

Reality and the Historical Narrative in Umberto Eco's the Name of the Rose

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Abstract

Eco's first novel *The Name of the Rose*, primarily deals with the relationship between historical narrative and historical reality. Eco's endeavours as a fiction writer have demonstrated an abiding affinity towards the opportunities provided by the historical fiction, for representation. Eco's works engage fundamentally with the challenges and problems of writing history. The medieval setting in the novel signifies a mode of interpretation and attitude towards experience that are both historically specific and transhistorically central to the dialogic relationship between past and present. The novel stresses on the important roles played by representation and interpretation in shaping our knowledge of the past. One of the major themes of *The Name of the Rose* is the reliability/unreliability of historical sources. Being a metafiction, the novel is willfully aware of its own limitations as a fictional narrative. By drawing attention to its own unreliability, the novel emphasizes on the unreliability of historical sources.

KEYWORDS: history, representation, reality, narrative, medievalism.

In the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act II, Scene II, Line 47-48), Juliet says, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet". (Shakespeare 16) This oft quoted romantic line from Shakespeare is deeply ironic. Because, in the end, it is their family names that lead to the tragic deaths of Romeo and Juliet. So, names are everything. Eco makes use of this idea while selecting the title for his first novel *The Name of the Rose*, which primarily deals with the relationship between historical narrative and historical reality.

According to Eco, the rose is beautiful not because it confirms to some pattern that one has previously imagined, but because one abstracts from its physical form a mental image that one can contemplate and value. Similarly, there is no such thing as 'dead reality'. One can see the remains of the past only through the lens of the associations they evoke. Past is only a construct that is assembled from the mass of ideas and thoughts they call into mind. One encounters past primarily through texts.

The Name of the Rose is a riveting account of a series of murders at a mysterious monastery during the papacy of John XXII, amidst the tensions of the Franciscan Spiritualist controversy, thus providing an excellent understanding of the cultural, philosophical and theological milieu of the fourteenth century Europe. In the novel, Eco tests fiction's capacity to communicate factual knowledge effectively. The novel which is as complicated as the medieval period itself, presents a daunting challenge to the readers. The novel integrates the issues central to the study of the Middle Ages into an engaging novelistic frame.

Eco's endeavours as a fiction writer have demonstrated an abiding affinity towards the opportunities provided by the historical fiction, for representation. Eco's works engage fundamentally with the challenges and problems of writing history. Eco's long study of the Middle Ages prior to writing *The Name of the Rose* may have rendered inevitable his decision to give that novel a medieval setting. The medieval setting in the novel signifies a mode of interpretation and attitude towards experience that are both historically specific and transhistorically central to the dialogic relationship between past and present.

The Name of the Rose does not allow the reader to lose himself in a historical narrative. He is made aware of the fact that he is reading a construction of history, through the inherent contradictions and apparent anachronisms of the novel. The reader is not expected to suspend his disbelief. "The reader is bound to be reminded repeatedly of the inescapable anachronism of a whodunit set in the Middle Ages." (Richter 263) William of Baskerville is an essentially modern detective who is placed in a medieval setting that is as authentic as possible.

In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco demonstrates that a fictional narrative can communicate complex ideas and cognitive structures as effectively as any theoretical discourse of the academy. Eco has said in the cover of the novel's first edition, "those things about which we cannot theorize, we must narrate" (Stephens 8).

The novel revises historical understanding that often constructs a binary relationship between the medieval and the modern, inflating the former with negativity. It recuperates the medieval as a historical category that is inseparable from its relationship to concepts of modernity and postmodernity. This undermines the conventional linear conceptions of history and historical periodization. The novel is in the form of the memoir of a medieval monk whose observations have been passed through and translated by a line of scholars.

Blending contemporary and medieval sources, the novel creates a multivalent space that is extremely rich for analysis. A critique of the novel fundamentally raises questions relating to translation and anachronism, as the reader navigates the meeting of the contemporary and the medieval in a composite script. The novel is full of fragments of borrowed quotations, citations and paraphrasing. The self-awareness and artificiality of the text unsettles the interpreter's preface which, on the surface level, seeks to authenticate the narrative. Overtly, the novel is concerned with the tracking and confrontation of a murderer and covertly, in expressing the reader's interaction with the text.

The novel stresses on the important roles played by representation and interpretation in shaping our knowledge of the past. The historian is a detective who makes use of textual evidences to interpret and reconstruct the past. The past represented by him is limited by so many factors that it remains partial and incomplete. Sometimes, representation/interpretation dominates reality as in the case of William, the detective. He is more of a culprit than Jorge in instigating the destruction of the library that symbolizes knowledge. Through him, Eco sends a warning against the intellectual sin of over interpretation.

William's interpretation dominates his reality. The apocalyptic pattern that he discerns in the murders misleads his investigation and his understanding of the events around him. In the end, he comes to understand that he has been wasting his time on a wild goose chase, identifying the murderer only by chance. The danger lies in the fact that Jorge picks up the idea of the apocalyptic pattern only after William hints at it. Thus, William's false interpretation changes the course of events, setting in a completely new reality. This is Umberto Eco's warning against over interpretation and representation dominating reality.

Like Eco's detective, the historian also frames a hypothesis based on his interpretation of the textual evidences, their authenticity and objectivity as well as the historian's understanding, being shaped by his cultural identity and ideology. Thus, *The Name of the Rose* skillfully brings out the disparity between reality and its representation. When the historian reads a document, he does not examine an artifact of pre-existing social structures. He merely gets a mechanism with which he must reproduce the past. He cannot be sure of drawing any firm conclusion about the past. All he can do is to construct plausible narratives, based on his knowledge.

The historian amasses, interprets and explains his evidences, using methods similar to those employed by a fictional detective. Both search for evidences that give partial answers for their questions, arrange them in meaningful patterns and finally evaluate their validity, significance and casual interrelationships. "The detective and historian judge the credibility of their witnesses ... in order to determine possible biases that might affect the events being described... Finally, both must make the grand leap from evidence to conclusion – a process that invariably entails an intuition or 'legitimate inference'" (Haft 23)

From the perspective of a medieval historian, *The Name of the Rose* is compelling both because of the accuracy of its medieval setting and the disquieting commentary it offers on the profession of writing history. Umberto Eco in his "Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*", calls the novel a 'metahistory'. The narrative is set in historical terms, dealing with historical monastic orders, exegetical schools, and real ecclesiastics that existed in the thirteenth century Italy. Eco acknowledges the influence of his early studies in medieval thought and literature, upon this novel. The narrative of the novel shifts within a medieval framework to demonstrate two opposite patterns: what happens when words control thought and action or what happens when thought and action control words. It is difficult to classify the novel since it has resemblances with several genres – gothic novel, medieval chronicle, detective story, ideological narrative, etc. Its plot entwines itself with history.

The novel's title is taken from Bernard of Cluny's twelfth century Latin poem, which has also contributed the last line of the novel. The last line can be translated as, "yesterday's rose endures in its name, we hold empty names" (Haft 175). At one point, William observes, "the discourse is presumed de dicto and not de re..." (460), which actually means, "the discourse is presumed about the word itself and not about the thing for which it stands" (Haft 169-70). William's mistakes and his failure to understand the events in the monastery are based upon a misconception about language.

Language does not necessarily refer to something in the external world. Language can be metareferential and refer to itself first. This idea plays a vital role in ciphering the code word for 'finis Africae', the forbidden chamber in the middle of the labyrinthine library. This discovery leads to the ultimate destruction of the monastery and the loss of the only copy of Aristotle's manuscript. William and Adso have the dubious satisfaction of concluding that Jorge was the evil genius behind some but not all the events taking place in the novel. Their unsuccessful investigation constitutes a rejection of the literary tradition of the ingenious and infallible detective. The failure of Eco's detective casts a postmodern veil of doubt not only upon semiotics as a master discipline, capable of understanding all facets of human culture but also over the very power of reason itself.

A number of cleverly constructed narrative frames separate the contemporary reader from the events recounted in the novel. Adso's manuscript dates back to the last decade of fourteenth century, boyhood events recollected in his old age. It had been edited by Dom J. Mabillon in the eighteenth century, which further underwent a translation by Abbe Vallet in 1842. This translated version is further transcribed by the narrator of the preface. Eco parodies "the glorious tradition of narrative fiction based upon imaginary manuscripts – Ariosto, Cervantes, Manzoni" (Bondanella 121).

The elder Adso is well aware of the danger of establishing an interpretation which could overshadow events and come to substitute for reality. The final line of the novel, "stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus", (611) means set a name on the pristine rose, we hold the name alone. It suggests that interpretations overshadow experience. But, still Adso cannot keep himself silent.

Adso denies that his chronicles contain historical interpretation. But he cannot present a narrative of the past events without interpreting them. The mere process of selecting the events to be related constitutes an interpretation. Adso cannot refrain from interpreting the events that he narrates. He frequently interrupts his narration to explain certain historical events related to the context of the plot. As a chronicler of his own youth, Adso presents an interpreted, mediated view of events, thus risking the establishment of a false promiscuous pattern in the mind of the reader.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator, though troubled by doubts and premonitions, still believes in the task of interpretation. But at the end, the fragile hope is destroyed, as his efforts at deciphering lead only to confusion. He surrenders to the nothingness that he recognizes as the one principle of the universe. He has discovered that he is unable to even say or think what he desires the most. The exercise in narration has destroyed the last vestiges of his faith. He concludes with the realization that the whole process has become pointless. He is left with only names and lists that have no reference to anything beyond themselves. So, in the end, there is only the word – the only logical space to which human beings have access. Language becomes self-referential, like a closed magic circle, pointing towards itself.

The beginning and the end close in on each other like a snake circling into its own tail, reestablishing the connection between the Middle Ages and the present day. The narrative is self-reflexive, recognizing with horror, its own inadequacy and self-contradiction. The novel is about a doomed search for truth and of a star crossed effort of

rationality to evade its own shadow. The text is devious since it insists on the futility of interpretation and deciphering while doing the same.

The novel is in the form of a memoir of an aged medieval monk who recounts the adventures of his youth. Thus, Eco brings in the concept of 'memory' and the role it plays, in one's understanding of the past. Postmodern novelists often explore the concepts of 'personal memory' and 'collective memory' and their interrelationship with the historical narrative. In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco has made use of the concept of 'personal memory' to throw veil on the accuracy of the narrative account. The aged Adso recalls the experiences of his adolescence, bringing into focus, the inaccuracy of the events narrated, due to some lapse in his memory. Apart from Adso's ideology and intellectual limitations, the authenticity of the narrative is further tainted by the fact that it is a recollection of Adso's memory that has lost its clarity due to the passage of several decades of time.

The lapse between 'external reality' and 'textual reality' has been one of the major concerns of contemporary historians. Textual reality is several layers removed from external reality. The first hindrance in our complete understanding of the reality around us is our own intellectual limitations. Human beings are not intellectually well equipped to gain a comprehensive knowledge of all the dimensions of the reality that surrounds us. Even a person with firsthand experience cannot represent reality in all its multi-dimensions. The second hindrance is the human perception which is shaped by our ideology as well as our cultural/political/social/gender/national identity. Each and every human being is susceptible to this flaw. Each and everyone views the world around them only through those glasses custom made for them by the society to which they belong. So, textual reality is further blurred by the perception of the author/ narrator/ historian.

The third hindrance is the human inability to fill the gap between reality and language. when language is used for representation, it creates its own version of 'reality'. This theme is explored elaborately, by Eco in all his novels. Finally, it could be concluded that texts, instead of faithfully reproducing the existing reality, actually produces a new version of reality. Thus, language, cultural ideology, identity politics, power struggle and several other man-made factors stand in line to disrupt the possibility of an accurate, unbiased and comprehensive representation.

One of the major themes of *The Name of the Rose* is the reliability/unreliability of historical sources. Eco stresses on the unreliability of his historical narrative by using the 'implied author' technique in the Prologue. The narrator of the Prologue is neither Eco nor Adso. Using this as a pretext, Eco presents Adso's narrative as several times removed from reality, since it has gone through several editions and translations. Thus, in the beginning itself, Eco has established that the narrative is highly unreliable as a historical account. By casting doubt on itself, the novel raises the issue of the reliability/unreliability of historical sources in general.

Eco who began his career as a medieval scholar has recreated the medieval atmosphere with great accuracy and elaborate details. Still, he did not have any firsthand experience of the period and had gained his knowledge only through texts. Being aware of this fact, Eco has planted this seed of self-doubt within the text itself. This, along with

the other narrative techniques used by Eco, has made this novel a historiographic metafiction. Being a metafiction, the novel is willfully aware of its own limitations as a fictional narrative. By drawing attention to its own unreliability, the novel emphasizes on the unreliability of historical sources.

At the end of the novel, William says, “It’s hard to accept the idea that there cannot be an order in the universe because it would offend the freewill of God and His omnipotence. So, the freedom of God is our condemnation or atleast the condemnation of our pride.” (492) To this Adso replies, “What difference is there, then, between God and primogenital chaos? Isn’t offering God absolute omnipotence... tantamount to demonstrating that God does not exist?” (493) The response of the medieval spirit is to negate not the question itself but the asking of it – to hide the uncertainty of the essences behind a labyrinth of authority and deviousness.

The God that Eco addresses, is the implacable God of nothingness who is both relentless and indestructible testimony to the fact that there are some things man will never be able to reach, with his paltry reason. Like Adso who stand in the ruins of the monastery, picking and choosing from the rubble, fitting pieces together, the postmodern man stands lonely at the end of the long path of history, looking back over the catastrophes and successes of what has gone before. He cannot commit himself to anything and merely fills the emptiness around him with patterns and semblances of order. He knows that the patterns have lost their immanent meaning.

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