

Encounters with Umberto Eco

Arnaud Quercy

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Encounters — philosophical dialogue

This dialogue stages an encounter between Umberto Eco and Arnaud Quercy on the terrain of cryptic languages and the limits of interpretation. Eco's novelistic practice — from the scholastic Latin of **The Name of the Rose** to the invented medieval patois of **Baudolino** — constructed linguistic labyrinths held within the protective frame of fiction. Quercy arrives with **Boucles Abstraites**, a 2021 cycle of French verse transformed iteratively through Old French, regional dialect, argot, and morphologically valid coinage until the surface sounds like French yet resists decoding. The exchange turns on a single asymmetry: Eco's cryptic languages are diegetic, absorbed by plot and character; Quercy's stand in the open, without frame. What Eco theorized as **intentio operis** — the constraint a text imposes on its own reading — is recast through the lens of ideamorphism as generative loss. The codex becomes the invariant; meaning passes through the receiver and becomes unrecoverable, even to the emitter. Quercy claims the position of first receiver, and the least privileged. Eco recognizes in this a more radical fidelity to what he himself wrote than he was prepared to practice. The encounter closes on a final reciprocal gesture — Eco in an invented medieval Italian, Quercy in his own cryptic French — neither speaking the other's language, both released into it.

In which two labyrinth-builders meet, one of them without walls.*Encounters — a series by Arnaud Quercy*

Umberto Eco spent his life building cryptic languages inside fictional worlds. Latin scholastic argument in *The Name of the Rose*, Kabbalistic permutation in *Foucault's Pendulum*, seventeenth-century rhetoric in *The Island of the Day Before*, the invented medieval patois of *Baudolino*. Each novel a linguistic labyrinth in which the reader is held without a map. As a theorist, he also defended the limits of interpretation, insisting that a text cannot mean anything the reader wishes. The tension between these two Ecos — the novelist who opens, the semiotician who closes — is the site of the encounter. What complicates it is that Quercy arrives with his own cryptic-language project, *Boucles Abstraites*: a 2021 cycle of French verse transformed through Old French, dialect, argot, and invented morphology into something that sounds like French and cannot be decoded as French. Eco recognizes the procedure immediately. The dialogue turns on an asymmetry neither can fully resolve: Eco's cryptic languages live inside fictions that protect the reader. Quercy's live in the open, with no diegetic frame to absorb the risk. Where the exchange arrives, neither speaks the other's language, and both are released.

Arnaud — I brought something for you to read.

Eco — A painting?

Arnaud — A poem. From 2021. I wrote a cycle of them.

Eco (*taking the page*) — "*Le caresmel s'en va, les roses s'ensordent...*" (*pause*) *Caresmel*. That's not modern French.

Arnaud — No.

Eco (*reading*) — "*A costière des puis déjà court le prael...*" *Costière. Prael*. These are old. Some I recognize. Some I don't. "*Cependant du joiaument le froideillous verseret...*" (*he stops*) I cannot place that word. *Froideillous*.

Arnaud — It's not in any dictionary you have.

Eco — You made it.

Arnaud — I followed a rule. The rule made it.

Eco (*setting the page down carefully*) — How many of the words are real?

Arnaud — I don't know anymore. That's the point. Some are attested in Old French. Some are regional. Some are invented by the procedure. I cannot reliably tell you which is which without going back to my notes.

Eco — So you have a codex. A transformation pipeline.

Arnaud — Modern French, passed iteratively through strata — Old French, medieval vernacular, dialectal slang, morphologically valid coinage. Each step obeys a rule. The cumulative drift produces what you just read.

Eco — And you do not publish the pipeline.

Arnaud — No. The poem stands alone. The reader receives the surface.

Eco (*smiling*) — *Baudolino* would love you.

Arnaud — I was going to bring him up.

Eco — Of course you were. A peasant from Alessandria who invents his own Piedmontese, who writes letters in languages that no one quite spoke, who lies so consistently that his lies become the historical record. I gave him a language and I thought I was being transgressive. You've done something I didn't quite do.

Arnaud — What?

Eco — I wrapped Baudolino in a novel. The reader is held inside a fiction. There is a plot. There are other characters. The cryptic language is diegetic — it belongs to a world. If the reader gets lost, the world catches them. You took the frame off.

Arnaud — Yes.

Eco — That is a more radical gesture than I allowed myself.

Arnaud — It's not a gesture. It's a position.

Eco — Explain.

Arnaud — A gesture is something one does to provoke a reaction. A position is where one stands regardless of the reaction. I didn't strip the frame to be radical. I stripped it because the frame was doing work I wanted the codex to do.

Eco — Ah. (*pause*) You wanted the codex to produce the reader's disorientation, not the fiction.

Arnaud — The codex produces everything. The fiction was redundant.

Eco — But then you lose the reader entirely.

Arnaud — No. I release them.

Eco (*picking up the page again*) — "*Le Printemps imaginaire esclave l'horizon.*" I can hear what that means. I cannot read what it means. These are not the same operation.

Arnaud — They are not.

Eco — And you prefer the first.

Arnaud — I prefer what happens when the second is impossible.

Eco — (*long pause*) I wrote a book once against this. *The Limits of Interpretation* ^[1]. I argued that a text cannot mean anything the reader wishes it to mean. That there is an *intentio operis*, an intention of the work itself, which constrains what can be legitimately drawn from it. I defended this against the wilder forms of reader-response.

Arnaud — I read it.

Eco — And?

Arnaud — I think you were defending something that was already lost. By the time you wrote that book, you had already written *Foucault's Pendulum*. You knew what happens when a code runs past its author. Belbo, Casaubon, Diotallevi — they invent the Plan as a game and the Plan kills them. The *intentio operis* could not protect them from their own invention.

Eco — That was the horror of the novel. It was meant as a warning.

Arnaud — And the warning was received. But you also demonstrated, in the same book, that the warning cannot be separated from what it warns against. You *had to write the Plan* to warn against it. You had to build the code to show what the code does. At the end, the code remains. The warning is optional.

Eco (*quietly*) — Yes.

Arnaud — That is ideamorphism. The emission proceeds regardless of the emitter's intent. The receiver does what the receiver does. The codex is the invariant. What happens in the passage is no longer yours ^[2].

Eco — You give this a name.

Arnaud — I give it a framework. The name matters less than the operation.

Eco — *Perte générative*. Generative loss. I saw that phrase somewhere.

Arnaud — In the manifesto ^[3].

Eco — It is close to something I could have written. And yet I did not write it.

Arnaud — Why?

Eco (*a long silence*) — Because if I had written it, I would have had to act on it. And I was not prepared to give up the frame. The frame was what allowed me to write novels at all. Without the frame I would have been a poet. I was not a poet.

Arnaud — Baudolino is poetry.

Eco — Baudolino is a novel that contains a poet. That is not the same.

Arnaud — No. It isn't.

Eco (*looking at the page again*) — "*Belle meschine tiescheresse aux auréals bobelins.*" I would read these. I would read all of them. I would want to know the rule. And I would ask you, over and over, and you would not tell me.

Arnaud — I wouldn't.

Eco — That is where we part company. I built labyrinths and I always, somewhere, left a thread. An erudite reader with enough patience could always, in principle, reconstruct the path. You have cut the thread.

Arnaud — There was no thread to cut. The codex doesn't produce a path. It produces a surface.

Eco — (*smiling, setting the page down*) Then I have one last question.

Arnaud — Yes.

Eco — When you write these, do you know what you are saying?

Arnaud — At each step, yes. The rule tells me. But by the tenth iteration, when I read the finished poem aloud, I cannot always reconstruct what I meant at the start. The codex has taken the meaning where the codex took it. I receive the poem too.

Eco — You are the first receiver.

Arnaud — And the least privileged.

Eco (*a long pause*) — That is where I would have stopped, you know. That admission. I would have turned it into a novel about a poet who could no longer read his own work. A character. A frame.

Arnaud — And I left it as the poem.

Eco — Yes. You left it as the poem.

(*silence*)

Eco — I did not write the poems. But perhaps, for a breath, I can let the thread fall.

(*a pause*)

Eco — *Forsan anc'hoggi lo filo se disligia da la mano, et lo verbo se'n va senza nui, per li camini che non sapemmo.*

Arnaud — *Le mot s'est desbiné de nos pelmoires ; il crapaudille tout seuliot par les besgloises voies, et nul mézignant ne le desgoteillera.*

(*silence*)

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