

*Mundus Senescit: Umberto Eco recreates the Middle Ages*

Umberto Eco's recent historical novel *Baudolino* opens with a sort of gibberish combination of Latin, German, Italian, and English, a gleeful combination of inside jokes, puns, and scholarly winks and nods. The tale, written on top of an earlier history that has been scratched off the parchment but occasionally peaks through, is a story in a story in a story on a story. If that sounds complicated—well, it is. Trickster Baudolino, an unreliable narrator by his own unreliable report, tells his long life story to Niketas, an historian whom Baudolino hopes will be able to give shape and meaning to an otherwise almost random series of events and decisions. From the very beginning, Eco is playing with myth, truth, history, and storytelling—and tackling a project far more lofty than Niketas'.

With the recent publication of *Baudolino*, Umberto Eco returns to writing fiction set in the Middle Ages—and creates an ultimate symbol for medieval thought and history, in its own time and in our own. Eco's concern for medieval philosophy, present in both his popular and scholarly works, is in fact a sort of nostalgia for a time now much maligned and misunderstood, a forgotten kingdom of intellect and imagination. Very much a realist, Eco never suggests we can—or should—return to a medieval mindset (Society for Creative Anachronism aside, no one who truly knows the Middle Ages could ever wish to live it over.) But in medieval thought he finds an elegant system, though one that was obsessed with its own eventual irrelevance and decay. In his essays, he expounds on the tension that exists between medieval and modern thought; in his novel *The Name of the Rose*, he heralds the emergence of the modern man; in his new *Baudolino*, the book itself is a symbol for medieval thought, its triumphs, its failures, and its eventual decline.

*Baudolino* starts realistically enough, with the adoption of the young peasant Baudolino by the emperor Frederick. Baudolino becomes a symbol of the new social mobility of the late Middle Ages, when urban centers and burgeoning nations created footholds for merchants and even peasants in the upper classes. Quick-witted and gifted with languages, Baudolino is sent to study in Paris, where he meets up with a group of friends that are sadly never much developed as characters. Baudolino falls in love twice, marries, takes part in battles and sieges, and generally leads a remarkable—but believable—life.

However, throughout Baudolino's early life, he is obsessed with the myth of Prester John, a legendary king and priest who rules a mythical empire in the east. Prester John's story begins to take on a life of its own. Baudolino shares this story with his classmates, each of whom contributes to the kingdom whatever vision they hope to find there (for a Jewish scholar, it is the lost tribes of Israel; for a romantic poet, it is a cherished woman). Soon, they devise a letter in which Prester John describes to Frederick his fabulous kingdom, and its most fabulous treasure—the fabled Holy Grail. What begins as a political ploy spins out of hand, as copies of the letter—all altered slightly from the original—spread out. The lie disseminates and takes on its own life, history is entwined with myth. Baudolino and his friends soon set off to find this mythical land—a land they themselves invented—and find there precisely what they expected to. The word becomes the world, and the last half of the book is as full of monsters and magic as any fantasy novel. Naturally, Eco is making some bold assertions about language and reality, but none so bold as the very model of the book itself—as Baudolino's world fades into the sunset of dreams, so too does the whole medieval world, its philosophical models and ideas, even our perception of it, clouded by myth and time.

*Mundus senescit*: The medieval world anticipates its own decline.

Just two years after the publication of *The Name of the Rose*, Eco laid out his own version of the medieval system in his slim volume *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*, in which he makes a convincing argument for Joyce as a medieval man—or, more appropriately, a man in whom a basic medieval understanding warred with a modern sensibility. This battle between the medieval and the modern, of course, is as much a hallmark of Eco as of Joyce, and one doesn't have to think too far ahead to watch Eco carry out the same sort of drama he attributes to Joyce. In this essay, Eco devotes a section to "The Medieval Model," in which he presents a sort of "Middle Ages for Dummies," a simplified, practical key to medieval thinking. Naturally, the section says as much about Eco as it does about either Joyce or medieval writers; in this section, we learn what to expect in Eco's historical fiction.

"The medieval thinker," Eco begins, "cannot conceive, explain, or manage the world without inserting into the framework of an Order." True enough. It's easy today to imagine the Middle Ages as a time of great intellectual chaos, even stupidity. In fact, the Middle Ages was a time of great intellectual rigor and passion, born out of a need to bring order to the chaos unfolding in religion and politics, the ravages of disease and greed, the uncertainties of a changing world. When errors were made—and they often were—they were not the result of chaos, but the result of an excess of reason. When the order is primary, stubborn details that do not fit must be altered or disregarded. Yet this reason-before-reality system is not evidence of faulty thinking, only of different goals. Their reliance on systems, after all, was no less a liability than the modern thinker's, who cannot explain the whole for the tyranny of details.

All around was unrest and dissolution, but still there remained immense intellectual potential. The world was waiting to be remade. Classical thinkers, while still respected, were to be assimilated or ultimately discarded; after Christianity, all thought and experience was new again, waiting to be explained, classified, and ultimately redeemed.

In his essay, Eco contrasts medieval order with the disorder of modernity—and post-modernity—a jumble of signs and references, a movement "from the ordered cosmos of scholasticism to the verbal image of an expanding universe." Still, within this ordered cosmos a wilderness is contained, a "grid of allusions." "The medieval mind," Eco goes on, "does not fear innovation, [but] it conceals changes under the form of commentaries." This dialogue among texts, part of "an unlimited chain of relations between creatures and events," unfolds as "history telling itself to itself." This very idea of speaker and reference is at the heart of *Baudolino*, where the character tells his history—and, by extension, the story of the whole medieval period—to another, and the story is spread and changed even as the world it depicts diminishes and gradually passes away.

Eco quotes the common medieval wisdom, "*Mundus senescit*" (which he quotes in both *The Name of the Rose* and *Baudolino*, as well). The Latin phrase sums up the basic medieval nostalgia, the preoccupation with age and decay; then, too, it describes the eventual decline of the medieval system under the pressures of modern thought; Eco uses it to invoke the way the very notion of the "Middle Ages" has declined in popular imagination, straying off into myths of King Arthur and dragons, the real substance and detail of everyday life increasingly difficult to imagine.

*Mundus senescit*: Eco charts the passing of the medieval era.

Language, storytelling, detail, and order are all embedded in Eco's first medieval novel, *The Name of the Rose*. In this mystery story, a forward-thinking monk and his apprentice are called to an abbey—and its vast library—to solve a series of murders. Using signs, the monk William interprets the clues in the natural world, coming to conclusions in a thoroughly modern way. He maneuvers through the ordered library, itself a model of an ordered world, and masters it; finally, the ordered library is itself destroyed and its knowledge forever lost. Naturally, it is easy to see in this story an allegory for the dissolution of the medieval philosophical system and the rise to prominence of the scientific method and all it entails. Eco is quick to complicate the matter, however, by telling *The Name of the Rose* in a series of frames—William's apprentice, Adso, tells the story, which is supposedly found in manuscript form, an "Italian version of an obscure, neo-Gothic French version of a seventeenth-century Latin edition of a work written in Latin by a German monk toward the end of the fourteenth century." This self-conscious list of references naturally calls into doubt the veracity of the text and its translation; already the ordered intellectual world of the Middle Ages is on shaky ground.

Adso opens his story meditating on "the disaster of an aging world," its unruliness and vice. He remembers fondly his teacher, the monk William, a man who could "read the great book of nature," though perhaps also sensing that William is the sort of modern man of science, of detail, that is bringing down the order he mourns. The story progresses, all contained in the space of only a few days, in the small space of one abbey. Following these unities of place and time, *The Name of the Rose* is a small work, but one that contains hints of bigger things. The murder weapon—a poisoned book—is the first sign that *The Name of the Rose* is more than just a mystery novel. The book presages the work that Eco will produce in time. In fact, a list of monsters, found in an illuminated library text, alludes to precisely the same sort of monsters that appear in the flesh in the great, sprawling adventures of *Baudolino*, stories whose only unity is in their own telling.

*The Name of the Rose* is a relentlessly practical book. After all, there is a murder to solve, and that sort of directedness does not allow the wild game of allusions that leads *Baudolino* everywhere but to the point. Yet at the end there is a key, a way to unlock the mysteries of the library and tear down its rigid order. Adso stumbles on this clue almost by mistake, causing William to exclaim, "Why, of course . . . the discourse is presumed *de dicto* and not *de re*." Of words and not of things: this little line is the key to more than just the mystery. In *Baudolino*, Eco will create a vast system of allusions, lies, jokes, puns, myths—a world of words and not of things, a modern system of texts that defy any order.

*Mundus senescit*: The medieval world fades into obscurity.

Enter *Baudolino*, Eco's return to fiction and the culmination of his nostalgia, his predictions, his games, and his lessons. *Baudolino* is full of everything—history, magic, philosophy, science, theology. There are debates about the nature of the vacuum, the nature of the Grail, the nature of the Trinity. It is as if Eco meant this book to be a compendium of everything medieval, every idea, every system, a real, wide world fading to memory and myth. In *The Name of the Rose*, the book did it; here, the book is it, the lesson, the device, the universe. (Medieval literature, too, is replete with frame stories, dream visions, and unreliable narrators.)

If *The Name of the Rose* is the Middle Ages that was, *Baudolino* is the Middle Ages that we see now, looking backwards, its details dissolving into myths and misconceptions and generalities. When Baudolino and his companions ride off to find a place they made up themselves, Eco refutes the very notion of the accurate and the real. Baudolino's lies become reality, while annihilating the very possibility of reality and order, annihilating the library of the *Name of the Rose*, annihilating itself. You can imagine the giddiness with which the wise semiotics professor employs language to simultaneously create and destroy, to usher in a modernity of information and communication and dissolve forever the stately calm of the medieval system.

While *The Name of the Rose* is small in scope, *Baudolino* is huge. It tackles every issue: war and peace, the creation and dissolution of cities, the creation and dissolution of kingdoms. These issues were at the forefront of the medieval consciousness as well; the birth of nations, the need to bring fractured and warring kin groups together for "national" interests, the rise of urban power centers and the university elite, the violent conflict between Church and state—all of these demanded a system of political and religious thought that could put order to chaos.

Authenticity is at the very heart of *Baudolino*, where much of the plot hinges on phony relics. Baudolino even carries a phony Grail, one he himself fabricated, and comes to guard it through years of wandering torment with the passion of a believer. In Eco's world, believing makes it so, whether it is a phony relic or a phony kingdom. "When you say something you've imagined, and others then say that's exactly how it is, you end up believing it yourself," Baudolino explains to Niketas. Baudolino uses his fabulous stories to deceive, to seduce, to entertain, and to encourage—and the listener has an eager ear, because he is waiting to be lied to. Often, Baudolino lies out of a sense of duty; of three phony relics, the supposed bodies of the Magi, he says it was "up to me to give those three bodies a new Bethlehem." And you believe him, because you can hear in his voice how much he wants to believe himself.

The mythical kingdom of Prester John may or may not be real, but real is no longer a category worth considering. Previously, in the medieval system, the world was organized and ranked, a great chain of being that accounted for all things. Baudolino represents a new world of half-truths and relativity, a world without organization or rank. At the end of his life, Baudolino is bound to his lies, committed to living out the truth he made. He lives in his own mad dreams and wills them into reality. Whether this is a punishment for lying or a gift for genius, one can't say.

*Baudolino* is certainly a novel of the head and not the heart. The characters are more allegorical than personal, the allusions and cleverness make it hard to feel a bond of affect with the characters. Yet Eco intended to make *Baudolino* not only an allegory for medievalism and its decline, but a lesson about truth and memory. Again and again, reading the novel, you want to ask, "How could that obviously phony letter fool them all?" But we are all fooled by narratives of our own devising, sometimes heroically, sometimes tragically. Eco, too, is a victim of his wildest dreams, for while he struggles to save medieval scholasticism from the dustbin of history, he takes another step toward fabulous obscurity.