

the PARIS REVIEW

Umberto Eco, *The Art of Fiction* No. 197

Interviewed by Lila Azam Zanganeh

The first time I called Umberto Eco, he was sitting at his desk in his seventeenth-century manor in the hills outside Urbino, near the Adriatic coast of Italy. He sang the virtues of his *bellissima* swimming pool, but suspected I might have trouble negotiating the region's tortuous mountain passes. So we agreed instead to meet at his apartment in Milan. I arrived there last August on *ferragosto*, the high point of summer and the day the Catholic Church celebrates the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Milan's gray buildings gleamed with heat, and a thin layer of dust had settled on the pavement. Hardly an engine could be heard. As I stepped into Eco's building, I took a turn-of-the-century lift and heard the creaking of a door on the top floor. Eco's imposing figure appeared behind the lift's wrought-iron grating. "Ahhh," he said with a slight scowl.

The apartment is a labyrinth of corridors lined with bookcases that reach all the way up to extraordinarily high ceilings—thirty thousand volumes, said Eco, with another twenty thousand at his manor. I saw scientific treatises by Ptolemy and novels by Calvino, critical studies of Saussure and Joyce, entire sections devoted to medieval history and arcane manuscripts. The library feels alive, as many of the books seem worn from heavy use; Eco reads at great speed and has a prodigious memory. In his study, a maze of shelves contains Eco's own complete works in all their translations (Arabic, Finnish, Japanese . . . I lost count after more than thirty languages). Eco pointed at his books with amorous precision, attracting my attention to volume after volume, from his early landmark work of critical theory, *The Open Work*, to his most recent opus, *On Ugliness*.

Eco began his career as a scholar of medieval studies and semiotics. Then, in 1980, at the age of forty-eight, he published a novel, *The Name of the Rose*. It became an international publishing sensation, selling more than ten million copies. The professor metamorphosed into a literary star. Chased by journalists, courted for his cultural commentaries, revered for his expansive erudition, Eco came to be considered the most important Italian writer alive. In the years since, he has continued to write fanciful essays, scholarly works, and four more best-selling novels, including *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988) and *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004).

With Eco's paunch leading the way, his feet shuffling along the floor, we walked into his living room. Through the windows, a medieval castle cut a gigantic silhouette against the Milanese sky. I had expected tapestries and Italian antiques, but instead found modern furnishings, several glass cases displaying seashells and rare comics, a lute, a collection of recorders, a collage of paintbrushes. "This one, you see, by Arman, is dedicated especially to me . . ."

I sat on a large white couch; Eco sank into a low armchair, cigar in hand. He used to smoke up to sixty cigarettes a day, he told me, but now he has only his unlit cigar. As I asked my first questions, Eco's eyes narrowed to dark slits, suddenly opening up when his turn came to speak. "I developed a passion for the Middle Ages," he said, "the same way some people develop a passion for coconuts." In Italy, he is well known for his *battute*, his comedic sallies, which he drops at nearly every twist of his snaking sentences. His voice seemed to grow louder the longer he spoke. Soon he was outlining a series of points, as if speaking to a rapt classroom: "Number one: when I wrote *The Name of the Rose* I didn't know, of course, since no one knows, what was written in the lost volume of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the famous volume on comedy. But somehow, in the process of writing my novel, I discovered it. Number two: the detective novel asks the central question of philosophy—who

dunnit?” When he deemed his interlocutor clever enough, he was quick to extend professorial appreciations: “Yes, good. But I would also add that . . .”

After our initial two-hour interview session, Mario Andreose, the literary director of Bompiani, Eco’s Italian publisher, arrived to take us to dinner. Renate Ränge, Eco’s wife of forty-five years, sat up front with Andreose, and Eco and I took the backseat. Eco, who just minutes before had brimmed with wit and vitality, now appeared sullen and aloof. But his mood lightened soon after we entered the restaurant and a plate of bread was placed before us. He glanced at the menu, dithered, and as the waiter arrived, hastily ordered a calzone and a glass of Scotch. “Yes, yes, I shouldn’t, I shouldn’t . . .” A beaming reader approached the table, “Are you Umberto Eco?” The *professore* lifted an eyebrow, grinned, and shook hands. Then, at last, the conversation resumed, as Eco launched into excited riffs about Pope Benedict XVI, the fall of the Persian Empire, and the latest James Bond movie. “Did you know,” he said while planting a fork in his calzone, “that I once published a structural analysis of the archetypal Ian Fleming plot?”

INTERVIEWER

Where were you born?

UMBERTO ECO

In the town of Alessandria. It is known for its Borsalino hats.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of family did you come from?

ECO

My father was an accountant and his father was a typographer. My father was the eldest of thirteen children. I am the first son. My son is my first child. And his first child is a son. So if by chance someone discovers that the Eco family is descended from the emperor of Byzantium, my grandson is the dauphin!

My grandfather had a particularly important influence on my life, even though I didn’t visit him often, since he lived about three miles out of town and he died when I was six. He was remarkably curious about the world, and he read lots of books. The marvelous thing was that when he retired, he started to bind books. So he had a lot of unbound books lying here and there around his apartment—old, beautifully illustrated editions of popular nineteenth-century novels by Gautier and Dumas. Those were the first books I ever saw. When he died in 1938, many of the owners of the unbound books did not ask for them to be returned, and the family put them all in a big box. Quite by accident, this box landed in my parents’ cellar. I would be sent to the cellar from time to time, to pick up some coal or a bottle of wine, and one day I opened this box and found a treasure trove of books. From then on I visited the cellar rather frequently. It turned out my grandfather also collected a fabulous magazine, *Giornale illustrato dei viaggi e delle avventure di terra e di mare*—the illustrated journal of travels and adventures by land and by sea—devoted to strange and cruel stories set in exotic countries. It was my first great foray into the land of stories. Unfortunately, I lost all of these books and magazines, but over the decades I have gradually recovered copies of them from old bookstores and flea markets.

INTERVIEWER

If you didn’t see any books until you visited your grandfather, does that mean your parents didn’t own any?

ECO

It's odd, my father was a voracious reader when he was a young man. Since my grandparents had thirteen children, the family struggled to make ends meet, and my father couldn't afford to buy books. So he went to the book kiosk and stood reading in the street. When the owner was tired of seeing him hanging around, my father made his way to the next kiosk and read the second part of a book, and so forth. This is an image I treasure. The dogged pursuit of books. As an adult, my father only had free time in the evenings and he'd mainly read newspapers and magazines. In our house there were only a few novels, but they weren't on shelves, they were in the closet. Sometimes I saw my father reading novels borrowed from friends.

INTERVIEWER

What did he think of your becoming a scholar at such an early age?

ECO

Well, he died very early, in 1962, but not before I had published a few books. It was academic stuff, and probably confusing to my father, but I discovered that very late in the evening he would try to read them. *The Open Work* was published exactly three months before his death and was reviewed by the great poet Eugenio Montale in the *Corriere della Sera*. It was a mixed review—curious, friendly, and nasty—but it was a review by Montale nonetheless and I think that, for my father, it would have been impossible to imagine anything more. In a sense, I paid my debt, and in the end, I feel I met all his wishes, though I imagine he would have read my novels with greater pleasure. My mother lived ten more years, so she knew that I wrote many other books, and that I was invited to lecture by foreign universities. She was very sick, but she was happy, though I don't think she quite realized what was happening. And you know, a mother is proud of her own son, even if the son is completely stupid.

INTERVIEWER

You were a child when Fascism thrived in Italy and the war began. How did you perceive it then?

ECO

It was a strange time. Mussolini was very charismatic, and like every Italian schoolchild at that time, I was enrolled in the Fascist youth movement. We were all obliged to wear military-style uniforms and attend rallies on Saturday, and we felt happy to do so. Today it would be like dressing up an American boy as a marine—he'd think it was amusing. The whole movement for us as children was something natural, like snow in the winter and heat in the summer. We couldn't imagine that there was another way of living. I remember that period with the same tenderness with which anyone remembers childhood. I even remember the bombings, and the nights we spent in the shelter, with tenderness. When it all ended in 1943, with the first collapse of Fascism, I discovered in the democratic newspapers the existence of different political parties and views. To escape the bombings from September 1943 to April 1945—the most traumatic years in our nation's history—my mother, my sister, and I went to live in the countryside, up in Monferrato, a Piedmontese village that was at the epicenter of the resistance.

INTERVIEWER

Did you see any of the fighting?

ECO

I remember watching shoot-outs between Fascists and Partisans, and almost wishing I could join the brawl. At one point I even remember dodging a bullet myself, and jumping to the ground from a perch. And then, from the village we were in, I remember seeing every week that they were bombing Alessandria, where my father still worked. The sky burst like an orange. The telephone lines didn't work, so we had to wait until he came home for the weekend to know whether he was still alive. During this period, living in the countryside, a young man was forced to learn how to survive.

INTERVIEWER

Did the war have any impact on your decision to write?

ECO

No, there is no direct connection. I had started writing before the war, independently of the war. As an adolescent I wrote comic books, because I read lots of them, and fantasy novels set in Malaysia and Central Africa. I was a perfectionist and wanted to make them look as though they had been printed, so I wrote them in capital letters and made up title pages, summaries, illustrations. It was so tiring that I never finished any of them. I was at that time a great writer of unaccomplished masterpieces. Obviously, however, when I began writing novels my memories of the war played a certain role. But every man is obsessed by the memories of his own youth.

INTERVIEWER

Did you show those early books to anyone?

ECO

It's possible that my parents saw what I was doing, but I don't think I gave them to anybody else. It was a solitary vice.

INTERVIEWER

You've talked before about trying your hand at poetry in this period. In an essay on writing, you said, "my poetry had the same functional origin and the same formal configuration as teenage acne."

ECO

I think that at a certain age, say fifteen or sixteen, poetry is like masturbation. But later in life good poets burn their early poetry, and bad poets publish it. Thankfully I gave up rather quickly.

INTERVIEWER

Who encouraged you in your literary endeavors?

ECO

My maternal grandmother—she was a compulsive reader. She had only been through five grades of elementary school, but she was a member of the municipal library, and she brought home two or three books a week for me. They could be dime novels or Balzac. In her eyes, there was not much difference—they were all fascinating. My mother, on the other hand, had the education of a future dactylographer. She started French and German, and though she read a lot in her youth she succumbed to a sort of laziness when she got older, reading only romance novels and women's magazines. So I didn't read what she read. But she spoke gracefully, with a

good Italian style, and wrote so beautifully that her friends asked her to compose their letters for them. She had a great sensitivity for language, even though she left school at an early age. I think I inherited from her a genuine taste for writing, and my first elements of style.

INTERVIEWER

To what extent are your novels autobiographical?

ECO

In some way I think every novel is. When you imagine a character, you lend him or her some of your personal memories. You give part of yourself to character number one and another part to character number two. In this sense, I am not writing any sort of autobiography, but the novels are my autobiography. There's a difference.

INTERVIEWER

Are there many images that you've transferred directly? I'm thinking about Belbo playing the trumpet in the cemetery in *Foucault's Pendulum*.

ECO

That scene is absolutely autobiographical. I am not Belbo, but it happened to me and it was so important that now I will reveal something that I've never said before. Three months ago I bought a high-quality trumpet for about two thousand dollars. To play the trumpet, you must train your lips for a long time. When I was twelve or thirteen I was a good player, but I lost the skill and now I play very badly. I do it every day even so. The reason is that I want to return to my childhood. For me, the trumpet is evidence of the sort of young man I was. I don't feel anything for the violin, but when I look at the trumpet I feel a world stirring in my veins.

INTERVIEWER

Did you find that you could play the tunes of your childhood?

ECO

The more I play, the more vividly I remember the tunes. Certainly there are passages that are too high, too difficult. I repeat them several times, I try, but I know that my lips simply don't react the right way.

INTERVIEWER

Does the same thing happen with your memory?

ECO

It's odd, the older I get, the more I remember. I'll give you an example: my native dialect was Alessandrino, a bastard Piedmontese with elements of Lombard, Emilian, and Genovese. I didn't speak this dialect because my family came from the petite bourgeoisie, and my father thought that my sister and I should speak only Italian. Yet among themselves my parents spoke dialect. So I understood it perfectly but was unable to speak it. Half a century later, all of a sudden, from the cavern of my belly or from my unconscious, the dialect grew, and when I met my old friends from Alessandria I could speak it! So as time went by in my own life I was not only able to retrieve things I had forgotten, but things I believed I had never learned.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you decide to study medieval aesthetics?

ECO

I had a Catholic education and during my university years I ran one of the national Catholic student organizations. So I was fascinated by medieval scholastic thought and by early Christian theology. I started a thesis on the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, but right before I finished it my faith suffered a trauma. It was a complicated political affair. I belonged to the more progressive side of the student organization, which meant that I was interested in social problems, social justice. The right wing was protected by Pope Pius XII. One day my wing of the organization was charged with heresy and communism. Even the official newspaper of the Vatican attacked us. That event triggered a philosophical revision of my faith. But I continued to study the Middle Ages and medieval philosophy with great respect, not to mention my beloved Aquinas.

INTERVIEWER

In the postscript to *The Name of the Rose* you wrote, “I see the period everywhere, transparently overlaying my daily concerns, which do not look medieval, though they are.” How are your daily concerns medieval?

ECO

My whole life, I have had innumerable experiences of full immersion in the Middle Ages. For instance, in preparing my thesis, I went twice for monthlong trips to Paris, conducting research at the Bibliothèque Nationale. And I decided in those two months to live only in the Middle Ages. If you reduce the map of Paris, selecting only certain streets, you can really live in the Middle Ages. Then you start to think and feel like a man of the Middle Ages. I remember, for instance, that my wife, who has a green thumb and knows the names of just about all the herbs and flowers in the world, always reproached me prior to *The Name of the Rose* for not looking properly at nature. Once, in the countryside, we made a bonfire and she said, Look at the embers flying up among the trees. Of course I didn't pay attention. Later on, when she read the last chapter of *The Name of the Rose*, in which I describe a similar fire, she said, So you did look at the embers! And I said, No, but I know how a medieval monk would look at embers.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you might have actually enjoyed living in the Middle Ages?

ECO

Well if I did, at my age, I'd already be dead. I suspect that if I lived in the Middle Ages my feelings about the period would be dramatically different. I'd rather just imagine it.

INTERVIEWER

For the layman the medieval era is pervaded with an air of mystery and remoteness. What draws you to it?

ECO

It's hard to say. Why do you fall in love? If I had to explain it, I would say that it's because the period is exactly the opposite of the way people imagine it. To me, they were not the Dark Ages. They were a luminous time, the fertile soil out of which would spring the Renaissance. A period of chaotic and effervescent transition—the birth of the modern city, of the banking system, of the university, of our modern idea of Europe, with its languages, nations, and cultures.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that in your books you never make conscious parallels between the Middle Ages and modern times, but that seems to be part of the period's attraction for you.

ECO

Yes, but one must be extremely careful with analogies. Once I wrote an essay in which I made some parallels between the Middle Ages and our time. But if you give me fifty dollars, I will write you an essay about the parallels between our time and the time of the Neanderthals. It's always easy to find parallels. I think nonetheless that being concerned with history means making erudite parallels with the present time. I confess to being monstrously old-fashioned, and I still believe, like Cicero did, that *historia magistra vitae*: history is the teacher of life.

INTERVIEWER

Why as a young medieval scholar did you suddenly take up the study of language?

ECO

For as long as I can remember I have been interested in making sense of communication. In aesthetics the question was, What is a work of art, and how does a work of art communicate with us? I became especially fascinated with the how. Moreover, we are recognized as human beings insofar as we are able to produce language. As it turned out, immediately after my thesis I started working for Italian state television. This was in 1954, only a few months after the first television broadcasts were made. It was the beginning of the era of mass visual communication in Italy. So I began to wonder if I had a bizarre sort of split personality. On the one hand, I was interested in the most advanced functions of language in experimental literature and art. On the other hand, I relished television, comic books, and detective stories. Naturally I asked myself, Is it possible that my interests are really so distinct?

I turned to semiotics because I wanted to unify the different levels of culture. I came to understand that anything produced by the mass media could also be an object of cultural analysis.

INTERVIEWER

You once said that semiotics is the theory of lying.

ECO

Instead of "lying," I should have said, "telling the contrary of the truth." Human beings can tell fairy tales, imagine new worlds, make mistakes—and we can lie. Language accounts for all those possibilities.

Lying is a specifically human ability. A dog, following a track, is following a scent. Neither the dog nor the scent "lies," so to speak. But I can lie to you and tell you to go in that direction, which is not the direction you have asked about, and yet you believe me and you go in the wrong direction. The reason this is possible is that we depend on signs.

INTERVIEWER

Some of the enemies of semiotics as a field of study assert that semioticians ultimately cause all reality to vanish.

ECO

This is the position of the so-called dECONstructionists. Not only do they assume that everything is a text—even this table right here—and that every text can be infinitely interpreted, but they also follow an idea coming from Nietzsche, who said that there are no facts, only interpretations. On the contrary, I follow Charles Sanders Peirce, undoubtedly the greatest American philosopher and the father of semiotics and the theory of interpretation. He said that through signs we interpret facts. If there were no facts and only interpretations, what would there be left to interpret? This is what I argue in *The Limits of Interpretation*.

INTERVIEWER

In *Foucault's Pendulum* you write, “The more elusive and ambiguous a symbol is, the more it gains significance and power.”

ECO

A secret is powerful when it is empty. People often mention the “Masonic secret.” What on earth is the Masonic secret? No one can tell. As long as it remains empty it can be filled up with every possible notion, and it has power.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say that your work as a semiotician is completely separate from your work as a novelist?

ECO

It might seem incredible, but I never think of semiotics when I am writing my novels. I let others do the work afterward. And I am always surprised by the result when they do.

INTERVIEWER

Are you still obsessed with television?

ECO

I suspect that there is no serious scholar who doesn't like to watch television. I'm just the only one who confesses. And then I try to use it as material for my work. But I am not a glutton who swallows everything. I don't enjoy watching any kind of television. I like the dramatic series and I dislike the trash shows.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any shows that you particularly love?

ECO

The police series. *Starsky and Hutch*, for instance.

INTERVIEWER

That show doesn't exist anymore. It's from the seventies.

ECO

I know, but I was told that the complete series was just released on DVD, so I am thinking of acquiring it. Other than that I like *CSI*, *Miami Vice*, *ER*, and most of all, *Columbo*.

INTERVIEWER

Have you read *The Da Vinci Code*?

ECO

Yes, I am guilty of that too.

INTERVIEWER

That novel seems like a bizarre little offshoot of *Foucault's Pendulum*.

ECO

The author, Dan Brown, is a character from *Foucault's Pendulum*! I invented him. He shares my characters' fascinations—the world conspiracy of Rosicrucians, Masons, and Jesuits. The role of the Knights Templar. The hermetic secret. The principle that everything is connected. I suspect Dan Brown might not even exist.

INTERVIEWER

This idea of taking a fictional premise seriously seems to be present in many of your novels. Fictions somehow acquire substance and truth.

ECO

Yes, invention can produce reality. *Baudolino*, my fourth novel, is exactly about that. Baudolino is a little trickster living at the court of Frederick Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor. And the boy invents a wild number of things—from the legend of the Holy Grail to the legitimization of Barbarossa's reign by Bolognese jurors. In doing so he produces factual consequences. Fakes or errors can produce real historical events. Just like the letter of Prester John: it was a forgery—and in my novel it was invented by none other than Baudolino himself—but it really incited medieval explorations of Asia because it described a fabulous Christian kingdom thriving somewhere in the mysterious Orient. Or take Christopher Columbus. His vision of the earth was completely wrong. He knew, like everybody in antiquity, including his adversaries, that the earth was round. But he believed it was much smaller. Led by this false idea, he discovered America. Another famous example is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It's a fake, but it corroborated Nazi ideology and in a sense paved the way to the Holocaust, because Hitler used the document to justify the destruction of Jews. He might have known it was a fake, but in his mind it described the Jews exactly as he wanted them to be, and thus he took it as authentic.

INTERVIEWER

Baudolino declares in the end that, "The kingdom of the Priest is real because I and my companions have devoted two-thirds of our life to seeking it."

ECO

Baudolino forges documents, devises utopias, constructs imaginary schemes about the future. His lies become real when his friends gaily embark on an actual journey to the legendary East. But this is only one side of the narrative business. The other is that you can use real facts that, in the framework of a novel, seem incredible and absolutely fictitious. In my novels, I have used countless real stories and real situations, because I

find them far more romantic, or novelistic even, than anything I have ever read in so-called fiction. In *The Island of the Day Before*, for instance, there is a part where Father Caspar makes up a strange instrument to look at the satellites of Jupiter and the result is pure slapstick comedy. This instrument is described in the letters of Galileo. I simply imagined what would have happened if Galileo's instrument had actually been created. But my readers take all this as a comic invention.

INTERVIEWER

What drew you to write novels based on historical events?

ECO

The historical novel for me is not so much a fictionalized version of real events as a fiction that will actually enable us to better understand the real history. I also like to combine the historical novel with elements of the bildungsroman. In all my novels, there is always a young character who grows up and learns and suffers through a series of experiences.

INTERVIEWER

Why didn't you begin writing novels until you were forty-eight years old?

ECO

It wasn't as much of a leap as everyone seems to think, because even in my doctoral thesis, even in my theorizing, I was already creating narratives. I have long thought that what most philosophical books are really doing at the core is telling the story of their research, just as scientists will explain how they came to make their major discoveries. So I feel that I was telling stories all along, just in a slightly different style.

INTERVIEWER

But what made you feel that you had to write a novel?

ECO

One day in 1978, a friend told me she wanted to oversee the publication of a string of little detective novels written by amateur writers. I said there was no way I could write a detective story, but if I ever did write one it would be a five-hundred-page book with medieval monks as characters. That day, returning home, I began making a list of names of fictional medieval monks. Later the image of a poisoned monk suddenly emerged in my mind. It all started from there, from that one image. It became an irresistible urge.

INTERVIEWER

Many of your novels seem to rely upon clever concepts. Is that a natural way for you to bridge the chasm between theoretical work and novel writing? You once said that "those things about which we cannot theorize, we must narrate."

ECO

It is a tongue-in-cheek allusion to a sentence by Wittgenstein. The truth is, I have written countless essays on semiotics, but I think I expressed my ideas better in *Foucault's Pendulum* than in my essays. An idea you have might not be original—Aristotle will always have thought of it before you. But by creating a novel out of that idea you can make it original. Men love women. It's not an original idea. But if you somehow write a terrific novel

about it, then by a literary sleight of hand it becomes absolutely original. I simply believe that at the end of the day a story is always richer—it is an idea reshaped into an event, informed by a character, and sparked by crafted language. So naturally, when an idea is transformed into a living organism, it turns into something completely different and, likely, far more expressive.

On the other hand, contradiction can be the core of a novel. Killing old ladies is interesting. With that idea you get an F on an ethics paper. In a novel it becomes *Crime and Punishment*, a masterpiece of prose in which the character can't tell whether killing old ladies is good or bad, and in which his ambivalence—the very contradiction in our statement—becomes a poetic and challenging matter.

INTERVIEWER

How do you begin researching your novels?

ECO

For *The Name of the Rose*, since I was already interested in the Middle Ages, I had hundreds of files at hand, and it took me only two years to write it. *Foucault's Pendulum* took me eight years to research and write! And since I don't tell anybody what I'm doing, it occurs to me now that I lived in my own world for nearly a decade. I went out on the street, I saw this car and that tree and I said to myself, Ah, this could be connected to my story. So my story grew day by day, and everything I did, every tiny scrap of life, every conversation, would give me ideas. Then I visited the actual places I write about—all the areas of France and Portugal where the Templars lived. And it became like a video game in which I might take up the personality of a warrior and enter a sort of magical kingdom. Except that with a video game you become completely stoned, while in writing you always have a critical moment in which you jump off the locomotive, only to jump on again the next morning.

INTERVIEWER

Do you proceed methodically?

ECO

No, not at all. One idea immediately summons another. One random book makes me want to read another. And it happens at times that, reading a completely useless document, I suddenly get the right idea for making a story proceed. Or for inserting another little box in a larger collection of inset boxes.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that in writing a novel you must first create a world and then “the words will practically come on their own.” Are you saying that a novel's style is always determined by its subject?

ECO

Yes, for me the main issue is to start constructing a world—a fourteenth-century abbey with poisoned monks, a young man playing the trumpet in a cemetery, a trickster caught in the midst of the sack of Constantinople. Researching then means setting all the constraints for these worlds: How many steps in a spiral staircase? How many items on a laundry list? How many comrades on a mission? The words will coil round these constraints. In literary terms, I feel we often commit the mistake of believing that style has only got to do with syntax and lexicon. There also exists a narrative style, which dictates the way we pile certain blocks together and build up a situation. Take flashback. Flashback is a structural element of style, but it has nothing to do with language. So style is far more complex than sheer writing. To me it functions more like montage in a movie.

INTERVIEWER

How hard do you work to get the voice just right?

ECO

I rewrite the same page dozens of times. Sometimes I like to read passages out loud. I am terribly sensitive to the tone of my writing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you, like Flaubert, find it painful to produce even one good sentence?

ECO

No, it's not painful for me. I do rewrite the same sentence several times, but now, with the computer, my process has changed. I wrote *The Name of the Rose* in longhand and my secretary copied it out on a typewriter. When you rewrite the same sentence ten times, it is very difficult to recopy. There was a real carbon base, but we also worked with scissors and glue. With the computer it is very easy to go over a page ten or twenty times on the same day, correcting and rewriting. I think we are by nature never happy with what we have done. But now it is so easy, perhaps too easy, to correct it. Therefore in a sense we have become more demanding.

INTERVIEWER

Bildungsromans usually involve some degree of sentimental, and sexual, education. In all your novels you describe only two sexual acts—one in *The Name of the Rose*, and the other in *Baudolino*. Is there a reason for this?

ECO

I think I just prefer to have sex than write about it.

INTERVIEWER

Why does Adso quote the Song of Songs when he has sex with the peasant girl in *The Name of the Rose*?

ECO

That was a stylistic amusement, because I was not so much interested in the sexual act itself as I was to describe how a young monk would experience sex through his cultural sensibility. So I made a collage of at least fifty different texts of mystics describing their ecstasies, together with excerpts from the Song of Songs. In the entire two pages that describe his sexual act, there is hardly a single word of mine. Adso can only understand sex through the lens of the culture he has absorbed. This is an instance of style, as I define it.

INTERVIEWER

When in the day do you write?

ECO

There is no rule. For me it would be impossible to have a schedule. It can happen that I start writing at seven o'clock in the morning and I finish at three o'clock at night, stopping only to eat a sandwich. Sometimes I don't feel the need to write at all.

INTERVIEWER

When you do write, how much do you write every day? Is there no rule for that as well?

ECO

None. Listen, writing doesn't mean necessarily putting words on a sheet of paper. You can write a chapter while walking or eating.

INTERVIEWER

So every day is different for you?

ECO

If I am in my countryside home, at the top of the hills of Montefeltro, then I have a certain routine. I turn on my computer, I look at my e-mails, I start reading something, and then I write until the afternoon. Later I go to the village, where I have a glass at the bar and read the newspaper. I come back home and I watch TV or a DVD in the evening until eleven, and then I work a little more until one or two o'clock in the morning. There I have a certain routine because I am not interrupted. When I am in Milan or at the university, I am not master of my own time—there is always somebody else deciding what I should do.

INTERVIEWER

What kinds of anxieties do you have when you sit down to write?

ECO

I have no anxieties.

INTERVIEWER

You have no anxieties. So you're just very excited?

ECO

Before I sit down to write, I am deeply happy.

INTERVIEWER

What is the secret of such prolific production? You have written prodigious quantities of scholarly work, and your five novels are not exactly short.

ECO

I always say that I am able to use the interstices. There is a lot of space between atom and atom and electron and electron, and if we reduced the matter of the universe by eliminating all the space in between, the entire universe would be compressed into a ball. Our lives are full of interstices. This morning you rang, but then you had to wait for the elevator, and several seconds elapsed before you showed up at the door. During those sECONds, waiting for you, I was thinking of this new piece I'm writing. I can work in the water closet, in the train. While swimming I produce a lot of things, especially in the sea. Less so in the bathtub, but there too.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever not work?

ECO

No, it doesn't happen. Oh, well, yes, there was a period of two days when I had my surgery.

INTERVIEWER

What are your greatest pleasures today?

ECO

Reading novels at night. Sometimes I wonder whether as a renegade Catholic there might not still be this fluty voice in my head whispering that novels are too pleasurable to be read during the day. Hence the day is usually for essays and hard work.

INTERVIEWER

What about guilty pleasures?

ECO

I am not in confession! OK: Scotch. Smoking was a guilty pleasure until I quit three years ago. I could smoke about sixty cigarettes a day. But I was a former pipe smoker so my habit was to puff the smoke away while I was writing. I didn't inhale too much.

INTERVIEWER

You have been criticized for the erudition you put on display in your work. A critic went so far as to say that the main appeal of your work for a lay reader is the humiliation he feels for his own ignorance, which translates into a naive admiration of your pyrotechnics.

ECO

Am I sadist? I don't know. An exhibitionist? Maybe. I am joking. Of course not! I have not worked so much in my life in order just to pile knowledge before my readers. My knowledge quite literally informs the intricate construction of my novels. Then it is up to my readers to detect what they might.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your extraordinary popular success as a novelist changed your perception of the role of the reader?

ECO

After being an academic for so long, writing novels was like being a theater critic and all of a sudden stepping in front of the footlights and having your former colleagues—the critics—stare at you. It was quite bewildering at first.

INTERVIEWER

But did writing novels change your idea of how much you could influence the reader as an author?

ECO

I always assume that a good book is more intelligent than its author. It can say things that the writer is not aware of.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your status as a best-selling novelist has diminished your reputation as a serious thinker around the world?

ECO

Since the publication of my novels I have received thirty-five honorary degrees from universities around the world. From this fact I gather that the answer to your question must be no. In the university milieu, professors were interested by the oscillation between narrative and theory. They often found links between the two aspects of my work, even more than I myself believed existed. If you want, I will show you the entire wall of scholarly publications on me.

Besides, I continue to produce theoretical essays. I continue to live like a professor who writes novels during the weekends, instead of living like a writer who also teaches at the university. I attend scientific colloquia more often than I attend PEN conferences. In fact, one could say the opposite: perhaps my academic work has disrupted my consideration as a writer in the popular press.

INTERVIEWER

The Catholic Church has certainly given you a hard time. The newspaper of the Vatican called Foucault's Pendulum "full of profanations, blasphemies, buffooneries, and filth, held together by the mortar of arrogance and cynicism."

ECO

The strange thing is that I had just received honorary degrees from two Catholic universities, Leuven and Loyola.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe in God?

ECO

Why does one love a certain person one day and discover the next day that the love is gone? Feelings, alas, disappear without justification, and often without a trace.

INTERVIEWER

If you don't believe in God, then why have you written at such great length about religion?

ECO

Because I do believe in religion. Human beings are religious animals, and such a characteristic feature of human behavior cannot be ignored or dismissed.

INTERVIEWER

In addition to the scholar and the novelist, there is a third persona jockeying for position within you—the translator. You are a widely translated translator who has written at length on the conundrums of translation.

ECO

I have edited countless translations, translated two works myself, and have had my own novels translated into dozens of languages. And I've found that every translation is a case of negotiation. If you sell something to me and I buy it, we negotiate—you'll lose something, I'll lose something, but at the end we're both more or less satisfied. In translation, style is not so much lexicon, which can be translated by the Web site Altavista, but rhythm. Researchers have run tests on the frequency of words in Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, the masterpiece of nineteenth-century Italian literature. Manzoni had an absolutely poor vocabulary, devised no innovative metaphors, and used the adjective good a frightening amount of times. But his style is outstanding, pure and simple. To translate it, as with all great translations, you need to bring out the anima of his world, its breath, its precise tempo.

INTERVIEWER

How involved are you with the translations of your work?

ECO

I read the translations in all the languages I can follow. I am usually happy because the translators and I work together, and I have been lucky to have the same translators all my life. We now collaborate with a sort of mutual understanding. I also occasionally work with translators in languages I don't know—like Japanese, Russian, and Hungarian—because they are so intelligent that they are able to explain what the real problem is in their own language, so that we may discuss how to solve it.

INTERVIEWER

Does a good translator ever offer a suggestion that opens up possibilities you hadn't seen in the original text?

ECO

Yes, it can happen. Again, the text is more intelligent than its author. Sometimes the text can suggest ideas that the author does not have in mind. The translator, in putting the text in another language, discovers those new ideas and reveals them to you.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have time to read the novels of your contemporaries?

ECO

Not so much. Since I became a novelist I have discovered that I am biased. Either I think a new novel is worse than mine and I don't like it, or I suspect it is better than my novels and I don't like it.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the state of Italian literature today? Are there great authors in Italy that we have yet to hear about in America?

ECO

I don't know if there are great authors, but we have improved the middle-level authors. The strength of American literature, you see, is not only to have had Faulkner or Hemingway or Bellow, but to have also a good army of middling writers who produce respectable commercial literature. This literature requires good craftsmanship, especially in the fertile field of the detective novel, which for me is a barometer of literary production in any country. The army of average writers also means that America can produce enough material to satisfy the needs of the American reader. That's why they translate so little. In Italy that kind of literature was absent for a long time, but now at last there is a group of young writers producing these books. I am not an intellectual snob, I don't think, and I do recognize that this brand of literature is part of the literary culture of a country.

INTERVIEWER

But why don't we hear from Italian writers? You are probably the only Italian writer at the moment who's read internationally, at least on a large scale.

ECO

Translation is the problem. In Italy, more than twenty percent of the market is work in translation. In America, it's two percent.

INTERVIEWER

Nabokov once said, "I divide literature into two categories, the books I wish I had written and the books I have written."

ECO

Well, all right, in the former category I would put books by Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo, Philip Roth, and Paul Auster. Generally, though, I like the contemporary Americans far more than the French, even though my culture is basically French for geographical reasons. I was born near the border, and French is the first language I studied. I may even know French literature better than Italian literature.

INTERVIEWER

And if you had to name influences?

ECO

Usually I say Joyce and Borges to keep the INTERVIEWER quiet, though it's not absolutely true. Just about everyone has influenced me. Joyce and Borges, certainly, but also Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke—you name it.

INTERVIEWER

Your library here in Milan is a legend in and of itself. What kind of books do you like to collect?

ECO

I own a total of about fifty thousand books. But as a rare books collector I am fascinated by the human propensity for deviating thought. So I collect books about subjects in which I don't believe, like kabbalah, alchemy, magic, invented languages. Books that lie, albeit unwittingly. I have Ptolemy, not Galileo, because Galileo told the truth. I prefer lunatic science.

INTERVIEWER

With so many volumes, when you go to the bookshelf, how do you decide which book to pick up and read?

ECO

I don't go to the bookshelves to choose a book to read. I go to the bookshelves to pick up a book I know I need in that moment. It's a different story. For instance, if you were to ask me about contemporary authors, I would look through my collections of Roth or DeLillo to remember exactly what I loved. I am a scholar. In a way I should say I am never freely choosing. I am following the needs of the job I am doing at any given time.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever give books away?

ECO

I receive an enormous quantity of books every day—novels, new editions of books I already own—so every single week I fill up some boxes and send them off to my university, where there is a big table with a sign that says take a book and run.

INTERVIEWER

You are one of the world's most famous public intellectuals. How would you define the term intellectual? Does it still have a particular meaning?

ECO

If by intellectual you mean somebody who works only with his head and not with his hands, then the bank clerk is an intellectual and Michelangelo is not. And today, with a computer, everybody is an intellectual. So I don't think it has anything to do with someone's profession or with someone's social class. According to me, an intellectual is anyone who is creatively producing new knowledge. A peasant who understands that a new kind of graft can produce a new species of apples has at that moment produced an intellectual activity. Whereas the professor of philosophy who all his life repeats the same lecture on Heidegger doesn't amount to an intellectual. Critical creativity—criticizing what we are doing or inventing better ways of doing it—is the only mark of the intellectual function.

INTERVIEWER

Are intellectuals today still committed to the notion of political duty, as they were in the days of Sartre and Foucault?

ECO

I don't believe that in order to be politically committed an intellectual must act as a member of a party or, worse, write exclusively about contemporary social problems. Intellectuals should be as politically engaged as any other citizen. At most, an intellectual can use his reputation to support a given cause. If there is a manifesto on the environmental question, for instance, my signature might help, so I would use my reputation for a single instance of common engagement. The problem is that the intellectual is truly useful only as far as the future is concerned, not the present. If you are in a theater and there is a fire, a poet must not climb up on a seat and recite a poem. He has to call the fireman like everyone else. The function of the intellectual is to say beforehand,

Pay attention to that theater because it's old and dangerous! So his word can have the prophetic function of an appeal. The intellectual's function is to say, We should do that, not, We must do this now!—that's the politician's job. If the utopia of Thomas More were ever realized, I have little doubt it would be a Stalinist society.

INTERVIEWER

What benefits have knowledge and culture afforded you in your lifetime?

ECO

An illiterate person who dies, let us say at my age, has lived one life, whereas I have lived the lives of Napoleon, Caesar, d'Artagnan. So I always encourage young people to read books, because it's an ideal way to develop a great memory and a ravenous multiple personality. And then at the end of your life you have lived countless lives, which is a fabulous privilege.

INTERVIEWER

But an enormous memory can also be an enormous burden. Like the memory of Funes, one of your favorite Borges characters, in the story "Funes the Memorious."

ECO

I like the notion of stubborn incuriosity. To cultivate a stubborn incuriosity, you have to limit yourself to certain areas of knowledge. You cannot be totally greedy. You have to oblige yourself not to learn everything. Or else you will learn nothing. Culture in this sense is about knowing how to forget. Otherwise, one indeed bECOMes like Funes, who remembers all the leaves of the tree he saw thirty years ago. Discriminating what you want to learn and remember is critical from a cognitive standpoint.

INTERVIEWER

But isn't culture itself, in the larger sense, already a filter?

ECO

Yes, our private culture is a secondary operation, so to speak, because culture in the general sense discriminates already. In a way, culture is the mechanism by which a community suggests to us what has to be remembered and what has to be forgotten. Culture has decided, for instance—look in every encyclopedia—that what happened to Calpurnia after the death of her husband, Julius Caesar, is irrelevant. Most likely nothing interesting happened to her. Whereas Clara Schumann became more important after the death of Schumann. She was rumored to be the lover of Brahms, and she became an acclaimed pianist in her own right. And all this remains true until the moment a historian retrieves an unknown document that will show that something we neglected was in fact relevant.

If culture did not filter, it would be inane—as inane as the formless, boundless Internet is on its own. And if we all possessed the boundless knowledge of the Web, we would be idiots! Culture is an instrument for making a hierarchical system of intellectual labor. For you and for me it is enough to know that Einstein proposed the theory of relativity. But an absolute understanding of the theory we leave to the specialists. The real problem is that too many are granted the right to bECOME a specialist.

INTERVIEWER

What do you make of those who proclaim the death of the novel, the death of books, the death of reading?

ECO

To believe in the end of something is a typical cultural posture. Since the Greeks and the Latins we have persisted in believing that our ancestors were better than us. I am always amused and interested by this kind of sport, which the mass media practice with increasing ferocity. Every season there is an article on the end of the novel, the end of literature, the end of literacy in America. People don't read any longer! Teenagers only play video games! The fact of the matter is that all over the world there are thousands of stores full of books and full of young people. Never in the history of mankind have there been so many books, so many places selling books, so many young people visiting these places and buying books.

INTERVIEWER

What would you say to the fearmongers?

ECO

Culture is continuously adapting to new situations. There will probably be a different culture, but there will be a culture. After the fall of the Roman Empire there were centuries of profound transformations—linguistic, political, religious, cultural. These types of changes happen ten times as quickly now. But thrilling new forms will continue to emerge and literature will survive.

INTERVIEWER

You have said in the past that you would like to be remembered more as an academic than a novelist. Do you really mean that?

ECO

I don't remember having said that because it's the sort of feeling that changes according to the context in which I'm asked this question. But at this point experience tells me that the work of an academic survives with great difficulty because theories change. Aristotle survives, but countless texts from academics of just one century ago are not republished. Whereas many novels are continuously republished. So technically speaking there are more chances to survive as a writer than as an academic, and I take into account these pieces of evidence independently from my own wishes.

INTERVIEWER

How important to you is the notion of your work surviving? Do you often think about your legacy?

ECO

I don't believe one writes for oneself. I think that writing is an act of love—you write in order to give something to someone else. To communicate something. To have other people share your feelings. This problem of how long your work can survive is fundamental for every writer, not just for a novelist or a poet. The truth is, the philosopher writes his book in order to convince a lot of people of his theories, and he hopes that in the next three thousand years people will still read that book. It is just as you hope that your kids survive you, and that if you have a grandchild he survives your children. One hopes for a sense of continuity. When a writer says, I am not interested in the destiny of my book, he is simply a liar. He says so to please the interviewer.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any regrets at this point in your life?

ECO

I regret everything, because I have committed many, many mistakes in all walks of life. But if I had to start again, I honestly think I would commit the same mistakes. I'm being serious. I've spent my life examining my behavior and my ideas, and criticizing myself. I'm so severe that I would never tell you what my worst self-criticism is, not even for a million dollars.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a book you never wrote but ardently wish you had?

ECO

Yes, just one. Until the age of fifty and throughout all my youth, I dreamed of writing a book on the theory of comedy. Why? Because every book on the subject has been unsuccessful, at least all the ones I've been able to read. Every theoretician of comedy, from Freud to Bergson, explains some aspect of the phenomenon, but not all. This phenomenon is so complex that no theory is, or has been thus far, able to explain it completely. So I thought to myself that I would want to write the real theory of comedy. But then the task proved desperately difficult. If I knew exactly why it was so difficult, I would have the answer and I would be able to write the book.

INTERVIEWER

But you have written books on beauty and, more recently, on ugliness. Aren't those notions just as ungraspable?

ECO

Compared to beauty and ugliness, comedy is terrifying. I'm not talking about laughter, mind you. No, there is an uncanny sentimentality of the comic, which is so complex that—I cannot quite explain it. And this, alas, is why I didn't write the book.

INTERVIEWER

Is comedy a specifically human invention, as you said lying is?

ECO

Yes, since it seems that animals are bereft of humor. We know that they have a sense of play, they feel sorry, they weep, they suffer. We have proof that they are happy, when they are playing with us, but not that they have comic feelings. It is a typical human experience, which consists of—no, I can't exactly say.

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

ECO

OK, fine. I have a suspicion that it is linked with the fact that we are the only animals who know we must die. The other animals don't know it. They understand it only on the spot, in the moment that they die. They are

unable to articulate anything like the statement: All men are mortal. We are able to do it, and that is probably why there are religions, rituals, and what have you. I think that comedy is the quintessential human reaction to the fear of death. If you ask me for something more, I cannot tell you. But perhaps I'll create an empty secret now, and let everyone think that I have a theory of comedy in the works, so when I die they will spend a lot of time trying to retrieve my secret book.

In truth, what really happened with my desire to write a book on comedy was that I wrote *The Name of the Rose* instead. It was one of those cases in which, when you are unable to construct a theory, you narrate a story. And I believe that in *The Name of the Rose*, I did, in narrative form, flesh out a certain theory of the comic. The comic as a critical way of undercutting fanaticism. A diabolical shade of suspicion behind every proclamation of truth.

You might also enjoy

Louis Auchincloss, *The Art of Fiction* No. 138

W. H. Auden, *The Art of Poetry* No. 17

Amy Clampitt, *The Art of Poetry* No. 45