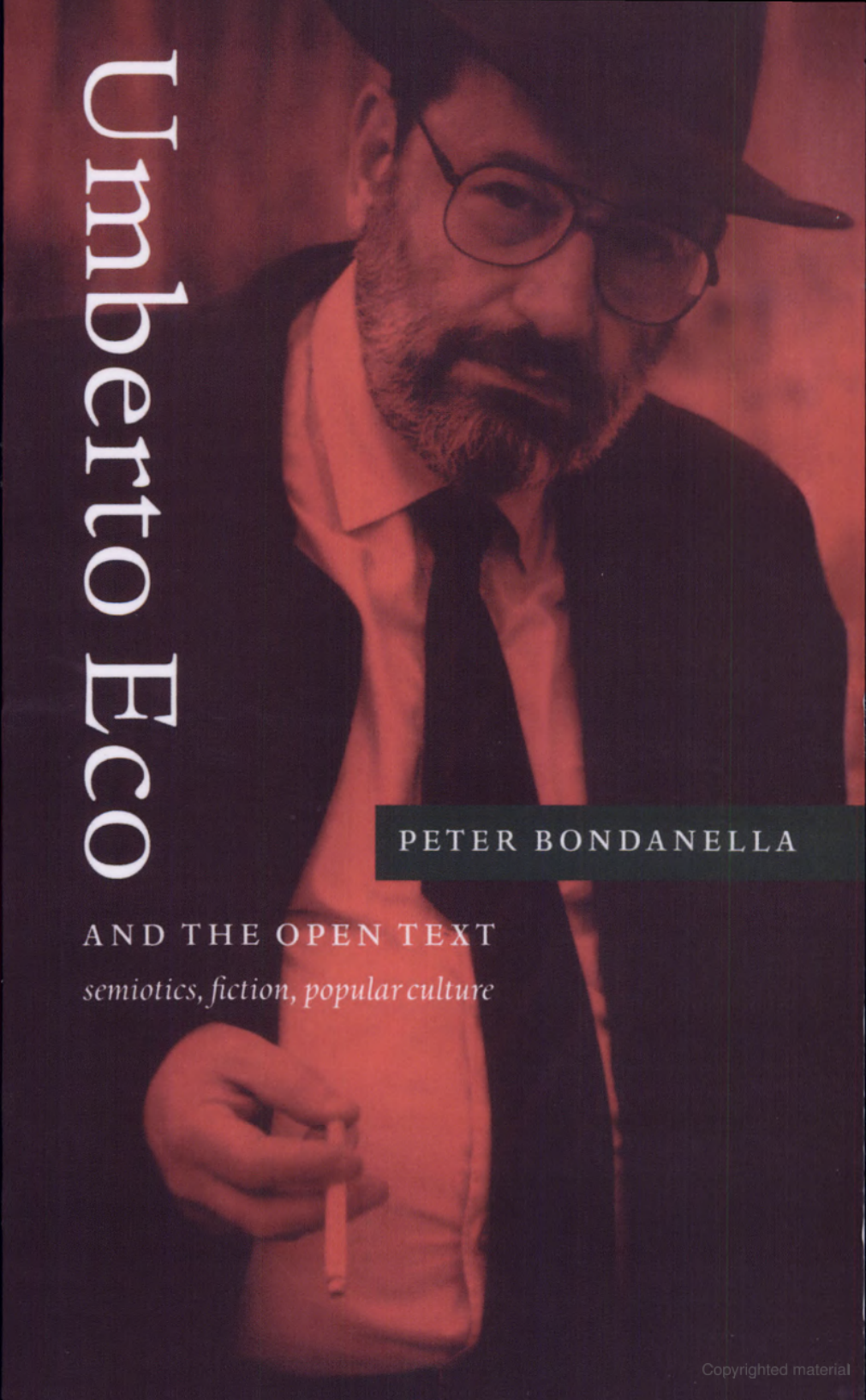
Umberto Eco



PETER BONDANELLA

AND THE OPEN TEXT

semiotics, fiction, popular culture

Umberto Eco and the open text

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one

Umberto Eco's intellectual origins: medieval aesthetics, publishing, and mass media

Umberto Eco was born on 5 January 1932 in the city of Alessandria in the Piedmont region of Italy. Alessandria in the nineteenth century had become best known for the location of the most important factory of the Borsalino company, Italy's premier maker of hats.[1] According to the accounts of his childhood that have come down to us after he reached international fame (accounts, therefore, which may be somewhat tinged by hagiography), Eco was a precocious young student who excelled in cartoons, parodies, and intellectual games. Apparently he composed a parody of Dante in hendecasyllabic verse entitled *La diacqua commedia* (The Divine Water Comedy), purporting to narrate events in his family as if he were the *sommo poeta*.[2] After completing his *maturità classica* at the Liceo Plana, Eco began his university education, enrolling at the University of Turin, where he completed his degree in philosophy with Professor Luigi Pareyson in 1954.

[1] For Eco's account of his birthplace and its inhabitants, see "Miracle of San Baudolino," *Architectural Digest*, January 1994, pp. 24–32, now reprinted in Umberto Eco, *How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994), pp. 234–48; for the original, see Eco, *Il secondo diario minimo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1992), pp. 329–39.

[2] The reminiscences of two childhood friends (Gianni Coscia and Giovanni Massola), as well as reports on Eco's life between the time he left Alessandria and the completion of his university education, may be found in Francesca Pansa and Anna Vinci, *Effetto Eco*, Preface by Jacques Le Goff (Arricia: Nuova Edizioni del Gallo, 1990), pp. 1–65.

Even before the publication of his thesis, however, Umberto Eco had begun to make a name for himself, even if not initially in the fields of cultural and literary theory. In 1951, a young man named Mario Rossi was elected president of the Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica (the GIAC), the youth group of the Catholic Church. At this early stage in his life, Eco was a militant Catholic intellectual, working closely with a man and a movement attempting to transcend the heavily conservative religious, social, and cultural policies represented by the then reigning pontiff, Pius XII. Eco worked with Rossi in Rome, writing for *Gioventù cattolica* (the publication of GIAC) and attempting to push the church into the direction that would reflect the more liberal policies of the French clergy of the period. When Pius XII forced Rossi's resignation from the direction of Azione Cattolica on 18 March 1954, Eco left the organization as well, and his resignation began a long period (1954–60) characterized by an avoidance of any practical political activity.

The Italian literary world in the immediate postwar period was predominantly shaped by remnants of prewar Crocean idealism, even though the Marxist literary theories of Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci would soon constitute a counterweight to Croce's intellectual hegemony. But neither early Marxist criticism nor Crocean idealism paid serious attention to what we may today label the manifestations of "popular" or "mass" culture in literature. In sharp contrast to this contempt for popular culture on both the right and the left, in an early article in *Gioventù cattolica* (17 January 1954), Eco declared with the self-assurance of youth: "If we went to dig through the library of a famous man, of a man of culture, or a scientist, perhaps we would discover there a series of detective novels. The detective novel is not only a youthful sin; it is a perpetual temptation."[3] This

[3] Cited in Pansa, *Effetto Eco*, p. 23. The Italian name for the detective, mystery or "whodunit" novel is *un giallo*, referring to the traditionally yellow covers used by the publishing house of Arnoldo Mondadori, the company that introduced in 1929 what was essentially a foreign literary genre to Italy. The fact that Eco's literary fame is due to his best-selling mystery novel is only one of the many aspects of his career that sets him

early remark about the importance of the mystery or detective novel – the kind of popular literary genre so many of the mature theorist's essays would do so much to explain in successive decades – may be taken as an initial declaration of critical independence from the predominant schools of criticism in Italy at the time, all of which took themselves terribly seriously and were concerned primarily with "high" culture.

While not so well known outside of Italy as Rome, Florence, and Venice, Turin in Piedmont and Milan in Lombardy in the 1950s were exciting intellectual environments in which to live.[4] Milan was the financial and publishing capital of an Italy poised on the brink of what would later be described as the "economic miracle." It was also the home of a significant portion of the Italian avant-garde in art, music, and literature. Turin, the center of the automobile industry and the Fiat Corporation, would lead the mechanization of Italy and thereby ushered into the postwar period not only a consumer society but also an enormous internal migration which eventually turned Turin into the largest "southern" Italian city in the nation. Turin's intellectuals were also reshaping the definition of Italian culture. At the city's university, Norberto Bobbio (1901–) held the Chair of Philosophy of Law after 1948 and began a long series of books, usually printed by Turin's major publishing house, Einaudi, critical of Italy's idealist heritage and focusing upon a number of pressing practical political problems. Giovanni Getto (1913–) came to the university's Department of Italian Literature in 1948. While initially identified with a form of historical criticism indebted to Crocean models, Getto would

apart from his countrymen. For a summary of the history of the *giallo* in Italy, see Benedetta Bini, "Il poliziesco" in Alberto Asor Rosa, ed., *Letteratura italiana – storia e geografia: l'età contemporanea* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), III: 999–1026.

[4] Umberto Eco's university career will eventually become linked to the city of Bologna, but his early intellectual and editorial connections have closer ties to either Turin or Milan. For lengthy and enlightening discussions of the role Turin and Milan played in the postwar period in Italy, see Marziano Guglielminetti and Giuseppe Zaccaria, "Torino" and Folco Portinari, "Milano" in Alberto Asor Rosa, ed., *Letteratura italiana – storia e geografia: l'età contemporanea*, III: 77–129 and 221–88.

eventually work to introduce Italian scholars to the structuralist analysis of literary texts. Eco befriended one of Getto's star pupils, Edoardo Sanguineti (1930–), who would later become one of the key figures in the literary movement called Gruppo 63. Eco's writings on aesthetics culminating in the publication of *Opera aperta* (*The Open Work*, 1962) reflected, in many respects, the concerns of this avant-garde movement. Sanguineti would eventually become one of the most caustic and unforgiving reviewers of Eco's best-selling fiction. In philosophy, Nicola Abbagnano (1901–) had begun opening Italian philosophy to the foreign influences of European existentialism (Sartre, Heidegger) and away from Crocean idealism. Luigi Pareyson (1918–91), an influential theorist of aesthetics who had come to the University of Turin from Pavia in 1952 and with whom Eco would write his thesis on the aesthetics of St. Thomas Aquinas, devoted his major works to a new theory of aesthetics and historical studies of existentialism, all of which constituted a reaction against Crocean idealism.[5]

In literature, Cesare Pavese (1908–50) had just committed suicide after an unhappy love affair with an American actress, but his editorial work at Einaudi had already begun to shape the Italian literature of the postwar period, especially with a series of translations from American literature. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century American writers became popular and were instrumental in offering stylistic models diametrically opposed to the highly rhetorical prose of Gabriele d'Annunzio, the most popular Italian writer of the prewar period. Pavese had written his own thesis on the poetry of Walt Whitman at the University of Turin in 1930 at a time when such

[5] Pareyson's major works include: *La filosofia dell'esistenza e Karl Jaspers* (Naples: Loffredo, 1940); *Studi sull'esistenzialismo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1943); *Estetica: teoria della formatività* (Turin: Edizioni di filosofia, 1954; rpt. Milan: Bompiani, 1989); and *Teoria dell'arte* (Milan: Marzorati, 1965). Pareyson not only helped introduce European existentialism to Italy but also was important in the spread of Heidegger and hermeneutics. His assistant, Gianni Vattimo (1936–), a classmate of Eco's at the University of Turin, replaced Pareyson in the chair of philosophy at Turin after serving as his assistant for many years.

studies were not common, and he eventually translated such American classics as Melville's *Moby Dick*, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and novels by Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis. Perhaps equally influential and certainly a longer-lasting influence upon the Turin literary scene was Elio Vittorini (1908–66), like Pavese another early enthusiast of American literature and an editor at Einaudi. From 1945 until 1947, Vittorini edited the weekly cultural magazine *Il Politecnico*, a publication that engaged in lively debates with the official publications of the Italian Communist Party over the proper direction for postwar Italian culture. Vittorini would direct a number of Einaudi's book series and edited, with Italo Calvino, Einaudi's important literary review, *Il Menabò di letteratura*, which first appeared in 1959 and in which Eco would eventually publish an important essay entitled "Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà" (Form as Social Commitment), a piece eventually worked into the second edition of *The Open Work* in 1967. And, of course, there was the increasingly important presence of Italo Calvino (1923–85), editor at Einaudi from 1947 until 1983, whose literary fame had been originally launched at Einaudi by Cesare Pavese with the publication of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, 1947). Finally, while less important to Eco's formation, mention should also be made of other major literary figures from Turin such as Primo Levi (1919–87), Carlo Levi (1902–77), and Natalia Ginzburg (1916–91), many of whose most influential literary works first appeared with the Einaudi imprimatur.

Northern Italy was therefore an intellectually exciting place. Between Turin and Milan, Eco's twin points of reference, old modes of thinking were tested, modified, and rethought in a number of literary and cultural fields as Italian society itself was transformed into a modern, consumer-oriented society characterized by an emerging popular or mass culture that the dominant prewar elites, staunch defenders of "high" culture, preferred to ignore. Umberto Eco would take advantage of access to such cultural changes by plunging directly

insistence of a young scholar upon technical-sounding phrases instead of plain language, and an overblown apparatus whose purpose, often enough, was merely to show that the writer had read everything he could find on the subject."[6] More important than his honest appraisal of his stylistic pretensions is Eco's acknowledgment that when the work was begun in 1952, the writer himself was a practicing Catholic working in the militant ranks of Azione Cattolica. By the time Eco completed the study and published his findings, he had set aside both Thomistic metaphysics and a religious outlook on life for a more secular attitude.

Yet, in both the first and second editions of the study, Eco emphasizes the continuing relevance of the methodology he evolved in his study of Aquinas, even going so far as to quote in his second preface of 1970 a statement on methodology in the first edition:

> I believe that a philosopher's significance appears most fully when he is placed in his own time, considered as a representative of his period, and when his ideas are seen as part of a problematic peculiar to that period. His greatness consists in his ability to encompass the spiritual temper of his age . . . And what we can learn from him is above all the lesson of his humanity, which is also a lesson in method in a somewhat wider and deeper sense of that term than is usual.[7]

In the preface to *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Eco is even more blunt about rejecting the typical flaws of young Italian scholars ("tortured syntax as a respectable symptom of wisdom and maturity"), while accepting the basic opinions expressed in the essay: "maybe in this small book I tell my story with the clumsiness of a young scholar, but I tell a story in which I still believe."[8]

[6] *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Hugh Bredin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. vii; for the original Italian, see Umberto Eco, *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino* (Milan: Bompiani, 1982), p. 5.

[7] *The Aesthetics*, p. viii; *Il problema estetico*, pp. 6–7.

[8] Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, translated by Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. ix.

Few readers interested in Eco's literary or cultural theory will become passionately involved in discussions of medieval aesthetics, although readers familiar with his best-selling novels will not find Eco's medieval erudition surprising. Yet, it is necessary to grasp what Eco means by the evolution of his critical method in his work on Scholastic aesthetics in order to understand his approach throughout his intellectual career. A fundamental characteristic of Eco's scholarship here and in his later theoretical writing – his impressive linguistic abilities – literally leaps out at the reader on every page. Today, anxious young scholars seeking tenure busily cite Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Gramsci at every turn in English translation. Few possess the ability to read such theorists, or the numerous literary works such theorists analyze, in the language in which either the theory or the literary works first appeared. In contrast, Eco's mastery of medieval Latin and his facile command of major European languages cannot fail to impress. Eco brings such erudition and energetic research to bear upon all his projects, and his academic persona seems to hark back to an earlier tradition of nineteenth-century philological scholarship usually identified with Germanic academics, such as Auerbach, Curtius, and Spitzer, and which in Italy found its most felicitous expression in Benedetto Croce, Eco's theoretical *bête noire*. In Eco's case, the felicitous combination of such Teutonic linguistic prowess and erudition avoids the arrogant pedantry too often associated with the lesser exponents of such learning and is lightened by his celebrated sense of humor, a quality not often associated with the German philological tradition.

Without Eco's linguistic preparation and his generally impressive erudition, his methodology would fail to function, for its major goal, in the author's own words, is to "explain and clarify every term and every concept in the original texts in the light of the historical circumstances to which they belonged," remaining "genuinely faithful to Aquinas," and returning him to "his own" time and "his authentic visage." When Eco applied his own methodology to

Aquinas, he discovered that "his truth" was no longer Eco's truth.[9] Umberto Eco's philosophical method thus begins with true "faithfulness" to a literary text, which involves thorough preparation in languages other than his own. As Eco has become a popular figure with the publication of his novels, his mastery of English and French (in which he gives lectures, writes original articles, and composes entire books, as well as assisting in the translation of his many works) has always represented one of his trump cards in introducing his ideas directly into various academic and cultural communities around the globe.

Historically, Eco faced two major stumbling-blocks to an understanding of Aquinas' aesthetic theories. In the first place, there were the neo-Thomist or neo-Scholastic scholars who approached Aquinas as a doctor of the church. A doctor of the church could not, in principle, err. When Eco speaks of learning the lesson of Aquinas' "humanity," he implicitly rejects the elevation of this thinker, or any thinker, to such a privileged position. Understanding a mind from the past involves clearing our own minds of any contemporary ideology and allowing the past to speak in its own language, with its own technical terms, and with its own ideology. Such a language should always be considered not as eternal or revealed "Truth" but, rather, as a historically circumscribed "truth," one of many possible "truths." Accepting the claims of the church that Aquinas was an infallible philosopher would, Eco believed, preclude any historical understanding of his role in the development of a medieval aesthetic.

Perhaps even more of an ideological or intellectual obstacle to Eco's historical methodology was the Crocean idealism that then dominated and had dominated Italian criticism even before the beginning of the Second World War. In fact, Eco begins his study of Aquinas with a discussion and critique of Benedetto Croce's negative assessment of medieval aesthetics contained in a review of Nelson Sella's *Estetica musicale in San Tommaso*, which Croce had published in his review, *La critica*, in 1931:

[9] *The Aesthetics*, pp. vii–viii; *Il problema estetico*, p. 6.

> The essential thing is that the problems of aesthetics were not the object of any genuine interest, either to the Middle Ages in general, or to St. Thomas in particular . . . For this reason, studies of the aesthetics of St. Thomas and other medieval philosophers make dull and unhelpful reading when (as is usually the case) they lack the restraint and good taste that characterize Sella's work.[10]

Croce's dismissal of Scholastic aesthetics provides Eco with the target all young and ambitious academics love to attack when justifying a new book on an old and seemingly worn-out topic – that of the Master in error. The aesthetic theories Croce propounded made it impossible for the Neapolitan theorist to come to grips with the kinds of problems that fascinated Eco. The foundation of Croce's aesthetic theory was the belief that art derived from pure intuition. Furthermore, Croce believed that all art is an expression of the artist's emotion and is therefore ultimately "lyrical" – the intuition of an image. Therefore, for Croce, writing the history of either a literary genre or a period style, as well as working on projects involving comparative literature, were, in theoretical terms, fruitless endeavors. The critic's task consisted primarily in the identification, interpretation, and assessment of the lyrical, uniquely "poetic" moments in literary texts. Such moments are not only original, creative moments, but they are also only expressed through individual, concrete images. In Croce's theory, there is of necessity a strict organic unity between form and content. Croce rejected any type of rhetorical, generic, or formal theory stressing historical development over time rather than the concrete, unique character of an individual work of art. Ultimately, in his later essays on aesthetics, Croce even went so far as to affirm that a critic's primary task was to distinguish between "poetry" and "non-poetry" in a work, and Croce defined "non-poetry" as all elements not reflecting the perfectly achieved expression of the lyrical essence of art.

Eco is perhaps one of the few Italian scholars in the postwar period to share the kind of erudition and linguistic ability Benedetto Croce

[10] *The Aesthetics*, p. 1; *Il problema estetico*, p. 15.

enjoyed. Yet Eco rejected Croce's aesthetic theory because it denied any historical development and any diachronic instability. For Croce, poetic moments in Dante, Shakespeare, or Ariosto existed in a timeless realm of completely achieved lyrical expressions that had little or nothing to do with the historical periods they reflected. In fact, Croce's ahistorical aesthetics suffered from the same fatal flaw that Eco will finally discover embedded in the aesthetics of Aquinas.

Influenced by Pareyson's own aesthetic theories, which rejected Croce's emphasis upon art as idealistic vision or as the expression of lyricism, Eco preferred to see art, following Pareyson, as *form* and to replace the Crocean concept of "expression" with that of "production" as a forming action.[11] His exhaustive analysis of numerous classical sources for medieval aesthetics, as well as almost every pertinent Scholastic statement on the subject, led him to a long treatment of the definition of beauty contained in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* (I, 4, 4, *objectio* 4): "Beauty, however, has to do with knowledge, for we call those things beautiful which please us when they are seen" (*visa placent*).[12] Eco analyzed beauty as a transcendental category in Aquinas in great detail, along with the formal criteria for beauty (proportion, integrity, clarity). He concluded that "form is the cause and origin of the aesthetic," thereby refuting Croce's emphasis on *liricità* and affirming the lessons learned from his master Pareyson.[13] A chapter dealing with concrete Scholastic aesthetic problems – the beauty of the Son of God, the beauty of mankind, the beauty of music – leads to a discussion of three different types of medieval symbolism (metaphysical symbolism, universal allegory, and the differences between scriptural and poetic allegory) that will have a bearing on Eco's future

[11] Eco discusses Pareyson's ideas in an essay included in the English edition of *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni with an intro. by David Robey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), "Form and Interpretation in Luigi Pareyson's Aesthetics," pp. 158–66 (the original essay appeared in *Lettere italiane*). This essay was not included in either the original Italian edition of *Opera aperta* or in subsequent Italian reprintings of that book.

[12] *The Aesthetics*, p. 35; *Il problema estetico*, p. 54.

[13] *The Aesthetics*, p. 121; *Il problema estetico*, p. 153.

Eco's treatise on the aesthetics of Aquinas had limited its scope to a narrow focus upon a specific problem in one branch of philosophy, aesthetics. With the evolution of his views on aesthetics, however, embodied in the new 1970 preface and conclusion to his studies of Scholasticism, Eco added a new historical or ideological dimension to his earlier book. As he notes, no system of thought as well organized as that of Aquinas collapses solely because of apparently *logical* or internal inconsistencies. Such systems arise "as a response to specific social, political, and cultural questions and to solicitations which are implicit in the relations of production and are mediated through the superstructure"; the failure of a philosophy results from a breakdown in "something *outside* it."[18] Aquinas' image of an immutable reality was "mystificatory," Eco believed, since the facts around him in the dynamically changing society of medieval Italy contradicted the Scholastic search for essences. In the eyes of experience, science, and especially the new vernacular literature of Dante, Petrarca, and Boccaccio (together with the new merchant class they represented), such essences had already changed drastically and immutably: "the Thomistic model expressed the ideology of a system of relations of production, and a system of political relations, which they, the new men, were beginning to annul."[19] Eco concludes that *all* systems of thought attempting to rationalize individual historical relations at a particular moment in historical time are of "equal value" and that every philosophy's claim – "This is how things really are!" – represents "an act of mystification."[20]

Eco's remarks in his 1970 preface and conclusion are themselves demonstrations of the idea they express, for such views certainly mirror his interest in Marxist theory after 1968. His reference to "relations of production" and other similar Marxist terminology suggest that he, too, has absorbed new ideas from his milieu that were

[18] *The Aesthetics.*, pp. 209–10; *Il problema estetico*, p. 251.
[19] *The Aesthetics*, p. 213; *Il problema estetico*, p. 254.
[20] *The Aesthetics*, p. 215; *Il problema estetico*, p. 257.

not as influential when Eco first published his study of Aquinas. But the conclusion Eco draws from his retrospective assessment of his work on medieval aesthetics avoids the far more revolutionary conclusions many of his university colleagues drew during that troubled period in Italy. Eco was attracted by the parallel between Scholasticism and structuralism as a valid reason to study past aesthetic theories. The impact of Scholasticism upon modernist poetics in writers such as James Joyce, and upon the literary theorists of the Chicago School or the New Critics, provided additional incentives. Only a few years later, Eco himself would devote many pages to a study of Joyce within the context of his own aesthetics in *The Open Work*. Ultimately, however, Eco justified studying the Scholastics not for philosophical, historical, or intellectual reasons but for what ultimately represents an aesthetic and a moral impulse:

> Anyone who makes use of the thinking of the past is enriched by an experience which is organic and complete, and is enabled subsequently to reconsider the world from a higher level of wisdom. However malformed and misplaced the tower which he has clambered up, he will see a larger vista; and not necessarily behind him. As Bernard of Chartres remarked, with a genial, imperious, and spurious humility, we are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants.[21]

Few readers of Eco's treatise on medieval aesthetics could have imagined that its author would eventually produce a best-selling novel replete with medieval erudition, untranslated Latin phrases, and puns of all kinds. And in truth, concentration upon Eco's early career with an eye only on his studies of Scholastic aesthetics would do Eco's personality and the wide range of his interests a great injustice and would never prepare us for the humor of his future works, as well as his irreverent attitude toward clerics and theorists in general. To anticipate fully the mixture of humor and erudition that

[21] *The Aesthetics*, p. 222; *Il problema estetico*, p. 264.

will characterize Eco's entire career, we must make at least brief mention of a little pamphlet called *Filosofi in libertà*. The title can be rendered into English as either "Philosophers in Freedom" or perhaps "Liberated Philosophers," if the phrase "in libertà" also makes reference to the Futurist motto "parole in libertà" or "words in freedom." In this work, Eco treats the history of philosophy in cartoons and verse, from the pre-Socratics to the present day. His goal is to "liberate" philosophy from its overly serious character and to apply laughter to its sometimes all-too-ponderous posturing. The book was first published under the Joycean pseudonym of Dedalus in a small volume limited to 550 copies by Marianne Abbagnano. It was issued again in 1959 in another 500 copies and subsequently a third time in 300 copies in 1989. This semi-serious narration of the development of philosophy soon became a collector's item and was included by popular demand in Eco's *Il secondo diario minimo (How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays*, 1992).[22]

Fifteen cartoons, not dissimilar from those in daily newspapers, illustrate a humorous trip through the pre-Socratics, Aristotle, Saint Anselm, Abelard, Aquinas, Nicholas of Cusa, Roger Bacon, René Descartes, Spinoza, Vico, Kant, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Croce, Gentile, Boutroux, Bergson, Dewey, Husserl, and a number of existentialists and ordinary language philosophers. The cartoons capture Eco's talent for puns and for his subversive, irreverent sense of humor. In one of them, for instance, Abelard (famous for the emasculation he suffered as a result of his love affair with Heloise) is addressed by a friar with a single question: "Vir?" ("Man?") and like a good medieval debater, Abelard responds: "Sic et non" ("Yes and no"). In another, at the ticket counter of the train station, Nietzsche asks for "un biglietto di andata e eterno ritorno." Here Eco plays upon the Italian expression for "round-trip ticket"

[22] See *Il secondo diario minimo*, pp. 201–43, for the complete text and Eco's explanation of the work's history. The partial English translation, *How to Travel With a Salmon*, does not include *Filosofi in libertà*.

("un biglietto di andata e ritorno"), adding the adjective "eternal" in a reference to Nietzsche's notion of the "eternal return." In a third cartoon, Giovanni Gentile, a philosopher associated with a form of idealism expounded in his *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* (*The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, first published in 1916) is shown at a confessional, describing his philosophical "sin" to a priest: ". . . and then I committed a pure act . . ." Gentile's confession refers both to the philosopher's major book and puns upon the Italian euphemism for masturbation ("atti impuri" or "impure acts"). The rest of this collection continues in much the same vein.

Of course, no student of Eco's works would equate this bit of goliardic verse and collection of cartoons with the scholarly achievement represented by Eco's two major books on medieval aesthetics. But Umberto Eco and all his theories cannot be understood without some notion of his sense of humor, his love for word-punning, and his ingenious linguistic games. These qualities reflect a mentality that permeates *The Name of the Rose*, an entire novel centered on a villainous monk who fears the redemptive power of laughter. Laughter, Eco always reminds his reader, is an activity that is proper only to man. And it is ultimately Eco's sense of humor that prompts him to apply serious analytical tools usually identified with "high" culture to phenomena generally associated with "low-brow" mass culture, such as cartoons, advertising, television programs, James Bond novels, and Superman comics. The alternation, or, more accurately, the contemporaneous composition, of erudite and theoretical writings, on the one hand, and less weighty, apparently frivolous books, on the other, will characterize each important phase of Eco's career. Eco's combination of theory, learning, and erudition with humor, parody, and pastiche constitutes one of the fundamental traits of his way of theorizing about literature, culture (both "high" and "low"), and the world around him.

two

§

The Open Work, Misreadings, and modernist aesthetics

Umberto Eco's treatises on medieval and Scholastic aesthetics reflect the esoteric and rarefied atmosphere of an Italian university, an erudition he satirizes in his parody of the history of philosophy. With his subsequent publications in the early 1960s – *The Open Work* and *Misreadings* – Eco continues his pattern of alternating a learned and erudite work with a parody and pastiche of the same subject-matter, but his cultural and critical theory now encompasses theoretical positions associated with the Italian avant-garde. During the same period, after working with the Turin television studio of the RAI from 1954 until 1958, Eco abandoned this post for an even more eventful career collaborating with Bompiani, a major Italian publishing house centered in Milan. From 1959 until the present day, Eco has played a major role at Bompiani, not only as the house's most profitable novelist but also as a major influence upon its editorial policy. While Eco's role at Bompiani was originally to direct a philosophical collection, *Idee nuove* (New Ideas), he was brought into the press for his familiarity with innovative theories from a wide variety of fields, and he continues to this day as an editor of several collections dealing with the fields of sociology and semiotics. By Valentino Bompiani's own testimony, it was Eco's parody of the history of philosophy in

Eco's precocious interest in extending the traditional discipline of aesthetics to include both popular culture and postmodernist phenomena, such as postmodern architecture. The second review was *Quindici*, a short-lived periodical (June 1967 until July 1969) that collapsed because of internal editorial problems arising from divergent political views on its editorial board. The board included not only Eco, Porta, and Sanguineti but also Renato Barilli (1935–), a student of Anceschi who had earlier collaborated on *Il verri* and had been part of Gruppo 63. Barilli is currently one of Eco's colleagues at the University of Bologna.[5] It was the demise of *Quindici* in 1969 that marked the definitive death of the Italian neo-avant-garde and of Gruppo 63 by "hara-kiri" or "suicide," as Eco himself put it in a survey article on Gruppo 63 included in the English translation of *The Open Work*.[6]

In its broad, ecumenical, cultural outlook, the avant-garde associated in particular with *Il verri* looked abroad for theoretical models that would open up Italian culture to a variety of new and often imported ideas. For example, it was during this period, and in part due to the influence of neo-avant-garde theorists, that such intellectual currents as structuralism, Russian formalism, the Frankfurt school, Brechtian theater, semiotics, American New Criticism, myth and archetypal criticism, the *nouveau roman*, phenomenology, and existentialism were all introduced into Italian intellectual life. The academic circles Eco frequented were particularly attracted by structuralism and semiotics. In some respects, the neo-avant-garde followed its better-known antecedent, the pre-fascist Futurist avant-garde, in its rejection of conventional poetic language, as well as taking an active

definition of postmodernism. Portoghesi's works in English translation include *After Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982); and *Postmodern, the Architecture of the Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983).

[5] Barilli has written a number of major critical works on Italian literature and aesthetics, some of which are available in English translation: *Art Nouveau* (London: P. Hamlyn, 1969); *Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); and *A Course on Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[6] "The Death of the Gruppo 63," in *The Open Work*, p. 249. This essay was not included in the original Italian edition or subsequent Italian editions of *Opera aperta*.

interest in contemporary political problems. But whereas the Futurists embraced a nationalistic and proto-fascist political stance, the intellectuals and poets associated with the neo-avant-garde and Gruppo 63 were fundamentally leftists – but "respectable" leftists with close ties to the most important Italian universities and publishing firms. As Eco has commented: "since we started out from a position of power, it ought to be pretty clear that we hardly ran any risk."[7] But their success in opening up Italian society to a sometimes bewildering variety of non-provincial outside cultural influences should not go unappreciated.

The appearance of *The Open Work* in 1962 certainly owed a debt to the intellectual ferment that the neo-avant-garde produced within Italian culture. Eco's book quickly became a *caso* in Italy (selling some tens of thousands of copies) and was frequently seen as the theoretical manifesto of the poets and literati making up the neo-avant-garde. However, the book – originally entitled "Form and Indeterminacy in Contemporary Poetics", an academic title judiciously replaced by the far more memorable title it now possesses by Eco's astute publisher Valentino Bompiani – cannot actually be described as a manifesto of Gruppo 63, even though Eco belonged to the group and its ideas on aesthetics often paralleled his own. In fact, many of the concepts developed in *The Open Work* are just as closely connected to Eco's earlier work in medieval aesthetics as they are to the neo-avant-garde. This medieval intellectual linkage is less obvious from a reading of the English translation of *The Open Work*, which has been greatly abbreviated, omitting the entire second section of the book drawing a parallel between the medieval world view and the writings of James Joyce, Eco's most important example of what he defined as an "open" literary work. What was originally a single book when it first appeared in Italian became eventually, in both Italian and English, two separate books: one section, *The Open Work*, contained a general aesthetics of modernism; the second part, rendered into English as

[7] Eco, "The Death of the Gruppo 63," in *The Open Work*, p. 239.

The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce, was eventually transformed into a monograph on Eco's favorite novelist.

The original Italian book presented an imposing obstacle to readers whose aesthetic theories were rooted in Romantic idealism or the aesthetic theories of Benedetto Croce. Once again, as in Eco's analyses of Scholastic aesthetics, the ultimate target of Eco's revisionary ideas was Benedetto Croce. The very notion of "culture" held by most Italian intellectuals when the book appeared was antithetical to Eco's approach. "Serious" scholars were expected to spend their lives analyzing "high" culture, the "great works" produced by "masters." Such obviously philistine products of mass or popular culture as television, cartoons, or even the cinema were not considered worthy of reflective attention, let alone a prominent place in a book dedicated to contemporary aesthetic theory. Yet, Eco proposed that the defining boundaries of contemporary poetics should be set by considering products of popular or mass culture, the artistic theories of the avant-garde, and illustrations from works of high modernism, such as *Finnegans Wake*, a work only grudgingly accepted in Italy by intellectuals but scarcely read by a wide public at the time. In fact, *Ulysses* was translated into Italian only in 1960, and *Finnegans Wake* had yet to appear in a complete translation when Eco's book was published in Italy. In *The Open Work*, therefore, Eco automatically alienated Crocean critics as well as numerous representatives of the official intellectual elite who were simply not prepared to deal with an aesthetic dominated by an incomprehensible English novel they were unable to read. The hostile review of Eco's book by the poet Eugenio Montale, who attacked Eco's work on several grounds in an essay published on 29 July 1962, is most revealing in this regard, since Montale can hardly be suspected of philistine tendencies. In only a single sentence, and with a thinly disguised sarcastic tone, Montale undermined Eco's original interpretation of Calder's mobiles (the "moving art" to which Montale referred) and implied that real cockroaches scampering around a kitchen floor were as "open" as the more famous

insect immortalized by Kafka's classic tale, "The Metamorphosis":

> I am completely convinced that everything in the world is connected; and that moreover even the cockroaches of Capogrossi, placed under the rubric of moving art, can possess the undeserved honor of figuring next to the works of Kafka, which are also open as a result of their countless meanings.[8]

Montale simply refused to treat Eco's views seriously. He then continued in much the same vein, disparaging the clearly leftist tenor of *The Open Work*, insofar as Eco's theories on contemporary aesthetics claimed to demonstrate that the "open" work was an accurate reflection of twentieth-century "alienation." Montale refers to Eco as one of a group of young men who are "more or less Marxists, or rather, if I beg your pardon, Marxians," who

> look with complete confidence toward the advent of a society in which science and industry, united, create new values and destroy forever the archaic face of nature, substituting in its place a landscape of machines, the perfect background for a man who is finally "integrated."[9]

A few years later after the French translation of *The Open Work* appeared, no less a figure than Claude Lévi-Strauss would continue such harsh attacks, affirming that Eco's book

> defends a formula that I absolutely cannot accept. What makes a work of art a work is not its being open but its being closed. A work of art is an object endowed with precise properties and [it possesses], as it were, the rigidity of a crystal.[10]

So strongly ingrained were notions of linking artistic merit with closure and an artist's intentions that Eco's aesthetics thus angered

[8] Eugenio Montale, "Opere aperte," in *Auto da fé* (Milan: Il saggiatore, 1966), p. 197 (author's translation).

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 199 (author's translation).

[10] Paolo Caruso, ed., *Conversazioni con Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan* (Milan: Mursia, 1969), p. 81 (the original interview was first published in *Paese Sera* on 20 January 1967, author's translation).

not only Crocean idealists but also intellectuals such as Montale or Lévi-Strauss, both normally representatives of progressive points of view. Yet, while Eco's aesthetic theory is resolutely anti-Crocean, intriguing affinities between the two thinkers do exist. Croce's aesthetics contrasted *poesia* to *non-poesia*. Thus, the successful expression of an artistic intuition in a moment of *liricità* – for example, the greatest dramatic moments in Dante's epic poetry – were defined as "poetic," while what Croce considered non-artistic material in that same poem, such as Dante's views on theology, would be called "non-poetry." While Eco's aesthetic theories are completely opposed to those of Croce, Eco sometimes seems to repeat Croce's habit of grouping works of art into opposing camps, not unlike the distinction Crocean critics set up between "poetry" and "non-poetry." Thus, Eco contrasts "closed" or traditional works of art with "open" artistic works in a variety of fields: music (Luciano Berio, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Henri Pousseur, Pierre Boulez), literature (here the example of James Joyce occupies what later becomes a separate book), and sculpture (Alexander Calder, as the creator of "works in motion," is Eco's strongest example). Of course, neither Croce nor Eco was ever so naive as to believe any binary grouping of complex works of art could exhaust their meaning, and such a rhetorical stance was primarily a polemical one, adopted to strengthen the force of their argument. It is important to note that Eco does not refer simply to the ambiguity inherent in any work of art from any historical period. Such ambiguity, so highly praised by the American New Critics, is insufficient to constitute a truly "open" and modernist work. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which moves beyond mere ambiguity toward an "open" quality, does so in a manner characterized by Eco as "intentional, explicit, and extreme."[11] In a brief but illuminating

[11] *The Open Work*, p. 39; *Opera aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962), p. 78. I cite from this edition and not from subsequent editions of this work because it contains the original chapters on the poetics of James Joyce. For a newer edition of this work, see the Bompiani edition of 1993 which omits the chapters devoted to Joyce.

early book on Scholastic aesthetics has been subsumed under a far more authoritative and original philosophical voice in *The Open Work*.

Besides a rejection of Crocean idealism and a willingness to consider the most typical products of popular culture, such as television, in the same breath with the masterpieces of world literature, another novelty of *The Open Work* was Eco's marked emphasis upon the role of the reader/listener/viewer in the aesthetic experience. Most previous discussions of aesthetics current in Italy emphasized the formal properties of the work of art itself. Eco's recognition that an aesthetic "fact" involved not only an object but an on-looker will become extremely important to the works of his later career. Several chapters of *The Open Work*, in fact, deal with the implications of information theory for aesthetics and poetics, and it was Eco's interest in information theory that would eventually lead him toward structuralism and, ultimately, to semiotics. Eco stresses the fact that both avant-garde literature in general, and the open work in particular, employ disorder to increase information: probability and predictability actually always result in a decrease of information. From the perspective of information theory, conventional or classical art "violated the conventional order of language *within well-defined limits*," while contemporary open works constantly challenge

> the initial order by means of an extremely "improbable" form of organization . . . whereas classical art introduced original elements within a linguistic system whose basic laws it substantially respected, contemporary art often manifests its originality by imposing *a new linguistic system* with its own inner laws.[16]

To this point, Eco's theoretical aesthetics seem to suggest that *The Open Work* had little of interest to say about a possible linkage between a work of art and the society which produced it. But, just as Eco had already done in his study of Aquinas and Scholastic aesthetics, he underlines quite clearly in *The Open Work* the crucial role aesthetics

[16] *The Open Work*, p. 60; *Opera aperta*, pp. 104–105.

plays in defining what previous generations of critics might have called the "spirit of the age." Any truly important work of art, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Joyce's novel, must be understood as "epistemological metaphors." Such metaphors represent the "structural resolutions" or "a widespread theoretical consciousness (not of a particular theory so much as of an acquired cultural viewpoint)"; they embody "the repercussion, within formative activity, of certain ideas acquired from contemporary scientific methodologies."[17] For example, an "informal" art emphasizes the possible combinations between work and viewer. Such "informal" work calls into question a number of traditional principles of logic and science – the principle of causality, bivalent logics, univocal relationships, and the principle of contradiction – just as a work such as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* may be said to embody a perfect linguistic reflection of such contemporary scientific forces as the Einsteinian curved universe, the relativity principle, or the uncertainty principle of quantum physics. Because art serves as an epistemological metaphor, it reflects a way of dealing with the reality of one's historically defined universe. Dante's *Divine Comedy* embodies the essence of Scholastic theology and philosophy just as Alexander Calder's famous mobiles – what Eco calls "works in movement" – expand the very notion of artistic *form*. In like manner, the linguistic polyvalence and the aesthetics of chaosmos in James Joyce's great novels – that is, their form and not their content – reflect an intimate sensitivity to the change in the world view that took place during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries in physics and mathematics. Eco explains this in a key passage of a chapter entitled "Form as Social Commitment," a section he added to the second edition of *The Open Work* and a statement that marks the direct influence of his teacher Pareyson:

> The real content of a work is the vision of the world expressed in its way of forming (*modo di formare*). Any analysis of the relationship

[17] *The Open Work*, p. 87; *Opera aperta*, p. 137.

> between art and the world will have to take place at this level. Art knows the world through its formal structures (which, therefore, can no longer be considered from a purely formalist point of view but must be seen as its true content). Literature is an organization of words that signify different aspects of the world, but the literary work is itself an aspect of the world in the way its words are organized, even when every single word, taken in isolation, has absolutely no meaning, or simply refers to events and relationships between events that may appear to have nothing to do with the world.[18]

This crucial addition to the original edition of *The Open Work* first appeared as an article ("Del modo di formare come impegno sulla realtà") Eco had been invited to write for Elio Vittorini's journal, *Il Menabò di letteratura*, in the second of two issues devoted to the relationship between literature and industry. Vittorini had defended the writers associated with the French *nouveau roman* who had been criticized by leftist critics for ignoring the world of the working classes in general and the factory in particular in their works. Eco continued Vittorini's defense using a more theoretical tone. Writers who simply reflect the "real" world in their content but who continue to employ the literary language or codes of that traditional world merely reproduce the system of conventional language that buttresses a traditional system of class relationships. Avant-garde authors of "open" works, on the other hand, innovate at the level of artistic form, which is always their ultimate content. When properly analyzed and understood, their works of art, always epistemological metaphors, tell us far more about the true nature of reality than any so-called "realist" literature employing out-moded, traditional, and thoroughly predictable literary conventions linked to the old regime.

In the second half of the original Italian edition of *The Open Work*, Eco had discussed the implications of the "open" quality of James Joyce's works with great persuasive power. Subsequently issued as a separate edition of criticism and translated into English as *The*

[18] *The Open Work*, p. 144 (this material was not included in the Italian edition).

Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce,[19] this slim but impressive volume not only makes an interesting contribution to Joyce studies but also implicitly draws a parallel between Joyce's artistic development and Eco's own career. While Joyce moved from a Catholic, Thomist aesthetics to the modernist aesthetics of the open work, the Irish writer remained so fundamentally marked by the medieval world view that Eco can characterize his entire career as "medievally minded": "If you take away the transcendent God from the symbolic world of the Middle Ages, you have the world of Joyce."[20]

Eco argues that much of the characteristically Joycean style has obvious medieval antecedents in its mania for encyclopedic lists (a trait also evident in Eco's own fiction) and in the *summa*-like quality of both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce's transition from a traditional Catholic, Thomist view of the world to a revolutionary revision of that conventional model in two ground-breaking novels that serve as emblematic "epistemological metaphors" for the modern era also finds a parallel in Eco's own career. Eco's mania for an orderly aesthetic theory began with a study of Scholastic aesthetics but eventually resulted not only in an overall *Theory of Semiotics* in 1976 (in its scope, a book reminiscent of the Thomist *summa*) but also in a popular novel filled with medieval lore. Yet, like Joyce's works, Eco's novel is imbued with a completely non-medieval aesthetics. As Eco remarks, "to me Joyce was the node where the Middle Ages and the avant-garde meet, and the present book is the story and the historical-theoretical foundation of such a paradoxical meeting."[21]

If *The Open Work* represented the erudite, theoretical, and abstract aspect of Eco's literary persona, *Misreadings* reflected the humorous, goliardic, and comic side of Eco's intellect. As Eco's prefaces to both the Italian edition and English translation make clear, the literary

[19] Translated by Ellen Esrock (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). The material on James Joyce's poetics was originally published in the Italian edition of *Opera aperta* (pp. 215–361).

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7 (this material was not printed in the original Italian edition).

[21] *Ibid.*, p. xi (this material was not printed in the original Italian edition).

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Umberto Eco is Italy's most famous living intellectual, known among academics for his literary and cultural theories, and to an enormous international audience through his novels, *The Name of the Rose, Foucault's Pendulum and The Island of the Day Before. Umberto Eco and the open text* is the first comprehensive study in English of Eco's work. In clear and accessible language, Peter Bondanella considers not only Eco's most famous texts, but also many occasional essays not yet translated into English. Tracing Eco's intellectual development from early studies in medieval aesthetics to seminal works on popular culture, postmodern fiction, and semiotic theory, he shows how Eco's own fiction grows out of his literary and cultural theories. Bondanella cites all texts in English, and provides a full bibliography of works by and about Eco.

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