperback, 151pp. RRP \$29.95.**

This volume includes the revised texts of Umberto Eco's 1990 Tanner Lectures, along with papers by Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose. The latter were speakers at a seminar held after Eco's Cambridge lectures, and the volume concludes with a response by Eco. Despite his efforts in this response to portray the collection as a debate, and similar efforts on the part of the editor, Stefan Collini, the overall effect is rather that of a *dialogue des sourds*. Each of the contributors pursues a private line of argument which only occasionally interrupts the discourse of another speaker, and much of what is said addresses an imaginary and absent interlocutor.

Eco's primary target is a form of overinterpretation which he associates with deconstruction, and which he takes to involve the assumption that a text can be made to mean anything which the reader wants it to mean. Against this, he defends the weak and unexceptionable principle that there are limits to the interpretative possibilities of any given text: 'What I want to say is that there are somewhere criteria for limiting interpretation' (40). By contrast, Rorty does not assert that anything is possible in the interpretation game, but he does reject the idea that texts themselves set limits to their possible uses. Rorty's primary target is not Eco's thesis, but rather something which he supposes to be a premise of Eco's argument, namely the distinction between using and interpreting texts, or between 'internal' and 'external' conditions of textual interpretation, and more generally the distinction between signifying bits of the world such as signs and texts, and other objects such as trees and quarks. Since it was written for the same occasion, his paper is a response not to Eco's lectures, but to his earlier published paper, '*Intentio lectoris*: the state of the art' (*Differenzia*, 2, 1988, 147-68). Nevertheless, it does contain an implicit challenge to a notion which Eco invokes in the course of his lectures. Between the intention of the author and the intention of the reader, Eco argues, there is a third important element: the *intentio operis*, the intention of the work. In his reply, Eco does not return to the notion of *intentio operis*, but instead appeals to the Piercean idea of the consensus of a given interpretative community as the only ultimate check on extravagant interpretations.

Rorty has no sympathy for the radical deconstructionist either, whom he accuses of remaining attached to a form of textual essentialism. Culler points out the disturbing disparity between Eco's deconstructionist, who represents an extreme case of reader-oriented criticism, and Rorty's deconstructionist, who represents a neo-structuralist belief in underlying textual structures or mechanisms which operate independently of readers and writers. His own paper defends a form of overinterpretation which is no less



mild than Eco's limits to interpretation, namely one which champions the value of "pursuing questions that the text does not pose to its model reader" (114): for example, asking why there are three little pigs in the well known children's story and not simply what happens to them. Brooke-Rose's contribution says nothing about Eco's lectures, or the issues raised by the other discussants, but concerns the modern form of palimpsest novel of which Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* is one example.

Despite or perhaps because of the failure to conform to elementary communicative norms, there is much of interest in this assemblage of texts. Eco's first lecture contains an erudite archaeology of the overly suspicious practices of postmodern interpretation. He finds the roots of this phenomenon in the hermetic tradition, according to which "a text is an open-ended universe where the interpreter can discover infinite connections" (39). Against the underlying principle of hermetic semiosis, which allows that any form of similarity between things is sufficient to make one the sign of the other, Eco advances some forensic conditions which must be satisfied before something can be considered a sign of something else: that the evidence cannot be explained more economically, that it points to a limited and not an indefinite class of possible causes, and that it fits with other evidence (49). Such criteria will not enable us to distinguish between the many hypotheses of signification which might satisfy them, but this is as far as Eco's argument goes. His strategy is fundamentally Popperian: there are no rules which will allow us to ascertain the best interpretation of a given text, but there are rules which will allow us to ascertain which interpretations are bad (52). From this it follows that 'it is not true that everything goes' (144).

Eco presents erudite and amusing examples of interpretations which exceed the bounds of plausibility set by these rules, such as the late 19th century attempt to find Masonic and Rosicrucian symbolism in the work of Dante. Over and above such examples, his argument rests upon the claim that there is an intention of the text which any acceptable interpretation must address. Like Arthur Danto's conception of a work of art, Eco's conception of a text is that of a 'machine conceived in order to elicit interpretations' (85). While the class of possible good interpretations is open, and any interpretation amounts to a hypothesis about the *intentio operis*, the only way to test such hypotheses is 'to check it upon the text as a coherent whole' (65). In this sense, Eco argues, 'internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader' (65).

Rorty does not disagree that if we want an interpretation to be convincing, it should say something about the whole rather than merely a part of its object. But he can find no use for the metaphor of a text's internal coherence. Rather, he thinks that a text "just has whatever coherence it happened to acquire during the last roll of the hermeneutic wheel" (97). To suggest that texts themselves impose certain readings is like saying that a screwdriver coerces us into using it to drive screws, when we can perfectly find other uses for it, such as prying open packages. In other words, Rorty detects a residue of logocentrism in Eco's view that the text has intentions of its own, while his own view is that a text is simply a set of stimuli which make it more less difficult to convince yourself or others of what you wanted to say about it (103). In fact, the difference between Eco and Rorty at this point does not appear to be very great. Take Rorty's 'better example' of the software program: he points out that he can very well use a word-processing package for a purpose for which it was neither designed nor gives optimal performance, such as preparing tax returns. What he does not say, but the example implies, is that there are limits to the class of possible uses of a given program: let him try to use Word to perform complex algebraic operations. Such limits to possible uses

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are all that Eco requires in order to establish his minimal point that there is an internal coherence to the text. But if this is all that is meant, one may doubt that 'intention' of the text is an appropriate description.

If Eco's talk of textual 'intentions' is questionable metaphors, Rorty's extreme externalism leads him into strange territory and unlikely company. When he claims that reading texts is a matter of placing them in relation with 'other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information or what have you' (105), Rorty sounds very like the French anarcho-pragmatists Deleuze and Guattari, who also proclaim that there is no philosophically significant difference between what a text speaks of and what it is made of: "We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier, we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities ... A book itself is a little machine" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, Minnesota, 1980, p.4). Rorty travels further along this particular line of flight by unfavourably contrasting 'methodical' readings, which apply a preconceived grid of interpretation, with 'inspired' ones which are more like an affective encounter endowed with the power to change the reader's purposes and priorities, 'to make a difference to the critics' conception of who she is, what she is good for, what she wants to do with herself' (107). Even for the anarcho-pragmatist critic, it seems that the text is substantial enough to challenge the intentions of a reader in unexpected ways. However, there is no a priori rule telling us how such confrontation ought to be resolved: the wheel of interpretation can turn in either direction.

*Paul Patton*