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QUESTIONS FOR UMBERTO ECO
Media Studies

Interview by DEBORAH SOLOMON
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Q: Although you're known best as the author of the highbrow murder mystery "The Name of the Rose," you're also a prolific political commentator whose essays have now been collected in a book, "Turning Back the Clock," in which you warn against the dangers of "media populism." How would you define that term?

Media populism means appealing to people directly through media. A politician who can master the media can shape political affairs outside of parliament and even eliminate the mediation of parliament.

Much of your book is an assault on Silvio Berlusconi, the former prime minister of Italy who used his media empire to assist his political ends.

From '94 to '95, and from 2001 to 2006, Berlusconi was the richest man in Italy, the prime minister, the owner of three TV channels and controller of the three state channels. He is a phenomenon that could happen and is maybe happening in other countries. And the mechanism will be the same.

But here we have the F.C.C. and other federal agencies to prevent the sort of monopolies that would allow a politician to control the country's newspapers and TV stations.

In the States, there is still a great separation between the media and political power, at least in principle.

So why would any country besides Italy be at risk of having the media takeover you describe?

One of the reasons why foreigners are so interested in the Italian case is that Italy was in the last century a laboratory. It started with the Futurists. Their manifesto was in 1909. Then fascism — it was tested in the Italian laboratory and then it migrated to Spain, to the Balkans, to Germany.

Are you saying that Germany got the idea of fascism from Italy?

Oh, certainly. According to what the historians say, it is so.

Maybe just the Italian historians.

If you don't like it, don't tell it. I am indifferent.

You're saying that Italy was a trendsetter in both fashion — or art — and fascism?

Yes, O.K., why not?

What do you make of Berlusconi's successor, Romano Prodi, who was elected last year and has shifted the government leftward?

He is a friend. I like him, but I think he has been overwhelmed by the infighting after the election within his own majority. Berlusconi has the advantage of being a big actor. Prodi is not an actor, which is not a crime, but it is a weakness.

Prodi is an intellectual as opposed to a businessman?

Yes, he was a professor of economics. In the early '90s, Prodi was also a teacher in one of my programs. Suddenly he went into politics.

You're referring to the department of communications at the University of Bologna, where you're a professor of semiotics.

I retired this month. I am 75.

Have you ever wanted to go into politics?

No, because I think everybody must do his job.

Do you see yourself mainly as a novelist?

I feel that I am a scholar who only with the left hand writes novels.

I am wondering if you read Dan Brown's "Da Vinci Code," which some critics see as the pop version of your "Name of the Rose."

I was obliged to read it because everybody was asking me about it. My answer is that Dan Brown is one of the characters in my novel, "Foucault's Pendulum," which is about people who start believing in occult stuff.

But you yourself seem interested in the kabbalah, alchemy and other occult practices explored in the novel.

No, in "Foucault's Pendulum" I wrote the grotesque representation of these kind of people. So Dan Brown is one of my creatures.

Do you care if people read your novels 100 years from now?

If somebody writes a book and doesn't care for the survival of that book, he's an imbecile.