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.
Umberto Eco
and the open text
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Semiotics, fiction, popular culture

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For
Lynn Luciano
In Memoriam
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Preface

Umberto Eco is probably Italy’s most famous living intellectual figure. A significant portion of his critical works has been translated into English, not to mention countless other languages, even though that portion is but a small fraction of the mass of work he has produced in a wide variety of fields. While it is his literary and cultural theory, particularly associated with semiotics (a field to which he has made major contributions since the mid-1960s) which has established Eco’s reputation as a major European intellectual, capable of comparison to such thinkers as Foucault, Lacan, Althusser, Derrida, or Barthes, Eco has a second and even broader international audience created by the extraordinary success of three widely read novels: The Name of the Rose (made into a major motion picture starring Sean Connery); Foucault’s Pendulum; and The Island of the Day Before.

Given Eco’s fame, it is surprising that numerous English-language books on him and his works are not already available. Dozens of books each year appear in English focusing upon other major European literary or cultural theorists, but readers searching for reliable information about Eco’s intellectual development must be satisfied to peruse specialized scholarly journals or to glance through the all-too-brief critical introductions or translators’ comments included in several English translations of his major works. The fact that French is the foreign language and culture most familiar to English or
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American academics (especially those interested in literary theory or cultural studies) undoubtedly helps in part to explain this strange oversight. But this is only a partially satisfactory explanation, since it is regrettably the case that most French theory is read by English or American academics in translation, rather than in the original language. Too often, Anglo-Saxon academics have been inattentive to truly innovative developments in Italy for reasons that are often simply parochial; while medievalists and Renaissance specialists feel they cannot ignore Italy’s contributions in literature, art, music, and culture, all too often contemporary scholars of literature in the English-speaking world have not looked to Italy for many years for original critical perspectives. In fairness, it must be noted that the recent appearance of a number of English translations of Eco’s early books on aesthetics and popular culture will no doubt focus attention upon his entire career now that representative selections from every stage in his career are available in English. Nevertheless, a reader without some knowledge of Italian and lacking a firm grounding in Italian literature, culture, and history will find approaching Eco’s works sometimes a difficult task, given the scope of his interests and the depth of his erudition.

The purpose of Umberto Eco and the Open Text: Semiotics, Fiction, Popular Culture is to provide a reliable, thought-provoking, but necessarily brief account of Umberto Eco’s intellectual development and major theoretical contributions during the past four decades. It is my hope that the results will satisfy specialists in Italian studies, literary theory, and semiotics, but the book is also designed for what I trust is an even larger group of people, the educated but non-academic readers who still care about critical discourse on literature and contemporary culture. In short, this book defines as its model reader the same model reader Umberto Eco examines in his theoretical essays on narrative theory.

A complete bibliography of Eco’s works would require a separate book by itself. Moreover, the massive quantity of Eco’s writings is
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further complicated by the author’s polyglot nature and his sometimes bewildering habit of publishing numerous variants of a single article or book in a variety of languages, making small and sometimes imperceptible but nevertheless important revisions each time. Lately, Eco has begun to compose articles and books in languages other than Italian, so that the “original” may well be written in a foreign tongue while the “translation” appears in his native language. Moreover, as Eco’s international reputation has grown and grown in the aftermath of the appearance of his three novels, writings from other periods have been reprinted in numerous Italian editions (usually with modifications or revisions and new prefaces) or in translations which may sometimes differ from the Italian originals. In this study, I have cited English editions of Eco’s writings whenever available, although my own assessment of Eco has been based upon the Italian texts. Any of Eco’s works that have not yet appeared in English and to which I refer have been translated, if cited in my study, by me and will be so noted in the footnotes. In every instance that an English translation is employed, I have also provided a reference to the most current Italian edition.

Perhaps more than any single individual, Umberto Eco embodies the postmodern sensibility: his own work has made major contributions to the definition of what the term “postmodern” signifies, and his own personal habits as a writer seem to deny the uniqueness of individual artistic creation (the ultimate goal of literary modernism), and propose, instead, a continuous “work in progress” that constitutes his entire bibliography, an ever-evolving and highly sophisticated collection of original theories, heuristic ideas, amusing observations, and incisive vignettes that paint an unforgettable portrait of contemporary popular culture and provide a means of understanding the very cultural milieux that have produced Eco and his works.

In this study, I have decided to concentrate upon Eco’s major books. For the most part, I shall deal with Eco’s many hundreds of articles, essays, book reviews, and interviews primarily only when
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they are collected, as they periodically have been, and published as a book. Furthermore, in discussing Eco’s novels, I shall focus not only upon their literary merits (which are considerable) but also upon their status (less often acknowledged) as implicit treatments of the nature of literary discourse, practical demonstrations of key philosophical concepts first expounded in his “serious” theoretical works, and highly self-conscious reflections of how Eco defines the mutual dependency between “high” culture and “mass” or “popular” culture in the postmodern world. It is my belief that Eco’s move from semiotic theory to fiction represents a step forward, not a betrayal of “pure” theory but, rather, a fascinating experiment combining theory with practice that could have been successfully achieved by very few academic thinkers of his generation. Such a transition can hardly be said to imply a theoretical failure on Eco’s part or a flaw in semiotics, since it was precisely Eco’s immersion in structuralist and semiotic theory that allowed him, first, to understand the mechanisms underlying narrative fiction and, then, to become one of the century’s most original and popular practitioners of postmodernist storytelling.

Eco’s intellectual career moves through a remarkable series of intellectual developments. He intended to write a traditional thesis on Thomist aesthetics but eventually produced a rejection of the Crocean aesthetics that constituted modern Italy’s most original contribution to twentieth-century philosophy. A precocious reader of James Joyce in an Italy that ignored the Irish novelist at the time, Eco, influenced not only by Joyce but also by communications theory and structuralist thought, then produced a post-Crocean aesthetics founded upon the concept of the “open work.” Subsequent essays collected in a number of influential anthologies on popular culture emphasized the search for a methodology that could deal simultaneously with both the high culture literature of Dante as well as the comic strips of a Charles Schulz or the spy novels of an Ian Fleming. Eco’s interest in exploring general theories about culture led him toward semiotics, the science of signs, and he was responsible, in part,
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for popularizing this new methodology and for turning the theory of semiotics toward a reappraisal of the American philosopher Charles Peirce, making Peirce’s key ideas the cornerstone of his own semiotic theories. A major shift in Eco’s career occurred when he turned from theory to practice, producing three major novels, the first of which, The Name of the Rose, reached astronomical sales figures never before even imagined by an Italian or European author in the world market. His fascination with demonstrating through concrete examples of prose fiction many of the theoretical concepts that had always attracted his attention (the role of the reader, the place of tradition in literature, various narrative strategies producing diverse effects, the philosophical status of textual interpretation, etc.) marks Eco’s postmodernist stance as a novelist who simultaneously addresses a number of different audiences. It is this marriage of practice and theory that has characterized the latter part of Eco’s intellectual career.

If Eco’s career has been characterized by a complicated odyssey from Thomist aesthetics to postmodern fiction, the man behind the works has remained a constant. Eco’s writings on semiotics, popular culture, and literary theory, as well as his fiction, all celebrate intellectual tolerance and an open-minded fascination with new ideas, while their author delights in polemical debates with his interlocutors and employs his rapier wit and ironic sense of humor in a prose style that has earned him the respect of readers in many different cultures.

I am indebted to critical comments on the manuscript supplied by a number of friends, colleagues, and students. I would like to thank the anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press who provided a critical eye to this manuscript that I found extremely useful. Katharina Brett, the Cambridge editor who originally dealt with me on this project, was a joy to work with, and Linda Bree was a perfect editor when the manuscript actually reached the press. I owe special thanks to Julia Conaway Bondanella, Jody Shiffman, and Matei Calinescu for reading parts of the manuscript and offering their useful advice at
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various stages of its composition. I am also grateful for the encourage-
ment and advice of my colleagues Willis Barnstone, Bruce Cole, 
Harry Geduld, and David Hertz. Tom Sebeok, the founder of the 
program in semiotics at Indiana University, bears some responsibility 
for my interest in Umberto Eco (although none of the blame for any 
errors I might have made here): he was primarily responsible for 
inviting Eco to Indiana University on numerous occasions, having 
many of his works translated and published by our university press 
(on some of which he was a collaborator with Eco), and for 
nominating Eco for an honorary degree from Indiana University. 
Finally, Umberto Eco himself was kind enough to read the final 
manuscript and to provide detailed corrections about matters of fact 
concerning his life and the history of the publication of his works, 
information that has helped me to avoid the many errors of fact that 
plague almost all discussion of Eco’s life in print in Italian reference 
works. Obviously, a critical biography of Eco written with full access 
to his own archives would be an important project for the future. In 
his reading of my manuscript, Eco scrupulously avoided ever attempt-
ing to have me modify my own interpretations of his career, 
confirming the opinion that any reader may form of him from his 
own works, in which he constantly defends intellectual curiosity and a 
tolerance and respect for the views of others.

This book is dedicated to a dear, departed friend who met Umberto 
Eco several times in Bloomington under very amusing circumstances.

Bloomington, Indiana
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1996