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SUMMARY

The Book and Its Value in UMBERTO ECO's Writings

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KEY WORDS

Umberto Eco; the Book; the book as a paper object; literature; canon value; model; influence; quotation; plagiarism; pastiche; list; author; reader; novel; reading; interpretation; obsession with the word; obsession with knowledge; memory and forgetfulness; memory and identity

ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is to highlight the value, role and importance of the book as a paper object and of literature, the writer, and the reader in the present day, taking as point of reference the critiques, literary theory and esthetics, as well as the novels of the Italian writer and theorist Umberto Eco.

We live in a world where authentic values and standards pertaining to and modeled after the modern times are felt to be lacking. Current themes are the lack of culture, globalization, disinterest in quality cultural events, and a domination of the material over the spiritual and of quantity over quality. The signification of notions such as *value*, *model*, *importance* and *role* seems to become more and more inaccessible or poorly perceived and understood. The word *crisis* is broadly used and invoked with reference to all domains, including the realm of literature and the book, the latter being understood as a paper object, text, fruit of literature and creation.

Paradoxically, books are written, published and translated in large numbers, which makes it very difficult for us to be able to choose, discern and understand the current values that we should believe in. We are surrounded by contests and surveys, classifications, rankings and prize-awarding ceremonies, we are constantly subjected to choice and invited to join various opinion groups and express ourselves. These are the times of ‘it has all been already said’ but we believe that, in a world in constant evolution and change, through literature, everything can be resaid and rewritten. We believe, alongside TzvetanTodorov, that literature can achieve a lot: it can hold out a helping hand when we are profoundly depressed, guide us towards the human beings around us, help us to understand the world and live a better life.

As mentioned before, our point of reference in this thesis is Umberto Eco and his proteiform creation. We have opted for a comparative approach, limiting the comparisons to the Latin-based languages in an attempt to demonstrate the prospects of the book and literature and their role in our existence.

We start by justifying our choice: Why Umberto Eco? Because he is, unquestionably, the Italian author most widely translated into Romanian and internationally. Umberto Eco is, first and foremost, a semiotician and an authority in the field of literary theory, literary criticism and aesthetics. He has demonstrated through all his writings and actions a constant preoccupation for the book and literature, a passion and a commitment that have become a purpose in life and a way of being.

All his six novels (*The Name of the Rose*, *Foucault's Pendulum*, *The Island of the Day Before*, *Baudolino*, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, and *The Prague Cemetery*) proceed from a different text, be it a manuscript, a quotation, a drawing; they are built around an intertext invented by the author himself and end with being integrated into the universal ensemble.

Umberto Eco the reader is preceded by Umberto Eco the writer. For him, reading is a way of being and a permanent preoccupation of his existence. He lives his life among and for books, and is in his element telling stories, writing, and playing with words, texts and books. Umberto Eco will definitely be considered a representative author of his time and a source of inspiration for the generations to come.

While his scientific work is highly imaginative, his novels are abundant in science and erudition – the kind of intelligence and erudition that generate culture. His novels are the products of a man in love with books and with the gift of storytelling, association and accumulation, and a passion for discovery and revelation.

Another aspect of his personality that we can find in his novels is the passion for secrecy: secrets of evil, secrets of truth, secrets that must be sought and are difficult to uncover, secrets that we carry with us throughout our lives and into death. All the six main characters of his novels devote their lives to solving a mystery – an adventure that will eventually lead them to their end, but that will help them to reconsider and rebuild their own identities, thus giving purpose and meaning to their existence.

We also find in Eco's books his passion for mysterious and turbulent places that provoke the imagination and around which the action of the novel unfolds: the castle-monastery in *The Name of the Rose*; the temple-church with magical machines in the Museum of Science and Techniques in Paris; the mysterious island where, if we ever managed to arrive there, we would win precious time, as on this island 'today is still yesterday'; the attic in the grandparents' house, whose dark corners and trunks hide the secret of a life and the entire history of fascist Italy. In *The Prague Cemetery*, the last novel written by Umberto Eco, through a mysterious

character with memory lapses and a double identity, we discover how a new chessboard is drawn on the Old Continent in the second half of the 19th century.

The necessity for history is another characteristic of Eco's personality and implicitly of his writings – a history at the crossroads of space and times that the author travels through and reconstitutes minutely out of the desire to find (again) the truth, reality and authenticity. With Umberto Eco we always find a past that explains the present and anticipates the future. His characters typically oscillate between the past and the present, a past that is brought into present by their searches, be it a return to the Middle Ages, the 13th century, the 17th century, or closer to our days, to the beginning of the 20th century, stretching to the second half of this century, in their hope to find the answers to their questions and have the truth revealed to them.

One last facet of the author's personality and of his novels is the quest for freedom. This is a freedom of the spirit, the mind and of intelligence, which should be able to think and express itself beyond space and time, and beyond cultural accumulations and its own memory. This freedom is obviously cultivated by Eco's characters: they are continuously pursuing a mystery, the novelty, the unexpected, and the conclusion they all reach is that, in the end, what matters is the quest, keeping alive the spirit, the intelligence, the will, the hope and the desire not to settle, not to limit oneself, not to stop, to carry on.

The Eco case is undoubtedly the most visible and the most discussed cultural and editorial phenomenon of the last decades. The multitude of languages into which his work has been translated, the often discordant discussions around his work, the criticisms he receives, all these keep him at the forefront of contemporary literature.

Umberto Eco can be considered a unique phenomenon in the literary world: no other novelist has offered, at the same time, an equally impressive and complex set of usage instructions to guide the reader through his narrative world. The author is aware that there are at least two categories of readers: on the one hand, the innocent reader model, who follows the narrative thread and at the most attempts amateur interpretations; on the other hand, the critical reader type, who has the capacity and the competency to go beyond the critical interpretation. The first category comprises the vast majority of readers, while the second includes just a small number of qualified readers, professionals and experts. Umberto Eco is well acquainted with both groups, and communicates with them on a regular basis, be it as an author of narrative texts or as a model reader of his own texts. Such examples are the apostils and the glossaries to *The Name of the Rose* and the useless erudite notes at the end of his last novel, *The Prague Cemetery*.

We do not attempt a critical analysis of his novels, nor do we propose to express value judgments on the novel writing qualities of Umberto Eco. Beyond his qualities and flaws, and beyond the polemics, controversy and debates around his writings, we consider that Eco is, above all, a model of what ‘being an intellectual’ means in the present day, a model of a professor and researcher that uses writing as the main means of expression and that seldom makes public appearances, in a world where making yourself visible and heard can be the first, if not the only step, to success.

In the first chapter, for the scope of our research, we find it important to clarify and determine the senses and connotations we assign today to such terms as *value*, *hierarchy*, *standardisation*, *model*, *identification*, *influence*, and to analyse their transformation along time. In order to define the concept of value in literature, we consider it pertinent to study the characteristics and evolution of the term of *literary canon*, from Dante’s canon in *Inferno* to the *Western Canon* proposed by Harold Bloom.

Next, we attempt to underline the prevalent values in our days and identify who determines the criteria for their selection and ranking, accepting the premise that economic primacy imposes the editorial strategies and that publishing houses have already learned the “art of rejecting a novel”. We continue our analysis by defining the notion of model in literature, its function and evolution along time, starting from the types of identification with the literary hero proposed by Hans Robert Jauss in his well-known theory of aesthetic reception and its effects. Throughout our research, we assert the necessity in our chaotic times to validate some authentic models and a literature of high quality meant to awake irreplaceable emotions in readers, to make the real world more beautiful and meaningful and to allow everyone to respond better to their vocation of human being. We believe that now, more than ever, we need canons, models and reference points to guide us in a century marked by crises of identity and discipline, alienation of feelings, and indeed by a crisis of artistic performance, since it is the lack of values that leads to chaos.

At the same time, we have to admit the fact that we live in a world of impactful slogans and images that bombard us the moment we turn on our TV sets, radios, computers or open a magazine. Being aware or unaware of this, with or without our will, we end up being influenced by publicity and the recipes that sell success. All these imposed values or non-values waste our time and invade our thoughts and imagination. Probably the value of Shakespeare was imposed too, but what has validated it is the fact that it has endured over time. How many of the values imposed at present will endure over time? It is very possible that we shall not find an answer to this question during our earthly existence.

Nowadays value is weighed in quantitative terms: the number of copies sold, the number of editions published, the number of reviews, the number of languages into which a book has been translated, the number of awards received or the position held by a book or author in various rankings. As Saramago remarked, today we represent a number rather than a name, an image rather than an identity. What matters most is how we present ourselves rather than what we do, what our pursuits are or what we genuinely stand for .

Next, the thesis approaches the notions of *influence*, *quotation*, *pastiche* and *plagiarism* – forms of intertextuality and concepts that have been the subject of discussions and controversies and that are mainly applied in contemporary literature. We are surrounded by lists: of names, friends, titles, of things to do, of books to read, etc. Today, instead of discussing a canon of general validity, we discuss rankings, classifications, that is, lists. At the end of the first chapter, we analyse Umberto Eco's latest reconsideration of this term. According to the author's view and application of the term, the list lies at the basis of culture and is part of history and literature. Since what culture attempts to accomplish is to render the infinity comprehensible by describing its forms of manifestation and organising it, the list is primarily viewed as a means of creating order. Library catalogues, museum collections, encyclopedias and dictionaries are forms of the list meant to establish order in a chaotic universe.

Today we believe less and less in canons and only pay lip service to our predecessors by citing, plagiarising or imitating their works to acknowledge their influence on us. It is our firm belief that in order to understand the present, we need to consider the past while not neglecting the future since it is the latter that will judge our achievements. We place faith in progress and evolution, but resort to the list, which already existed in Homer's *Iliad*, in the hope that we will manage to organise and exhaust the multitude of possibilities and the vast quantity of information that assaults us in every area of activity.

The second chapter deals with the importance and role that the book, literature, the author and the reader play in the works of Umberto Eco, the literary theoretician and critic. We analyse the main theoretical writings of the author and review the notions of *author*, *novel*, *reader*, *reading*, *interpretation*, as these are discussed in Eco's studies and in the theories of some of the most prominent text interpreters, such as Paul Ricoeur, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Wolfgang Iser, Ion Vlad and Paul Cornea. We consider it essential to have a realistic view of these terms in order to determine the role and value of books in our days by referring first to Umberto Eco, our principal point of reference.

We also propose a comparative analysis of the following writings: Umberto Eco's *Vegetal Memory* vs Alberto Manguel's *History of Reading*; *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*

vs Italo Calvino's *American Lessons; Confessions of a Young Novelist* vs Borges, *about Borges. Conversations with Borges at 80*, a volume edited by Willis Barnstone; and *Don't Hope You Will Get Rid of Books* vs *With Borges on An Ordinary Evening in Buenos Aires*, another volume edited by Willis Barnstone.

The model author is the voice which speaks affectionately, imperatively or cunningly to the readers in order to win them. This voice manifests itself as a narrative strategy, a set of instructions for the reader to follow at every step if they decide to behave as model readers. The model reader is perceived by the text as a collaborator and is at the same time created by the text. The model reader knows the rules of the game before starting to read a book, observes those rules and is anxious to take part in the game proposed both by the author and the text. The text is a piece of machinery devised to trigger interpretations, but, between the unattainable intention of the author and the debatable intention of the reader, there is the transparent intention of the text, which refutes any interpretation that is impossible to sustain. The contemporary model reader simply has to learn how to select, filter, synthesise, forget what should be forgotten and give more consideration to identity than to numbers.

The third chapter analyses the role, importance and value of the book, the word and the text in Umberto Eco's novels. It also pays attention to such themes as mystery and knowledge in *The Name of the Rose*; the obsession with the word derived from the obsession with knowledge in *Foucault's Pendulum*; the recovery of time and memory through knowledge in *The Island of the Day Before* and *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* and *The Prague Cemetery*. We also treat the relationship between reality and fiction and the author's identification with his own characters, as they are represented in Eco's novels. All his novels develop around a book, a manuscript, a diary, a library, or an attic full of books and documents. Our aim is to highlight his commitment to books, the word, writing, and his passion for collecting books and information about books in order to justify our proposal that our author should be considered a model of success and value of our time. One of Umberto Eco's main qualities is the ability to comprehend the reality around him, adapt to it and integrate into it without abandoning his principles and obsessions. He has understood that if you are in the position to make a claim, in order to impose your point of view, it is better for you to be inside the system than outside it. Umberto Eco the intellectual is aware that for your writings to become valuable and successful in these times it is important that they sell well and that to achieve this you need the support of the system to which you belong. Above all, quality is measured in money and to achieve success it is important to understand and be part of your

times. Only then will you be able to analyse and criticise your system, evaluate the past and anticipate the future.

The present research tries to determine the prospects of survival that books and literature have nowadays. For books and literature to survive, readers and authors need to be anchored in reality and have a thorough grasp of its meaning so that they provide us with alternatives to it and help us to come to terms with it or escape it. Taking Umberto Eco as our point of reference, we try to underline the importance of the book to him and his appreciation of literature as reflected in his novels and studies of literary theory and criticism.

In the last chapter we present Eco's characters along with other similar or opposite characters that have the same obsessions, problems and concerns, and demonstrate that, regardless of the historical period they embody, they are extremely actual and emblematic for today's world. The dichotomy between good and evil and between the good of ignorance and the evil of absolute knowledge, the struggle of the human mind to attain a balance between the desire to know everything and its limitations are constant preoccupations of Eco's fictional heroes; they are nothing else but the multiple facets of his complex personality.

We discover, albeit in different styles and forms, the same passion for the book, the word and knowledge, and the same themes, i.e. memory, identity and the rediscovery of the past, in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, José Saramago, Daniel Pennac, Rita Monaldi and Francesco Sorti. We have analysed some novels and characters of these authors in comparison with our author and deem that the comparative approach and the conclusions we have reached are essentially our original contribution to the field of comparative literature, to which our thesis belongs.

We first approach Borges, for whom Umberto Eco has a special admiration, whose influence he has acknowledged several times, and whom he implicitly and explicitly mentions in his writings. The two authors share the same love for the book and are convinced of its ability to survive in a world that is continuously predicting its end. The attempt to solve the Babel library's labyrinth ends for Borges with the hope that the library and the knowledge that is hidden in the pages of its books will endure even if the human species should disappear. The Library is unlimited and periodical and if there were an eternal reader of this boundless library, he or she would be able to understand after centuries of reading that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder, a recurring disorder that in the end was turned into order. This utopia remains just an "elegant hope", as Borges names it, for those who live their lives among books and who aspire, just as the copyist monks from the

Benedictine abbey after years and years of commitment to the “holy work of copying”, to create something new themselves.

Both Borges and Eco have a prodigious memory of the texts read (paper memory) that could invent a sixteenth or eighteenth century manuscript and convince us that it is an original document that has just been retrieved from the dusty shelves of a labyrinth library. Like his character Yambo, the antiquarian from the *Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, who relives his life through quotes from books read over the years, or like the secret agent Simonini, who is suffering from amnesia and begins to keep a diary hoping to remember certain events from his past and to regain through memory his lost identity, they could create stories endlessly by rewriting the present, past and future texts.

From the comparison with Saramago we learn that man is the product of his past, not only at the individual level, as an accumulated memory of one’s life, but also collectively. Collective memory, or community memory, shapes and conditions the individual as much as personal experience. Salvation is found in and through the book, in and through writing. The novel, the book, the writing become for Saramago, as well as for Eco, a repeatedly resumed struggle against forgetting. Forgetting finds its antidote in the investigation of the past, which, no matter how remote it may be, continues to constitute the subject of writing.

The comparison with Daniel Pennac leads us to the following conclusions: Pennac’s faith that if life is not always a novel, the novel must necessarily contain life, and Eco’s faith that life surpasses the novel most of the times. A parallelism between the two novels seems relevant from the perspective of the tribute paid to the word by the two contemporary writers. Although their styles differ, they both invoke the same reason for/purpose of their existence, namely their love for the word and the book.

Both writers demonstrate that they are fully grounded in reality and perceive the spirit of the times we live in, but they do not give up their passion for the book and the word, and their desire to learn and discover the world, which they try to transfer to their readers too. Whether they choose irony, exaggeration, or sometimes the absurd or the return to the past or to a relative present, the two writers are conscious of the reality of our world and through the themes they approach they prove to be fine observers of the way in which the contemporary society and culture are evolving.

With the writing of *The Name of the Rose*, structured after a detective novel formula, Eco discovers that the plot, story and action can be recovered in the form of quoting other plots, actions. In his *Apostilles* to the novel he launches a definition of postmodernism based on this new poetics of citation, to which he will remain faithful in his subsequent fictional

writings. A book is an open world that communicates with the world around it and the open worlds of the other books. The characters migrate from one text to another. The text is like a musical score: the echoes of the sounds remain in the ears and in the mind, and spread around us to compose other songs.

Borges has defined the theory of the text as a generator of other texts, or a “book of books” resulting from infinite connections, from invoking the great books of the world, and from their *memory*, which generates a system of correlations and of unexpected associations, analogies and endless encounters in the privileged space of the Library.

The intertext means the impossibility of living outside the infinite text, and intertextuality requires a return to an archetype, an original text, the initial model and space that we keep searching for, from which we distance ourselves, but to which we always return.

Texts are made rather than written; they are products of the author’s memory of the books read, which feeds itself on other books, texts and words, a memory that generates other words, texts and books and that obliges us to read them over and over again until we penetrate their density and decipher them. These are books that remind us of other books, some of which have not been written yet, as the reader in the hell library would say, but which will guide us to other books.

The world of the book is an opportunity for us to get out of our own universe and see it from other perspectives, understand that we are not alone and find solutions to our daily or existential problems.

As long as books as those mentioned in this research continue to be published, we believe that we can fully agree with Umberto Eco and hope that “we will not get rid of the books” and that people will continue to write and read quality books that have a message for us, give us food for thought, impact and transform us.

The reading book is one of the wonders of that modern technology that includes the wheel, the knife, the spoon, the hammer, the pot, the bicycle, says Umberto Eco at the beginning of the dialogue from *Don't Hope You Will Get Rid of Books*; therefore, we cannot abandon it. The book will remain what it is. The book is like the spoon, the hammer, the wheel or the chisel: once invented, they cannot be improved significantly. You cannot invent a better spoon than a spoon.

The book as an object is likely to survive the rapid evolution of technology through the passion and effort of the book lovers. We dare say that, as long as there remains a touch of humanity in us, the paper book will survive too. Maybe it will become a useless object, but this object will appeal to our feelings, to a special bond between man and the objects around

him. Therefore, we consider useful and beneficial any attempt of appreciation of the book despite the times that are changing faster than we want and are able to accept.

The message that emerges from the works of the authors analysed in our thesis is that, in order to acquire knowledge and create, we must maintain our memory awake, invent and reinvent ourselves, discover and rediscover ourselves, that is, remember things known and unknown, experienced or just intuited, seen, heard, or spoken, so that we become spectators and actors of our own world and the world in which we would like to live.

While we accept that *nihil sub sole novum*, we believe that sunlight can help us to see the world through different eyes every day.