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SOME REMARKS ON ECO'S CONFESSION
AND HIS MYSTICAL RAPTUS

Abstract

What happens when we read a text like *The Name of the Rose*? How may we understand what is fictional and what is true in it? By working on Eco's *Confessions of a Young Novelist*, we will try to investigate the phenomenology of reading together with immersivity and our emotional involvement with fiction.

1.

In 2011, Harvard University Press published Umberto Eco's *Confessions of a Young Novelist* – the *Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature*, delivered by Eco at Emory University in 2008 – an impressive work starting from the question how to write (to which the answer is, «from left to right») and ending with a provisional list of Eco's lists.¹

But why a confession? And why a novelist's one? Eco considered himself an academic by profession and nothing more than an amateur as a novelist, so why did he decide to speak about his secondary, i.e. non-professional activity? Maybe because this was more in line with the spirit of the Richard Ellmann Lectures, and also because readers often turn out to be more interested in knowing how the creative process works for novelists and the like, while finding philosophers (and their work), on the other hand, clearly less interesting.

¹ Eco had an authentic passion for lists, as he himself explains at the beginning of the final chapter: «I had a Catholic education, and thus became used to reciting and listening to litanies. Litanies are by nature repetitious. Usually they are lists of laudatory phrases, as with the Litanies of the Virgin: 'Sancta Maria', 'Sancta dei genitrix', 'Sancta Virgo virginum', 'Mater Christi', 'Mater divinae gratiae', 'Mater purissima', and so on. Litanies, like phone books and catalogues, are a type of list. They are cases of *enumeration*. Perhaps, at the beginning of my career as a narrator of fiction, I did not realize how fond I was of lists. Now, after five novels and some other literary attempts, I am in a position to draw up a complete list of my lists» (Eco 2011: 121).

So, what we are dealing with here is a confession made by a novelist. Doesn't this sound somehow problematic? What are novelists doing? According to David Hume's *Treatise* (1.3.10.5), novelists as well as poets, are "liars by profession, [who] always endeavour to give an air of truth to their fictions," hence they do not tell the truth and always invent. But, if so, how should we consider a novelist's confession? If a confession, according to the Augustinian definition, is a way of making, producing, creating the truth by telling it (indeed, there is no real need to confess sins to God who already knows everything), then what kind of truth would be made by passing off fiction as reality? And last but not least, how can a 77 year-old man be considered "young" (Eco's age at the time)?

Luckily, this all makes sense. Let's start from the last question, the one concerning a man who defines himself as "young" at the distinguished age of seventy-seven. Actually, Eco is here referring to his novelist's career and not his age: since he published his first novel (and masterpiece), *The Name of the Rose*, in 1980, as a novelist he is just thirty, and therefore quite young. As it is, answering questions concerning novelists and confessions is less difficult than firstly imagined: as a matter of fact, these confessions are nothing but a sort of journey through the mind and way of working of one of the greatest Italian novelists, *confessing* many precious details to his readers concerning his way of creating fiction, his philosophical ideas about semantics, ontology, semiotics, aesthetics and much more.

Creation, or rather creative writing, is his starting topic. After devoting a few lines to a distinction of the kind of writing typical of philosophers, on one hand, and that of novelists/poets on the other, and after having identified the only difference in the ways writers will respond to interpretations of their texts (creative writing accepts multiple interpretations whereas scientific writing does not, since they are supposed to demonstrate a specific thesis or solve a particular problem), Eco concentrates on the creation of a fictional work, focusing on his own novels.

The creation of fiction is a hot topic in philosophy both with regard to the *genesis* of novels (how did an author decide to write that novel? In what specific circumstances? How did s/he decide on the plot, characters and style?), and where their *structure* (what kind of entities populate these invented worlds? Is it possible to import reality into fiction? How can we feel emotions for entities we know do not exist?) is concerned. Let us start from the genesis of *The Name of the Rose*.

2.

In early 1978, a friend of mine who worked for a small publisher told me that she was asking non-novelists (philosophers, sociologists, politicians, and so on) to each write a detective story. For the reasons I have just mentioned, I replied that I was not interested in creative writing, and that I was sure I was absolutely incapable of writing good dialogue. I concluded (I do not know why) by saying provocatively that if I had

to write a crime novel, it would be at least five hundred pages long and would be set in a medieval monastery. [...]

As soon as I returned home, I hunted through my desk drawers and retrieved a scribbling from the previous year – a piece of paper on which I had written down some names of monks. It meant that in the most secret part of my soul the idea for a novel had already been growing, but I was unaware of it. At that point; I had realized it would be nice to poison a monk while he was reading a mysterious book, and that was all. Now I started to write *The Name of the Rose*.²

This is what happened, what led Eco to start writing the book that a couple of years later was published, read and appreciated all over the world: some facts took place (his friend's proposal), some words were written down (the name of the monks), and a seminal idea or image came to his mind (that of a monk poisoned while reading a book). More than enough to explain how everything began. No special inspiration guided the material writing of the novel («genius is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration»),³ and much of the setting, thought, life, and habits were already obtained by Eco, who was an expert on the Middle Ages (his doctoral dissertation was on the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas) and who over the years had visited many abbeys and cathedrals dating back to Medieval times. This is why it took him only a couple of years to write such a huge novel: because he already had a sort of archive from which to extract places, to draw maps and to make portraits of the monks he was writing about.

Novels are not just sequences of words, but «the *universe* the author has built, and the events that occur in it, that dictate rhythm, style, and even word choice.»⁴ There is a cosmological affair the author is involved in while creating the world of the story, when he provides readers with instructions so as not to get lost within it. At the beginning of *The Name of the Rose*, there is even a plan of the abbey, so that readers may easily visualize how monks moved through the monastery while things happen.

Once the universe has been created and the events to take place selected, the words arranged in a specific style follow: «the style I used in *The Name of the Rose* was that of a medieval chronicler: precise, naïve, flat when necessary (a humble fourteenth-century monk does not write like Joyce, or remember things like Proust). Moreover, since I was supposedly transcribing from a nineteenth-century translation of a medieval text, the stylistic model was only indirectly the Latin of the medieval chroniclers of the time; the more immediate model was the style of their modern translators».⁵ Besides location, events and style,

² Eco 2011: 7-8.

³ *Ibidem*: 9.

⁴ *Ibidem*: 14.

⁵ *Ibidem*: 21.

the author also has to impose a frame and precise constraints for his novel, i.e. a special scheme to be followed for the succession of events' in a specific historical period (where certain things may occur but not others). So far we have had to do with the particular creation of a novel, *The Name of the Rose*, by its author, Umberto Eco, in a specific time and with a certain way of working. But what has thus been created? What does it mean *to create* a fictional world? And how will the *structure* of such a universe be characterized?

3.

Fictional worlds and their inhabitants are *created entities*: William of Baskerville was created by Eco, as well as the narrator Adso of Melk, the blind librarian Jorge of Burgos and many other characters. It seems uncontroversial that traditional fictional entities (and here by "traditional" we mean those entities invented by novelists and not simply "imported" from reality as happens with historical figures) are ones that have been created by their author. Nonetheless, philosophers have often been uneasy about explaining this aspect of the question. What is the meaning of "creation" as used here? What does "to create" mean? Usually it means to bring something into being, and this is the reason why it may not be easy to consider fictional entities from a creationist perspective. Because if "to create" means to bring something into existence, how is it possible to create something that is not out there?

Let us consider the answer Terence Parsons⁶ gives. According to him, fictional entities *do not exist* (that is, even though there *are* fictional entities, he distinguishes between "being" and "existing"). Therefore, what authors of novels actually do is not *create* fictional entities (in fact, when considered solely as nonexistent objects, fictional entities are already there before the author's work of describing them in a story) but rather they *give them fictional existence* by providing them with a new extra-nuclear property, that of being described as existent in a story (where *to exist in a story* has nothing to do with *existing* in general terms). For Parsons, «to create» must not be taken as meaning «to make something exist,» but rather as «to make something fictional».⁷ But is this really what "to create" means? Are we willing to accept that attributing an extra-nuclear property to an entity that is already there is the same as creating that entity? It seems not. Creating means giving being and not just assigning an additional property to something.

A more convincing solution is the one proposed by Kit Fine, according to whom fictional entities «[...] come into being as the result of [the appropriate

⁶ Parsons 1980: 184-188.

⁷ *Ibidem*: 188.

activity of the author], in much the same way as a table comes into being as the result of the activity of a carpenter».⁸ Takeshi Yagisawa⁹ objected that the analogy in this proposal between author and carpenter is not actually helpful. Pretense, Yagisawa says, plays no essential role in the carpenter's creation of a table, nor does the appropriate activity of the author involve manipulation and reconfiguration of physical objects. Hence it might be hard to understand the likeness in the form of creation identified by Fine between the creation of a fictional individual and the creation of a table. Yagisawa's point hits the mark, but there is still room for maneuver: both the carpenter's and the author's are undoubtedly intentional activities (artisans engage in intentional, purposeful behavior in order to create an artifact, and we have good reason to suppose that the intention of creating a table plays a causal role in the creation of a table; likewise, we might say that an author creates a character if and only if she intends to create a character – when she intends to create a character, she engages in pretenseful reference, knowing that this particular act of pretenseful reference will produce a fictional character), and in both cases there is the manipulation of something (properties, words, and sentences on one hand; wood, hammers, saws, and planks on the other). Another strong objection to Fine's solution is that «If 'to create' is to make something exist, then had Shakespeare created Hamlet, Hamlet would have existed. Hamlet, however, does not exist, so he was not created, by Shakespeare or by anyone else».¹⁰ In order to answer such objection, Fine underlines that «not all actual objects are existent [...] fictitious objects acquire their being through appropriate creative activity. Thus these objects have their being in contrast to merely possible fictions that might have had such being but, in fact, do not. These objects are actual ones. On my view, then, there is a tripartite division within the realm of objects. There is the usual division between the actuals and the merely possibles. But among the actuals, there is a subdivision onto the existents, and the non-existents».¹¹ So fictional characters have a positive way of being, even if not in a space-time one.

This last is an assumption that even artefactualists accept, for instance when maintaining, like Peter Van Inwagen, that fictional individuals are created as abstract and theoretical entities: «...we may say 'Mrs. Gamp is fond of gin' and be talking about a theoretical entity of criticism without thereby predicating fondness for gin of that theoretical entity of criticism».¹² A similar position is defended by Amie L. Thomasson who refers to the creation process while em-

⁸ Fine 1982: 130.

⁹ Yagisawa 2001.

¹⁰ Zemach 1997: 184.

¹¹ Fine 1982: 132.

¹² Van Inwagen 1977: 305.

phasizing the similarities with the creation of other artifacts such as tables and chairs, tools and machines, which all require creation by intelligent beings. She nonetheless also points out a crucial difference between fictional entities and all other artifacts: «[...] the way in which fictional characters are created does make them strange, for although one cannot simply create a table, toaster or automobile by describing such an object, fictional characters are created merely with words that posit them as being a certain way».¹³

The problem of an insufficient treatment of creation arises from the conflict between different theories of fictional entities and our own naïve convictions. We therefore need to investigate the creation process in order to find a plausible answer, compatible with a theory of fictional entities. Let us ask: when can a sentence like the following be considered true?

(*) William of Baskerville was created by Umberto Eco

It is true if and only if there is an author who, through a given process, creates a character; in other words, it is true if and only if Eco created William of Baskerville. The question is intricate mainly because William of Baskerville seems to be an abstract object, in terms of being a nonexistent object (in space and time). In fact when considering concrete artifacts, the problem does not arise. For instance:

(**) David was created by Michelangelo Buonarroti

is true if and only if Michelangelo created the David statue. In actual fact, from 1501 to 1504, the sculptor Michelangelo did create the statue called “David”, and his act of creation consisted in carving marble and refining the form until the Biblical hero emerged. This is not what happens with fictional entities: firstly because they are abstract, and secondly because they are in some ways repeatable.¹⁴ Briefly, the creation problem arises because we are inclined to accept each of the following statements, but it seems that they cannot all be simultaneously true as they would be contradictory:

(C1) William of Baskerville is a created entity

(C2) To create means to bring something into being or to cause it to exist

(C3) William of Baskerville is an abstract object

(C4) William of Baskerville was created as a man

¹³ Thomasson 1999: 12.

¹⁴ I can find William of Baskerville in Eco’s novel. Nevertheless he may also be found, as exactly the same object, in other artistic products such as movies, TV series, comics, plays, and paintings.

Investigating the creation process means giving reasons for all these statements, and seeing in what ways they may be maintained without falling into contradiction.

4.

So, what kind of entity has been created? William of Baskerville, we could say, is the product of Eco's imagination: inspired both by the scholastic philosopher William of Ockham and his razor (according to which one should always prefer the simplest explanation accounting for all facts) and by Sherlock Holmes (the title of the third novel written by Arthur Conan Doyle and published in 1902 featuring Sherlock Holmes is *The Hound of the Baskervilles*), and imbued with medieval culture. Take the beginning of the novel. After the old ironic trick of the opening title, "Naturally a Manuscript" (the literary *topos* referring to Alessandro Manzoni's masterpiece), and after having presented the map of the abbey, Eco writes the following lines:

ON AUGUST 16, 1968, I was handed a book written by a certain by a certain Abbé Vallet, *Le Manuscrit de Dom Adson de Melk, traduit en français d'après l'édition de Dom J. Mabillon* (Aux Presses de l'Abbaye de la Source, Paris, 1842). Supplemented by historical information that was actually quite scant, the book claimed to reproduce faithfully a fourteenth-century manuscript that, in its turn, had been found in the monastery of Melk by the great eighteenth-century man of learning, to whom we owe so much information about the history of the Benedictine order. The scholarly discovery (I mean mine, the third in chronological order) entertained me while I was in Prague, waiting for a dear friend. Six days later Soviet troops invaded that unhappy city. I managed, not without adventure, to reach the Austrian border at Linz, and from there I journeyed to Vienna, where I met my beloved, and together we sailed up the Danube. [...]

If something new had not occurred, I would still be wondering where the story of Adso of Melk originated; but then, in 1970, in Buenos Aires, as I was browsing among the shelves of a little antiquarian bookseller on Corrientes, not far from the more illustrious Patio del Tango of that great street, I came upon the Castilian version of a little work by Milo Temesvar, *On the Use of Mirrors in the Game of Chess*. It was an Italian translation of the original, which, now impossible to find, was in Georgian (Tbilisi, 1934); and here, to my great surprise, I read copious quotations from Adso's manuscript, though the source was neither Vallet nor Mabillon; it was Father Athanasius Kircher (but which work?). A scholar – whom I prefer not to name – later assured me that (and he quoted indexes from memory) the great Jesuit never mentioned Adso of Melk. But Temesvar's pages were before my eyes, and the episodes he cited were the same as those of the Vallet manuscript (the description of the labyrinth in particular left no room for doubt).

I concluded that Adso's memoirs appropriately share the nature of the events he narrates: shrouded in many, shadowy mysteries, beginning with the identity of the author and ending with the abbey's location, about which Adso is stubbornly, scrupulously

silent. Conjecture allows us to designate a vague area between Pomposa and Conques, with reasonable likelihood that the community was somewhere along the central ridge of the Apennines, between Piedmont, Liguria, and France. As for the period in which the events described take place, we are at the end of November 1327; the date of the author's writing, on the other hand, is uncertain. Inasmuch as he describes himself as a novice in 1327 and says he is close to death as he writes his memoirs, we can calculate roughly that the manuscript was written in the last or next-to-last decade of the fourteenth century.¹⁵

In reality, no old manuscript is found and no real location (in spite of the map) is described in the book (even though the author was inspired by many real sites): everything has been intentionally invented. The author's intention plays a crucial role in making a work x a *fictional* work x. What needs to be considered as the content of the author's intention is nevertheless not fully obvious. According to Gottlob Frege,¹⁶ for instance, what characterizes the content of the author's intention is only her indifference towards truth and a non-scientific attitude, while others¹⁷ maintain that the content of the author's intention has to do with the value of truth, because an author does not assert anything but merely pretends to, and therefore the author's statements are merely pretend assertions, i.e. they do not carry the value of truth. According to Saul Kripke,¹⁸ there is a sort of pretense principle that precedes the act of writing fiction, while according to Gregory Currie a *fictive intention* is involved.¹⁹

But then why do readers look for the "real" abbey where the story (a "true story"?) took place? And why do so many believe that the setting for the story is Saint Michael's Abbey in the Susa Valley (Piedmont, Italy)? And why did some write to Eco telling him that they had found the antique bookshop in Buenos Aires and the volume by Kirchner mentioned in the novel? Presumably for the very same reason why London visitors search for Sherlock Holmes' apartment in 221b Baker Street: because they are somehow confused and mix fiction with reality, or take fiction for reality.

What are these fictional worlds that novelists create like? They are (actually quite often, but not really always) *possible* (they describe possible courses of events,²⁰ i.e. they respect the principles of non-contradiction and excluded

¹⁵ Eco 1983: 1.

¹⁶ Frege 1892.

¹⁷ Cf. Searle 1979, especially: 61 and ff.; van Inwagen 1977: 301; Lewis 1978; Crittenden 1991: 91.

¹⁸ Kripke 1973.

¹⁹ Currie 1990: 49.

²⁰ Lewis 1978.

middle), *small* (as Jaakko Hintikka²¹ explains «a relatively short course of local events in some nook or corner of the actual world»), *incomplete* (they are not ontologically determined under every aspect²²) and *parasitic* on the real world.²³ The ontological incompleteness (not to be confused with epistemological incompleteness, to do with our knowledge of things and not with things themselves) of these worlds and the individuals they contain is what clearly distinguishes them from the real ones:

[...] intrinsic incompleteness (an incompleteness suffered by the characters themselves, independently of any additional epistemological incompleteness which may arise due to inadequacies in particular readings of the appropriate works).

Real objects cannot be *ontologically* incomplete in this sense, for although every act of perception of such objects is partial and one-sided, there exists (or, in the case of real objects in the past, did exist) the constant possibility of further, complementary perceptions (Husserl talks of ‘turning the apple in one’s hand...’), such that there is in principle no point where indeterminacies in the object may lay undetected. Fictional objects on the other hand are such that from the very start we can exclude the possibility of supplementary information, information which would be additional to that which is to be *found in* (or, within certain limits, *read into*) the texts themselves.²⁴

Hence, these worlds are essentially incomplete, and what the author tells us about them determines not only what is true and what is false in the novel (for instance, from what we read in *The Name of the Rose*, it is true that Berengar was found drowned in a bath, and therefore it is false that he was found hanged) but also what the reader needs to know in order to appreciate the specific kind of novel he is reading.

When appreciating *The Name of the Rose*, we actually imagine – by understanding and interpreting the propositions that make up the novel with such force that some may even be “transported” to narrative worlds²⁵ – the world created by the author *via* our construction of mental representations of the setting, individuals and events told by the story. Thanks to this sort of «mental model»,²⁶ we make inferences by using our knowledge to sketch a coherent representation of what is explicitly described in the text. Hence the real world is always in the background of our reading experience, as Stacie Friend’s *Reality Assumption* maintains; i.e. that «everything that is true or obtains in the real world is

²¹ Hintikka 1989: 55.

²² Smith 1979.

²³ Eco 1990.

²⁴ Smith 1979: 381.

²⁵ Gerrig 1993.

²⁶ Johnson-Laird 1983.

storified – that is, we are invited to imagine it as part of the storyworld – unless it is excluded by the work». ²⁷ This means readers tend to see the world of the story as being as close as possible to the real world, and this explains not only why they interpret the text from their starting point in the real world, but also why they often find it quite hard to comprehend those stories that ask them to reject real-world assumptions.

Once *transported* into the fictional world, we look for reality at any passage or word we read. We try to find evidence about real places the author has maybe imported into her novel: that's why we shouldn't be surprised by those writing to Eco to tell him they found the "real" abbey or bookshop in Buenos Aires: the real world permeates fictions and informs people's understanding of them.

5.

However, it happens quite often that we do not only understand fiction but also that we are absorbed by it so strongly that we are less likely to engage in the critical processing necessary to reject misinformation or to question specific parts or elements of the story. ²⁸ Indeed, as readers of realistic novels, our default mode is to believe what we read, ²⁹ since to disbelieve would require a great effort and may also reduce the pleasure of our (perhaps also aesthetic) experience. This clearly explains why when deeply involved in the act of reading, we are less likely to detect falsehoods or invented elements: ³⁰ when the story absorbs our attention, we suspend critical judgment of the text and we are led to believe what we are told entirely.

Of course, some might maintain that in some specific cases, it is difficult for readers to distinguish what is fictional from what is real because the two are mixed together with remarkable mastery, and needless to say, the specific literary genre to which *The Name of the Rose* belongs does not help. Sure enough, it is a historical murder mystery taking place in the year 1327 in a Benedictine monastery situated in Northern Italy. But how might we discriminate what is true in it from what has been invented? It is a novel, one could promptly answer, therefore of course most of what is told is fictional, i.e. untrue. But it is not only a novel: it is also a historical novel, and thus a literary genre in which the story is supposed to take place in a recognizable and documentable past, and where the effort made by the author to reproduce places, manners, people,

²⁷ Friend 2017: 31.

²⁸ Prentice, Gerrig 1999.

²⁹ Gilbert 1990.

³⁰ Green, Brock 2000.

social conditions, and shared culture with historical accuracy is undoubtedly a painstaking one.

Nevertheless, even if the frame is that of a precise medieval historical setting, what we are dealing with – as far as plot, characters and location are concerned – is essentially fictional. Firstly, many characters – starting from the protagonists William of Baskerville and Adso of Melk – have been invented. The fact that they have been invented does not mean that they have been created out of thin air:³¹ the author was inspired by someone else when creating them; nonetheless, since they have not been «imported» from reality, they may be defined, in the words of Terence Parsons,³² as *native objects*, i.e. objects «born» in that specific story (and thanks to that specific author). Other characters Parsons defines as *immigrants*³³ are historical figures the author has «directly» taken from reality, such as Ubertino of Casale and Bernard Gui.

Bernard Gui was born in France in 1261/1262 and had been a Dominican friar, a bishop and an inquisitor for the Pope. In *The Name of the Rose* he is described as a sinister character, and many have considered the caricatured way he is portrayed by Eco as clear evidence of historical inaccuracy. Though the description of the character is imprecise, whole parts of some dialogues are directly taken from Gui's *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*: a sort of inquisitor's handbook, and hence are wholly faithful to the real character's work. Take the verbal exchange between Gui and Remigio of Varagine – when the former asks the latter “What do you believe?” Remigio replies, “What do you believe, my Lord?” while to Gui's answer, “I believe in all that the Creed teaches,” Remigio promptly replies, “So I believe, my Lord.” (Remigio does not claim to believe in the Creed; he claims instead to believe that Gui believes in the Creed) – where Eco paraphrases a passage from Gui's manual in which the manipulative tendencies of heretics are elucidated.

Now, just focus on Gui as described by Eco. How should we consider his historically imprecise description? Is the Bernard Gui we find in *The Name of the Rose* the real one or a different kind of object? Actually, Parsons himself, despite distinguishing between immigrant and native objects, explains³⁴ how it often happens for us to speak of the London of Doyle's stories (and remember that *that* London had a 221b Baker Street, whereas in the real London of the time Baker Street did not go as high as 221) or of Tolstoy's Napoleon we find in *War and Peace*, considering them to be somehow different from their corresponding entities in reality. Hence he suggests considering them *fictional surrogates* of real

³¹ On the debate concerning creation, see (for opposite positions) Deutsch 2000 and 2013; Friend 2012.

³² Parsons 1980: 51-52.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*: 57-59.

entities because, even though they were not invented by the author as inspired by reality, they are still characterized by properties their real counterparts do not exemplify. These fictional surrogates should therefore be considered fictional entities sharing many properties with the corresponding real ones, but also with new ones.³⁵ Or, following Alberto Voltolini's suggestion – totally in line with Eco's position on the matter³⁶ – we might maintain that:

[...] the relevant fictional works *only* involve such surrogates, fictional entities like any other such entity. Put alternatively, [...] there are *no* immigrant characters imported in fiction from reality. All characters are native characters, i.e., fictional entities. Some of them involve no correlation with real entities, while some others involve such a correlation – in this sense, they are fictional surrogates of real entities – yet the real entities the latter are correlated with do not figure at all in the relevant works. If there is a gap between fiction and reality, this is a *total gap*. Thus, over and above *mere realists* on fictional entities, i.e., people believing that there are fictional individuals, as mobilized by the relevant fictional works, there are *hyperrealists*, i.e., people believing that fictional works only involve fictional individuals, some of which are fictional surrogates of real individuals.³⁷

Therefore, adopting a hyperrealist position,³⁸ we could say that also Ubertino of Casale and Bernard Gui do not exist, since they are fictional entities intentionally created by their author to share many of their features with the real Ubertino and the real Gui (although not *all* features, and thus making it possible to explain dissimilarities from real individuals), but definitely not being identical to them. Hence all the characters we find in *The Name of the Rose* are to be considered fictional objects.³⁹

³⁵ Bonomi 2018.

³⁶ «It is useless to say that I invented both the layout and the location of the abbey (though many of its details were inspired by real sites); that beginning a fictional work by saying that one has found an old manuscript is a venerable literary *topos*, to such an extent that I entitled my introduction '*Naturally, a Manuscript*'; and that the mysterious book by Kirchner and the even more mysterious antiquarian shop were both invented.

Now, those who looked for the real abbey and the real manuscript were perhaps naive readers unfamiliar with literary conventions, who stumbled on my novel by accident after seeing the movie. But the German fellow I just mentioned, who seems in the habit of visiting rare-book dealers and who apparently knows about Kircher, is certainly a cultivated person, familiar with books and printed materials. Thus, it seems that a lot of readers, regardless of their cultural status, are, or become, unable to distinguish between fiction and reality. They take fictional characters seriously, as if the characters were real human beings» (Eco 2011: 70-71).

³⁷ Voltolini 2013: 238.

³⁸ Besides Voltolini's, a hyperrealist position is also the one defended by Bonomi 1994.

³⁹ As Eco 2011: 82 states: «fictional characters are *undetermined* – that is, we know only a few of their properties – while real individuals are *completely determined*, and we should be able to

This is hard for some to accept: isn't it legitimate, being a historical novel, to have what we might call "genre expectations"? If social conditions, manners, culture and details are accurately described, why shouldn't we also believe that locations and manuscripts are also represented faithfully? How can we, as readers, know the difference between a (partially invented but) historical-realistic work and a nonfiction novel? Are there criteria offered by the text to distinguish the two or not? Unfortunately, it seems not.

6.

This last point explains why we are often somehow "confused" and therefore unable to distinguish what is fictional from what is not. The phenomenology of reading gives further reasons to explain why this happens: «when we enter a very absorbing and captivating narrative world, a textual strategy can provoke something similar to a mystical *raptus* or a hallucination, and we simply *forget* we have entered a world that is merely possible» (*Confessions*: 113). While having access to these *little* worlds, we suspend our disbelief for a (more or less) brief period of time, because as Emily Dickinson⁴⁰ emphasizes, "There is no Frigate like a Book | To take us Lands away, | Nor any Courses like a Page | Of prancing Poetry – | This Traverse may the poorest take | Without oppress of Toll – | How Frugal is the Chariot | That bears a Human Soul". And during the reading experience, like a trip to a foreign land, people lose contact with reality.

Richard Gerrig in his *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*⁴¹ explains the "immersive experience" readers have when lost in a book: while reading (and thanks to the act of reading), they are transported in the literary world, hence they distance themselves from the world of origin, in the meanwhile importing some knowledge from their everyday experience to the literary world (even though the book may follow different rules from the ones valid in the real world); and once back (to their departure point), they give signs of having been changed by the journey they have made. Actually, this being transported in the literary world has to do both with fictional and with non-fictional texts, not being focused on how the world readers are transported to relates to the real one. The transportation at stake here can be split into two different levels: a first one concerning just the act of grasping the linguistic meaning of the text (of course, in order for us to "enter" it, the text needs to be accessible), and a second one, deeply immersive,

predicate of them each of their known attributes. [...] the properties of fictional characters are severely limited by the narrative text – and only those attributes mentioned by the text count for the identification of the character».

⁴⁰ Dickinson 1960, No. 1263.

⁴¹ Gerrig 1993.

depending on our capacity to complete plot, narrative and imagery in our mind. This second stage of transportation is usually intense but temporary – that’s why Eco speaks of “raptus” – remaining thus distinct from addiction:

While the addicted reader blocks out reality, the reader capable of pleasurable immersion maintains a split loyalty to the real and the textual world. The ocean is an environment in which we cannot breathe; to survive immersion, we must take oxygen from the surface, stay in touch with reality.⁴²

Hence, the kind of transportation, immersion and absorption we experience while reading can be explained as follows: first we need pay attention to the text and understand the sentences, then we need being transported in the textual world thanks to imaginative involvement, and despite being totally aware that the textual world is not one and the same as reality, what happens is that we contemplate the textual world from the inside, taking advantage of being temporarily detached from our native reality. When imagining, we are centered in the textual world and thus consider what we find written down to be true (i.e. true within the text); that’s why so often, when reading of *The Name of the Rose*, we tend to see fiction as non-fiction, mistakenly believing places and events as parts of the real world. Furthermore, we tend to recognize pieces of reality – and here again Eco’s first novel is an important example – in fictional places and events, simply because it is easier for us to shape our mental representations on the basis of what is somehow connected to our personal experience, or from what has to do with famous real places we have never visited but which we have often dreamt about. Actually, and Roland Barthes’s *effet de réel*⁴³ intends to underline just this, when the text mentions concrete details, elements of the real world, readers activate their memory, believing in the meanwhile that what is described refers to the real world.

Nevertheless, immersion does not only concern belief, it also has to do with our emotions. How can we be frightened by Venantius of Salvemec’s death in the vat of pig’s blood? If we know that nobody died in the real world, why are we disturbed by the series of crimes we read about in *The Name of the Rose*? “Being frightened” presupposes *perceiving* danger together with *being* in danger, but this obviously is not the case: there is no danger of the killer jumping out of the pages of the book to murder us; nonetheless, we feel like we are in that specific emotional state. Why? Has the distinction between real and fictional world collapsed? Why do we have emotions when reading about fictional events?⁴⁴

⁴² Ryan 2001: 97.

⁴³ Barthes 1982.

⁴⁴ For this kind of questions the seminal paper, opening the philosophical debate in the matter, cf. Radford 1975.

In order to be frightened of something, don't we need believe the propositions describing those events? But actually we know the propositions we find in *The Name of the Rose* describe fictional situations, so how is this possible? It is possible because while reading, following the way psychologists usually explain cases of phobia, appreciators somehow do deactivate beliefs.⁴⁵ That's why we are worried about the monks' destiny, because «when we enter a very absorbing and captivating narrative world, a textual strategy can provoke something similar to a mystical *raptus* or a hallucination, and we simply *forget* we have entered a world that is merely possible».⁴⁶ And this happens quite often: after having anxiously followed the deaths of Adelmo of Otranto, Venantius of Salvemec, Berengar of Arundel, Severinus of Sankt Wendel, Malachi of Hildesheim and others, suspending our appointments, duties and “serious things” for a while, we run through the corridors of the labyrinth, we discover secret passages and forbidden rooms, we visit wonderful libraries and we try to solve an intricate mystery. All this for hours, days, maybe months for slower readers. But then, as Umberto Eco loved to remember by quoting Paul Valéry, “*le vent se lève, il faut tenter de vivre*”. And we need close the book and go back to the here and now of reality. Maybe less exciting and capturing than Eco's world, but that's life.

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⁴⁵ Gerrig makes reference to the psychological principle he calls the «non-penetration of belief into emotional experience» (Gerrig 1993: 181).

⁴⁶ Eco 2011: 113.

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