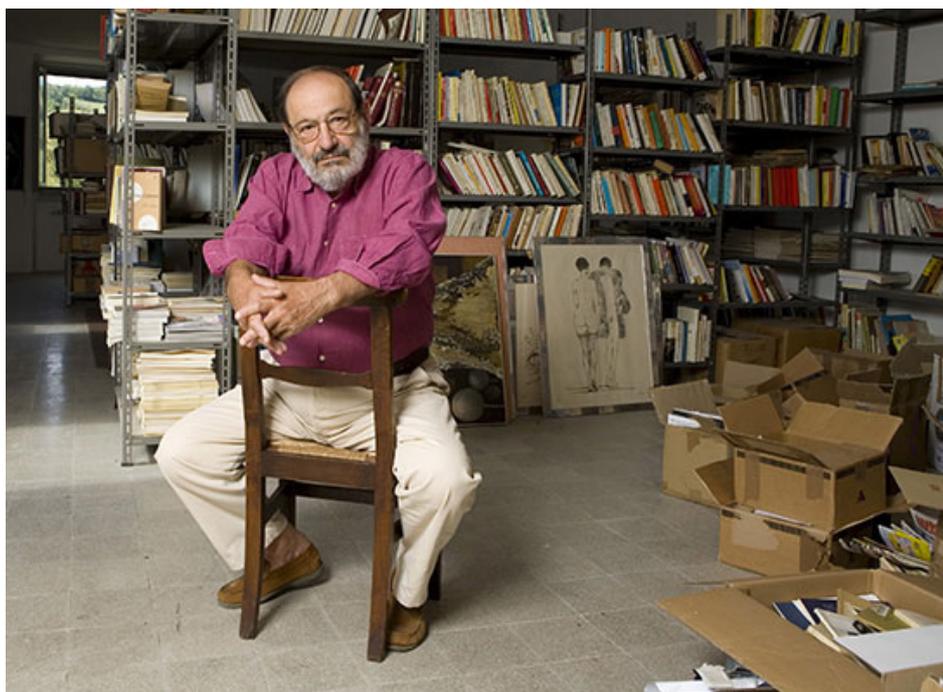


A bibliophile of huge Ec(h)o at Yale

When I asked Umberto Eco to come to Yale for this celebration he told me: *"I have been teaching there for three years and I even know in which pubs I could drink the best Martini on the rocks"*.

In 1990 Eco published *How to Travel with a Salmon* and in 1997 an essay on cognition titled *Kant and the Platypus*: as we came together from Italy, and I am now talking before him, I am anyway very honoured to have the chance of playing here the part either of the *salmon* or the *Platypus* !

As I am among the happy few in the world who has given 4 lectures together with him, I would like to introduce here, in such a place as the Beinecke, Umberto Eco not as the best-known living Italian writer, nor as the great professor of semiotics: I would like to talk about him as a bibliophile and a writer about books, revealing the *Liaisons dangereuses* between the collector and his own "pusher" of rare books.



When my adventure in the antiquarian books began, the fax didn't exist, e-mails couldn't even be imagined, and the book-lovers rarely went to the expense of a phone call. So, every morning I waited expectantly for written orders from our catalogues, often beautiful handwritten letters. Almost seven centuries ago another famous bibliophile, wrote to a friend: *"An insatiable passion possesses me, which even today I cannot and would not stop... I never grow tired of books. Perhaps I have more than necessary, but getting the book you seek stirs further the desire ... they are faithful and beloved friends at the same time, ready to blame you, to give you advices"*. Sadly I don't possess any of Francesco Petrarca's autograph *epistolae*, but I guard jealously letters received from other notable collectors such as Umberto Eco: in which he points out some inaccuracy in my catalogue, and even complains because I had sold to somebody else a book he was looking for! My favourite is the one in which he complains about the *tennis elbow* he got because of the moving of his library to the new flat!

The entire world of the Antiquarian-book-trade owes him a lot: through his novels he has made a much wider public familiar with the world of medieval libraries and ancient books. I had the privilege of meeting him more than 30 years ago, while he was writing *Il nome della rosa*, and he used to come often in our bookshop in Turin. I like to think that back in the Fifties, as a penniless student, Eco timidly looked for books in my grandfather's bookstore situated near the Turin University College, where he lived during his studies.

I am proud of sharing many interests with Eco, beside our common origins near Torino and our love for books, we also share the delight in playing with words and puzzles. And we share the same name – even this has helped our relationship: his letters or e-mail are entitled *"Dear Omonimo"* – I think I

can reveal that he keeps the most important part of his library in a dark - and unheated - room, and that every month he mounts in his living room thematic exhibitions in four window-cases, just for his own pleasure and that of his guests only.

Sometimes I wonder which comes first in Eco's novels, *the chicken or the egg*: I mean, I keep asking myself if it's the writer's need which guides the book collection, or the possession of certain books which inspires the writing. One thing is for sure, all of his novels are supported by a deep study of antique texts, as shown in *The Name of the Rose* with herbaria, texts on drugs, labyrinths and the Inquisition. Needless to say, my dream would be to find a manuscript of the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poietikés* – the one in praise of *laughter* – which causes Jorge's homicides and the fire in the library, which is the source of the worst nightmare for any antiquarian bookseller, and for all the Beinecke curators...

The same meticulous research on texts about alchemy and Rosicrucianism can be found in *Foucault's Pendulum*, where three editors amuse themselves by inventing a conspiracy theory regarding the Knights Templar. For *The Island of the Day Before*, about a 17th century navigation to an island on the other side of the international dateline, Eco sought out books on the Jesuit order, navigation and astronomy. Reading the index of this novel, only the watchful eye of a collector would notice that almost all the 40 chapters are reminiscent of 17th century elaborate titles by Galileo, Kircher, Huygens, Copernicus, Komeneski... In short, even the index is a real *hymn to bibliophily*.

Eco's studies continued on texts about the Crusades, Niketas Coniate and Barbarossa for the writing of *Baudolino*. And, recently, about conspiracies, forgeries, anti-Semitism and the Protocols of Zion for *The Prague Cemetery*

As Eco will talk soon about the secrets folders of memory, a separate mention deserves today *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (as the Italian title of the comic strip *Tim Tyler's Luck*). For his simplest but most hypertextual novel he searched comics and magazines of the Thirties. The antiquarian bookseller named Giambattista Bodoni, just like the typographer, loses his episodic memory due to a stroke, but he can remember everything he has ever read, as *Funes el memorioso*. Seeking to regain his lost identity, he searches through old magazines, books, and childhood comics. When, the shocking discovery among his grandfather's books of a 1623 Shakespeare First Folio – this library owns a copy... – makes him relive his lost memories of childhood.

About this matter, I cannot help but remind you that in about one month Umberto's new essay, *The Book of Legendary Lands*, will be released in the States. This work will lead us again to our imaginary childhood places, of which we can recall details as if we actually had been there... And the "journey" through these lands of myth and invention will be both enjoyable and erudite, since it brings us from Homer and Marco Polo to *Gulliver's Travels*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Twenty thousand Leagues under the Seas*. Eco made for us another "Six Walks", this time let's say in the "Fictional books or Fictional Worlds", instead of the "Fictional woods" he visited in his essay of 1994.

So, throughout the years therefore Eco turned often to me and to other antiquarian booksellers, looking for books on a variety of subjects. A certain friendship began between us, sealed with mutual exchange of information not only about books – even if his knowledge of bibliography and prices is exceptional – and I for one am certain that his intellectual contributions are infinitely more valuable than his commercial ones, however much money he spends!

I cannot help but recall the epistolary relationship between the English bookseller Anthony Hopkins and the American collector Anne Bancroft in the elegant movie *84 Charing Cross Road*... Anyway, I've never been able to guess the exact theme of the novels Eco was working on, but then as usual he would send me a copy of his latest work with the dedication: "so you'll understand why I needed that kind of books...".

His masterpiece, *The Name of the Rose*, is also a tribute to Jorge Luis Borges: like the blind librarian, he lived a celibate life consecrated to his passion for books, and also went blind in later life. Borges once declared "When a writer dies, he embodies the books he has written"; paraphrasing this significant quotation, I would say that a rare-book-dealer lives on through the catalogues he has published. Very

few memories might be left of the books he purchased and sold, while the *ensemble* of his own catalogues is the bookseller's true spiritual last will, the story of his life and of how he was able "to sell his own soul", transmitting with every sale his knowledge and his passion to the collectors.

Sometimes I keep on my desk on purpose for weeks a book I have to catalogue, and suddenly I realize that I already know how I can describe it. This peculiar phenomenon, which I believe occur to many librarians too... may have three explanations. The first one is that my fingertips gained understanding of the contents of the book, and then they transmitted it to my memory. The second explanation is that every time I moved it I gave a look to its text or its engravings; because little by little, its paper and ink talked to me of different and far away ages and ideas. In fact in the meanwhile I described other books and studied bibliographies that quoted that very book, its author, its editor, its printer. I don't believe in the supernatural, but I do think that all the three factors somehow magically match and helped me to become intimate with those pages I never truly read. A library is not only the place for your own knowledge, where you keep what you have read, but the place for universal memory, where one day you'll be able to find what others have read before you. It is a repository, where at most everything melts and generates a cocktail of erudition and culture.

This should remind us that Dante never had the chance of disposing of a personal library – because of his poverty and of his continuous wanderings after he had been banished from Florence. But the astonishing storehouse of book knowledge which laid within his encyclopaedic mind allowed him to offer us clear proofs of his erudition about religion, philosophy, politics, astronomy and science.

And what about Saint Augustine – no less – who in his *Confessiones* describes his great astonishment when he met Saint Ambrose in Milan (?): he was able to read "with his eyes only". Silent reading was extremely uncommon in the mediaeval culture, which set a high value on oratory and mnemonics, but built up very few libraries.

Some bibliophile *even reads* the books he got – and Eco is one of these – but a collector cannot become a *bookworm*... even though he pays attention to the contents, he wants the object. Once Eco told me that he wouldn't approve – but he may understand – bibliophiles who don't even open the pages of an uncut copy in order not to violate the object they have conquered: cutting the pages of a rare book would be like, for a collector of watches, to break the case to check the internal mechanism...

One of Eco's essays is titled *The vegetal memory*, and in fact he will give us a *lectio magistralis* about libraries and memory. The book on paper, *vegetal* record of human civilization, came after the first *mineral* record in cave paintings and the *animal* one in manuscripts written on vellum. I'm sure the printed book will be joined, but hopefully not supplanted, by the new memory – *mineral* again – this time on silicon chips. So, *Don't hope to get rid of Books ...* and especially in these days at the Beinecke Library !

