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Peter Bondanella

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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.

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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

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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.

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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); *Eстетica: 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.

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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

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into one crucial expression of this new mass culture – the upstart medium of television. Immediately after completing his doctorate in 1954, Eco took a position with the Milanese television studio of the RAI, the Italian state network that at the time exercised a monopoly within the peninsula over all means of mass communication. It was at the RAI that Eco met Furio Colombo (1931–), a journalist who became a life-long friend and would eventually direct the Italian government’s cultural institute in New York. At the RAI, Eco also befriended Luciano Berio (1925–), whose avant-garde music would play a major role in formulating the theories Eco introduces in *The Open Work*. Eco’s television experience was therefore crucial in a number of respects. Besides making a number of personal contacts that would influence the rest of his professional and private life, he was thrown pell-mell from the rarefied atmosphere of the Italian university, a cathedral devoted to the often monastic pursuit of learning, into the everyday world of popular culture. His work covered a wide variety of fields, from cultural programs to book reviews, children’s shows, and dramatic reconstructions of historical events. A version of the popular American program “You Are There” was one of the projects upon which he collaborated. Like its American counterpart, the Italian program was devoted to imaginary interviews with important historical figures at a crucial moment in the past, and the series had a primarily didactic purpose. Everything was broadcast live in an era before video tape, and the entire industry still had the improvisational atmosphere of a new toy that must certainly have constituted its major attraction. Such an experience would later bear fruit in some of Eco’s most thought-provoking essays on popular and mass culture phenomena in the 1970s, his so-called “semiotic” period. And his years in Turin, surrounded by the intellectual ferment the city boasted during the 1950s, represent a fundamental stage in Eco’s early development, during which time he moved beyond his essentially academic background into a wider, broader, and far more suggestive framework for his theoretical writings.

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Eco published several important essays in the 1950s, but his original ideas and theories about the nature of the contemporary avant-garde and the “open work” would first see the light in journals of relatively limited diffusion before eventually being turned into book-length essays in the early 1960s. As we might expect from a promising young intellectual with a voracious memory and prodigious appetite for erudition, Eco’s doctoral thesis, defended in 1954 and published in 1956, was devoted to what is even for well-educated readers (except for fans of James Joyce) an esoteric subject: the aesthetic theories of St. Thomas Aquinas. The first edition was entitled *Il problema estetico in San Tommaso*. In a second edition, which contained a number of stylistic modifications and an important new conclusion written during the time Eco was heavily influenced by structuralist theory, the title is modified to *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d’Aquino*. Thus, as Eco’s thinking evolved, the learned doctor of the Catholic Church lost his saintly title. Yet, Eco’s treatment of Aquinas’ aesthetic theories argues paradoxically for the increased relevance of Scholastic philosophy for twentieth-century methodology. Shortly thereafter in 1959, Eco published a far briefer synopsis of his aesthetic theories which nevertheless embodied most of the ideas in the more erudite volume devoted to Scholastic aesthetics, “Sviluppo dell’estetica medievale” (The Development of Medieval Aesthetics) which would later appear in English in 1986 as *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. In the following year, an enlarged and revised version of the English edition was published in Italy as *Arte e bellezza nell’estetica medievale*. The two works can be discussed together without doing too much damage to Eco’s arguments, since the shorter essay recapitulates, for the most part, conclusions argued with more subtlety and far more attention to detail in the longer work.

Eco himself points out the defects of the first edition of the work on Aquinas in his preface to the second edition of 1970: “it is a typically youthful work, with all the faults that this implies: a convoluted style, a tendency to equate the readable with the unscientific, the headstrong

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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.

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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

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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.