

VARIA

## Memories of Umberto Eco and Bologna

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*Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*  
There once was a rose and now we have only its name.

Umberto Eco spoke to us once in class of the death of Thomas Aquinas, whom he had studied very seriously—Eco’s thesis was on the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was so fat he could barely walk and had to be carried by four men. Faced with death, he stated, “All that I have written seems like straw to me.” According to church sources, Aquinas levitated; compared to his mystical quest, his intellectual life seemed to have been futile. I wonder how Umberto felt about that as his own hourglass ran out.

I never saw Eco levitate, but he certainly pushed our minds to their limits. His work always touched on the relation between the mystical and the rational. He argued that intuition was simply speedy logic, and Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes were the masters of this semiotic. He always addressed me as Doyle. I am afraid I was never quite as good a reader of signs as Sherlock Holmes, and I may have disappointed him. I was unable to solve mysteries of the mystical or murder variety. It was no surprise that the mystical and the rational came together in *The Name of the Rose*. I tended to agree with Eco’s best friend and constant intellectual sparring partner Paolo Fabbri, who had a Neo-Platonist twist on the sign, as they debated Origen. Eco thought intuition was simply very fast logic and Fabbri thought logic was slow intuition.

I first arrived in Bologna in 1976 from Brisbane having just read his treatise on semiotics. I was nineteen and had no scholarship, very little money, a tourist visa, and mediocre Italian, but I just turned up Australian style, stayed in a youth hostel, and went to his lectures. His theoretical books had grabbed my imagination. Semiotics was what I wanted to know and I wanted to study with him. How words and signs relate to the composition of different lived realities fascinated me. I tried to find a job, a way to stay in Italy, but nothing appeared and I went back to Australia. I graduated from Griffith University in 1979 and continued to read Eco and semiotics. I also began working in the civil service, as my father insisted I give up my useless intellectual pursuits and get a “real job.” By 1982 I could not give up the desire to study in Italy and applied for a scholarship from the Italian government, which I won. Six years after I had first arrived, I headed off to Italy to study semiotics. With little money and a bicycle, sharing rooms in that medieval city of Bologna, my life was devoted to intellectual passion and cycling under porticoes, with the occasional impromptu meetings leading to long, rambling intellectual discussions.

What an adventure it was. The lectures were held in the crumbling Collegio dei Fiamminghi in via Guerazzi. The fifteenth-century building almost heaved under the overcrowded rooms, brimming with intellectual intensity and swimming in a cloud of blue smoke. (Eventually the roof fell in.) Eco explained the No Smoking sign was an indicative sign and not a prescriptive one, so we puffed away as everyone else did in the unventilated

room. Our minds were as suspended as the cigarette smoke, waiting on the next insight or hilarious witticism coming from *il illustro professore*. He was exceedingly funny and moved between worlds of arcane philosophy and popular culture with a nonchalance that was all his own. I remember giving a talk on the theory of the sign in Brahmanic monism, and he responded by saying it was like the force in *Star Wars*.

Italian universities still had a touch of the medieval in the 1980s. There was no registration, no distinction between graduate and undergraduate students, no real controls, and you could take exams every month. There were only oral exams. If you did not like the grade, you could come back the next month and try again as often as you wished. Classes were full of people who just came out of interest who were not registered, and many enrolled never came. It was a type of freedom so different from the bureaucratic bean counting that has now taken over universities. For their degree, some people wrote theses of 900 pages and some of 100 pages. It was a world of considerable fluidity where you could make your space and contacts and live your individuality, a strange type of freedom I have rarely known since.

Every Saturday morning a few of us would gather for the research seminar—many of us were foreign. Eco accepted anybody who came into his seminar, which was on the history of semiotics. There were a few of us who were not Italian: an Iraqi, an American or two, and a Belgian—Eco called us the “foreign legion.” Every Saturday morning we would present work on the history of semiotics. After the seminars we would crowd into the tiny bar beneath the institute and he would often pay for a glass of frizzante. During this time his popular novel began to be a best seller and the money flowed into his pockets and then he would sometimes take us all twenty or thirty, to an Osteria and pay for our lunch. He said writing the novel *The Name of the Rose* had been as easy as pissing, “una pischata” with characteristic self-derision. Then he won a literary prize in the small town of Anghieri and turned the prize into an intellectual party on Piero Della Francesca in the town’s miniature opera house, inviting Daniel Arasse, Louis Marin, Paolo Fabbri, Hubert Damisch. We were all put up in hotels and we feasted in the restaurants of the little town at the expense of his literary prize. He blew it on a weekend for his friends and students.

In the summer, seminars on semiotics were held in the jewel of a Renaissance town of Urbino, where he would hold parties at his country house, a converted monastery. Apparently his wife asked for one logical reason they should spend so much money on buying a ruined monastery and restore it. He replied it had been his lifelong ambition to walk down corridors with flaming torches. That clinched it. They bought the monastery, a great investment as there he wrote *The Name of the Rose*, which would sell ten million copies.

Eco quoted with ease from Greek and Latin, and the student was supposed to understand. I was always trying to get a quick translation from the student next to me, invariably the crème de la crème of il Liceo Classico. My personal interests were in yoga, and I began to read Sanskrit texts in English translations about their theory of the sign. At least this was something these virtuosi of the classics did not know and we opened the idea of a world history of semiotics, including oriental traditions. I spoke to Eco and he sent me over to the Institute of Oriental Glottology, where I had the pleasure of knowing Professor Franchi, who told the two or three of us who tried to study Indian philosophy and smatterings of Sanskrit many stories, including wandering India with the enfant terrible Pier Paolo Pasolini. So I tried to draw a comparison between Charles Sanders Peirce and the Indian universe. Eco was both intrigued and taken aback. I prepared a paper on this arcane subject and I had to sit outside his office while he read it. One would often wait an hour to speak to a

professor and particularly long for Eco. As famous as he was, he never missed office hours and always saw everybody who came to see him. He had the only office in the institute.

My friend Ata got me to read Ibn Arabi, and I began to see the similarities between the Sufi scholars doctrine of the sign and Sanskrit philosophers. Together we worked with the remarkable Roberto Pellerey to produce an article for an edition of VS on languages of the so-called Edenic languages, the perfect languages of the Garden of Eden. My Italian friends, who were amongst the most brilliant of scholars, had little hope of ever getting a job—perhaps if they were lucky they would win a competitive exam to become a secondary school teacher—but our intellectual life was really an authentic passion lived in the moment with little care for the future. We shared rooms in decrepit houses and ate at the university restaurant the *Mensa* twice a day and rode our bicycles everywhere. The conversations were intense, informed, and full of beauty.

I had decided to spend my life doing this and maybe go to Paris to pursue the Sanskrit side of semiotics, but then one morning came the call saying that my mother had only a short time to live. I left Italy that evening after two years in Bologna and was not to return for another two years, leaving behind that world I had tasted for a moment outside time, dominated by the blustering, joyous corpulence of Umberto Eco, which like the rose once was and now is simply a name that resonates.