

## Essay

## Reader, anti-reader and the liberation of the book

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Contemporary Italian critic and philosopher Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* is not a novel at all. In the modern period, there have been many novels which were claimed to be 'non-novels', but this particular novel does not belong to that category. It does not have any qualms about its being a novel, and we can even call it a realistic novel, despite the fact that it uses certain devices that are common to many novels, one of which is mixing fact and fiction in a delusive fashion. According to the novelist, it is just a document ('Naturally, a manuscript'): a story following the order of time, with events that provide structure and momentum to the story, a conventional narrative style, and nothing that could be regarded as astonishing and playful with respect to narrative or narrative time.

There is a large 14th century monastery governed by the Benedictine monastic rules. The monastery has a church, auditoriums, gardens, a stable, a museum of grand and archaic objects, and a large, ancient and renowned library which houses old and rare books and manuscripts from languages all over the world. In its structure and organization, the library is mysterious, with a lay-out like that of a labyrinth: no one is allowed to enter it; adjacent to it there is a scriptorium where students/researchers read together, powwow with one another, and copy and translate the scripts. There are hundreds of monks in the monastery who look after its daily needs: these include students, researchers and experts in different fields. The atmosphere in the monastery is extremely disciplined, religious and inquisitive. Historically, it is a period of intense and rampant turbulence and churning within the European Christianity: all kinds of sects and sub-sects are active; there is a conflict of opinion about the relationship between the state, the society,

religion, morality, and sexuality, etc.; communalism, violence and legal battles are on. The monastery too is charged with this air, when a monk is mysteriously killed. The chief monk, in order to unfold the mystery, invites a brilliant investigator, William. Meanwhile, a series of deaths takes place, and within a week half a dozen monks mysteriously die. William, trying to discover a common link between these deaths, finds that they have something to do with a secret related to the library. He enters the library secretly against the rules of discipline; using his extraordinary intelligence and skills, he unravels the mystery of the library and discovers that the cause of all the deaths (most of which are murders) is a rare book which is being guarded in an extremely inaccessible chamber of the library by a blind, old monk called Jorge who wants to hide it from the world because he thinks that the book is a lie, and is against both God and religion. When William discovers the secret of the book, Jorge tries to kill him as well, but fails and destroys the book and commits suicide. The novel comes to an end with the burning of the library and then the monastery itself.

And yet *The Name of the Rose* is not a 'novel'. It is a 'book'—not 'a book about life' as a novel is but 'a book about a book'—about a particular book ('the book') and about the book itself ('a book'). This particular book (*Aristotle's Second Book of Poetics* which is the root cause of the killings in the monastery) is a character in Umberto Eco's book that plays the role of a book—a book that, obviously, includes this book of Umberto Eco. In this specific sense *The Name of the Rose* is a book about itself.

A book's being a book about itself is similar to *being's* being about itself, which is *to be* at a level of self-awareness where *be-ing* is simultaneously evidence-neutral and

exposed to evidence. This ambiguous existence's other name is 'reader': the book and the reader are mutual evidence of each other. The reader is book's self consciousness. *The Name of the Rose* is not a novel also because its fiction does not house a hero (or an anti-hero): in *The Name of the Rose* this place is occupied by a 'reader' whose reading gives birth to this book and simultaneously this book brings into existence this reader. Like the book ('the book' and 'a book'), this reader has a double existence—as 'the reader' and as 'a reader'. Brother William is 'the reader' who plays the role of 'a reader'—a reader that includes us as well. In this special sense this book is our own reading:

The good of a book lies in its being read. A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs, which in their turn speak of things. Without an eye to read them, a book contains signs that produce no concepts; therefore it is dumb.

I intended to stress the plurality involved in saying 'our reading', as a book brings forth speech only when it is not circumscribed into a monolithic reading, that is, when it is read by many readers. This plurality constitutes the very character of a reader. Brother William is a reader in this very sense. His plural readerhood is shown not only by the fact that he reads multiple and mutually opposite meanings in the details concerning the mysterious killings in the monastery; it belongs to the basic composition of his nature in which 'curiosity' and 'skepticism' towards truth are the departing point of each of his ventures. Given this nature, he regards truth and every means of approaching it as perspective-motivated and relative. While defining 'text', a contemporary of Eco (Jacques Derrida) calls it 'a field of forces.' After reading *The Name of the Rose* we can propose an amendment to this definition and say that a text is a *battlefield of reading forces*.

How these reading forces construct a text and how a text throws up these reading forces—this book is a singular example of this process. The singularity does not lie in the fact that the book *tells* us about this process; the singularity is that the book comes into existence in this process. This is a reincarnation of an analytical proposition into fiction where the means and laws of analysis themselves, without any

metaphorical ground and role to them, become the means and laws of synthesis: where meaning and truth illuminate each other instead of liquidating each other.

In the book, this analytical proposition is that science of interpretation which in biblical terms is called 'hermeneutics'—multiple interpretation of the knowledge of the world, and the desire, the attempts and the techniques to comprehend it and read its signs perceptible to senses. The killings of the monks in the monastery are, in fact, a murder of the desire for this very interpretation. In other words, these are murders of books, because the monks are in one way or another associated with that process of reading which gives birth to the core of the book, i.e., the text. The murders stop, as we know, when that particular book is killed which had been hidden by Jorge in the most secret chamber of the mysterious labyrinth of the library: having passed through the dreadful process of theft and displacement, it comes back to rest in the abyss of darkness through Jorge's violent manoeuvring.

Who is the killer of this particular book? Jorge? On the face of it, this is what the answer is: chasing the book, William reaches the gloomy chamber and tries to seize the book; Jorge, in the manner of a monster, starts swallowing the poisoned pages of the book, and throws into fire what is left of it.

But this would be a superficial answer to our question—a literal reading of Eco's book. A person cannot be the killer of a book: till he is born as a reader, he cannot give birth to a text (which is, actually, the reader taking birth), nor can he kill the text (which is, in fact, the reader committing suicide). This barbaric act can be perpetrated only by an anti-reader. In this story Jorge is this anti-reader; anti-reader, that is, a reader who believes that his monolithic reading of this world is the only way it can be read and who does not want it to be read in any other way. Jorge says:

'I am He who is,' said the God of the Jews. 'I am the way, the truth and the life,' said our Lord. Knowledge is nothing but the awed comment on these two truths. But beyond that there is nothing further.

Anti-reader is one who is blind to an interpretation different from his own

(in this sense Jorge's blindness can be said to be metaphorical) but who is not powerless because of this blindness: he is the repository of the knowledge acquired through his monolithic reading ('Knowledge is to be preserved, not to be searched for,'—Jorge) and has transformed knowledge into power (Jorge is all powerful in the monastery). Jorge is an anti-reader because he is hostile to curiosity and playfulness towards knowledge, truth and God; he believes that laughter is sinful and mischievous; and he regards speech to be a privilege of the wise ('the simple must not speak'). He organizes murders so that this particular book in *The Name of the Rose* remains a secret from the world. He says about this book: 'This book would have justified the idea that the tongue of the simple is the vehicle of wisdom. This had to be prevented, which I have done'.

It is anti-reading that transforms knowledge into an impenetrable myth. The library of the monastery is a myth of this kind. The mythicization of the library is an outcome of Jorge's strategy to safeguard his anti-reading by converting his knowledge into an armour; hence the library is a prohibited place (only the librarian, Malachi, who lacks all curiosity, is allowed to enter it). The battlefield of reading forces cannot be a mythical space because it is constructed and deconstructed by these very forces in an open and interminable struggle. This library lacks the status of such a field as it is under the hegemony of an autocratic mono-reading—Jorge's reading.

Nevertheless, anti-reading is not altogether a closure of reading: an anti-reader might be preventing others from reading, but since he reads, reading survives, however feeble and impoverished it might be in its monolithic state; exactly as religion survives even in *Kaliyug*, as a cripple—standing on one feet. It is not without reason that despite the presence of an anti-reader like Jorge, who has cumulated into himself monstrous power, the library of the monastery (even if as a prohibited place) continues to exist. Jorge does not propose to obliterate the readings that challenge his own reading; he thinks they must be preserved:

Everything that involves commentary and clarification of scripture must be preserved because it enhances the glory of the divine writings; what contradicts must not be destroyed

because only if we preserve it can it be contradicted in its turn by those who can do so and are so charged in the ways and at a time that Lord chooses.

The 'impossible tolerance' towards criticism and contradiction that one sees in this statement is that residue of the existence of reading which the anti-reader carries within himself, thus keeping alive the act of reading. The book that Jorge strives to keep a secret from the world, hoping that one day competent scholars would be able to repudiate it at a time and in the manner chosen by the Lord—this book too survives in that residue of the life of reading which is part of the anti-reader named Jorge: condemned to be monolithically read, this book has Jorge as its only reader, almost till the end.

In the concluding scene of the story Jorge swallows the book knowing well that its pages are drenched in poison. The book and Jorge die together: in a single act, the book eats up the reader and the reader the book. Both kill each other simultaneously. Or this is just a suicide—committed by the reader or by the text. Both die, because both were the evidence of each other's existence.

But the story does not end here. It concludes with the catastrophic fire in which this library, the most plentiful in the entire world but shrunk into the labyrinth of interdiction, is the first to be reduced to ashes. This ruination of the library was preordained, for the library was merely a character, a role, representing the book in general, being played by that particular book which becomes a victim of murder or suicide. It is only logical that with the annihilation of this character the whole theatre of the battle (the monastery)—which housed that character—too is annihilated. A portent intrinsic to this story is worth a mention here: Jorge reads (or fabricates) the mysterious killings in the monastery as a revelation of the arrival of the 'Anti-Christ'. If the arrival of the Anti-Christ denotes that religion is on its last legs, then Jorge's death (which is the seventh death in the series and, ironically, is only a denouement of his own reading) signifies the death of that religion which we have called by the name of 'reading'. The transpiration of the catastrophe in the monastery—is it not the arrival of the Anti-Christ?

However, does the book actually

die? The library is burnt down; so also the monastery. But, as we know, William survives — William who plays the role of the reader: of the reader that he is, and that we are, too. If there is a reader here, then there is a text here as well, whose core this reader is. Which text is this? This is the text whose title is *Aristotle's Second Book of Poetics*: the book. The reader of this book is not only Jorge (an anti-reader) but also William, a reader whose reading makes us the reader of this book. William's whole pursuit, venture and struggle is to liberate this book from the clutches of an anti-reader, in which struggle he finally succeeds: not only does he read the book, he also invites the participation, in his own reading, of an infinite number of other possible readers. The murders or deaths of the monks are without doubt murders or deaths, but in a certain sense they are also a sacrifice, performed with the intention of liberating a text imprisoned in an impenetrable and mystical dungeon of knowledge, and subject to the depredations of a malevolent anti-reader—sacrifice whose risk every reader has to confront before he can hope to become a reader. William too accepts this risk—for demythicizing the myth of knowledge. We recognize his resolve from the extraordinary skill, courage and intelligence he employs in order to decode and enter into the impermeable structure and prohibited space of the library. Eco's book is replete with the marks of William's judicious reasoning that prompts him to demythicize the myth of knowledge. Having undergone his first and almost fatal experience of entering into the library, William's disciple and colleague, Adso (who went with him into the library) says to William, 'How beautiful the world is and how ugly [the] labyrinths...'. William responds by saying, 'How beautiful the world would be if there were a procedure for moving through labyrinths...' Elsewhere he states: 'We understand the world better through love rather than having knowledge of it'; Benoo [a character in the book] falls victim to greed because he suffers from the greed for acquisition of knowledge.'

William is a reader because he creates the text of *Aristotle's Second Book of Poetics*. We already know that Aristotle is not the author of this book. But it is only when we read *The Name of the Rose* that we come to understand how a text, even as it is

in a state of nonexistence, exists in the very imminence of its existence. We become aware of the existence of this imminence in the middle of the story when William learns about the discussion that had taken place between the Greek scholar Venetious and Jorge before the death of the former. In this discussion Venetious had defended the inherent proclivity of man to wonder and laugh at God and at the world, and to regard it all as absurd, and had presented the evidence of this book in support of his argument. This baffles us, because we know that there is no such book; however, this very naming of this book is, in fact, the beginning of its becoming a book. Jorge's very challenge to Venetious that perhaps he had never read that book opens up the possibility that that particular book (as any other book) would materialize into life. The opening of this possibility is the other name of the creative process. Probably every creator faces this challenge posed before his imagination by an anti-reader existing inside or outside his self. It is William who opens up this possibility. (This is also shown by the fact that William is the one who opens the door of that secret chamber where we come across the book). Venetious is a figment of William's imagination. The book is Venetious's dream. William is the name of that judicious (inner) eye that reads and deciphers a dream:

Dreams are often mysterious messages in which learned people can read distinct prophecies.... One can also dream books and therefore dream of dreams.... A dream is a scripture and many scriptures are nothing but dreams.

*The Name of the Rose* too is such a book—a dream of dreams, a book within the dream of the book, that we see and also read, along with all those readers who live inside, as outside, the book. Reading *The Name of the Rose* we can identify the anti-book and anti-reading forces within ourselves and of our times—an identification which is the only means of emancipating the book.

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