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The Echo of Eco

in *The Name of the Rose* (1980)

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All literature is written out of and into the society where it has its offspring, no matter how hermetic, autonomous and fantastic it claims to be. Novels may be located in the past or the future, in a fairy world or a utopian society. Under all circumstances they bear witness of the temporal ethnic, national, social, cultural etc. contexts they are written in, one way or the other. They always have relations to society, even though their relations may be very complex. In fiction the social reality and the historical events are always interpreted, transformed, construed etc. according to certain procedures of artistic and aesthetic kind, i.e. narrative, structural, symbolic, metaphoric, stylistic, and cognitive devices. This is abundantly the case in *The Name of the Rose*.¹

Eco has several intentions built into his novel. He wants to challenge and revise the usual ideas of the Middle Ages as a cultural monolithic unity. He uses his semiotic approach first to suggest, and then to deconstruct religious explanations, *in casu* with the starting point from the Apocalypse. Instead he proposes a (post)modern model to give an adequate understanding of society today. At the same time he states the hermeneutic situation of the historians: they are left with only fragments of the past. He gives a fictional explanation of the disappearance of Aristotle's book on the comedy and defends laughter's open liberation potential (William) in contrast to seriousness and control (Jorge). He gives the Bachtinian bodily grotesque figure the name Salvatore (savior). He plays an intertextual game with Jorge Luis Borges (fictionalized in the shape of the blind librarian Jorge from Burgos) and others. And finally his anti-authoritarian critique of the power elite in Avignon anno 1327 reminds of Rome anno 1980 – and in fact today.

In historical novels various time levels are significant:

- 1) time of fictional *plot*, i.e. a) time of *action*, b) time of *narration* (often later)
- 2) time of a) factual *writing* and b) *publication* (normally a little later)
- 3) time of factual *reading*, moveable in time

The plot in historical novels is placed back in time, for Eco in *The Name of the Rose* several centuries back. The primary time of the *plot* (action) is fixed to seven days late November 1327. Eco gives detailed arguments for this specific choice, for example that Michele de Cesena visited Avignon during that

period, and he was necessary as an opponent to the inquisitor Bernard Gui. At a larger scale this was approximately a thousand years after Emperor Constantine's tolerance edict, the Council in Nicea (325) and the Christendom's *de facto* status as state religion in the Roman Empire. During the 1320s the ideas of the Apocalypse and the Millenarianism were prominent and this gives a good background for Adso's organization of his narrative according to the pattern of the seven days of The Last Judgment, even if his *narration* takes place at the end of the century. Most of the time the point of view lies by the young Adso during the events but sometimes the old Adso who steps forward at the end inserts his comments underway.

The other important time level is that of the author's *writing* in the late 1970s and the *publication* of his book in 1980. The historical novel is first of all oriented towards the time it is written in, even it is indirectly. Eco chose The Middle Ages as his projective space because this period gave him opportunities to express important ideas and opinions on his own time in various ways. Theresa Coletti asks the question: "Why are representations on the Middle Ages so well suited to Eco's postmodern project for the historical novel?" and she moves on to give the answer that the temporal distance "(...) underscores the already shaky possibilities for historical knowledge emphasized in postmodern historical fiction." and she points to the similarities between medieval and postmodern language and sign theories.

The third important level is the time of *reading*. Even if the reader anno 2011 is approximately contemporary with the author some conditions of social, political, and epistemological sort have changed. The apocalyptic threat from the Cold War and the Nuclear Bomb is not the same as it was in 1980. The *brigata rosse* that were active during the 1970s are completely erased. On the other hand the instable political situation in Italy is fundamentally the same. On a more general level some new features have been added to the postmodern epistemology even if the basics are the same. This means that the later readers' background will inevitably lead to other readings and interpretations.

In his short story "Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote" Borges claims that Menard's fragment of "Quixote" which is no new "Quixote" but word for word, line for line identical with Cervantes' is much more subtle than its predecessor. More than three hundred years have passed with multiple complicated events and this means that new readings will produce richer interpretations. The context of the reading is important for the understanding of

the text. Eco shares this *reader response* theory that he has elaborated in his *Role of the Reader*.

The multiplicity of the reader's possible interpretations is characteristic for the postmodern novel. Already in 1961 Eco wrote his *Opera aperta* (Open work) in order to liberate the literary works from the attempt to restrain the many possible interpretations to one single, unified, total, exclusive, and exhaustive interpretation. In 1991 he felt compelled to publish *Limits of Interpretation* to avoid arbitrary use of texts in contrast to *interpretations* that had to be based on the text itself and its manifold and unlimited signals. He argued in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992) that interpretations that were contrary to the content, the information, and the signals, which were given by the text, should be excluded.

Borges emphasizes that Menard has enriched the art of reading by means of his archaic and deliberate anachronistic technique even if his project not to mime but to *be* Cervantes is impossible *a priori*. The historical comprehension is subject to the circumstances that Georg Lukács labels *necessary anachronism* in his book on *The Historical Novel*. Nobody can break away from his own time in order to live totally and completely as people did in another time. Everyone is bound to the horizon of his or her own time and the mentalities of that time. Understood in this context Eco's novel is characterized by possible ideas from the end of the 20th century.

Eco has done a lot of work in order to find characters that could express what he wanted to tell his own time. William of Baskerville incorporates features from William Ockham's nominalism, Roger Bacon's empiricism, Marsilius of Padua's tolerance and Alain of Lille's semiotics. He is the closest Eco can come in The Middle Ages to a tolerant humanist etc. He must be placed within the limits of The Catholic Church at the ultimate margin as a gradualist Franciscan. All these modern features collected in one person were hardly possible in the 1320s. Likewise it seems unlikely that a Franciscan friar would get access to a Benedictine monastery at that time.

In his *Postscript* Eco claims that his novel is composed and pieced together by means of quotations and points of view from medieval authors and their texts - and that is right very far. But there is much more at stake in the novel. Eco has inserted several puns and allusions to later authors with his technique of *conscious anachronism*. William of Baskerville refers to Sherlock Holmes and his first short story *Baskerville's Hound*. The blind librarian Jorge

from Burgos inevitable leads the reader to Jorge Luis Borges. One of the manuscripts in the library is attributed to a magister Alcofribae which is an allusion to Francois Rabelais who published his two novels *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* under the pseudonym Alcofribas Nasier, an anagram for Francois Rabelais. There several other direct or indirect references to authors and books, ideas and mentalities of persons from later periods.

In his research William follows the strategy of *abduction*. On the basis of empirical observations William is able to give an exact description of the abbot's horse, Brunellus, in the beginning of the novel, even if his conclusion is based on (qualified) guesses. According to the deductive method absolute truth can be achieved through *deduction*, i.e. logical reasoning from given premises, for instance from the Revelation. In opposition to this method *induction* requires empirical investigations in order to establish a generally valid rule from a certain amount of examples that by means of generalization. Eco adheres to Pierce's epistemological theory of *abduction*, according to which comprehension can never be absolute. Knowledge is relative and dynamic and subject to uncertainty and indeterminacy. William tries to recognize a pattern in the way the homicides are committed in the abbey. Most scholars claim that he uses the means of abduction but I tend towards the opinion that his failure in his investigations is due to his deductive way of reasoning from the Apocalypse.

Eco wrote his novel not in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit but in the name of the Rose. In his *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (1983) Eco argues that a title should confuse the reader rather than bring order and in fact *The Name of the Rose* opens up for multiple interpretations. The last sentence that is equipped with extraordinary signal value may give access to one of the interpretations: "stat rosa pristina nomine, nomine nuda tenemos" (Instead of the former rose the name is left, we only have the naked name). The semiotic sign remains even the thing itself has disappeared.

Eco has taken his title from Bernardo Moliacence's *De contemptu mundi* (Contempt for the World, 11th century) where he is dealing with the World's and everything's timeliness and transitoriness. Moliacence – and Eco - focuses on the importance of *time* and the consequences of time passing by: decay, disillusion and death. The old Adso reflects on the *ubi sunt* (where are) theme when he writes: "Est ubi gloria nunc Babyloniae?" (Where is now the glory of Babylon) and "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" with an allusion to

the last verse in the first stanza of Francois Villon's poem "Ballade des dames du temps jadis" from *Le Grand Testament* (late 15th century).

Eco also refers to Pierre Abelard's expression "nulla rosa est" (there is no rose) in order to signify that a sentence may refer to something non-existing or to something that has existed but does not exist any longer (Abelard, Eco 1984). Surprisingly Eco does not touch explicitly upon the problem of *representation* in his postscript, even if that would be obvious for a semiotic like Eco. The surrealist René Magritte dealt with the topic in his painting *La Trahison des images* (The Treachery of Images, 1929) where he shows a pipe with the sentence underneath: "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is not a pipe). His point is that it is definitely not a pipe but an *image* of a pipe. When Magritte was asked about his the meaning of his painting he answered ironical: "Of course it is not a pipe, just try to fill it with tobacco"

Eco underscores the multiplicity of possible interpretations. He gives some indications in his *Postscript*: the rose is a mysterious symbol, signifying the short intense life; it points to the Rose Wars, the rose as a Christian symbol etc. In this passage Eco has changed the quotation "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" from Gertrude Stein's poem "Sacred Emily" (1913) to "una rosa è una rosa è una rosa è una rosa" (a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose). It changes the meaning significantly to substitute the girl's name "Rose" with the flower's name "rose" even if both are concerned with the question of identity.

Most of Eco's indications are rather vague but in the novel itself some clues are given. Adso falls in love with a girl from the village below the abbey. In the novel she is characterized just a nameless (!) girl. In the Danish version she is introduced in this way: "Pigen navnløs måske rosen" (The girl nameless maybe the rose). The Danish translation implies an interpretation but absolutely an interpretation in accordance with the text and the paratext. Her name might even be Rose and this is why the original quotation from Gertrude Stein is interesting and meaningful.

Exactly in the middle of the book Adso kisses the girl and makes love to her for the first, last and only time in his life. Immediately after the act of love Adso falls asleep and when he wakes up she has disappeared. In other words: only the name of the rose (Rose?) is left – if she is the rose. Adso's description of the girl draws heavily on *The Song of Solomon* from the Old Testament. She scents of "a rosy perfume" that breathed from her lips. During his erotic experience Adso sees a brilliant light that resembles the overwhelming light

Dante sees in the *Divina Commedia* but in contrast to Dante's mysterious religious insight in Heaven Adso's ecstatic experience has its offspring not in love to God but in corporal love to the girl.

Shortly after his initial and final sexual experience Adso regains his temper and the image of the rose is interpreted in a more traditional religious context: "the humblest rose becomes a gloss of our terrestrial progress". In medieval and later iconography the rose may be a symbol of chastity and platonic love but it may also be the opposite: a plain symbol of the female genitals. This last interpretation will not be in accordance with the narrator Adso's character but it is an obvious connotation within the universe of the novel. All these connotations and many more are at stake in the novel.

The title is the first part of the paratext and essential for Eco's attempt to guide his reader into the direction he wants. The next step is his ironic document fiction: "*Naturally*, a manuscript" (my italics). There are multiple layers of manuscripts: 1) Adso's original manuscript from the late 14th century many years after the events he relates and shortly after his return to the abbey in order to collect remaining fragments of parchments, 2) Mabillon's later Latin version from the 17th century, 3) Vallet's translation into French in the 18th century, and finally 4) the Italian version published by a fictive publisher at the end of the 20th century – not to mistake for the factual author Umberto Eco. This sort of document fiction normally serves to give a novel its authentic stamp and this is also the case here. At least at the surface. On the other hand the many layers tend to make the knowledge of the events insecure and unstable in the shape they are served for the reader. They do not receive the narrative from a first hand's contemporary eye witness (Adso), as the historical source critique demands, but handed down through four instances on a distance of more than six centuries. These conditions contribute to give the novel its postmodern character.

In his article "Dreaming the Middle Ages" from the mid 1980s Eco displays ten Middle Ages. From his point of view The Middle Ages have been (mis)understood and (mis)used for several problematic actual purposes by various novelists, philosophers etc. in the 20th century. He does not explicitly mention the maybe most common idea today that The Middle Ages first of all were characterized by a *culture of unity*. This point of view was held by Christian patristicians, theologians, and philosophers in The Middle Ages – and modern scholars who restrict themselves to ecclesiastic sources.

The world was believed to reflect the Gods ideal plan and this meant that the world was conceived as a well ordered cosmos, characterized by clarity, harmony, proportion, unity, and totality. The ultimate aim of literature and art was to express these ideas in beautiful aesthetic forms and in this way to reflect the divine cosmos. In his dissertation on *Thomas Aquinas' Aesthetics* (1954) Eco has given a detailed description of Thomas Aquinas' cosmological notions and his interpretation of the world on four levels: the literal level, the analogous level where events etc. refer to biblical parallels, the exemplary level with its moral guidance and the anagogic level that simply reveals God. As many of his contemporaries Thomas was very much concerned with the idea of collecting all accessible knowledge about the world in a *summa*, in *casu* his *Summa Theologica* from the 1270s.

In the cosmological *mappae mundi* (world maps) from the same period Jerusalem (Christ's tomb) is placed exactly in the middle of the world and the earthly Paradise to the East which is normally placed at the top of the maps, eventually with Christ presiding over the world, as it is the case at the *Psalter Map*. In the *Ebsdorf mappa mundi* Christ's body is incorporated as a prototype of the world with his head at the top, the arms at each side and the feet at the bottom of the world map. Jerusalem often is conceived as the *umbilicus mundi*, the navel of the world. In accordance with these cosmological ideas Eco in *The Name of the Rose* places the church exactly in the middle of the abbey.

Eco himself has stated that his work with the Thomas Aquinas' theology led him away from the medieval religious point of view on the *encyclopedia*. Patrizia Violi identifies four types of encyclopedias in Eco's work: 1) the global encyclopedia, 2) encyclopedia as situated knowledge, 3) encyclopedic competence and 4) semantic competence. In this context the two first types are most relevant. The medieval encyclopedia is global and it contains the knowledge of the world which is universal, all-comprising, coherent, void of contradictions and exhaustive. In the same way the *summae* and the *mappae mundi* display the world *in toto* from Creation to the Last Judgment, i.e. everywhere at all times. On the maps Asia covers the Eastern half, Africa a quarter to the South West and Europe a quarter to the North West.

This model of the world is challenged in various ways. In the margins of the *mappae mundi*, i.e. in the periphery of the world, the monstrous races live: centaurs, blemmyas, harpys, cyclopes, amazones, sciapods etc. Eco draws heavily on these ideas, especially in *Baudolino* where the protagonist and his

followers arrive at the Eastern verge of the world where most of the monsters are located. In *The Name of the Rose* the grotesque creatures are placed in the corners of the tympanon over the entrance to the church in the abbey. The tympanon gives a total image of the world with Christ on his throne as the Judge at the Last Judgment surrounded by the four evangelists (their symbols angel, eagle, oxen and lion). This part of the tympanon is characterized by harmony and proportion, diversity in uniformity and uniformity in diversity, everything united in a heavenly totality. But beside this cosmos there are several elements of a chaotic counterculture : demons and devils and grotesque figures like cynocephals, fauns, sirens, hermaphrodites, gorgons etc.

The marginalia of the manuscripts have a similar status. The dominating official ecclesiastic culture occupies the central text in the manuscripts of the abbey but the young monk Adelmo produces drawings in the margins that express a *mundus inversus*. He draws *adynatons*, i.e. drawings of an opposite world with dogs fleeing from hares, fallow deer chasing lions, chars pulling oxen, and small heads on bird's legs, flying deer etc., some of them drawn in succession of artificially made initial letters in the manuscripts. Some of Adelmo's drawings show elements taken from the idea of the Land of Cockaigne where the roasted chicken fly into the mouth and the rivers swell with fish that throw themselves upon the frying pan. In The Middle Ages the idea of a Land of Cockaigne express ordinary people's dreams of plenty of food and drink, no work, free sexuality and eternal life in a land where sausages grow on the trees, houses are made of pies and the roofs covered with pancakes.

In *The Name of the Rose* Salvatore has this sort of dreams. He is out of a very poor family and he incarnates the grotesque with his distorted body and his macaronic language. He is very much like the figures at the tympanon and his position in society has always been extremely marginal. In accordance with the prevalent ideas during The Middle Ages Adso estimates that he must be possessed by the devil. He exerts magic and adheres to the heretic Dolcino and his rebellious ideas and he is brought before the inquisition, tortured and questioned by the inquisitor Bernard Gui.

As Brian McHale shows how Salvatore reflects the multilingualism of the world in the wake of Pantagruel's follower, Panurge, who speaks "all languages and no language". Salvatore's Latin is garbled and mixed with vernacular language and sometimes unarticulated and hardly understandable. His ideas are heterogeneous like Menocchio's in *The Cheese and the Worms*. In

a way he expresses the postmodern polyphonic mentality. He is not called Salvatore, savior, by accident. He is the ultimate counter image to Christ, the savior.

The plot structure of the novel is in many ways traditional modernist. The plot is structured according to the crime genre. The protagonist investigates a homicide but before he is able to unravel the riddle the next murder is committed and so on during six days. William is unquestionably the ultimate hero and the mentor of the novice Adso. He is contrasted by the ultimate rogues, Jorge from Burgos, and the inquisitor Bernard Gui. William's investigations lead to the solution of the crimes, more by accident than through his observations and consecutive conclusions. The crimes are not committed by one murderer with one motive. There are various murderers and the causes differ from one murder to the other. The deductive method William uses in the beginning where the pattern seems to follow the Apocalypse shipwrecks and so does the abductive method at the end. He literally stumbles into the hidden room in the library with Adso's unknowing help.

The final confrontation between William and Jorge is the culmination on the curve of suspense. William discovers that the most important book in Jorge's *Index Librorum* (parallel to that of the Catholic Church) is the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* on the comedy. The confrontation discloses two opposite views and value systems. Jorge is reactionary. He does not want change and he endeavors to protect the purity of Christianity by all means. William on the other side defends tolerance, openness and access to all sort of knowledge, including Aristotle.

The discussions in the library focus on the role of laughter. Jorge sees laughter as a distortion of the face and thus a deviation from God's ideal plan for humanity. Jorge's point of view is in accordance with many philosophers in the middle Ages who take the open mouth and especially the tongue to be obscene. He defends seriousness and claims that laughter degrades man to the level of the monkey with its grimaces. William on the other side argues that man is the only creature who is able to laugh and this makes laughter to an indispensable part of man's identity.

William apparently succeeds. He solves the crime riddle. He disguises the ultimate guilty and his motives. He finds the book which Jorge has equipped with poison at the leaves. And he discloses the content of the second book of the *Poetics*. The poetic justice is accomplished as the rogue gets his punishment

dying in the flames. On the other hand Jorge is able to destroy all the books he wants to keep in secrecy together with the largest library in humanity.

The plot structure follows the schema of the crime but the logical deductive way of solving the mysteries is rejected. Instead a postmodern abjective, i.e. relative and insecure access to knowledge is introduced. With that in mind it seems really ironic that Jorge imitates the pattern of the Apocalypse when he stuffs the poisoned pages of Aristotle's volume 2 into his mouth. The library symbolizes the world – as it does in Borges' short story "The Library in Babel" and when the library burns it likewise alludes to the fire of the world at the Last Judgment.

As the most extensive library in Christianity the abbey's library is encyclopedic and when it burns we may interpret it as an expression of the destruction of the medieval idea of the encyclopedia. When Adso returns to the ruins of the abbey many years later he only sees fragments of parchments and his knowledge must inevitably be restricted to the partial and insecure information he can get from the scattered and accidental remains. These are the conditions for the historians and everybody who endeavors to gain valid knowledge of historical events. Instead of a medieval encyclopedia Eco advocates a postmodern version of encyclopedia.

Immediately before leaving the abbey for ever William hands his glasses over to Adso as a final present. This makes Adso capable finally to see and think what William has seen and thought. And we may say that William's glasses are likewise offered to the vigilant reader.

Note

¹ Umberto Eco: *Il nome della rosa*, Bompiani, Milano 1980/1989, XXV. edizione con Postille a "Il nome della Rosa" 1983. English translation *The Name of the Rose*, Secker & Warburg, London 1983. Danish translation *Rosens navn*, Gyldendal, København 1984. It is remarkable that the Italian version contains a map of the abbey in the beginning and the end of the book, whereas the English version has no map and the Danish version a map only at the end. All three versions have a Foreword, a Note and a Prologue. In addition to this the Danish translation has a list of the most important persons in the book after the note. The Danish version is also equipped with translations of the most important Latin phrases and quotations and with explanations of unfamiliar words. The Italian and the Danish versions have indexes but that is lacking in the English version.