cal system and religious praxis that would foster their political aims. The demolition of Christianity would clear the way for robust and heroic Teutonic ideals. The Jews had to be eliminated first, but that was only the first step. Eventually the real enemy, Christianity, had to be replaced by a stronger religion rooted in the blood and soil of Germanism. Christianity and Germanism were portrayed in the textbooks for schoolchildren as opposites. The conversion of Germans to Christianity was described in history books as fostering unheroic Semitic qualities that inhibited the quest for German domination—and German domination was considered the divinely destined future of the evolutionary process.

The defeat of Hitler by war put an end to this nefarious system of education, but if Hitlerism had a metaphysic and an ideology, then that idea can lie fallow and rise again. Not military might, only a good idea can defeat a bad idea.

—Reviewed by Robert Paul Roth

Playing Games


The genial linguist Umberto Eco not too long ago made a considerable amount of the thought and atmosphere of the Middle Ages comprehensible to the general reading public by portraying them in a mystery novel The Name of the Rose. In the present work he similarly attempts to make cultural anthropology and semiotics palatable to nonacademics by applying these trendy disciplines to topics of general interest. Despite his title, he has not adopted the genre of the travelogue, but conveys his views in a series of essays, most of which appeared originally in Italian periodicals over the past two decades. Unlike his countryman Marco Polo, who promised his readers a million marvels, Eco professes to adhere to strict actuality, but his jovial satire and semiotic games frequently transport the reader to a world of fancy in many ways more entertaining than the sober one we occupy in reality. His theme essay affirms that the United States attempts to compensate for the lack of an indigenous cultural tradition by fabricating showplaces or cultural Disneyland stuffed with fake artifacts that exceed the originals in verisimilitude. Although he suggests that his entire book embodies this theme of American reality, a large part of it concerns Italy and the Middle Ages exclusively.

In his preface, Eco assumes the stance of a social critic, responding to a moral obligation to speak out, and he occasionally introduces the names of popular leftist heroes, but there is no more substantive political ideology in these essays than in his fictional portrayal of the Middle Ages. Essentially he treats in one way or another the problems of communication and the organization of sign-systems in a wide variety of social situations, particularly in the mass media and in forms of mass behavior. In one essay, Eco even ridicules forms of sign-interpretation much older than semiotics, that is, fortunetelling and predicting the future. The mystical significance of spatial configurations of tea leaves, the various cards in a deck, and the numerical patterns in which various phenomena appear, he rightly considers as examples of signs with no rational connection to the meanings attached to them. Some literary critics have the same opinion of what is called semiotics. Most of the signs we encounter from day to day are directly connected to some real aspect of life, but in the world of semiology it frequently happens that only the semilogist perceives the link between sign and significance. Eco interprets a trade fair, for example, as a sociology or semiology of objects in which the visitor is tricked into believing that his free will functions when he isolates objects that he wishes to possess, but in reality "he has
only accepted his role as consumer of consumer goods since he cannot be a proprietor of means of production," which, although far more to be desired, the fair makes him think he does not want.

It has long been recognized that political news is marked, motivated, and confirmed by the symbolic, and in this sense there is a connection between semiotics and ideology. Eco believes that the relationship is apparent today more than ever. As an example, he cites a photograph that appeared in an Italian newspaper during the university revolts of the 1970s of a lone student in the middle of the street grasping a pistol in the posture of a professional gunman. This pose inspired a public attitude of rejection of the student movement and hostility toward it. Norman Rockwell paintings have had as great an impact in the United States in a reverse direction, however, for over half a century. Eco realizes that various people—semiologists or not—may interpret the same symbols in entirely different ways. He demonstrates that two major books of cultural anthropology disagree fundamentally in their attitude toward social value. Hans Sedlmayr in his *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* grimly and lugubriously delineates a gradual degeneration in the object of human worship from God as its focus, to nature, to form, and, finally, to technology. Marshall McLuhan joyfully accepts the same series of transformations to herald the well-known concept that the medium of communication is more important to the future of civilization than the message imparted by the medium (a formula which Eco finds to be ambiguous). Eco gives the reader a superb précis of these chronicles of mass culture in an essay paradoxically affirming that works of this kind cannot be paraphrased because they belong to a type of reasoning impaired by what he calls "cognito interruptus."

Eco presents a number of his own theories, which may have elements of truth, but still come far short of universal acceptance. At first it seems self-evident that a country belongs to the person who controls mass communications, a thesis developed in his essay "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare." This opinion may be supported by the armed struggle for television studios in the Philippines, but not by the Solidarity movement in Poland (Is the Catholic Church part of mass communications?) or by black resistance in South Africa. Other Ecoing theses inspire greater scepticism. He argues that since multinationals are invincible to terrorists, these organizations, therefore, allow the terrorists to exist. This may perhaps be true of the Red Brigade in Italy, but it has little relevance to Libyan and other terrorism elsewhere in Europe. Eco also claims that violent excitement may be channeled into either extreme patriotism on the Right or terrorism on the Left. A theory such as this cannot be disproved, but the doubts it inspires transfer to Eco's statements in other areas in which he is an authority and create skepticism concerning his literary and historical concepts which the general reader might otherwise accept without question.

Eco argues that the Roman Empire was not at first undermined by Christian ethics, but by Alexandrian culture, oriental cults, and new sexual views. Perhaps, but I am equally convinced by a nonsemiotic theory of Will Durant that the construction of the Great Wall of China frustrated the barbaric Huns in the East and turned their invading forces toward Rome. Another theory, that modern universities are deliberately being decentralized to avoid "mass agglomeration," seems to be contradicted by the gigantic institutions at Madrid, Moscow, and Peking. Is there any truth to the notion that the modern mania for suicide is a direct result of the abolishing of capital punishment—the state having formerly provided a solution for citizens with a martyr complex? I cannot cite any conflicting evidence, but I am still dubious. I go along with Eco's conclusion, however, that the chatter accompanying the coverage of sports in the communication media overwhelms the sporting event itself and that this artificially excited commentary is a parody of political talk. Eco does not indicate the reverse situation,
that the coverage of a modern political campaign resembles that accompanying a sporting event. In an essay on blue jeans, "Lumbar Thought," specifically touted on the dust-jacket, Eco treats clothes as semiotic devices or means of communication. For readers of Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, there should be no argument.

Apart from theorizing, Eco offers sparkling commentary on a variety of subjects. Supplemeting Lukacs, he contrasts historical novels with cloak-and-dagger ones. The former attempt to reach a better understanding of a former period and through it of the present. Their characters need not be people who really existed as long as they are representative of their period. The cloak-and-dagger novels, to the contrary, must have real historical figures to support their credibility, and they use the past as a device to increase the appeal of fictional characters. Eco also provides a distinction between an art movie and a cult movie. The latter must lack unity; display not one central idea, but many; and be indivisible into a number of memorable parts, irrespective of their intended relationship with the whole. As an example, the professor as film critic provides a structural analysis of Casablanca, based on the premise that one or two clichés make us laugh, but a hundred or so move us emotionally. After celebrating Yale students who have mastered the art of cheating multinational companies by making illegal overseas telephone calls, the indulgent professor reveals a kindred method of destroying the computer system of a public utility, a type of nonviolent guerrilla warfare. The method consists of persuading a large segment of the public to overpay its bills by one cent. This reminds me of a student project during my undergraduate days of bringing down an administration by turning on simultaneously all of the water faucets on the campus. I have never heard of either project actually being carried out. On a more realistic level of mass manipulation, Eco explains how anticipatory applause is artificially generated at pop music festivals. A song is made deliberately dull, un-rhymed, and dissonant until just before a melodious section is about to be introduced, when the intensity and pace are increased to alert the audience to the coming relief and to produce grateful applause. This is simple and more acceptable than his explanation of why notions of the tragic are universal and those of the comic vary from culture to culture. What is funny for a European is not necessarily so for a Japanese. Eco explains that a comic character violates a rule that is taken for granted, but the tragic character defines the rule. I wonder whether the taking for granted of a rule would not indicate a greater degree of universality than needing to have it defined.

An essay which seems somewhat incompatible with the others in the collection, but which is by no means less worthy of attention, summarizes in panegyric terms the great intellectual contribution of Saint Thomas Aquinas to Western thought. Although taking full advantage of the amusing aspects of the medieval philosopher's great girth, Eco seriously expounds the specific manner in which Aquinas applied the philosophy of Aristotle to the needs of his day and assesses his debt and relationship to the preceding system of Averroes. The Church to this day follows Aquinas's method and direction: "to examine facts and opinions to make a decision, and resolve contradictions without concealing them, trying to reconcile them openly."

This defense of Aquinas and other substantive segments make this book valuable reading, but the greatest enjoyment comes from its humor. Here are a few samples: "Cultural anthropologists accept cultures in which people eat dogs, monkeys, frogs and snakes, and even cultures where adults chew gum." "The Lyndon Johnson Memorial is the work of a nouveau riche Texan who thought that his every act had become worthy of historiography and who raised a cenotaph to his laundry list." "For a Californian, leaving his car means leaving his own humanity." A contemporary liberal is an "Anglophone entrepreneur whose folk epic was Robin-
son Crusoe and whose Virgil was Max Weber." In his Latin puns and witticisms, however, Eco resembles one of Wilhelm Raabe’s nineteenth-century schoolmasters. He approves of forms of communication that are ambiguous and, therefore, allow a variety of possible interpretations, but paradoxically his own style is remarkable for precision and clarity. No doubt his translator, William Weaver, deserves some of the credit.

By and large Eco’s style depends more on words than on ideas, and despite the reference to hyper reality in his title, his ideas are largely insubstantial. The trouble with theories that perceive the problems of the world in terms of signs and lexemes is that solutions to these problems are too easily framed in the same terms. Semiology as practised by Eco is more of a game than serious social criticism. In a sense he is continuing the medieval debate between realists and nominalists, voyaging not in the realm of hyper reality, but in the antipodes.

—Reviewed by A. Owen Aldridge

Confession as Criticism


A WARM AND PERSONAL TONE permeates this volume of essays on twentieth-century poetry and prose. The author’s professed allegiance to New Criticism accounts for a sensible style, and his Lebanese background (to which he refers in the text) has something to do with his choice of Kahlil Gibran as one of the objects of his commentary.

Eugene Paul Nassar makes no secret of the fact that his interpretations of literature stem in many ways from his personal experience of life. This is a refreshing change from the tenor of contemporary literary discourse that strives for objectivity and achieves blandness instead. While Professor Nassar would probably not subscribe to Anatole France’s saying that criticism is “an adventure of the soul among the masterpieces,” he would probably agree that criticism is a response of individual taste and temperament to congenial or ungenial texts.

His thesis is that English and American literature of the past hundred years reasserts two postures, or offers two approaches, to the ever-pressing problems of human existence. The first consists in an acceptance of the need of human beings to hold on to some “context of values and beliefs . . . assumptions that will give meaning and continuity to one’s life.” Nassar contends that a good deal of modern poetry and fiction reasserts this by upholding the idea of “illusion as value” and by holding on to an ethical system even when proofs of its objective validity are lacking. The other approach, that of “exultant dualism,” denies that such problems exist at all. This posture stems from a pretense that “the human hunger . . . for permanence and immorality” can be satisfied by emotional “highs” or by philosophical speculations.

Nassar declares himself in agreement with the first attitude, and he perceives its presence in Robert Frost, William Butler Yeats, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and Ezra Pound. He maintains that it has been favored in the West ever since religious attitudes began to wane. The second solution he identifies with D. H. Lawrence, Kahlil Gibran, Dylan Thomas, and Walt Whitman, and he finds it lacking. This is a pose rather than a solution, he contends, and it can hardly sustain one’s spiritual equilibrium in the long run.

Loosely tied to this argument is the final chapter in which a personal critique of Freudianism, McLuhanism, Jungianism, Marxism, deconstruction, and archetypalism is offered. In all of these Nassar sees a monist compulsion and a manifestation of the “categorical mind.” Nassar’s “illu-