

The 'Influence' of Borges in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*

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ABSTRACT

Ever since its publication, *The Name of the Rose* has received much critical acclaim as a seminal postmodern text. It invariably includes all the typical postmodern traits, including intertextuality and an ironic revisiting of the past. Critics have found a great influence of the Argentine author, Jorge Luis Borges, on Eco's novel. Without denying the 'influence', however, it would be pertinent to point out Eco's own views on this matter. Being a postmodern artist, Eco presents the past with ironic overtures; and Borges being a part of the past, has been looked at with irony. This is what the paper would try to present: how Eco ironically appropriates Borges in his novels as part of a greater cultural inheritance, thus subverting 'influence' with 'appropriation'. These two concepts are the key to understand the manner in which Eco makes use of Borges, thus negating the effect of what Bloom calls the 'anxiety of influence'.

Key words: Influence, Appropriation, Intertextuality, Irony

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a discussion on how the Italian novelist Umberto Eco uses the postmodern concepts of intertextuality and irony to deal with his appropriation of past writers, especially, Jorge Luis Borges. Ever since its coinage by the French feminist Julia Kristeva in 'Word, Dialogue and the Novel'(1966), the term 'intertextuality' has been much in vogue in postmodern critical studies. Eco presents intertextuality as 'intertextual irony' and distinguishes it from quotations and other forms of allusions (Eco, 'Intertextual Irony and Levels of Reading', 2006). The present paper uses this concept of intertextuality along with the concepts of 'appropriation' and 'influence' to talk about Eco's indebtedness to Borges in writing *The Name of the Rose* (1983).

Influence and Appropriation:

'Influence' and 'Appropriation' are two terms that are recurrently used in contemporary lit-

erary studies. While influence often indicates a conscious or sub-conscious effect of other writers and their works on an author, 'appropriation' has more of a critical stance. What we read often gets reflected in our writing because this is how our mind works. For instance, in 'Borges and My Anxiety of Influence' Umberto Eco states that readers have discovered the influence of a book he had read when he was twelve, on the plot of *The Name of the Rose* (Eco, *On Literature*, p.120). Appropriation occurs when an author deliberately uses another writer's influence, through conscious irony, to either write back to that author, or to critically reconstruct his/her work. This paper will discuss these two concepts by looking at the relation between Jorge Luis Borges and Umberto Eco.

Ever since the appearance of *The Name of the Rose*, critics and scholars have been busy trying to figure out the extent of Borges' influence on the novel. My paper too will make an attempt to analyze the numerous ways in which the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges influences Umberto

Eco. Though this influence is perceived in almost all of Eco's novels, my concern here will be to illustrate the same with reference to *The Name of the Rose*. A quick glance at the novel would tell any reader that the presence of Borges in the novel cannot be denied. The old, blind librarian of the monastery is named Jorge; the structure of the library itself echoes Borges's 'The Library of Babel'; and at the centre of the novel surrounded by two chief Borgesian motifs, the mirror and the labyrinthine library, sits the old Jorge guarding, as it were, his world. Apart from these there are more subtle influences of form, of signs and of philosophy that only a deeper study of the novel will reveal. Having said this, we also need to remember that Eco was a postmodern artist who would look at any form of the past with conscious irony, including a past writer. Indeed, he himself has remarked that trying to find precise allusions to this or that in his novels is a waste of time (Eco, 124). Therefore in my attempt to find Borges' influence on Eco, I have not ignored the concepts of intertextuality and parody of history that are an integral part of his work.

My own argument in this paper has been influenced particularly by two articles – Deborah Parker's "Literature of Appropriation: Eco's Use of Borges in *Il Nome Della Rosa*" (1990) and Umberto Eco's "Borges and my Anxiety of Influence" (2006). Both the papers discuss the influence of Borges on Eco, but with a difference. Parker in her essay enumerates the ways in which Eco 'appropriates' Borges in his novel. In the book *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders defines 'appropriation' as a concept that 'introduces ideas of active critical commentary, of creative re-interpretation and of "writing back" to the original', and adds that it is 'often defined in terms of a hostile takeover or possession' (Sanders, 2006). This definition coheres with Parker's view of Umberto Eco's exploitation of Borges. She says that Eco exploits Borges' works as well as his cultural image. While the appropriation of Borges' motifs and plots constitute a positive debt, the appropriation of the political image of Borges is negative. Parker has made quite an elaborate analysis of how Eco has used Borges in his novel and men-

tions in passing that Eco's own attitude towards Borges in the novel is ambiguous. This is where I would choose to differ. In my opinion it is not ambiguous but ironic. We might here take a look at "Borges and My Anxiety of Influence". This essay was originally a talk presented at a conference held at the University of Castilla-La Mancha on the literary relationship between Borges and Eco. The title of Eco's paper alludes to Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' which is quite interesting because the entire paper talks about the influence of books on other books. Without denying his indebtedness to Borges, Eco remarks that he is in that manner indebted to every book of the past and present that he had read or glanced at or even heard about: "...this most important point is that books talk to each other" (Eco, 122). Through this allusion to intertextuality Eco leads us to the important issue of ironically viewing the influence of one author on another. Borges belongs to Eco's past and the past has to be looked upon with conscious irony.

Having said this let us first look at evidence from the novel of Eco's appropriation of Borges. A glaring influence of Borges is seen in the construction of the library. The Aedificium that contains the library is a maze. The library itself is a labyrinth and is a symbol of the universe which is a bigger labyrinth. In 'The Library of Babel' (Borges, Labyrinths, pp.78-86)¹, the narrator tells us:

"The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between...in the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances." (Borges, p.78)

In *The Name of the Rose* Adso narrates the following:

"Holding the lamp in front of me I ventured into the next rooms. A giant of threatening dimensions, a swaying and fluttering form came towards me...(William) also saw something, because he brusquely stepped back. Then he leaned forward again and raised the lamp. He burst out laughing. 'Really ingenious. A mirror!' 'A mirror?' 'Yes, my bold warrior...a mirror that reflects your image, enlarged and distorted'".

(Emphasis added)

These two examples from two texts speak a lot. Eco apparently imitates Borges in constructing the library but only to invert it. The mirror which "faithfully duplicates" appearances in Borges presents a "distorted" image in Eco. Speaking about the use of spectacles by William in *The Name of the Rose*, Eco mentions the influence of 'Averroes' Search' (Borges, pp.180-188), a short story by Borges: "This is not a Borgesian technique; mine is an 'anti-Averroes model' but without Borges's model before me I would never have been able to conceive it" (Eco, p.128). The implications of this remark are many. First of all, Eco admits that he has been influenced by Borges. Secondly, he seems to tell us that he is using Borges only as he might use any other material of the past. Moreover, he also mentions that it is inevitable that he be influenced by Borges because both of them draw from what he calls 'the sometimes millennial chain of culture'. Therefore, in Eco's opinion, both of them might have been influenced by common past sources. Eco proves this point by referring back to the presence of the labyrinthine library in *The Name of the Rose*. Though readers often consider it the most conspicuous proof of Borges' influence on Eco, the latter says that it is not so. Theorists of postmodernism regard the labyrinth as a recurrent image in almost all contemporary literature, which implies that Eco might have found his source anywhere. This is how Eco treats every attempt at pointing out Borges' influence on him – with an ironic reversal.

This kind of parody of historical influences abounds in postmodern fiction. As Parker notes, 'Affirmation and applauding of the use of the past is characteristic of present post-modern writers'. They acknowledge the appropriation of other writers...at times even flaunting such incorporation. As a true postmodern artist Eco too is audible about his allusions to Borges but he does not give the latter the credit he deserves. Having said this, let us now move on to the other obvious allusions to Borges. Historicizing of fiction is an interesting parallel that we find in Borges and Eco. In the story, 'Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (Borges, pp.27-43), the narrator leaves no stones unturned

to authenticate the story about a new planet called Tlon. Every reader would of course understand that it is pure fiction and yet the references to all the sources in which a mention of Tlon is made would tell us that it is a scientific and historical fact. In *The Name of the Rose* Eco uses a similar technique when he painstakingly goes through all the processes of finding relevant references to Adso's manuscript. However there is a twist when the narrator of Adso's story remarks: 'In short, I am full of doubts. I really don't know why I have decided to pluck up my courage and present, as if it were authentic, the manuscript of Adso of Melk' (Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 5). It is this kind of reversal that make Eco's novel a postmodern work that defeats every attempt at finding definite influences of past authors, while all the time reminding us of the influences.

Another such evidence of the use of Borges is the character of Jorge. When asked the reason for creating an evil Jorge, Eco replied that when he gave that name to that particular character, he had not known what the character would later do in the novel. This remark from Eco raises questions pertaining to the extent of Borges's influence on him. Does Borges actually influence Eco as much as it is generally made out? Eco himself admits that he does; at least some of his works did have an enormous influence on Eco, but not in the way most readers perceive. Jorge is a Spanish-speaking blind, erudite librarian. He is the custodian of the labyrinthine library, although he is no longer formally in charge. He believes that it is important to protect knowledge from the masses. He detests laughter and he is responsible for all the murders that take place in the abbey. He is juxtaposed against Roger Bacon whom William admires and Severinus who believes that "it is useful for monks to exchange the accumulated treasures of their learning" (Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 68). Jorge is presented here as a conservative patriarch who dreads the legitimization of the marginalized voices of society. Parker finds a parallel between the image of Jorge and the cultural image of Borges. Borges, she says is well-known for his detachment from the concerns of the masses. He is less accessible to general readers for his use of

compressed narration and esoteric literary allusions. Eco, on the other hand, tries to reach a mass readership. Here again, we see that Eco uses Borges's image only to differ from him. We only need to draw our attention to the debates between Jorge and William throughout the novel to prove this point. Jorge differs from William in his views about the dissemination of knowledge to the masses, in his view of laughter as an evil, and in his view of Roger Bacon. While Jorge believes that Aristotle's treatise on laughter, if made public, would ruin the world, William believes that it would make the world a better place to live in. William fails to understand why Jorge would damn himself in order to hide the book by Aristotle. If we consider William to be Eco's mouthpiece, then we shall understand why Parker says that Borges's stance is opposite of Eco's. However the fact is that it is difficult to accept everything that Parker says. From Borges's 'Library of Babel' we learn that Borges is equally unhappy with the inaccessibility of certain books, as the narrator says, "The certitude that some shelf in some hexagon held precious books and that these precious books were inaccessible, seemed almost intolerable" (Borges, p.83). In *The Name of the Rose* William believes that keeping the sources of knowledge secret is a great evil.

In such and other things we do find similarities between Borges and Eco. In form and style, at least, Eco was certainly influenced by Borges. *The Name of the Rose* is among other things a detective novel. In writing this novel Eco admits being influenced by Borges's 'Death and the Compass'. In that story, Borges deconstructs the form of the detective story – the detective Lonnot fails to find any design in the series of murders and realizes it was only a ploy to trap him. Similarly, Eco while providing the reader with the thrill of a detective novel, defeats the genre and the detective because there was an absence of design in the murders. As the murderer Jorge is surprised to learn so are we the readers that William the detective found out the murderer only out of chance. As Jorge asks William, "You have shown me that you have arrived here by following a false reasoning. What do you mean to say to

me?" (Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 471). Just as the murderer in 'Death and the Compass' had been expecting the arrival of the detective from the beginning so Jorge too in Eco's novel had been awaiting expectantly the arrival of William. In fact he had been waiting for William in the library. Later on William tells Adso, "I arrived at Jorge through an apocalyptic pattern that seemed to underlie all the crimes, and yet it was accidental... I arrived at Jorge pursuing the plan of a perverse and rational mind, and there was no plan..." (Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 472). A detective who is defeated by his obsession with signs and designs when he finally realizes there is no design reminds us of the exhaustion of certain literary forms as suggested by Barth in his 'Literature of Exhaustion'. In this essay, Barth extols Borges for his ability to make the best of 'aesthetic ultimacies' or 'formal dead-ends'. In this context reference is made to the story 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote' (Borges, pp.62-71). Borges's appropriation of the Quixote text shows that he has found a way out of the possible 'exhaustion of literary forms'. Pierre Menard's Quixote is an original text in the sense that the contemporary readers would perceive the story in a different way from the original readers. The same could be said of Eco. It is interesting that Eco actually includes the Pierre Menard story in his list of influences from Borges. As I have mentioned earlier, the narrator is full of doubts about the truth of the Adso manuscript and yet proceeds to present it. Eco makes him do this because he wanted to be the Pierre Menard of this medieval text. He knew that the 'faithful' rewriting of the medieval story would have a different meaning for contemporary readers.

It would not be wrong to say that Eco achieves this through intertextuality and use of history. The detective hero in the novel is William of Baskerville. In the Italian version he is called Guglielmo da Baskerville. He is an ardent admirer of Roger Bacon who wrote a treatise on the use of spectacles in 1262. Now Baskerville would remind the modern reader of Conan Doyle's The Hound of the Baskervilles, and the Detective of Baskerville would certainly speak of Sherlock Holmes, the immortal creation of Doyle. The names Roger

Bacon and Guglielmo would be linked together because Guglielmo is also the first name of Marconi who gave us the Radio. Similarly, the name William suggests an allusion to William of Ockham who was a Franciscan friar and had formulated a law of parsimony now called Occam's razor. This law holds that one should accept as most likely, the simplest explanation that accounts for all facts. William of Baskerville seems to follow this principle when he tries to solve the case of multiple murders in the abbey. So this list of names that Adso so innocently refers to, create a series of interconnected historical and fictional personalities that would lead any modern reader to draw a number of interpretations of the novel. Adso's original manuscript would, of course, fail to do so. The exhausted detective form showcasing the failure of the detective in Adso's manuscript thus gets transformed into what Linda Hutcheon terms 'Historiographic Metafiction'. In this kind of fiction, history and fiction are given parallel status following the postmodern belief that both history and literature are human constructs. In the chapter on 'Intertextuality, Parody and the Discourses of History' in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon remarks that '(these) un-innocent paradoxical historiographic metafiction situate themselves within historical discourse while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction' (Hutcheon, 124). For Eco as well as Borges the texts of literature and of history are equal in status. This is why Borges makes use of *Don Quixote*, Encyclopedia Britannica and Hart's *History of World War I* with equal flair. And this is also why Eco uses Jorge Borges in the same way that he would use medieval history, scientific treatises and works written by earlier writers.

Therefore we find Eco using Borges's style of writing a detective story. In this he says he was much influenced by 'Death and the Compass' (Borges, pp.106-117). We also see that like Borges, Eco makes his narrator go through all the labours of placing his story in a historical context, to authenticate it. Like Borges, we find Eco parodying literary genres; in *The Name of the Rose* the detective story is parodied. Like Borges, again, Eco believes that books talk to other books and therefore a library becomes the tower of Babel

where all kinds of books speak all kinds of languages. These seem to the general reader very clear evidences of Borges's influence on Eco. However, while discussing a postmodern writer like Eco, we cannot be misled by apparent clarity. I would like to go back to Eco's essay 'Borges and my Anxiety of Influence'. The first thing that strikes us here is the word 'anxiety'. The manner in which Eco plays on the question of Borges's influence clearly shows he is far from anxious. In fact he is ironically presenting the influence. At the beginning of the essay, he discusses an earlier writer, A's influence on B, a later writer. This can only be a one-way influence – of A on B. However, Eco refers to a third factor X. This X is the chain of previous influences that we call culture. In discussing Borges's influence on his writing Eco says that the 'culture' factor is important because Borges used universal culture as an instrument of play in his works. By bringing in the play of culture, Eco ironically subdues Borges's influence even while admitting it. He says that in fact it was a network of influences and echoes that came into play in his novels and not the influence of a single author. At a particular point in Eco's novel, towards the end, Adso is taken aback by the mutual admiration between Jorge and William. This could well be interpreted as an attraction felt by Eco for Borges. However, Eco says that he was at that time thinking of Proust, of that scene where Charlus tries to seduce Jupien, in *Sodome and Gomorrah*. He also mentions the influence of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* on the plot of *The Name of the Rose*, which very few readers have been able to trace. This shows how for Eco books by other authors bear a continuous influence on his books. This overturns the importance attached by his scholars on the influence of Borges on his works.

What we can derive from all this is that Eco views Borges as a part of the past, the literary and historical past to which he always turns with conscious irony. Even when he professes to be unconscious of the influence, he is still referring to Borges's works as part of the greater culture. In this therefore, I opt to differ from Deborah Parker who sees more of cultural appropriation of Borges

than literary. I, on the other hand, would say that it is the literary oeuvre of Borges that Eco turns to and appropriates whenever he wants to. He need not feel the anxiety of being influenced by Borges because it is he who actually uses Borges at his own free will. And the irony is that he needs to use Borges or any part of his cultural past in order to situate his novel within the discourse of history itself. As Linda Hutcheon points out in 'Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History', 'a literary work can no longer be considered original; if it were it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance.' If we now look into the influence of 'Averroes's Search', which I had mentioned only in passing, we shall see that it is pertinent to Hutcheon's discussion of the importance of history to a postmodernist writer like Eco. There could be no simpler and better illustration of its role than what is said by Averroes the character:

Zuhair's verse, when he composed it in Arabia, served to confront two images, the old camel and destiny; when we repeat it now, it serves to evoke the memory of Zuhair and to fuse our misfortune with that dead Arab's. (Borges, p.186).

What Averroes speaks about here is how texts of the past present the present-day readers with layers of interpretation and open up intertextual relationships. This is what Borges believes in as a writer and so does Eco, which brings to light the extent to which Borges is present in Eco's works. It would not be wrong to say perhaps then that the relationship between Eco and Borges can be assessed and understood only in the context of intertextuality and a universal cultural past that all postmodern writers share.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the paper attempts to validate the statement that in postmodern writing, the anxiety of influence has been dealt with through irony. Intertextual irony helps the author to relate with the past without facing the accusation of plagiarism. All texts according to the concept of intertextuality

are made up of a network of other texts, and therefore, there is no question of imitating a past author. All authors are a part of, and use, what Eco calls 'universal culture' or 'the universe of intertextuality' (Eco, 'Borges and My Anxiety of Influence', p.119-121). This is why Eco flaunts everything he borrows from Borges, and yet says with a 'wink' that all of it was already written.

Note:

All references of page numbers of Borges's short stories are to the book, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*.

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