

“Chronicles of a Liquid Society” by Umberto Eco, Translated from the Italian by Richard Dixon. Harvill Secker (2017).

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“Twitter is like a village or suburban bar” writes Umberto Eco in a fascinating essay, “I tweet, therefore I am” (Twittero ergo sum!). “You hear the village idiot, the small landowner....., and occasionally there is someone with a few sensible ideas. But it all ends there. Barroom gossip never changed international politics..” he elaborates. The essay is part of his latest collection of essays, “Chronicles of a Liquid Society” published posthumously.

Eco is of course best known as the author of the charming thriller “The Name of the Rose”. This murder mystery, filled with references to arcane manuscripts and texts, was set in a medieval monastery and was later adapted into a blockbuster film starring Sean Connery. “Foucault’s Pendulum”, “Baudolino” and the controversial “The Prague Cemetery” are some of his other well-known fictional works. The amazing “History of Beauty” is a personal favourite among his non-fiction works. His earlier collections of essays and columns have also been published as books.

The essays in the book under review are some of the bi-weekly columns that Eco wrote for the magazine L’ Espresso from 2000-2015. The concept of a liquid society refers to a state where everything is in a state of flux- there are no fixed or stable points of reference. There are multiple crises facing us today- the collapse of ideologies, a collapse of communities as well as that of the state. A defining feature of such a liquid phase is indignation which we are witnessing all around us and one which Pankaj Mishra has eloquently discussed in his recent book “The Age of Anger”.

The essays cover an enormous range of topics- from cellphones to internet pornography, from Presidential elections to Harry Potter’s impact on schoolchildren and much more. As he writes, in conclusion to a delightful piece on how Euclid described a right angle, that in these columns, he would be “talking about everything that came into my head, and this is what came into my head today!” However, the amazing thing about the pieces is that there is always something new that one finds in them. This could be a new way of looking at everyday events and things, or a piece of obscure historical or literary trivia.

The review of a book, “Where Are You? An Ontology of the Cell Phone”, is a discussion about the anthropology of *Homo cellularis* and how this technology has changed human existence so dramatically that it should be a topic for philosophical discussion. The review of a book on privacy is used as a peg to take the loss of privacy to its logical culmination with everyone watching everyone else-like Kekule’s serpent eating its own tail. And this piece dates from 2001!

The themes covered in this collection include Conspiracies, Racism, Religion, Philosophy, Mass Media and Education. And the bibliophile that he was (he had a library of more than 30,000 volumes including rare manuscripts) there are several essays on books. In a fascinating piece on the fictional gourmet detective Nero Wolfe, Eco mentions that he spent two months rereading all the eighty Nero Wolfe stories! Whether he is dealing with the quotidian or the abstruse, Eco's enormous erudition and intimidating intellect are visible in almost all the pieces.

As in his novels, Eco weaves in many threads from the literary and intellectual history of a variety of places, cultures and languages. But this is always done effortlessly and with prose that is playful and yet precise. A little known 5th century AD Neo-Platonist, Hypatia, who was killed by the bishop of Alexandria, is discussed in an essay on religious censorship. In "The reindeer and the camel", he laments the disappearance of nativity scenes (with Magi bringing gifts) which were central to Christmas celebrations of his childhood and their replacement with Christmas trees decorated with coloured balls. He goes on to discuss how Santa Claus was Saint Nikolaus and the tree a pagan legacy which was used at Yule, a pre-Christian pagan festival of the winter solstice.

Barring some pieces on local Italian politics and culture, these essays should be of interest to most readers. And since these were written as newspaper columns, they are best read a few at a time instead of all at one go. The connections he makes between disparate things leaves one marvelling at the breadth of his knowledge. Just like his earlier collections of essays, "Faith in Fakes" and "How to Travel with a Salmon", this one too will be read and savoured for many years to come.

But even someone as prescient as Eco can be wrong at times- even he could not imagine a world where the most powerful man in the world prefers to conduct the affairs of the state in 140 character bites, and threatens another megalomaniac in Northeast Asia by boastfully tweeting that "his is bigger and better and it works" (the nuclear button, of course).

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