

Alberto Manguel, *Into the Looking-Glass Wood*. London: Bloomsbury, 1999. 272 pp. \$39.95
Umberto Eco, *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999.
ix + 130 pp. \$35.00

Published under the heading of 'Forked Tongues' in *Australian Review of Books*, July 1999

'It is on the readers that we must concentrate, not on the writers', says Alberto Manguel towards the end of his essay 'The Age of Revenge' - 'on the readers who will make use of the text and "make something happen".' So here I am, in the middle way, having had – in my case, forty - years trying to learn to analyse words, knowing that every attempt is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure It reads better in lines, but Eliot's words apply just as much to the reviewer as to the poet. And the man says, 'make something happen'.

I don't want to make anything happen. It's late, and it's hot (I find myself writing this in Wales on the one day each year when the sun shines). I just want to review the book, and meet my deadline, as I was asked to do. But Manguel isn't having any of that. Once you let him into your life, he stays with you, like a vampire, changing the constitution of your blood as a reader. And even as a reviewer. Nothing's safe. Halfway through an essay on Cynthia Ozick, he observes: 'A reviewer is a reader once removed, guiding the reader, not through the book, but through the reviewer's reading of that book.'. So *that's* what I'm doing: I am reviewing myself. I wasn't expecting to be doing that. My first serendipity.

Thankfully, I don't have to worry too much about what to do. It is editor Kate Legge who has made something happen, on this occasion, by sending me not one book to think about, but two. Any forced juxtaposition of texts is likely to dredge something unexpected out of the brain. And when the other text is something by Eco, the brain is going to be dredged more than usual. So now I have to put Eco through the mangle. Or see echoes in Manguel. Both authors have first names ending in *-berto*. They rhyme. I hadn't thought of that before. My second serendipity.

Serendipity. A fine word, coined by Horace Walpole, who says (in a 1754 letter) that he made it up from the title of a fairy-tale, 'The Three Princes of Serendip', whose heroes 'were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of'. Eco chooses it as the title for his latest collection of essays. It evidently all started with a lecture he gave five years ago called 'The Force of Falsity'. He wanted to show how ideas that today we know to be false actually changed the world (for better or worse), or even led to the discovery of something true. Columbus thought he was travelling to the Indies; instead, he found America. Somebody tries to invent a perfect language; there can be no such thing, but in the course of the project, Eco claims, we find unexpected light thrown on the nature of language as a whole.

We have five essays here, in fact. What links them, he says, is that they are all about ideas, projects, and beliefs 'that exist in a twilight zone between common sense and lunacy, truth and error'. And all to do with language. 'Language and lunacy' is the subtitle. Read this title in a catalogue and you might have thought it was an Oliver Sachsian approach to a domain within clinical psycholinguistics. Oneirology is more to the point. We are in a world of dreams and the imagination. We have been invited to enter the twilight zone.

But be warned, those Eco-freaks entering here: you will from time to time encounter a distinct sense of *déjà vu*. I've been here before, you will certainly say – and you would be right. This was indeed unexpected. My third serendipity. Eco introduces his collection as a set of leftovers from *The Search for a Perfect Language* (1995) – that is, the one used by God to Adam, or

invented by Adam through divine inspiration. ‘Bearing in mind the physical limits of a book, I had been forced to omit many curious episodes’. Knowing only this, O reader, what would you expect to follow? New material, I opine. Insights from off the cutting-room floor. Fresh gleanings for the curious.

I had no problems with the opening essay, ‘The Force of Falsity’, but shortly after beginning Chapter 2, ‘Languages in Paradise’, I found my long-term memory getting queasy. Eventually it threw up – *The Search for a Perfect Language*, which I’d reviewed a couple of years ago. Once I’d got over the shock of realizing that I could remember that far back, I looked it up. And whaddaya know. Virtually the whole of Chapter 2, beginning with the language used in Eden, and moving through Babel, the ancient Greeks and Romans, Dante’s views on language, and the influence of Abulafia, is taken from Chapters 1 and 3 of the earlier book. I mean ‘taken’, literally. There has been a bit of re-jigging, a few bits of paraphrase, new introductory and concluding paragraphs, and some extra link passages, but the bulk of the essay is word-for-word identical. This is extending the concept of serendipity a bit far, it seems to me. We might call it literary echolalia.

I’d got over that – because it *is* a fascinating account, even as a reprint – and launched myself into Chapter 3, ‘From Marco Polo to Leibniz’, when the same thing happened again, and large chunks of the earlier book’s Chapter 7 started to materialize. I reflected: I am within the twilight zone. Anything can happen. Eco is a very clever man. The book is called ‘serendipities’. I was expecting new material. I am given old. There must be a truth in this.

I remember Manguel. I am a linguist. Linguists know that their truth lies in the distribution, where items are located in context, and not in the items themselves. Many words represent a salad of meanings, from which you can extract the appropriate one only when you see it used in a particular context. ‘I fixed the leg of the table’ – it is a piece of furniture. ‘I corrected the table’ – it is a set of data. By all means look the meaning of a word up in a dictionary – but don’t expect to be able to choose which meaning you require until you see that word used in sentences. That is what sentences are for: they ‘make sense’ of words. They provide the context for word interpretation.

So maybe we should see the Eco-collection as a kind of sentence metaphor? An essay which turns up in one book will be interpreted differently from when it turns up in another, because its essay-fellows are different? Eco is a semiologist. For him, *The Name of the Rose* as book and film will be different semiotic events, to be judged by different criteria. To judge the latter in terms of the former will for him be beside the point. It is a perspective which we routinely encounter, in these days of television adaptations of classics, when people complain about a film not being faithful to the book. So why not with essays in different contexts?

Let me try and make this happen. The contexts, fortunately, are different. To begin at the beginning. ‘The Force of Falsity’ is the first essay, and it easily justifies the title of the book. Eco marshals a fine set of examples. The Ptolemaic system, though wrong, nonetheless managed to support a vast amount of geographical discovery. The belief that the earth was much smaller than it was motivated Columbus. The letter of Prester John stimulated Christian expansion towards Africa and Asia. The belief in Eldorado brought Westerners to the Americas. The search for the philosophers’ stone fostered the development of chemistry. There are several other instances.

All of this is uncomfortable but essential reading for encyclopedia readers (and, I suppose, editors). ‘After all’, Eco concludes, ‘the cultivated person’s first duty is to be always prepared to

rewrite the encyclopedia'. Quite so. Today's encyclopedias, he demonstrates, categorically deny affirmations that were held as absolute truths centuries ago. A critical, creative response when reading an encyclopedia is just as essential as when reading a novel or a poem. Encyclopedias are sometimes opposed to literary works as being 'fact' vs 'fiction'. In fact, both are fiction, though of different kinds. They both involve selectivity, half-truths, rhetoric, imaginative exposition, and creative emphasis; both are 'theatres of illusion'. Which is the largest sea in the world? It depends on how you draw boundaries where none exist. Which is the largest island? It depends on what you mean by 'island'. When was the Taj Mahal built? It depends on when you consider a building to be well and truly finished.

Chapter 3 takes up the theme – intellectual misunderstandings from Marco Polo to Leibniz. The first character is chosen because he was looking for unicorns, and thought he found them (when actually he saw the rhinoceros), going on to report how different they were from the way they were described in classical tradition. In the 15th century, the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollus purported to decode Egyptian hieroglyphs, initiating a tradition which saw them as divinely inspired symbols, and thus a reflection of the perfect original language of mankind. This influenced Athanasius Kircher, the 'father' of Egyptology, who collected real archaeological material in pursuit of Horapollus' false hypothesis, and who in turn influenced the 19th century work of Champollion, whose decipherment is accepted today. And Leibniz? Working on his binary calculus, and believing it to have a metaphysical foundation (reflecting the dialectic between God and Nothingness), he found further evidence, as he thought, of the validity of his concept when he saw it underlying the hexagrams of the *I Ching*.

How far does language fit into this frame of reference? In the two remaining essays, 'The language of the Austral land' and 'The linguistics of Joseph Le Maistre' we have further accounts of the search for the perfect language. In the first, Eco tells us about someone who received only passing mention in his earlier book – Gabriel de Foigny, who narrated an imaginary journey in an Austral land, and explained the structure of the logical language used by its inhabitants. In the second, we are introduced to Le Maistre's mystical view of language which led him to create a world of fanciful etymologies. These are both fairly specific episodes in a vast literature, and they cry out for context. The context, of course, is found in *The Search for the Perfect Language*.

I can therefore see why Eco needs to include a chapter on 'Languages in Paradise', and in its role of providing context it takes on a new *valeur*. I can also sympathise to some extent with his decision to take this material from the earlier book. It's a short life, and if he thinks that he has made his point there as well as he can, then I don't see the need to rewrite for its own sake. But I have two caveats. The whole of *Serendipities* is only 111 pages of text (excluding preface, notes, and index), and to have as many as 29 pages of this carried over from before seems an awful lot. Eco never says two words when three will do – a point I make without rancour, for I have profited greatly from his 'third words' – but to have so much of the earlier material seems gratuitous. Also, he should surely have told his reader that this is what he has done.

More fundamentally, does the serendipities theme work for language, in the way his subtitle claims? In the light of Chapter 1, the virtually reprinted essay takes on the character of an illustration of a more general issue, and not an end in itself. That is also part of its new *valeur*. But what is the equivalent in the linguistic field of Columbus serendipitously finding America? It is of course fascinating to see the way in which the search for the perfect language has worked itself out over the centuries, involving hundreds of thousands of man-hours of intellectual energy. But what serendipities follow? To what extent has this work produced the kind of scientific side-effects in linguistics analogous to those in other fields?

Unfortunately, Eco doesn't give us much of an answer. He says of Foigny: 'he invents a language that cannot work ... but in doing so he helps us see ... why, on the contrary, the imperfect languages we all speak work fairly well.' A rather tenuous connection, it seems to me. Is there nothing more specific, more rhinoceros-like? Eco mentions some linguistic experiments by Borges in the 'land of novels', and concludes that the failure of the search for a perfect language has demonstrated 'how our imperfect languages can produce texts endowed with poetic virtue and visionary force'. This, he says, is 'no small achievement'.

Well, I dunno. I think we knew this before Eco delved into the perfect language question, didn't we? So perhaps there are other examples? Actually, no. Whatever the serendipities might be, there are none made explicit at the end of the 'Languages in Paradise' chapter, and the Le Maistre chapter just – well, stops, without any recapitulation of the supposed theme of the book. Lovely story – shame about the ending.

I'm not saying that we can't in principle learn something really important about language from the literature Eco reviews. After all, some of the issues are still the focus of present-day attention, such as the proposals in psycholinguistic theory about mental primitives which might underlie all languages. But the way in which our understanding of such matters might be illuminated by the views of Foigny *et al* is not at all clear, from Eco's exposition. It's not enough to say that, by seeing they were travelling down the wrong road, we can see the right road more clearly. It needs to be demonstrated that the reason we took the right road was because we saw where the wrong road led. This would require a focus on the early history of linguistics, relating Foigny *et al* to the views of the Indo-Europeanists, Saussure, and others. It would be very interesting to see Eco try to link these literatures, in support of a serendipity; but this book doesn't do it. There is still quite a leap to be made. And although I'm prepared to make some things happen, when reading a book, leaping so far is a bit too much to expect.

Making things happen. We are back with Manguel. Another collection of essays. Another strange title. Does he do any better?

What we have here is a collection of 21 essays, all of which bar the first have appeared in various literary or arty publications - part of one, indeed ('Borges in Love'), in *The Australian's Review of Books*. They are grouped into nine themes. 'Who am I?' includes essays on Jewish and gay identities. 'Memoranda' groups three biopics on Borges, Guevara, and Cortázar. 'Sex' has two pieces, one on erotic literature, the other on the 'porn horror' of *American Psycho*. 'Wordplay' is a somewhat miscellaneous grouping – not lunacy now, but ludicity. It has essays on translation ('no translation is ever innocent'), on editors ('all interfere'), and on Vargas Llosa's two personae as artist and person. 'Looking to See' has two pieces on the relationship between writers and museums. 'Crime and Punishment' gives us three glimpses of the Argentinian political horrors of the 1970s. 'Certain Books' provides three appreciations of authors – G K Chesterton, Cynthia Ozick, and Richard Outram. 'Getting Rid of the Artists' is a retelling of the story of Jonah and the Whale, for our time. And 'Remembering the Future' is a piece on the nature of reading, books, and the Internet.

How, in the name of all that's good in publishing, can we find a coherent theme here? Manguel calls in language. 'For me, words on a page give the world coherence', says the Foreword, line 1. And he reinforces this by copious epigraphs from the same source. Which source? Well, Alice, of course. He is a genuine Alice buff. All the themes, and the foreword, are preceded by quotations from *Through the Looking-Glass*; and two others from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* start the book. This isn't the first time that Lewis Carroll has been called into service. His vignettes on language and logic have an appeal which has led them to be used as

epigraphs at the head of hundreds of chapters, lectures, and books. But this is the first time I recall Alice being forced to carry the weight of an entire book.

This is Manguel the writer making things happen. But what things are happening, exactly? It is never enough for the writer just to use words. We gotta use words when we talk to people. To get beyond Sweeney, we also gotta explain what it is about words that, in this case, gives the claimed coherent vision. If words are so important, the author has to step back and start talking *about* them. Words on a page give the world coherence? Show me how.

Do the essays all show us how, in their various incarnations? Some do, some don't. The opening essay is highly promising. It is called 'A Reader in the Looking-Glass Wood'. The wood in question is the one Alice encounters in Chapter 3, when she reaches a dark wood where things have no name. Manguel comments on Alice's problem, compares it to Adam's – echoes of Eco here – and reflects on the nature of naming and on the way books help us get to grips with originally nameless experience. Once we have learned to read, 'the craft of reading signals our entrance into the ways of the tribe'; books 'in endless libraries' enable us to 'pilfer names', to label our experiences, to talk about things, and to realise that there are also worlds – such as that of the torture chamber - which words cannot adequately cope with.

If words/names provide the metaphor Manguel lives by, then it would seem reasonable to expect each essay to put the metaphor to work, to show us how language can give a world more coherence than we thought it had. Sometimes he carries off this task brilliantly. 'On being Jewish' begins with his account of being called 'Jew' as a child. It makes him reflect on whether the label itself gives him Jewish citizenship. 'We are,' he concludes, 'the language in which we are spoken'. And then, in a typical counterpoint: 'we are also the language in which we question these assumptions'. All assumptions. Herod Agrippa's advice to Claudius, 'Never trust anyone' – or anything - might have been Manguel's slogan.

Never trust museums, he says. The two pieces in 'Looking to See' castigate the 'labelling frenzy' which imposes judgements upon the exhibits, and encourage us (and curators) to see beyond the labels. 'Museums should encourage their own disregard'. Never trust libraries, either. The title of his third essay, 'Meanwhile, in Another Part of the Forest', reminds us there are always other roads to walk down apart from the one we have chosen. Manguel applies the analogy to library catalogues, which impose a single category on a book. Eco has noticed the problem, too: 'Anyone who is organizing a library often encounters the problem of deciding in which section a book should be cataloged. Manguel puts the point rather more vividly: 'Books refuse to sit quietly on shelves'; 'Every library has its shadow'.

Language is also at the core of 'The Secret Sharer', which is all about editors and how they can help authors or get in their way, and of 'St Augustine's Computer', which is all about words on the page and on the screen. It is there too in 'Reading White for Black', which is all to do with the nature of translation. Here the naming theme comes to the fore again: 'A culture is defined by that which it can name'. The point has a clear relevance to present-day concerns in sociolinguistics (not least, in relation to the situation of endangered languages): 'in order to censor, the invading culture must also possess the vocabulary to name those same things. Therefore, translating into the tongue of the conqueror always carries within the act the danger of assimilation or annihilation; translating into the tongue of the conquered, the danger of overpowering or undermining'.

A linguistic slant turns up from time to time in a few other essays. In the two 'Sex' pieces we find reference to the difficulties of language in conveying the erotic effectively and to the

versatility of language in permitting revelation alongside pornography. But there is nothing much on the topic in the 'Crime and Punishment' triad, apart from an excursus towards the end of 'God's Spies', where good writing is lauded for its ability to show loathsome acts to be what they are, and 'therefore not unconquerable'. 'The human mind is always wiser than its most atrocious deeds, since it can give them a name'. And that's about it, as far as an explicit language theme is concerned. There is no discussion of Manguel's views on language in the three Memoranda pieces, nor in the three 'Certain Books' essays. There is nothing in the essay on Llosa, 'The Blind Photographer', nor in the Jonah and the Whale' sermon.

In his foreword, Manguel quotes Henry James' phrase, 'the figure in the carpet', referring to the theme that runs signature-like through a writer's work. Looking for this theme in his own essays, he thinks it is 'something to do with how this craft I love so much, the craft of reading, relates to the place in which I do it'. But insofar as the craft of reading requires an explicit acknowledgement of the nature of language, then I'm not sure that the figure is as widely present as he thinks. In my estimation – and this is my review, remember, it's up to me to make this happen – of the 21 essays, eight are nicely focused on language, eight aren't, and five I'm not sure about. I feel short-changed. I enjoyed every minute of the read, but I'm not persuaded that I've been given a coherent map of Manguel's looking-glass wood. Nor does Carroll help. Although all 21 individual essays have their own epigraphs, only six of these are from Carroll. And although some of the quotations are apposite enough, some aren't. In particular, I worry about having a jocular Alice quote preceding a section dealing, inter alia, with political oppression and torture.

Both *Into the Looking-Glass Wood* and *Serendipities* are fascinating reads, powerful expositions full of compelling insights, and impressive in their intellectual range. Both writers have certainly made things happen. But neither have been entirely successful in their attempt to use language as a means of giving their essays coherence. Eco doesn't really show that the search for the perfect language has had major serendipitous effects. Manguel doesn't really demonstrate the relevance of his opening linguistic claim to everything he has written.

The words in their titles assert a coherence in the world of their essays. At the same time, both 'berto's have advised us to be scrupulous in questioning whether the coherence imposed by words, names, and categories is real. Always check that unicorns aren't rhinoceroses, said Tweedledum. Disengage yourself from the labels, said Tweedledal. Authors who advise readers to do such things to their essay collections do so at their peril. The claimed realities can disappear, with the reader finding that, like Alice, the essays are nothing but a random pack of cards. This seems to have happened here, both times. Um and Al turn out to have more in common than I was expecting, but in an unexpected direction. A final serendipity.