

Creation as Invention and Creation as Combination: A Semiotic Reflection on Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*

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Abstract: The continuity between the theoretical and the narrative works of Umberto Eco has been frequently pointed out. Eco himself often dwelled on it, famously claiming that “what cannot be explained must be narrated upon”. Such continuity manifests itself also in the opposite direction, for Eco's essays prominently feature a dimension of ‘conceptual story-telling’. Yet, when asked to explain the origin of the communicative power of narration, Eco constantly belittled the importance of individual genius and emphasized, on the contrary, the role of the artist as mediator between the encyclopedia shared by a community of interpreters and the artist's audience: creativity does not consist in pure invention but stems from a skillful combinatorial operation. Some critics, as a consequence, have labeled Umberto Eco's fiction as ‘cerebral’ and ‘cold’. To the attentive reader, though, Eco's theoretical stance is instrumental not only to downplay the romantic idea of individual creativity, but also to underline that language and culture are the only filters through which human beings can make sense of the irrationality of life and nature.

Key Words: Umberto Eco; creativity; structuralism

“Ma neppure io la so, questa maledetta natatione!” (Umberto 1994)

“Impara.” (Umberto 1994)

1. Introduction: Narration and Theorization

The semiotics of Umberto Eco is prolonged by other means in his novels: much has been written on this subject. But the reverse is true too: Umberto Eco's novels are propagated through sibylline ways in his philosophical work. The great

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Italian scholar's prodigious ability to narrate manifests itself well before *The Name of the Rose* and applies mainly to ideas and knowledge. In Eco, the novel dresses with actors, figures, icons, as well as with an ingenious arrangement of places, times, and aspects, a solid narrative structure, heir to the great popular narratives of the 19th century. But it is not only in the novels of Eco that one finds Dumas: it suffice to read one page, sometimes even one sentence of the semiotician's essays to immediately recognize the author therein too. This lightning recognition, to which also the great commercial success of Umberto Eco owes a lot, is sometimes due to the formulation of perspicacious ideas, sometimes to the rhetorical verve expressing them, but it is due, above all, to the narrative fabulation of the author. Perhaps even starting from the dissertation that Umberto Eco wrote, as young philosopher, to obtain his *laurea* from the University of Turin, the academic prose that he deploys depicts a battle of ideas, an abstract struggle whose evolutions and coups de *théâtre* one nevertheless follows as though they were the protagonists of a novel.

In Eco's scholarly prose, that happens not in the rather banal form of academic prosopopoeia, where opposing conceptions and theories confront each other behind the names of great scholars, but through a subtler rhetorical strategy, which might well be defined as "maieutic". The model-reader of *The Name of the Rose* is invited to discover truth behind mystery by following the bold abductions of Guglielmo da Baskerville; similarly, in Eco's essays, the model-reader is encouraged to assume the role of a hero of knowledge, re-grasping it - through a path whose structure is fundamentally narrative - after having been deprived of it, at least in the rhetorical simulation. Eco and his interpreters have often insisted that he would conceive a novel as writing intended to narrate that which could not be academically explained; but here too hides the suspicion of a symmetry that exegetes have often neglected: in Eco, the power of narration does not only manifest itself when explanation fails but also when it triumphs.

In other words, novels merely lead to the ultimate consequences an attitude of thought, composition, and style that dominates the whole prose of the Italian polymath. Does this perhaps mean that narration can go beyond explanation? And in what sense does the academic prose of Umberto Eco exploit this power? Scholars have often referred, to this regard, to the "Postille al Nome della Rosa" (1983), the essay that Eco published in the magazine *Alfabeta* so as to give an account of his narrative imagination and writing and unveil the secrets of its attractiveness as well as global success. In this essay, indeed, the narrator Eco explains himself and partly reveals himself; as always in Eco, however, such revelation is arranged on several layers, the deepest ones being reachable only by those who decode not only the content but also the form of Eco's prose. For those who have read, re-read, and

even memorized the semiotic work of Umberto Eco, an element appears as particularly striking in it: one could call it the alternation between rigor and impertinence. In the "Postille", for example, the author places great emphasis on those ingredients of narration that, reconnected along the main interpretive line of reading, altogether return the image of a writer who is essentially a craftsman, a builder, a calculator, but especially the image of a combinatorial rationality overriding any irrational dynamics of fantasy, such as inspiration, intuition, or genius.

When he explains the origin of the somewhat mysterious title of his most successful novel, Eco repeats what he has argued many times in his academic writings: the novel is a "machine for generating interpretations". Those who read this phrase in Eco's essays will have the impression of dealing with a fundamentally rationalist intellectual posture, which rejects any romantic, idealistic, and sentimental evocation of literature so as to transform it into a fact of language, explicable within a theoretical framework originally being that of Saussurean structuralism. In Eco's semiotics, the expulsion of creative and elusive subjectivity from language - an expulsion which started with Saussure and was theoretically achieved by Louis Trolle Hjelmslev - subtly applies to culture as a whole and rationalizes even the most elusive aspects of it, such as literary invention, for instance.

Umberto Eco dominates the entire Italian intellectual history of the second half of the twentieth century, but this primacy, like all primacies, is strategically constructed through the demolition - all the more effective since it is implicit - of the thought of the one who had dominated Italian culture in the first half of the twentieth century, namely Benedetto Croce. It would be an exaggeration to say that the semiotic ideology of Eco, that is to say, his way of imagining the nature of meaning and language, including literary meaning, is specular to the semiotic ideology of Croce. Whenever Eco quotes Benedetto Croce in his essays, however, for example in the *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975), one is often sure of being at an essential turning point of argumentation, since the semiotician's thought, his academic success, but also his intellectual mission ultimately consists in the project of rebuilding the Italian culture as a whole not by choosing as its pillar the idea - a constant temptation in Italian cultural history - of the force of the spirit, but rather through disaggregating this concept under the blows of a pitiless analysis, showing at every step that essentially sociocultural structures hide behind any proclamation of genius.

This mission is clearly not only theoretical. That Italy which yields to the desire for inspired individuality, hoisting itself above history by its own forces, often coincides with that Italy which abandons itself to the thought of an all-powerful leader, of a man who, endowed, or rather super-endowed with exceptional qualities,

forges his destiny at the same time as the destiny of the “homeland”. Hence stems the urgency, as Umberto Eco himself becomes the object of a generalized attribution of genius (especially after the extraordinary success of *The Name of the Rose*), to dismantle it, or at least to show that this genius too does not derive from a mysterious potion that the author and few chosen ones would have within their reach but that, on the contrary, essentially springs from a perfectly rational play with language and within language.

2. The Title and Meaning

Why did Eco choose the fiery title of *The Name of the Rose*? Perhaps for was he suddenly visited by a mystical vision? Not at all! In the “Postille”, Eco frustrates this idea by trivializing it and especially by rationalizing it: the title came to his mind “almost by chance”; moreover, as the rose is “a symbolical figure so charged with meanings that it hardly has one any longer”, it was perfect to “confound the reader”. But it would be very ingenuous to believe that following this strategy of trivializing the romanticism of literary creation readers would be convinced and, more importantly, disenchanted by it. On the contrary, confronted with the intellectual posture of someone who is believed to be a repository of genius and who, paradoxically, explains to you that this genius is within the reach of everyone, admiration does not diminish at all but increases, for one is before someone who does not only astonish by his word but who, through a meta-word, reveals the public sources of astonishment. Eco does not want to be taken as a magician of prose, he wants to be considered as its prestidigitator: his tricks befuddle you, but never does he let you believe that they are not the fruit of a technique. The veneration that ensues is, thus, doubled: for we admire not only the effect of magic, but also the magic of the effect.

3. Recounting the Process

“Writings of poetics”, Eco says in the “Postille” “have the function of helping to understand how the technical problem of the production of a work resolves itself”; “problem”, “technique”, “production”, “work”: these terms, like the definition of the novel as “machine” that one comes across beforehand in the same essay, and like many other terms and definitions that follow, are as “spoetizzanti” as they

could, an Italian term that has no equals in English but literally means “that takes away the poetry of things”. The novel is a “machine”; its creation a “technical problem of production”: one would say that it is not a writer who speaks here but an engineer. On the one hand, one is tempted to attribute the icy tone of explanation to structuralism; on the other hand, especially when the novel becomes a work that is “produced”, one detects therein a Marxist ideology of culture, thinking of it in terms of “means of production”.

The two currents of thought crisscross in Eco but it would be hasty to attribute his mechanical vision of the novel to either of them. The semiotician continues in the same essay: “The one who writes (or paints or sculpts or composes music) always knows what s/he does and how much that costs him/her. S/he knows that s/he has to solve a problem. The initial data may be obscure, instinctual, obsessive, no more than a whim or a memory. But afterwards, the problem is solved “a tavolino”. Another “spoetizzante” image: solving a problem “a tavolino” evokes, in Italian, the image of an individual or a group of individuals sitting around a “small table”; the closest expression, in English, would be “to decide something on paper”; but “a tavolino” is an even less poetic image; one does not even recognize to it the literary dignity of paper; it is an image of petty bourgeoisie, of a family sitting around furniture without frills in order to make ends meet.

On the one hand, Eco’s attitude is somewhat disturbing: readers want to believe in the myth of the poet’s, the writer’s, the artist’s inspiration; readers wish to imagine that the wind of a higher power uplifts artists to heights that are inaccessible to mortals; but artists too want to believe it: why reduce their creation to an exercise of accounting? It would be like saying to someone who is in love that, in fact, s/he is just prey to hormones. The effect of trivialization is farther bolstered by Eco’s disdain for all that precedes the engineering of literary creation: “the initial data”, “obscure, instinctual, obsessive”. But is it not exactly that which concerns us in literature? It is not exactly about these “obscure, instinctual, obsessive” subjects that we, the humans, have always questioned poetry?

4. Of Course, the Middle Ages

In the “Postille”, Eco does not reveal himself. “I wrote a novel because so I wished”, he writes. “I believe”, he adds, “that this is a sufficient reason to begin to narrate”; “man is a fabulator by nature”, he concludes. But is it really so? Perhaps in the very abstract sense of Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, or in the generative

semiotics of Algirdas J. Greimas, that is, in the sense that man structures the intelligibility of reality through narration, or better, through narrativity. But is man naturally a fabulator in the more specific sense that he or she is naturally inclined to telling stories, as Eco so excellently does in both his novels and essays? Empirical evidence contradicts this hypothesis: most academic essays bore - or, at least, they do not entertain like Eco's essays - exactly because they are completely incapable of producing the three pragmatic effects that the Italian semiotician perfectly mastered: narrating, surprising, and amusing. Several of the great philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, on the other hand, reached a considerable public through producing quite an abstract discourse, which was neither narrative, nor theatrical, nor jesting. No, when Eco explains the origin of his novel by saying that "man is fabulator by nature", he once again plays hide-and-seek, trying to divert the attention of the reader of the "Postille" from the only empirically acceptable position: it is Eco who is a fabulator by nature, but he does not want to explain why.

Afterwards he adds: "I began writing in March '78, moved by a seminal idea; I wanted to poison a monk"; that is a masterpiece reply for, instead of providing elements to explain the genesis of the novel in relation to the psychological biography of the author ("I began writing after my father's death; after I decided to abandon the Catholic faith; after a great disappointment in love; etc.), it explains it in relation to the central narrative core of the novel, namely, it does not explain it at all. What does it mean to write a long novel because one wants to "poison a monk"? Psychoanalysts could amuse themselves in the attempt at deciphering this confession, but the semiotician's job is different: it consists in pointing out that, when Eco writes an essay intended to reveal certain aspects of the writing of *The Name of the Rose*, he ends up narrating without narrating himself, composing, thus, a meta-romance having for object the writing of the novel itself.

What stems from it is a sort of fractal structure where, for example, Eco reveals, shortly after, that he found a notebook dated 1975 where he had "drawn up a list of monks in an imprecise monastery"; which merely reproduces, in the discourse of the "Postille", the same stratagem - that of the mention of a recovered manuscript - that opens *The Name of the Rose*, as well as other historical novels. Those who believe in this revelation do not realize that Eco is turning it into a new entertainment, the aim of which is, once again, to divert the reader's attention away from the idea of inspiration, to build an imaginary source - albeit a sort of self-source - for literary creation, and to leave readers alone, again, with their inferences. Eco found a list of monks drawn up in 1975; but why did he set it up in the first instance? What prompted him to do so? To the abovementioned revelation Eco adds "nothing else". The strength of reticence consists in creating narrative tension

- the same that the author masterfully distills in the story of *The Name of the Rose* - through the construction of secret. The thrill that a secret causes us - rhetoricians know it well - does not depend on the nature of what is hidden but on the nature of that by which it is hidden. If Eco had told us: the monk represents for me the religious education which, as a child, I received from my father; by killing him, I symbolically killed my father; that would be a revelation of something secret but it would be a kitsch revelation, almost a ridiculous one; on the contrary, Eco tells us of an imprecise manuscript, he adds this “nulla d’altro”, “nothing else”, he trivializes, thus, the psychological aetiology of his novel, but in so doing he constructs a meta-secret (a secret about the genesis of a novel dealing with a secret), which further nourishes the reader’s curiosity. Where did he really get the idea of *The Name of the Rose* from? One is, therefore, almost forced to continue reading the “Postille” so as to find it out.

By denying the role of inspiration on the one hand, and by concealing the source of this inspiration on the other, Eco sometimes gives even the impression that his novel wrote itself, that he merely lent his (prodigious) combinatorial capacity to a narrative that was already present in the narrative grammar of culture. Sometimes, this technique of fabulation on fabulation is so obvious that it even appears as somewhat ornamental, for example when Eco tells, always in the continuation of the “Postille”, that he had sought the advice of a biologist friend about a poison in all similar to that of *The Name of the Rose*, and that he, Eco, had then destroyed the reply letter of the biologist because he, the semiotician, feared that this document “could be read in another context”. That is pure fabulation. A novelist has no need for this kind of advice, for the readers of the novel do not need it: when the novel tells them that there is a substance X that kills in the way Y, they believe it.

On the contrary, this narrative on the narrative contributes to creating the public mythology of the author Eco, about whom we begin to imagine that, during the gestation of his novels, he corresponds with all sorts of scholars in order to verify the details of his stories. That is perhaps true (although probably less and less as regards Eco’s novels that were written after the invention of the Internet), but, again, that tells us nothing about the origin of the novel as expression of subjectivity. We have the text on the one hand, a combinatorial expression of the possibilities offered by a very complex system of signs, and the myth of the author on the other. Eco knew very well that the contemporary writer must not only narrate but to also self-narrate, stage himself/herself as a writer, a trend that seduces the masses and that, with the explosion of social networks, becomes almost grotesque: several young contemporary writers spend less time writing than caring for their image in social networks, posting all the photos of all the readers who read their books, for

example.

The place Eco leaves empty in the middle between an impersonal text and the media simulacrum of the writer is that of the personality of the author, of his sensitivity, of his fears and sorrows, of the intimate and, therefore, ultimate sources of his need for narration. In an admirable illusion, Eco proposes to us the effects as causes, and therefore he continues to conceal the causes of narration by creating around them a surreptitious aureole of mystery; it is evident that drawing up a list of monks, wanting to poison one of them, and searching for the perfect poison to do so, are not the cause of narration but the effects of its desire. It is as causes, however, that Eco presents them to us.

Similarly, when he questions and answers himself about the reasons that have pushed him to choose the Middle Ages, Eco does not unveil himself: he lets us know that, so as to write his novel, he drew from archives that he had accumulated for his academic works, but he does not deal with the essential question: why the Middle Ages? What is, in such epoch, that triggered the mind of the writer and his narrative imagination? Again, nothing is revealed to us about this subject. Eco even narrates quite a personal episode: his wife would reproach him not to know how to look at the sparkles emanating from a campfire, sparkles that appeared, afterwards, in *The Name of the Rose*; but Eco's conclusion is that "he knew how to look at sparkles with the eyes of a medieval man"; here too, in the evocation of the intimacy of the couple, Eco the man disappears and reappears only as impersonal, almost priestly memory and writing of knowledge.

5. The Mask

It is quite significant that, in the *Postille*, the only personal feeling that Eco confesses is shame: "I was ashamed to narrate", a statement that is somehow at odds with that in which Eco would tell us that "man is fabulator by nature". In fact, here too, the man-writer hides behind the writer-druid of culture: it is not Eco who speaks but the medieval chroniclers or, even better, it is the intertextual network that speaks, in a way that, once again, limits the personal intervention of the author to a choice of paths among the possibilities offered by the system.

6. The Novel as Cosmological Fact

This combinatorial conception of imagination powerfully comes back when Eco

explains his technique for the construction of that which he calls the “cosmology” of his novels; it essentially consists in the perfect mastery of *scripts*, of the narrative scenarios of a culture, in a way that appears almost robotic in its binary logic: what happens to a fisherman along the river? Either the fish take the bait, or they don’t. Eco lets us believe that his writing is a kind of calculus, a choice among the narrative possibilities of a system, a sort of textual pachinko where, once the first point of insertion of the marble is chosen, it is the system that determines its path. All that, in a novel, does not follow this mechanism is, according to Eco, poetry, in which “*verba tene, res sequentur*” [posit the words, things ensue]. Should one deduce that Eco’s prose, in its extreme fidelity to the laws of resemblance according to which a culture imagines and structures its possible worlds, entails no truthful invention but only combination, and therefore entails no “poetry”, meant as the capacity of not only discovering the possibilities of the real in words, but also of creating these possibilities through words?

“One must create restrictions to oneself in order to be able to freely invent”, that is the mantra that Eco continuously repeats in the “Postille” as well as in his academic writings on narration, adhering, thus, to a somewhat regimented conception of imagination. Why these constrictions? Are they meant to attribute the dignity of likelihood to a historical novel? But why bothering with the construction of this perfect cosmos, of this toy in all similar to the most sophisticated dolly houses, if it is not inhabited by that likelihood that most matters to humanity, namely, that of emotions, the likelihood that one finds in the almost empty scenographies of the Greek tragedy, or even in the detailed scenographies--detailed to the point of being suffocating-- of the great Russian novels, where one, though, finds oneself not only in the middle of a perfectly furnished possible world but also in the middle of a perfectly furnished heart?

The “Postille” are not to be believed. For instance, when Eco tells us that, in *The Name of the Rose*, he situates the events at the end of November for the plot of the story required him to kill a pork, and porks are usually killed with the cold (“I sought advice about it”, Eco wittily writes): that has strictly no relevance for the reader. Most readers of Eco have probably never seen a pork, let alone would they be puzzled in reading that, in the novel, the author has a pork killed in October (which is quite cold, by the way, in several regions of Europe). The necessity of motivating these narrative details a posteriori resides elsewhere: it must foster the myth of the writer as architect of a possible world, but it must above all transmit the idea that this world is not invented but found, retrieved from culture rather than created into it; why? Because that also contributes to distance and mystify the personality of the author, who admits that he wrote what he wrote moved by necessity, not

by desire.

After all, this occultation of the marks of the author's subjectivity, this insistence on the necessity that narrative possible worlds follow the constrictions dictated by cultural memory is nothing but an exercise of motivation: I haven't written a novel; the novel let itself be written by me. On the one hand, this attitude frees the writer from responsibility for his/her choices: that which s/he wrote, s/he wrote it in order to abide by the laws of narrative invention (beginning from a kick off whose nature is carefully concealed); on the other hand, this attitude hoists the writer from the status of subjective creator to that of depositary of a mysterious connection with the "natural laws of imagination". In compliance with this rhetoric, Eco announces, always in the "Postille", that "when I put Jorge in the library I didn't know yet that he was the assassin. So as to speak, he did all by himself". That is one of the most persistent myths, almost a stereotype, in the "legends of writers": as artists' legends tell us of sculptors, including Michelangelo, affirming that they would not invent forms but actually free them from matter, so the legends that writers narrate about themselves swear on the freedom of characters, on the independence of their movements and decisions, and on the fact that, after setting an initial scaffolding, the novel "writes itself".

7. Who Speaks

That is, evidently, an illusion, or a rhetoric. No form hides in the marble, as no character of a novel says or does anything if his/her words and actions are not determined by the more or less deliberate decisions of the author. Why then this necessity of necessity, this denegation of the role of the empirical author, of his life, tastes, distastes, of his character, in the enactment of the novel? Eco himself admits having eliminated a page of his novel where Guglielmo da Baskerville would pray in a moment of emotion, for this page would move Eco himself and would not harmonize with the personality of the character. Should one conclude that Eco's novels are cerebral, cold, emotionless, a sort of machine for narrative calculus wherein the author both extols his demiurgic role and hides his humanity, concealing himself in it as narrative voice but above all as empirical author, as subject with a story and a tragedy, like every other human being? Narrating, Eco affirms, is "thinking with one's fingers": the idea of a text that partially writes itself, following the rhythm of the writer's first impulsion, powerfully returns. And what returns with it, at the same time, is the idea of a space of isolation between two steps of narration, the

first, in which, for instance, Eco decides to narrate Adso's only sexual experience by means of references to mystical and spiritual religious texts that adopt the erotic embrace as metaphor; the second, in which the author, again, disappears behind this narrative device and follows its rhythm without personal engagement. "[I had] no emotion", Eco writes, when he had to narrate the story of Adso making love in the kitchens of the monastery, "as if I had decided to narrate a love story by playing a drum".

8. Conclusion: A Rose without Thorns

That is explicitly said in the "Postille": Eco draws pleasure from interposing layers, screens as he calls them, between his own subject of empirical author and the voice that readers can retrieve in *The Name of the Rose*, distilled through an articulation of several levels (Eco who enunciates Mabillon who enunciates Vallet who enunciates Adso who enunciates Guglielmo). Is Eco working for the "death of the author", proclaimed and planned by most twentieth-century avant-gardes? The insertion of all these filters of enunciation in the prose of the novel deploys a synergy with the meticulous arrangement of a space and a time of narration: in the three directions (actors, place, period) the author shows himself as obliged to respect a self-given structure, or at least a structure that he has chosen to adopt starting from formulae deposited in culture and its discursive genres. The resulting psychological effect is, however, not one of impotence but, on the contrary, a demiurgic effect: the empirical author, hidden behind this structure, gives the kick off of the grand machine of narration, which subsequently runs by itself, in a mechanism that inheres in fatality.

In Eco, however, the ambition of the demiurge, which is evident in the whole of his production, is sweetened by an essentially protective function: the text, conceived as combinatorial machine, must above all protect the empirical author from himself, constitute the sheath enabling him to "escape personal emotion", an escape that is the way in which Eco, following Joyce and Eliot, conceives of art. In one of the very rare personal confessions of the "Postille", the great Italian scholar states it clearly: Adso, with his "adolescent tremors", is Eco himself; his story is the story of someone who only lives life through the interface of culture; it is the story of Eco. But isn't that perhaps the noblest and most durable moral teaching of *The Name of the Rose*, mainly the painful but necessary conviction that the only way to tolerate life and its disquietudes is to transform it into a different possible world, where life

eludes the chaos that characterizes it and is cased in an orderly structure of places, times, actors, and actions? Isn't exactly that which *The Name of the Rose* offers to us in the end, the sentiment that the only rose without thorns is precisely that which is transfigured into a name, in the only garden that we could possibly inhabit, that of language?

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