

Book Reviews

The Name of the Rose. UMBERTO ECO. Translated by William Weaver. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. 502 p. ISBN 0-15-144647-4 \$15.95.

The Name of the Rose is a novel written on many levels. Set in a wealthy Italian abbey in the year 1327, it is, at its simplest, a fine blend of mystery and Gothic novel with a little sodomy and sex thrown in for good measure. On a mission from the Holy Roman Emperor to reach an accord with representatives of the Avignonese Pope, Franciscan Brother William of Baskerville arrives at the abbey to find the community in the grip of strange events which eventually lead to seven bizarre deaths and the destruction of the abbey. On another plane, the mystery itself serves as a way for Eco to indulge in his favourite topics: medieval philosophy, church history, and various skeins of heresy and corruption — all of which are probed with the detective techniques employed by William of Baskerville. Styling himself a moderate deconstructionist, the author builds his story on the questioning of texts. Eco has said: “There is not one immutable meaning or truth, intended or otherwise, but many. You have to extract all the implications or interpretations hidden within (a text).” (*Vogue*, April 1984, p. 393) Finally, the book exudes the author’s leading passion, semiotics — the philosophical study of signs and symbols as linguistic portrayals of reality.

Fine, but the patient reader may ask what makes this book merit review in a journal dedicated to archives and archival science? The major reason is that Eco focuses his philosophical questioning on the role of information and knowledge in a relatively primitive but rapidly changing society. The abbey’s main claim to fame is its library, a universal storehouse of knowledge which is described as the only light of Christianity against Islam. The library and the monastic community surrounding it become the symbolic backdrop for a battle between those who view knowledge as a corrupting force and those who view it, when unfettered, as a source for human good and development. As the ex-inquisitor and budding detective, William of Baskerville, tells us, the battle in the abbey is greater than that between Pope John and Emperor Louis because it is over a *forbidden book*, and it is for this book that men die.

There is no question about which side William is on. He is an ardent admirer of Francis Bacon, the originator of the dictum “knowledge itself is power” (a

phrase now corrupted by a host of two-bit commentators whenever they wish to attempt to say something profound about our so-called new information society). William carries Bacon to a deserved niche high above this crass modernism. His is the quintessential inquiring mind so elegantly summed up in a reply he makes to his assistant, Adso, regarding why he wishes to know certain facts: "Because learning does not consist only of knowing what we must or we can do but also of knowing what we could and perhaps should not do." (p. 97) This inquisitive yet sophisticated nature propels William forward in unravelling the "nice, complicated knots" (p. 394) which make up the mystery surrounding the deaths in the abbey. In the process, he tells us a great deal about the peculiar people who dedicate their lives to the acquisition, ordering, and preservation of books and documents and who sometimes maintain a desire to use the accumulated knowledge housed within their collections.

The interplay between the great library and the men of books who would tap its mighty secrets is essential to the mystery. The library itself is unique in its comprehensiveness, organization, security arrangements, and role. That the library is the universal storehouse of knowledge, we are left in no doubt. In its demise, William laments: "It was the greatest library in Christendom, the Antichrist is truly at hand, because no learning will hinder him any more." (p. 491) Because of its size and antiquity, the library has its own unique three number classification system: the first number indicates the position of the book on the shelf; the second is the shelf number; and the third is the case number followed by a designation of room or corridor. The books are "registered in order of acquisition, donation, or entrance within our walls." (p. 75) Indeed, as William and Adso discover by surreptitiously entering the library, it reproduces the map of the world, and the books are arranged according to the country of origin of their authors or where their authors should have been born.

Here, however, a problem begins to appear. Abo, the abbot, is proud of the library but claims secrecy about its organization and contents. It becomes obvious immediately to William that there is censorship of the library by those in authority. The librarian, Malachi, warns Adso about the organization system: "It is . . . right and sufficient that only the librarian knows how to decipher these things." Regarding the locations of books Malachi added: "It is enough for the librarian to know them by heart and to know when each book came here." (p. 75) The information in the library is shrouded in mystery; as one monk puts it: "The secrets of learning are well defended by works of magic." (p. 89) How reminiscent this is of creators of systems, including our own generation's beloved computer systems analysts! Lost in the plumbing of their system, they will claim a secrecy for it which through the use of inside knowledge and jargon is elevated to the realm of magic and the occult.

For this storehouse, as for all others, mysticism is not enough. Specific security arrangements must be carried much farther. Abo is again the chief spokesman. He points out that "devout men have toiled for centuries observing iron rules" (p. 35) to create the institution of the library. To guarantee the library's secret, the building has been laid out on a plan which has remained obscure over the centuries. It is a labyrinth which only the librarian knows, and he passes his knowledge on to his successor at death. The other monks, the users of the

library, may work in the scriptorium outside the shelving area and may know the list of volumes, but only the librarian may know a volume's "degree of inaccessibility" and "what secrets, what truths, what falsehoods" it contains. (p. 37) Because the collection in the library does not attempt to distinguish between divine truth and falsehood, a crude censorship is employed to ensure that books do not fall into the wrong hands — "not all truths are for all ears." (p. 37) Abo attempts to conceal the starkness of such a rule by claiming the need for conservation: "A book is a fragile creature, it suffers the wear of time, it fears rodents, the elements, clumsy hands." (p. 38) Malachi, a less sophisticated man than his abbot, has no doubts, however, about his role when answering William's query about the pentagon of Solomon: "Before giving you that book, I would prefer to ask abbot's advice." (p. 76)

This censorship grows out of the role which has been selected for the library by succeeding generations of abbots and librarians. For them, man is becoming smaller than the ancients as the world races to the Apocalypse. The role of the library is to *preserve*, *repeat*, and *defend* the treasure of Christian wisdom "without changing a syllable." (pp. 36-37) For Jorge, the evil influence behind the conservative forces in the abbey, there is no doubt that "God decreed that certain papers should bear the words '*hic sunt leones*'." (p. 421) He is willing to die a terrible death and drag down the entire community with him to conceal knowledge. His enemies are those who would *use* the information in the library to create new knowledge and break down the citadel mentality which keeps the library closed to new ideas and texts in the vernacular. The modernists would secure the Church's intellectual position in competition with the cathedral schools, cities, and universities. This conflict between preservation and use brings the community to grief. As Adso discovers: "For these men devoted to writing, the library was at once the celestial Jerusalem and an underground world on the border between terra incognita and Hades . . . they were dominated by the library . . . by its promises and by its prohibitions . . . They lived with it, for it, and perhaps against it, sinfully hoping one day to violate all its secrets." (p. 184)

For the conservatives in the abbey, the search for new knowledge is either a sign of professional weakness or capitulation to intellectual pride and a lust equal to carnal desire. In both cases the sin is plain, and it is blamed on the corrupt new urban society which is growing around the abbey. For Jorge, there is nothing but "sublime recapitulation" (p. 399) of the word of God and Christ. There is only "to continue meditation, to gloss, preserve." (p. 399) As Adso comes to realize, this view of the library means that it must exist in splendid isolation without users; it must become "the preserve of learning but can maintain this learning unsullied only if it prevents its reaching anyone at all, even the monks themselves." (p. 185) For Adso, a young novice, the revelation he learns from William is that one book is meant to be studied in conjunction with others and, most importantly, that "books are not made to be believed but to be subjected to inquiry." (p. 316) Adso also discovers that there is a basic flaw in the scholarly side. Benno, a chief advocate of open use of the library, is made assistant librarian on that official's unhappy death. He immediately forgets his noble ambitions and accepts the code of secrecy because, as William

philosophizes, he has that fearful lust for knowledge for its own sake. He does not wish to employ knowledge for the good of others but to indulge a prideful, insatiable curiosity for books for their own sake. William views this as a sterile course which has brought the library to a state where it "was perhaps born to save the books it houses but now it lives to bury them. This is why it has become a sink of iniquity." (p. 396) In the end, William cannot prevent Jorge from carrying out his mad plot to suppress that knowledge which he considered untruthful and seditious to Christian thinking. In an "insane passion for truth," the old monk pulls down the library which embodies the very ideal he has dedicated his life to preserve.

All this is esoteric you may say. Yet, it seems to me that William of Baskerville might well be shocked if he investigated conditions in some of our modern archival institutions. Certainly, the following allegations have been made by users: access to collections is becoming more difficult to obtain; archivists, librarians, and curators are becoming more caught up in their individual professionalism than interested in the information under their control; they are becoming less accessible to users and the "iron rules" governing institutions are impeding the true dispensation of knowledge. Each of these points is, of course, disputable and should be in constant debate between those employed by institutions and the users. It can also be tossed back to scholars that much of their search for knowledge is, like Benno's, self-serving, lustful, and in the end sterile — perhaps some serious professional reappraisal is necessary. Finally, one might ask archivists and librarians if they have really come to terms with Adso's discovery that one book speaks of another; that over the centuries there is an "old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, a living thing, a receptacle of powers not to be ruled by a human mind, a treasure of secrets emanated by many minds, surviving the death of those who had produced them or had been their conveyors." (p. 286) How many appraisal and acquisition programs truly come to grips with the tradition and role of the institution they serve rather than momentary whim and transient fad? Again, this is a debatable point but, as with all the others, one which Eco's work makes a useful touchstone for debate.

Beyond these rather specific points, there are others which are of somewhat broader application. Above all else, *The Name of the Rose* is about the futility of secrecy over long periods of time. As Adso asks: "What is the use of hiding books, if from the books not hidden you can arrive at the ideas in the concealed one?" (p. 256) A good point, it would seem to me. As Sissela Bok claims in her excellent book, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York, 1982), bias and hypocrisy blend with genuine efforts at justification in many debates concerning the collective practices of secrecy. Certainly, bias and hypocrisy were very much at the basis of secrecy in our fictional abbey, but in how many modern institutions is this also the case? Eco may bring a new jargon to the trade of access to information with his lovely phrase "degree of inaccessibility."

Finally, Eco also apprises the reader of another problem which is becoming more prevalent in our modern world. The abbey's library is the depository of knowledge and its abbot and librarian the "custodians of the divine word."

(pp. 36-37) It is for this reason that the secrets are maintained. But the more radical group in the abbey wants to open the library to the potentates of the cities who will buy its knowledge to promote their civic prestige. The radicals will use information and knowledge as a commodity. How like our own times when both government and business are coming increasingly to support the view that information is a marketable commodity. Is this really a solution or just the basis of another difficult problem? As Anita R. Schiller has pointed out, "we are coming dangerously close to the point where not only information, but research as well, is increasingly regarded as a commodity, whose proprietary economic value to the private sector transcends all other values, interests and uses it has in society. In this evolving environment, how long will it be before the suppression of ideas, for proprietary reasons, begins to be seen as necessary and reasonable?" (*Library Issues*, 4, no. 2 (November 1983)) A grim picture, but one that must be confronted by archivists and librarians alike if the traditional precepts of their professions are not to be overridden by the information merchants of our age.

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Canada Home: Juliana Horatia Ewing's Fredericton Letters, 1867-1869. MARGARET HOWARD BLOM and THOMAS E. BLOM, eds., Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983. 455 p. illus. ISBN 0-7748-0174-3 \$24.95.

The appearance of these letters is a major event in Maritime documentary publishing. Mrs. Ewing was a children's writer of distinction, wit, and grace in a milieu awash with maudlin sentimentality. Her letters, often long and discursive, are filled with sharply observed local detail. Between 1867 and 1869, there was a steady flow of them to "Dearest Mum" and sisters in Yorkshire, England; they are letters filled with a sense of joy and wonder at the natural environment of the provincial capital, and were no doubt stimulated by an obviously happy marriage.

Mrs. Ewing (I cannot bring myself to call her by her Christian name, which would seem to presume!) was, like the Bronte sisters, a daughter of the parsonage. She grew up in Ecclesfield in the West Riding of Yorkshire where her father, Alfred Gatty, held the living of St. Mary's for sixty-three years. In the words of the editors, the Gattys made "an amazing family even for Victorian times." The sheer intellectual industry, output, informed acquisition, and relentless curiosity which characterised so many of the well-educated middle class were epitomised in the Gattys. By the time of her marriage to Alexander Ewing, a captain in the military commissariat, and her arrival in Fredericton shortly thereafter, Mrs. Ewing was a nationally recognised successful author whose fame was to outlast her short life. As late as 1930, I was reading her *Jackanapes* with pleasure; it is *not* another *Little Lord Fauntleroy*.