

Umberto Eco (2013). *The Book of Legendary Lands*. Trans. Alastair McEwan. London: MacLehose Press.

Umberto Eco's most recent nonfictional foray, *The Book of Legendary Lands*, may initially appear as something of an outlier when compared against the previous elements of his series, namely: *On Beauty*, *On Ugliness* and not to forget, *The Infinity of Lists*. Eco's categorisation for 'legendary lands' are those "around which have grown legends that for centuries have suggested they really existed" (Eco, 2013, p. 309). Or, to paraphrase, once (and sometimes still) believable fictional places. Thus, in the same way Eco had challenged popular presumptions regarding the existence of beauty, ugliness and the complete list, *The Book of Legendary Lands* fits into sequence precisely due to its articulation of parametrical void. Legendary lands, physically inexistent and without means of qualifying them beyond scepticism and negation, are the protagonists of this work.

Eco's visually immaculate text contains fifteen chapters, exploring legendary lands of Biblical, mythical and scientific-fiction origin. The historical spotlight darts through the Antipodes, lands of Homeric epic, Atlantis, Utopia, the Earth's interior and numerous other legendary classics. Each chapter begins with an essay by Eco covering the origin and evolution of the legend and concludes with an extended and rigorous anthology of extracts. Throughout both essay and anthology, stunning and captivating images punctuate the text. However there is at times a distracting, arguably detracting, excess of glossy images where instead more textual rigour would have been beneficial. Indeed, Eco notes how medieval man was

convinced that the world was a great book written by the finger of God and that every living creature, animal and vegetable, and every stone was the vehicle of a superior meaning, it was necessary to

populate the universe with beings equipped with the most disparate properties in order to glimpse an allegorical significance through these characteristics (Eco, 2013, pp. 100-101)

One cannot, however, negate feeling Eco's text, via excessive imagery and anthologisation, slips dangerously close to becoming a critically-lacking text of digressions. *The Book of Legendary Lands* often risks becoming a legend unto itself. However, this criticism can also be envisioned as a practical attempt of demonstrating Eco's own espoused theory whereby legendary lands, as opposed to mere fictional places "do not excite our credulity because, by virtue of the fictional pact that binds us to the author's words, even though we know they do not exist, we *pretend* that they exist – and we take part as accomplices in the game suggested to us" (Eco, 2013, pp. 436-437). *The Book of Legendary Lands* is conceivably a rulebook whose active reading is the engagement of the very pastime it describes. However, the more critically-hungry reader directly concerned with the mechanics of the 'rules' of legendary lands, as opposed to the opportunistic mystery-hunter, cannot help but feel undernourished by this 'working example' construction. McHale has written that "We choose one story or variant over another for its superior interest. Minimally, we strive to tell stories that are at least relevant to our audience; optimally, we hope to make our stories compelling, if possible even gripping" (McHale, 1992, p. 26), and whilst *The Book of Legendary Lands* is gripping, it is gripping in the most minimally-relevant of ways.

Returning to the non-fictional content of the text, *The Book of Legendary Lands* is certainly intellectually informative in places. Whereas legendary earthly paradises have always existed for the more pious, Eco notes the delight's found within the land of Cockaigne always excited the more mundane and urgent physiological requirements of peasantry throughout the ages (Eco, 2013, p. 291). Thus the text explores how various manifestations of the same legend pertain to the multiple audiences whose anxieties are appropriately catered to via their particular permutation. Indeed, Eco notes how "The Isle of the Blessed could not fail to create an irrepressible desire, and so throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, people firmly believed in its existence" (Eco, 2013, p. 155). Indeed whatever the legend, Eco's commentary is always hinged firmly upon a twenty-first century perspective, one of objective hindsight, a contemporary objective platform from which he clinically and steadily reveals the political motives which have historically propelled and survived various legends into the modern consciousness. The concise manner of his essayed evolutionary examinations proves accessible and useful for the casual reader but acts perhaps as a frustration for the scholarly academic. By contrast, the anthologies which close each chapter

are likely to frustrate the casual reader but greatly assist the academic. Much like legends themselves, *The Book of Legendary Lands* becomes a multiperspectival reading experience.

The irresistibility of legend to the human mind makes it prime propaganda fodder, with Eco ever reminding us that “the propensity for legend is more on the part of moderns than on that of their forefathers” (Eco, 2013, p. 22), critiquing, perhaps, the continued delusions of contemporary society. Those delusions do however, in an oddly ritualistic way, maintain some connection to our prehistoric past. The will for imagination always layers itself upon the landscape. Eco’s chapter on how Nazis reconfigured various ancient legends (the racially pure Thule, Atlantis and Polar regions) reminds of the potentially darker, verging on dystopic, power of such utopic myths. Legendary revisionism is not just a contemporary phenomenon however, rather the ‘moderns’ of every epoch are revealed as recapitulating legendary lands for their own benefit. An abuse of power is often depicted as finding its idealistic home within olde mythology. Indeed, secular rationalists are just as guilty of employing legendary lands to further their agenda. In his chapter on the flat earth, Eco discusses how enlightened nineteenth-century secular thinkers, irritated by the fact that various religious denominations were opposing evolutionism, attributed the idea of the flat earth to Christian thinking ... It was a matter of demonstrating that, just as they had been wrong about the spherical form of the Earth, so the churches could be wrong about the origin of species (Eco, 2013, pp. 12-13).

The flat earth, however, had never been widely believed or even contemplated within the church (save a few obscure and largely unread manuscripts), but as Eco reveals even the absence legend is susceptible to revisionary abuse. Whether spearheaded by the nineteenth-century enlightened or twentieth-century fascists, legendary places such as the flat earth prove extremely susceptible to, and arguably survive on, modern reimagining. *The Book of Legendary Lands* continuously reminds us that whilst the real world changes, those places which never existed become a timeless and inexhaustible source of comfort – ripe fruit to further almost any agenda.

Eco’s constant reminders of how any single legendary land exists in a state of hypothetical plurality harmonises, perhaps unintentionally but certainly profoundly, with our modern condition of the postmodern. Gibson notes postmodernity as being “the (not necessarily contemporary) condition in which we arrive at ... a more and more developed awareness of moralities as myriad, groundless, incommensurable and interminable” (Gibson, 1999, p. 14). *The Book of Legendary Lands*, via both Eco’s turbulent introductory essays and the expansive anthologies, essentially reconstructs this “not necessarily contemporary” postmodern in the pre-modern – each legend with its plurality of interpretations becoming

a postmodernist beacon of epistemological relativism. For example, during the chapter concerning Biblical lands, Eco writes of how “Soloman’s Temple, which certainly was a real place to a certain extent, became legendary, and all the efforts in the following centuries were aimed at reconstructing it, at least in the imagination, but not finding it” (Eco, 2013, pp. 50-51). Soloman’s temple, much like every other legend inscribed within the text, becomes a vessel which appropriates a myriad of desires and meaning. It exists as a nonphysical hologram, a convergence of independent imagination, resulting in a groundless yet glistening dream which nobody attempts to geographically find, only continue to project onto from the safety of distance.

Barthes, in his influential essay *The Death of the Author*, considers the modern (post-modern) text “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, 1977, p. 146). The structure of *The Book of Legendary Lands* is a prime example of this clash of culture, absorbing quotations and ideas from numerous times and peoples. The anthologies closing each chapter, referenced during Eco’s generally brief introductory essay, in addition to numerous artistic and cartographic images, represent the majority of the text itself. With so many differing interpretations laid upon the pages and without an appropriately lengthy and critical introduction, the reader may easily find their unity of interpretation stretched poles apart. This destabilised disorientation may in fact be the entire basis of the text, since it most accurately embodies the very nature of legend and legendary land – those places which have been believed by many to exist in many places simultaneously. Eco essentially authors himself out of his own text, again appropriating Barthes’s disdain for how the general image of literature has historically been “tyrannically centred on the author” (Barthes, 1977, p. 143). Legends never had the benefit (or curse) of having one single omniscient author, hence their subjective and interpretative nature enabled anyone to project onto the inexistent yet potentially real space whatever they wanted. Legends were the postmodernist polysemous texts of old. *The Book of Legendary Lands*, in assembling a platform from which to view the legendary past, adeptly deconstructs the legend of the author.

For all the postmodernist thematics and logic potentially at work in the subtext of *The Book of Legendary Lands*, the fundamental failures and benefits of the text must be returned to. The contemporaneous and objective manner through which Eco weaves the narrative of individual legends, both in their isolation and concomitance with others, is extremely adept and draws on a wealth of knowledge. Each of Eco’s essays, which are stunted and perhaps unnecessarily terse in places, are buttressed by sizeable anthologies which certainly repre-

sents a boon for the reader seeking material for further reading. The text itself is constantly underpinned with humorous and oftentimes scathing societal criticism, a rampant eagerness to espouse so vividly and bibliographically the divergent nonsense of that strangest of beasts, the human mind: “when individuals or entire groups cling fideistically to some untenable idea, not even the evident failure of their theories will persuade them to change their minds” (Eco, 2013, p. 364).

Ultimately, however, for an almost five-hundred page text there is a definite lack of the substance or academic rigour one has come to expect of Umberto Eco. The chapters’ essays are too brief (save perhaps “The Interior Earth, the Polar Myth and Agartha”) to manifest original criticism of any substantial contribution. Just as how Eco comments that “many Atlantises may have arisen and then disappeared” (Eco, 2013, p. 182), one perhaps wishes that this particular Atlantis remained buoyant longer, or that its breadth of vision was not so sweeping as to render it critically unengaging.

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