

**"Defying the labyrinth"**

**Questions of Space and Interpretation in the Fiction of Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco and**

**Luigi Malerba**

**Theses of the PhD-dissertation**

**By Orsolya Szilvássy**



**University „József Attila”, Faculty of Arts**

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## 1. Aims and hypotheses of the dissertation

The purpose of this dissertation is to discover some poetic and ethic forms – including also their modifications – of the artistic thinking in Calvino's Eco's and Malerba's fiction, which at the same time are regarded as "cosmic pictures"<sup>1</sup> of the world. The interpretations of these texts emphasise the relation between signs and world, and it occurs by examining representations of space. Doing so, I try also to reconstruct the implicit semiotic principles<sup>2</sup> – integrated elements of that fictions –, which have determining force for the interpretations of not only the unique novels, but for the whole work of these authors.

Therefore, the dissertation is connected to discourses that focus on the condition of knowledge, on the consciousness of epistemic dependence in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Questions of order vs disorder, of becoming more chaotic and complicated mostly afflict ways of thinking, which have their roots in the tradition of rationalism.

The most important motivation of Calvino, Eco and Malerba for writing seems to be the "dialogue", the linguistic relation between the cognizent and the world. Their conceptions of art are deeply influenced both by the consciousness of the chaotic state of things and by a deliberated aspiration for epistemic openness. Calvino's words – which had been chosen for the title of this dissertation – express clearly this idea: "Resta fuori chi crede di poter vincere i labirinti sfuggendo alla loro difficoltà; ed è dunque una richiesta poco pertinente quella che si fa alla letteratura... Quel che la letteratura può fare è definire l'atteggiamento migliore per trovare la via d'uscita, anche se questa via d'uscita non sarà altro che il passaggio da un labirinto all'altro. È la *sfida al labirinto* che vogliamo salvare, è una letteratura della *sfida al labirinto* che vogliamo enucleare e distinguere dalla letteratura della *resa al labirinto*."<sup>3</sup>

The topics of openness and dependence acquire in their representations a visual and spatial character, it is correlated by the fact, that the influential aesthetic works of that period – one of them Eco's *Opera aperta* – lay emphasise on the reception-process and on the importance of seeing that becomes a kind of paradigm of plural experience. Therefore, I think it opportune to interpret these texts preferring questions of space.

The concept of the represented space as semiotic field is – among others – due to scientific theories and theories of philosophy of science contesting the objectivity of space,

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<sup>1</sup> "Vogliamo dalla letteratura un'immagine cosmica (questo è il punto di convergenza del mio discorso con quello di Eco), cioè al livello dei piani di conoscenza che lo sviluppo storico ha messo in gioco." (Calvino, I.: "La sfida al labirinto" In: *Una pietra sopra. Discorsi di letteratura e società*, Mondadori, Milano 1995, 116.)

<sup>2</sup> I use the expression „semiotic” in consideration to Greimas' opinion who confirms that every discours about meaning is to be regarded as semiotic praxis. Cf. *Del senso I*, Bompiani, Milano 1996. 15.

further it is inspired by cultural studies or conceptions emerging from the history of art. This concept is based on the assumption, that the space can not be neutral in its representations, but it bears circumstances that are constituting for the interpretation. So as if the representations of space would form a kind of example for the interpretation, or – as Lotman confirms<sup>4</sup> – the representations of space can be regarded as a "language of simulation", which the author writes his ideological and cultural models in.

It is characteristic for the late modern and post-modern literature that they reflect on the own signifying mechanism, show up the „being- space” of the text, in that one can „walk or travel”.<sup>5</sup> That's why, discussing problems of space, I think, I can not avoid questions about this secondary, „meta”-character of the examined texts.

On the other hand, the being self-conscious of texts offers me an opportunity to find access to the problem of the „Weltbild”, to that invading sense of our time, which accrues from the incapacity to make difference between the real and the fiction. So at last, with my investigation I try to understand the attitude of the 3 authors, what kind of answer they find for this problem.

2. A survey of the period designated by the interpreted works in the light of the history of literature and reception, criteria of interpretation applied in this dissertation

My hypothesis is that the 3 authors have an ideal platform in consideration of their relation to the neo-avant-garde, the experimental literature and post-modern. The spiritual roots of this common approach are that they want the literature to be experimental and rational.

Looking back to the neo-avant-garde, it can be seen as a period of transition, when the events show a change in judgement of aesthetic experience. The Sixties functions as a threshold between the classical modern of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the post-modern still appearing in a diffused form.<sup>6</sup>

My valuation of the neo-avant-garde and the experimental literature occurs in the light of the history of reception. Not only the contemporary declarations of aims will be surveyed,

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<sup>3</sup> Calvino, I.: "La sfida al labirinto" In: *Una pietra sopra*, 116.

<sup>4</sup> Lotman, Jurij M.: "Il problema dello spazio artistico" In: *La struttura del testo poetico*, Laterza, Bari 1980. 263-273.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Eco, U.: *Sei passeggiate nei boschi narrativi*, Bompiani, Milano 1994.; Illich, Ivan: *Nella vigna del testo. Per un'etologia della lettura*. Cortina Raffaello, 1994; Corti, Maria: *Il viaggio testuale, vagy Il cammino della lettura: come leggere un testo letterario*, Milano, Bompiani, 1993. Pugliatti, Paola: *Lo sguardo nel racconto, Teorie e prassi del punto di vista*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1985.

<sup>6</sup> Jauss, Hans Robert: *Recepcióelmélet - esztétikai tapasztalat - irodalmi hermeneutika*, Osiris, Budapest, 1999. 29-30. (further: *Recepció elmélet*)

but also later opinions about their significance. I think, this kind of interpretation is richer, because it makes possible to reflect on the temporal dimension of understanding<sup>7</sup>.

The Sixties are for our authors the "beginning" and the period when "common attributes" appeared.

Umberto Eco, although his novels are dated only to the Eighties, by his aesthetic studies in that period founds theoretically his later fiction.

For Luigi Malerba, 1963 is in fact the date of beginning. He takes part on the first conference of the Gruppo 63 and appears his first volume of short stories with the title *La scoperta dell'alfabeto*.

Not even Calvino is an exemption, although he is already a popular writer, this period can be seen as a special one in his work, it is the time of being conscious of a "common attribute" of his art.

The formation of their similar ways of thinking is due to their support of the forums of experimental literature (*Menabò*), and – in the case of Eco and Malerba – to their membership in the Gruppo 63. The main characteristics of these experimental literary directions are the following:

scepticism against the active political engagement and

the acceptance of the "new rationalism" that

- differs from its earlier forms mainly in its not being nor naturalistic (it does not assume the task to create minute documents of the external), nor realistic (doesn't takes upon to represent the historical relation with the point of view of the neorealism following the principles of the historical materialism, either).
- puts the question of the linguistic influence. It regards the language to be inseparable from the society, and to be an autonomous field of research. That's why it is closely related to the philosophical thought concentrating on language, and to the modern linguistics.
- declares as the first aim to be realised by the literature to produce works which shows language from the side of *langue*, and emphasises the notion of the "nude language" that could be an original starting point of literary communication.

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<sup>7</sup> Boehm, Gottfried: *Einleitung*. In: Gadamer, H.-G.-Boehm, G. (hg.): *Seminar: Die Hermeneutik und die Wissenschaften*. Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp 1978, 23. (cited by Kulcsár-Szabó E.: *Esterházy Péter*, Pozsony, Kalligram, 1996.10.)

Beyond the common rational disposition of these 3 writers, I have to mention the notion of the post-modern that also connects them.

The relation of neo-avant-garde/experimentalism and the post-modern is defined by a common challenge as we learn from Jauss<sup>8</sup>, who just cites Calvino to "defend his post-modern aesthetics". The situation of challenge consists in the confrontation between the reified reality and the plentitude of ways of knowing the world and of the self. For Calvino, this is the common inspiration for the authors who debut in the Sixties<sup>9</sup>. That means also, that the post-modern isn't a decadent ending of the classical modern, but it opens a new and immensely wide horizon for the aesthetical praxis.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Italo Calvino's cities of "space and desire"

Calvino writes in one of his essays that the labyrinth is not only an enemy, but also the multiplicity of relations, which provokes desire and pleasure. This twofold value of labyrinth guides Calvino's fiction from the early neorealist-existentialist view into the direction of experiencing the otherness as intellectual, artistic and ethic possibility of choice. The character of his works becomes more semiotic and hermeneutic that hides a growing willingness to at least provisional understanding.

I tried to follow the path of this transfer by the motive of the city. As for my choice of texts, I wanted to cover each artistic period of the author and to fill some receptional gaps, too.

3. 1. Surveying the system of symbols in Calvino's work, I interpret one his "forgotten" fairy tale (*La foresta-radice-labirinto*<sup>11</sup>), this item is absent in Calvino's bibliography composed by his most important critics until 2000. Further, my choice can be supported by Calvino's well-known attraction to the poetics of fairy tale.

In this work of Calvino we can find two opposite category of value: *the city*, which is geometric and solid like a crystal (stands for the willingness to systemise and to express the reality) and *the forest*, which is a kind of formidable labyrinth (stands for the nature, for unconscious desires, for the linguistic dissemination). The figures of this story can escape

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<sup>8</sup> For Jauss, Calvino's notion of literature (as it can be read in his *La sfida al labirinto*) has in view the reaction to the challenge of the labyrinth. Here, I think Jauss or his Hungarian translator must have misunderstood the Italian title of Calvino's essay, since it means an active behavior *against* the labyrinth, which is, I think, an essential attribute of Calvino's „enlightened" thought. Cf. Jauss, H. R: *Receptió elmélet*, 242.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem 245. note 11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem. 214.

<sup>11</sup> Calvino, I.: *La foresta-radice-labirinto*, Emme Edizioni, 2000. (A továbbiakban *Foresta*)

from the overwhelming force of the forest-Nothing only by a marvellous, utopian solution characteristic for the genre of fairy tales.

This system of values can be found also in the later interpreted novels (*La giornata d'uno scrutatore*<sup>12</sup>, *Le città invisibili*<sup>13</sup>, *Palomar*<sup>14</sup>), that, beyond the similarity of values, show a different conception of representation.

3. 2. The story of *Giornata* focuses on the symbolic character of seeing. Confirms continuously the importance of individual experience, although the dominant topics in the novel are the desire for community and wholeness. The seeing, or watching (the title of the English version is *The Watcher*) accesses a quality of aesthetic power. This power can defy selfishness and any aristocratic relation between man and world. Further, the importance of seeing as aesthetic experience is an allusion for experiencing the self as an other.

3. 3. In *Le città invisibili* we can find a different metaphorical mechanism. Its strange and marcant structure, the absence of action and its emphasise on the dialogical character of signification affirm the contingency of linearity, the crisis of the teleological narrative discourse. Here, the city is a form constructed by an "inner vision" with the interrelation of imagination, language and literary rules.

3. 4. In *Palomar*, the world is the object of the senses and the protagonist symbolises the inseparable relation between seeing and thinking, so he continuously has to realise the impossibility of fixing and perpetuating meaning. He represents that thought of his author that we can't do anything else, than go on searching and trying to re-construct a map to the labyrinth.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Umberto Eco and the stories of the fixed point

By interpreting Eco's novels, I suppose that there is a constructive and "conceptional" relation between his semiotic theory and his fictional works.

In *Opera aperta* Eco declares as the task of art to create complements to reality, maintaining in the same time the sovereignty of the art towards reality. The artistic forms conceived in that way, are "epistemic metaphors".

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<sup>12</sup> Calvino, I.: *La giornata di uno scrutatore*, Einaudi, Torino 1963. (a továbbiakban *Giornata*)

<sup>13</sup> Calvino, I.: *Le città invisibili*, Einaudi, Torino 1972. (*Láthatatlan városok*, Kosmosz Könyvek sorozat, Budapest 1980. Ford. Karsai Lucia.)

<sup>14</sup> Calvino, I.: *Palomar*, Einaudi, Torino 1972. (*Palomar*, Noran, Budapest 1999. Ford. Szénási Ferenc.)

<sup>15</sup> Cf. "Cibernetica e fantasmi. Appunti sulla narrativa come processo combinatorio" In: *Una pietra sopra*, 218.

In *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, he talks about metaphors as vehicles of knowledge that moreover present also a challenge for their users. According to this, the best metaphors show the "culture in action" and permit us to know also about the dynamism of signification process.<sup>16</sup>

*Il nome della rosa*<sup>17</sup>, *Il pendolo di Foucault*,<sup>18</sup> and *L'isola del giorno prima*<sup>19</sup> are interpreted in the light of their visual and cosmological-spatial motives (the library-labyrinth, the pendulum and the island). In my opinion, they – realising the above-mentioned concept of metaphor – express the most intensive and also most extensive influence on meaning generation in the novels.

4. 1. As most precious value of *Il nome della rosa*, I suggest to see its intertextuality, the tolerance for different discourses and for itself as historical and detective novel. These will be shown in my interpretation with reference to the motive of the manuscript, which applies a play of illusion and disillusion, text-labyrinth; and to the library-labyrinth, which holds the characteristics of the Time of Great Transition. The library is the real protagonist of the novel, a dominant actant in the narrative that's to be destroyed by the chaotic effect coming from the "periphery". I think very significant the absence of total consumption at the end. The destruction is only a transformation in disseminated condition that hides the possibility of new beginning.

4. 2. Right after its publication, *Il pendolo di Foucault* had an important role in theoretical discussions about interpretation. In his *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*<sup>20</sup>, Umberto Eco defends his theory of "limits of interpretation" getting support from this novel.

The story of *Il pendolo di Foucault* begins in my reading at the point where *Il nome della rosa* has finished the story (that of the semiotics, of modernism and of subjectivity). Here, the disbelief in essential structures will be transformed in an irrational way of thinking. Getting power on the figures of the novel, the hermetic irrationalism destroys them.

So, Eco's novel tries to defeat the hermetic thought (and similar theories of interpretations) by logic and pragmatic reasons, from that the last ones will be more efficient. At last, the hermetism loses the battle against a practical philosophy and against classical values, which are mainly exemplified referring on Goethe.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Eco, U.: *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, Einaudi, Torino 1984, 162.

<sup>17</sup> Eco, U.: *Il nome della rosa*, Bompiani, Milano 1980.

<sup>18</sup> Eco, U.: *Il pendolo di Foucault*, Bompiani, Milano 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Eco, U.: *L'isola del giorno prima*, Bompiani, Milano 1994.

<sup>20</sup> *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Cambridge U.P., 1992.

4. 3. In *L'isola del giorno prima* we submerge in the time of the unquiet 17<sup>th</sup> Century. This perspective of looking back before the modernism seems to consider the crisis of the tradition of classical modern literature. Beyond this effect there are several others that aim to discredit the self-confidence of modernism – one of the most important aesthetic techniques of this novel is that baroque force which defies centres and dominating perspectives<sup>21</sup> – but we can find also assertions laughing about the critics of modernism itself.

*L'isola del giorno prima* is an intertextual text, a collection of other texts of different historical periods. The problem moving the plot – how to calculate longitudes – has been borrowed from discourses of history of science. This problem helps Eco to ask questions about the ontological status of the fixed point (the “Punto Fijo” should be the really existing point of reference for that calculation and so for the life on the Earth) and about the relation between world and language.

Because of the invading sense of the immensity of the world, the figures of the novel become inclined to compensate their “horror vacui” by simulacrum. The protagonist represents a maladjusted mentality, creating idols he avoids the consciousness of death and of the end in generally.

#### 5. Luigi Malerba – The universe of writing in the expanding universe.

For Malerba, the writing process has an essential role for acquiring knowledge. The continuous and endless writing dissolves the supremacy of reason which has the tendency to be concluded. However, this importance of writing does not mean that the world beyond literature and language would be neglected. As Malerba affirms, the works, the process of creation for the writer – as the reading for the reader – have a liberating effect. Therefore the art is an existential possibility.

Malerba's novels and short stories are imprinted by the self-conscious search for limits between reality and language. Their context is a world of the global communication in that we have our restricted, human horizon. His fiction shows societies where majority interests hurt the existential conditions of individual life.

In Malerba's works the space of everyday life is continuously getting larger and different. Actual situations involve aesthetic and scientific themes and turn back again to tell the story, but then nothing is the same any more. The space of life is the part of an endless

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Eco, U.: *Nyitott mu*, 79.



space of never ending signification process, of always expanding encyclopaedia. Therefore, his figures can not stop suffering from the idea of the "expanding universe".

With the selection of the interpreted texts, I tried to cover the whole Malerba-corpus, examining one text of each characteristic period.

5. 1. The *La scoperta dell'alfabeto* is the real and symbolic beginning for Malerba, since his first narrative work uses the story, the myth of finding the alphabet. His style of writing exploits virtues of continuous story telling, of the *mythos* which should be seen as equal to *logos*, to reflexive thought.

The narrative technique applied in this volume of short stories is deliberately capricious and improvisative. This playful, anti-logocentric attitude of text production is reflected also on thematic levels. In the title-story, the protagonist, an old farmer explores a new world, that of the alphabet, which is wider and more pleasurable than the world of the fields. He learns to *use* the letters and to feel happy meeting the familiar words. This figure is the portrait of the reader, who can be dissolved in the *pleasure of the text* and so manages to loose the grip of rational order of his milieu.

5. 2. In *Il serpente* writing is shown as difficulty of giving form to stories. The narrator confronts an endless and disordered world. The serpent – present in the title – stands for that absurd job, since as biblical symbol alludes for the lost knowledge, and as for its form, biting its own tail, represents a never ending structure, a kind of *circulus vitiosus*. The assertions of the narrator are therefore suspended, the reader doesn't know whether that "facts" are events of the world of the speaker, or they are mere hallucinations of an ill brain, or the text is motivated by an adulterous intent to hide the murder. Just one seems to be sure: the perspective of the narrator deforms things and produces a world that originally is empty and expandable. Everything can happen and can be even repeated in that world.

5. 2. 1. I try to show the characteristics of Malerba's relation to space examining the motive of Garibaldi in his fiction.

That Malerba dislikes Garibaldi has first of all not historical but ideological and aesthetic reasons. These can be related to the notions of individual, cultural and political appropriation of space, to a discourse about deformed view .

5.3. The story of *Il pianeta azzurro* focuses on the presence of incoherence in the reality. Malerba seems to direct a battle of rationalism and irrationalism, of fiction and real world.

Space has a role first of all as cosmic space, an expanding universe in that men live without choices as "thrown in". But contemporary, men are those who produce this reality:

not only the language describes and influences the world, also the pieces of the world can become metaphorical.

The incoherence takes the traditional binding role of coherence. The lives of the figures (and that of the empirical author) in the novel seem to meet each other, but this is only an illusion, they have parallel destinies.

The story is overwhelmed by the hermeneutic aspect in the novel. It begins with a comment of the "events", the narrator/narrators are called commentator. So, Malerba discredits that hermeneutic attitude that is inclined to regard literary works as compact, and spatial forms .

5. 4. *Itaca per sempre* is inspired by the tension of identity and narration. The texts asks the question of how can we as individual and unique beings in a world of endless stories. Our time is woven of stories, and every new story – our personal ones, too – has to find his place in this universe.

Malerba's novel is a transcription of a myth, not only for its topic, but also for its concept of writing. The text shows an evident preference for the oral over the official written tradition. The Homeric time pre-establishes the conflict of the post-modern time, the conflict of logocentrism and its critics.

Malerba focuses on a specific point of the Homeric story: he explores the scene in that Ulysses recognises himself hearing his own story from a bard. This becomes for the reader symbolic, the scene expresses experiences that show the correlation of identity and narration, and that the story of the subject is written also by others.

Beyond this, Malerba widens this problem: the identity is a question of stories but also a question of aesthetic experience.

## 6. Conclusion

Against the overwhelming of signs, the works of Calvino, Eco and Malerba try to realise a strategy applying signs.

In a world invaded by signs, also literature can create its own forms. Not for producing a mimetic relation between reality and signs, but for understanding that condition, for challenging the interminable but not tragic dissemination of reason in an active manner.