

## Umberto Eco

*Newsweek* in December ran a front cover photo of Umberto Eco with the headline 'The Code Breaker - Name of the Rose Author has won Fame and Fortune Interpreting the Signs we Live By'. Inside, a long article celebrates a success crowned by the film adaptation of Eco's novel starring Sean Connery, which is about to go on general release in Britain. To his publisher's delight, the movie has created a strong new demand for *Name of the Rose*, which has sold more than 5m copies, and has been translated into 25 languages.

Here we have not rags to riches, but monastic obscurity to international fame; not the absent-minded professor, but the worldly wordsmith and code breaker. And yet our hero 'looks like a friendly gnome' and 'teaches a subject so complex and abstruse that only a few hundred people in the world have mastered its rudiments'.

Hype? Yes, but then Eco has understood how to handle as well as analyse the media, and plays different roles according to the occasion. Faced with American students' demands for the formula for writing a best-

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seller, Eco speaks in riddles; surrounded by academic obscurantism, he goes in for plain speaking. In America, he plays the Italian humanist, and in Italy, the American 'techno-buff'. However, this public recognition in *Newsweek* is appropriate in another sense. For Eco, the relationship America-Italy/Europe has been crucial not only for his recent acclaim but for the development 'of his writing and cultural analysis since the early

1960s. While this has a personal dimension, it also relates to the dramatic postwar transformation of Italy in which America has loomed large as a model of the future.

The United States is far from being the only country with which Eco is familiar. He teaches at the University of Sao Paolo in Brazil as well as at Yale, and is a speaker of five modern languages. However, while he has written about the literature of various countries (particularly France), America occupies a special place in his work; the 'America', that is, of mass culture, not its 'cultured' side. Above all, it has been a place (metaphorical as much as real) for getting and testing ideas - a sort of laboratory.

Eco first made his name with *Apocalittici e Integrati*, which, since its publication in 1964, has been an obligatory point of reference for debates on contemporary culture in Italy. Its importance can be compared with that of Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* or Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. Basically, through studies of American cartoon-strips (Steve Canyon, Superman, Charlie Brown), television and popular fiction, Eco demonstrated the need to analyse mass cultural forms as texts. Today, it all seems obvious (thanks also to the likes of Eco), but at the time it meant developing an alternative approach to that of the pessimistic enemies of mass culture (from marxists to arch-conservatives), who he calls 'apocalyptic', and to that of optimistic conformists, for whom the expansion of the media was automatically beneficial for all. (Eco, for instance, has been Marshall McLuhan's acutest critic).

Over the years, in fact, Eco's work has shown the different levels and contradictions within mass culture, distinguishing, for example, between 'closed' texts that

impose stereotypes which prevent rather than provoke thought, and 'open' ones which show the complexity of things. Perhaps his most important contribution has been to analyse the role of the 'reader', and how people can, and do, interpret television, films or whatever, so that they 're-make' them.

One of the main reasons for Eco's importance as an intellectual in Italy has been his part in interpreting the major cultural changes symbolised, if not induced, by the importation of American cultural models. He was a leading figure in national cultural life long before becoming internationally famous. Especially as he has put his skills as a semiotician to 'practical' use, proving himself an astute cultural operator and valuable political interlocutor and commentator.

Interestingly, Eco has been a failure as an academic in the sense that his proposals for reform at the university have made little headway. To his credit, he has failed to become one of the corrupt 'barons' who use party-politics to feather their nests.

Eco has always seen his role as an intellectual in the broadest sense. There is his prolific scholarship and commitment to teaching (even though he is rich enough not to have to); it is not by chance that Eco wrote a manual for students on thesis-writing which explains the mechanics and know-how involved. Then there is his journalism, especially his regular columns and features for the weekly *L'Espresso*, not to mention his fictional writing. The 'whole' is so impressive because the 'parts' add up to a project and life's endeavour - a rare feat in these opportunistic times.

Above all, Eco regards his 'public', or rather 'publics', as citizens to be engaged in dialogue. This is evident in Eco's own attempt to practise what he preaches about 'open' texts and 'active' readers. When the press in Italy became virtually a vehicle for propaganda, at the height of the terrorism emergency,



Eco: worldly wordsmith

Eco lucidly examined the Red Brigades' media strategy, and debunked the case for a news blackout. Then, from 1968 onwards, he has looked sympathetically as well as critically, at the social movements that have erupted in Italian society, making sense of their seeming 'nonsense' for puzzled bystanders. Against the 'guard-dog' apologists, who have identified democracy with silent majorities, Eco has been one of an honourable band of intellectuals who have seen forms of conflict as the sign of a healthy society and culture.

The success of *Name of the Rose* has made Eco famous as a novelist. However, his best-seller, in the longer term, will probably be judged to have promoted a revival of the gothic genre - a fascination with the Middle Ages - not to have opened a new chapter in Italian contemporary literature (though other writers, like Primo Levi, have suddenly become marketable outside Italy due to the 'Eco-effect').

Hopefully, in the meanwhile, his other writings will become available in translation to a wider public in the same way that Barthes' have. Certainly he has much to teach, not least concerning the positive role intellectuals can invent for themselves in society. •

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