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Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce*. Translated by Ellen Esrock. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989. xii, 87.

That James Joyce had a medieval mind remains one of the most commonplace yet enigmatic assertions of his critics. Umberto Eco's current work, *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (first printed in Italian in 1962 and recently translated into English by Ellen Esrock) does not so much attempt to explicate any one specific work as to arrive at a Joycean theory of poetics. In this newly reprinted work, which forms part of *The Open Work* (also recently translated and reprinted), Eco refrains from elucidating specific passages in Joyce. Instead, he describes how Joyce's Irish-Catholic "medieval" training redoubles upon itself in a "commodus vicus of recirculation" in which the form of earlier art and literature delivers up its cultural content to the newer representations of consciousness made possible by modernism and exemplified by *Finnegans Wake*.

The book is divided into three sections, each dealing with a chronological stage in Joyce's development. In the first chapter, "The Early Joyce," Eco sets forth the basis of Joyce's medievalism. Citing Jesuitical education, Eco claims that the Stephen Dedalus of earlier portions of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* embodies the young Joyce for whom the universe was an organized, systematic whole in which lists, inventories, keys to symbolic interpretation, cyclical conceptions of nature, and hierarchical chains of events demonstrate a "medieval disposition" in the aesthetic principles of the author. Stephen's subsequent loss of faith in the course of the book creates a significant break with his medieval forebears and produces a crisis in which individual consciousness must ultimately take philosophical primacy; however, according to Eco, Joyce succeeds in this representation only through preserving the medieval model and inspiration of the works: "If you take away the transcendent God from the symbolic work of the Middle Ages, you have a world of Joyce" (7). In the absence of God, Joyce offers the presence of art filtered through the individual consciousness in the nature of the epiphany. More than a way of discovering and understanding the world, the epiphany reveals to the poet "the profound soul of things, and it is he who makes them *exist* solely through the poetic word" (24). While Eco in no way implies that the sum total of Joyce's philosophical vision lies in his earlier works, nonetheless he does assert that the roots of Joyce lie in his fundamental conflict between a traditional, Thomistic worldview, and the chaos of individual consciousness suggested by the twentieth century.

In *Ulysses* the observations of Stephen in "Proteus" represent for Eco the equivalent of an aesthetic manifesto. Eco greatly emphasizes the way in which form constitutes the essential meaning of *Ulysses*, a book which exemplifies the chaos of life yet uses structural order and coherence reminiscent of medieval models. This ordering of chaotic experience has long been recognized as the hallmark of the book, but Eco expands on this tradition by emphasizing the medieval nature of the pursuit of meaning in obscurity as the book's philosophical guiding principle which is essential to understanding the work as a whole. While Eco's observations succinctly embrace in narrow limits the girth of a long and difficult work, the broadly philosophical nature of Eco's book does not greatly enhance the reading on a practical, interpretive level. For example, his brief comments on Molly Bloom reflect, one hopes, more of the influence of 1962 Joyce criticism than Eco's own observations. According to Eco, Molly is a woman whose wishes remain frustrated "by her laziness and the pure carnality of all her relationships" (49). Although *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos* anticipates Eco's own later work in semiotics while presupposing the advent of deconstruction, his esoteric focus seems to miss much that is pleasurable in *Ulysses* (and Molly): warmth, irony, and humor.

In his final chapter, devoted to *Finnegans Wake*, Eco arrives at what he considers the most pronounced instance of medieval sensibility informing avant-garde literature. As a book which seemingly encompasses all myth, religion, ritual, and words, the *Wake* continues, Eco says, in the great tradition of medieval catalogs, lists and encyclopedias; and this surface resemblance indicates a deeper epistemological affinity with the literary past which, largely by the power of Vico and structuralism, confers almost religious meaning on the book:

From a context of events the poet has isolated what was meaningful to him (this time the universe of linguistic relations) and has offered us what he retains as the comprehensible essence, the quidditas of the real experience. *Finnegans Wake* is the great epiphany of the cosmic structure resolved into language. (77)

This "cosmic structure" begins in the Middle Ages with the artistic composition of illuminated manuscripts. Eco argues that the intricate, bizarre phantasmagoria of the *Wake* ultimately derive from the intense study that Joyce devoted to this visual art, especially the *Book of Kells*, whose circularity, interrelatedness and obscurity held a fascination for the medieval mind as the *Wake* does for its twentieth-century readers who are similarly "enraptured by the difficulty of communication" which may be discerned

only by a "process of intelligence that deciphers and reasons" (81). Eco identifies the pun as the most central and important rhetorical figure of *Finnegans Wake* because it encompasses an intricate tapestry of references while conveying, with "irony and distance," the metaphysical role of language in defining and creating the universe. In essence, Eco identifies a habit of mind and interpretation which sees the universal in the specific and textual and which seeks to order the chaotic accordingly. As literary criticism the book necessarily focuses on generalities; however, it constitutes the most in-depth discussion of the "fearful Jesuit" for whom the Middle Ages, to paraphrase Eco, were, are, and always will be his "vocation and destiny."

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Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988. viii, 293.

Jacques Le Goff offers this latest set of essays as a successor to his earlier collection, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1978). As with the earlier collection, all of the essays in *The Medieval Imagination* have appeared previously in various journals and *Festschriften*, for the most part within the last ten years. Also as with his earlier collection, Le Goff links a diverse group of essays with a broad, general theme: a "history of the imagination." This history is similar to the *Annales* school's conception of the history of *mentalités*. Its primary sources are "the products of the imagination: literary and artistic works" (3). Le Goff cautions, however, that the historian of the imagination should not choose his primary sources on aesthetic grounds: "The masterpiece is no more valuable as evidence than the mass-produced mediocrity, provided that each is properly interpreted. Aesthetic values and ideas of beauty are in themselves historical constructs" (4). What Le Goff really calls for in this book is for historians to examine sources outside the range of materials they have traditionally considered:

The academic disciplines are scandalously specialized, not only in France but in most other countries as well. . . . The