REVIEWS


UMBERTO ECO: TWO PORTRAITS OF A PROTEUS

Umberto Eco's brilliance in literary and cultural theory, in semiotics, and in creative writing; the immense historical range of his interests; and his free use of several modern and ancient languages make him a paragon of comparative literature. Yet for some twenty-five years, work on Eco in this country has taken separate paths: critiques of his semiotics; of his three famous novels The Name of the Rose (1980); here I give the dates of the first Italian publication), Foucault's Pendulum (1988), and The Island of the Day Before (1994); of his tenets on popular, avant-garde, and postmodern culture; and of his ideas of literary interpretation. Peter Bondanella's Umberto Eco and the Open Text and the Rocco Capozzi anthology Reading Eco (several other collections are forthcoming) point to a new phase in Eco studies, namely the scrutiny of his oeuvre in both its totality and transformations.

Bondanella has consistently demonstrated his expertise in presenting major facets of Italian culture to English-speaking readers, who remain insufficiently familiar with them. Umberto Eco and the Open Text, the first comprehensive study of its subject in English, follows in the steps of his The Cinema of Federico Fellini (1993) and The Films of Roberto Rossellini (1993). The most appealing feature of Bondanella's latest study is its obvious usefulness both for those making their first acquaintance with Eco and for specialists. The former will appreciate the clear outline of Eco's most arcane theories and the broad scope of the book, which covers all major features of Eco's writings and personality. The latter will find the rich biographical and bibliographical data extremely helpful (often provided or corrected by Eco himself), as well as the many digressions on Eco's Italian context and the ingenious readings of his three novels.

Bondanella presents Eco by combining the chronological—biographical and thematic principles, which in this case overlap. He concentrates on Eco's major books and ideas but often augments our grasp of them with references to obscure publications by or about Eco in both Italian and English. Bondanella has chosen not to write a critical biography (xvi), but rather a portrait of "Eco's always evolving thought" (193). For Bondanella, Eco is much more than an exemplary academic; he is a protean intellectual, always the same in his creative passion and power and always new and contemporary in the forms of his creations. He is a Janus figure in every respect. His career is "a complicated odyssey from Thomist aesthetics to postmodern fiction" (xvi), and his writing is a "mixture of humor and erudition" (16); The Name of the Rose bridges "the gap between the erudite, academic, philosophical reader and the avid consumer of best-selling pulp fiction and detective stories" (106). Eco stays away from political parties, yet always takes a progressive "engaged political and cultural position" (157). He is an academic and artistic Proteus because his mind is eclectic, receptive, and open; he is "dedicated to such principles as pluralism, freedom of information, democracy, and intellectual tolerance" (88). All the facets of this kaleidoscopic figure come together in the powerful conclusion where Bondanella argues that Eco's personal traits converge with postmodern culture, making him an epitome of "the postmodern sensibility" (199).

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Every level of the book contributes to Bondanella's portrayal of Eco as a mutating, but indivisible phenomenon, with each chapter devoted to several complementary topics. The first focuses on his studies of medieval aesthetics, known by English-speaking readers from Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages (1986; here I give the date of the English translation, because the Italian versions are often quite different) and The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas (1988). The second chapter turns to Eco's neo-avant-garde aesthetics in The Open Work (1989) and The Aesthetics of Chaosmos (1989); Misreadings (1993) is treated as a humorous double of Eco's modernist doctrines. Bondanella next tackles the analyses of popular culture in Apocalypse Postponed (1994) and several essays in The Role of the Reader (1979). The fourth chapter deals with Eco's semiotics, most fully formulated in A Theory of Semiotics (1976). The last three chapters discuss Eco's novels and the theoretical works written simultaneously with them. The Name of the Rose is defined as postmodern fiction, which is theorized in Postscript to "The Name of the Rose" (1984). Foucault's Pendulum addresses overinterpretation, the issue treated in The Limits of Interpretation (1990) and Interpretation and Overinterpretation (1992). Finally The Island of the Day Before addresses postmodernism and the baroque, using palimpsestic techniques to explore the pleasures of narration, and thereby parallels The Search for the Perfect Language (1995) and Six Walks in the Fictional Woods (1994).

Bondanella's belief that Eco embodies unity in diversity operates on other planes as well. For instance, every important work of Eco's is introduced in its numerous versions, and this is a further proof of Eco's perpetually developing thought; the bibliography is not just a technical appendix but part and parcel of the study. Moreover, the book includes numerous biographical vignettes as well as information about Eco's Italian environment, which portray him as both a thinker and practitioner of his theories, and as someone in continuous dialogue with numerous intellectual and artistic traditions. Bondanella shows that as Eco's texts expand in scope, so do his cultural contexts: if the first half of the study focuses mainly on Eco's Italian milieu, the second emphasizes his participation in Western thought in general. Thus Bondanella's book amounts to a masterful sketch of Italian and Western intellectual history from the early 1950s to the present, with Eco as the central but not the only character. Last but not least, Bondanella's work offers a pioneering synthesis of the best Italian and American scholarship on Eco. One may expect that future representations of Eco in the English-speaking world (and perhaps beyond it, since this book has already appeared in Polish and Portuguese) will be strongly influenced by Bondanella's very generous and competent portrait.

Our other book, Reading Eco, has four parts: a forward by Thomas Sebeok and a preface by Capozzi, five of Eco's own articles, twelve essays on Eco's general and literary semiotics, and ten analyses of his three novels. The volume, Capozzi explains, focuses on "Eco's notions of literary semiotics and interpretation" after A Theory of Semiotics (xix). Fortunately, the anthology offers much more. The "bonus" includes two excellent contributions on general semiotics by Sebeok (xvi) and Eco (1-13, his only new article for English readers), Sebeok's overview of Eco's neo-avant-garde aesthetics from the 1950s-1960s, and two superb philosophical discussions of Eco's and Peirce's semiotics by Decly and Buczyńska-Gwarewicz. Deely's critique of A Theory of Semiotics can be read as a companion to Eco's semiotic masterpiece, whose pivotal "notion of sign-function," according to Deely, "is not an adequate—let alone necessary—substitute for the classical notion of signum" (103). Philosophically, he concludes, A Theory of Semiotics is "one small step"
(110) away from the idealism of modernity toward "the beginning of semiotic consciousness" (84) that is associated with postmodernity and was begun by Peirce; this consciousness breaks with modernity to continue traditions of Latin thought with which modernity parted company. Semiotically, however, Eco's book is "one giant leap for the doctrine of signs" (110). Buczynska-Garewicz examines "the chasm between rationalism and irrationalism" (172) exemplified respectively by Peirce's (and Eco's) semiotics and Derrida's deconstruction. This article, Petrelli's astute juxtaposition of Saussure's semiotics with that of Peirce and Eco, and Miranda's very good sketch of Eco's tenet regarding the limits of literary interpretation (367-73) lead, step by step, from philosophy and general semiotics to Eco's theory of reading in the 1980s-1990s. This progression should be helpful to literary scholars, because Eco himself does not detail his principal disagreements with Derrida and Saussure.

Consisting mostly of revised articles from the last two or a half decades, the anthology looks to the past; but by instigating a reexamination of Eco and the semiotics of literature, it looks to the present and the future. The title Reading Eco, therefore, is to be understood as re-reading Eco, and designates a historicizing of his unfolding ideas in conjunction with our own evolving comprehension of him. The progression of Eco's thought on different levels is caught wittily by Capozzi (xvii-xviii), it is repeated by most of the contributors, and it is also the organizing principle for Dolezel's shrewd summary of the leading themes in Eco's literary semiotics. Zamora, as if picking up on Capozzi's passing reference to Eco's novels as a "trilogy" (387), constructs a sophisticated framework for reading them as an oscillation from the Neoplatonism of The Name of the Rose through the nominalism of Foucault's Pendulum to a postmodern transition from the former to the latter in The Island of the Day Before. On the other hand, Tejera rightly observes that Eco's intellectual evolution has its price: Eco's use of some of Peirce's terms is inconsistent and marred by Cartesian dualism. (This dualism, I might add, colors Eco's prescientific thinking more obviously than either his semiotics or his ideas about postmodernism and the limits of interpretation.)

Eco scholars have different perspectives on his mercurial integrity. Some of their favorite topoi in this regard are: Eco's erudition; his gift for matching theoretical seriousness with humor, irony, parody, and pastiche; his postmodern sensibility; his practice as an intertextual writer. In literary criticism, the consensus on Eco's immutability in mutability culminates with the temptation of seeing Eco's novels as narrative transpositions of his own theories. This amounts to reinventing Eco's own neo-avant-garde doctrine of the work of art as an "epistemological metaphor," whereby the modern, open work represents reality as already formulated by science. Philosophically, this idea suggests a dualism of mind and matter, where mind (Eco's theory) precedes matter (his narrative practice). Semiotically, it belongs to Saussurean semiotics, with its exact correspondence between signifier and signified (Eco's novels signify Eco's theories). The fact that the signified (Eco's theories) advocates Peircean semiotics, where plurivocality and polysemy reign, does not change the fixed link between the signifier and the signified. The paradox of a criticism that interprets Eco's novels as fictional translations of Eco's theories is that by advocating ambiguity and polysemy, it perpetuates rigidity and monologism. This paradox is perhaps the major point in criticism of Eco's fiction. Eco himself gave up the doctrine of the "epistemological metaphor" in the late 1960s with his transition from structuralism and Saussure to semiotics and Peirce. Should then Eco's literary disciples persist in a path abandoned by the Master himself?

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Reading Eco includes specimens of this critical paradox, but it also offers telling examples of overcoming it, as when Hutcheon perspicaciously evades the theoretical trap by considering irony as a relation of sameness/difference between Eco's theory and fiction: "Without irony, Eco's novel [Foucault's Pendulum] would be an exemplar of hermetic semiotics; with irony, it becomes simultaneously a critique as well as an exemplar" (317). Tejera insightfully distinguishes Eco's novels from his theoretical semiotics: the former "remain true to the creative spirit of expressive art," while the latter bears the traces of "Cartesian or neopositivist approaches" (150; see also 158, 415 n.15). Several contributors offer impressive demonstrations that Eco's theory is a tool for analyzing artistic texts that are not necessarily like the ones he wrote: Riffaterre elaborates an effective Peircean (and Ecoic) approach to intertextuality, and Rauch does the same with linguistics. Other authors prove that Eco's texts can be interpreted by theories which are not his: Kevelson explores Peirce and Eco through drama, and Perron and Debeche analyze Eco's text through Greimas.

Bondanella's and Capozzi's books are timely indications of the fruitfulness of perceiving Eco as the same in his metamorphoses. They also testify to a certain price that Eco and his readers must/may pay for the enormous pleasure and intellectual stimulus of being Eco and being with Eco.

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In the age of deconstruction, David Halliburton is interested in reconstruction. How is the discourse of phenomena constructed? What social, political, economic, and cultural elements contribute to its shape and fullness? In turn, the answer to these questions becomes a means for interpreting the things. Taking his cue from Kenneth Burke's A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives, he proposes a grammar of phenomena that attempts to explore and open the various elements that mediate the critical discourse. In a further elaboration of Burke, he hopes to follow this book with a companion volume exploring the rhetoric and politics of things. Halliburton's title comes from Joachim du Bellay's discours fatal des choses mon- daines, and focuses on the fatefulness, as opposed to the fatality of discourse, that is its moment, fullness, or Deweyan "consummation." The book has a magisterial scope, roaming widely over Western philosophy and literature, with special attention to Hannah Arendt and to the American pragmatists C.S. Peirce, John Dewey, and William James. Halliburton, Professor of English, Comparative Literature, and Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford University, and author of a number of books, including Poetic Thinking: An Approach to Heidegger (1981), and The Col- or of the Sky: A Study of Stephen Crane (1989), is eminently qualified for the task.

The book is divided into five parts: Reconstructing, Constituting, Discoursing, Incorporating, and Experiencing, the activities that trace the stages in the construction of the discourse of phenomena, giving them their fullness. Jumping off from Dewey and Emerson, "Reconstructing" argues that "practice" precedes "theory," providing the ground for it. From this Halliburton suggests how theories create systems, comparing the civil models that emerge from Hobbes and Locke with that reconstructed by Pater in The Renaissance and Marius the Epicurean.