

Sabine Mercer

Looking at concepts of truth and lies through fictional worlds. Umberto Eco's novels "Baudolino" and "The Name of the Rose"

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**Looking at concepts of truth and lies
through fictional worlds:**

Umberto Eco's novels

Baudolino and The Name of the Rose

BA Honours Thesis (2010)

Revised in 2021

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Introduction

With *The Name of the Rose* and *Baudolino*, and their preoccupation with discursive enquiries into theories of truth, Umberto Eco continues the tradition of philosophical novels, a genre in which scientific concepts, logic and systems of knowledge form an essential part of the story. Going beyond mainstream historical fictions with more levels of meaning through intertextual references and correspondences between medieval and modern times, both books are ‘novels of ideas’, where Eco elucidates philosophical subjects by embedding them in a fictional narrative.

In both narrations, the eclectic combination of literary, historical and philosophical elements builds a complex textual structure; it can be compared to an arrangement similar to a musical score, where each part invites different readerships with different levels of possible reading – in this case, a ‘three-part harmony’.

At the first level, the novels are based on conventional narrative frameworks – an apparent detective mystery and an adventure story – a promise of drama and entertainment that is attractive to many readers. With the second level, Eco disturbs the expectations that these structures encourage by superimposing extended digressions that illuminate historical events of the medieval world. For most readers, this re-visitation to the knowledge from history books can induce an impression of *déjà-lu* as they encounter familiar names, places and events from the past. The third and highest level of reading is directed towards a sophisticated and educated readership: erudite readers, who can appreciate the nuances of the many intertextual references and rejoice in Eco’s allusions to philosophical themes as well as in their own ability to detect anachronisms, carefully planted within the dialogues. Storytelling within a decidedly postmodern structure is where Eco, in his own words, uses the “varied debris of the encyclopedia to make the music of ideas.”¹

¹ Umberto Eco, *On Literature* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2002) 134.

The two novels come together most closely in their recurrent concern with a number of philosophical and metaphysical *topoi*. Eco creates dialogues in which controversial argumentations, between the ones who seek after the truth and the ones who believe that they already possess the truth, can unfold. This authorial technique allows the author to deal implicitly with questions regarding the concept of truth: its definition, ambiguity, permanence, and how it can be distinguished from falsehood.

In order to explicate these questions – for which Eco never presents his own personal answer – both novels present and develop numerous approaches to finding or expressing truth, which can be subsumed under the categories of epistemology, which studies the origin, nature, and limits of knowledge and is concerned with the dissemination, accessibility, circulation and validity of same, and of ontology, the study of being, which is concerned with modes of experience, the categorical structure of reality and questions about the nature or essence of individuals and things.

Seen together, the two texts show the interplay between epistemological and ontological models of explanation and argumentation that surface in dialogues between characters that are solidly delineated by their narrative function of being representatives of ideas. In neither novel does the reader receive conclusive answers; Eco simply illuminates the different conceptualizations of knowledge and reality by investigating the grounds on which truth-claims were based. The novels differ in their use of the episteme, a term which denotes a system of understanding that provides a structure to thought and describes the “body of ideas which shape the perception of knowledge at a particular period.”² Both novels deal with fundamentally

² Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989. Michel Foucault defines the episteme as "the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences and possibly formalized systems" (*The Archeology of Knowledge*, 191).

important ontological issues, such as the essences of being, the potentiality and actuality of existence and the controversial philosophical argumentation for and against the existence of universals.

The starting point is an analysis of the author's use of structural strategies and Chapter One explores how Eco's mingling of historical knowledge with imagination in a dramatic plot and his use of fictional and fictionalized characters as well as contemporary chroniclers as narrators produces verisimilitude with the past: both texts are investigated for the production of truth-effects which, in turn, emphasises the truth-value of the narration for the reader. It will then be demonstrated how these carefully constructed historical worlds are deliberately destabilized, highlighting their special status as literary constructions.

In *The Name of the Rose*, the narration proper is distanced by encasing it in a frame-tale and by the use of mediators who, by claiming to have edited, translated and transcribed the text, weaken the solidity of the fictional world for the reader. Eco's extensive use of intertextual and anachronistic references deliberately corrupts the authenticity of the projected medieval worlds in both novels, but, an additional feature in *Baudolino* is the borrowing of fictional characters from other fictional worlds which serves to violate the ontological boundaries within the novel.

A major subject in both novels, which will be demonstrated in Chapter Two, is the important role of truth for the two medieval political powers – the Church and the state – in promoting their struggle for supremacy of one over the other and in their use of knowledge to assist their respective truth-claims.

A discussion of the role of the poverty-debate in *The Name of the Rose* exposes the internal philosophical conflict that raged within the different factions of the Catholic Church, which acted to further exacerbate the external struggle between the Church and the state.