

In October 2013 Filippo Rotundo and I we started our new venture in the States, opening PRPH RARE BOOKS with an extraordinary speech by Umberto Eco.

One month ago, not only the world of book-trading has lost its Patron, but Italy is missing one of the great *eccellenze* which distinguished our country everywhere. For once, not in the world of fashion or of food but in the field of culture: Umberto Eco's reputation was even higher abroad than it was in Italy . Having had the chance of accompanying him in what he was aware it would be his last trip to the United States - for a lecture at Yale and at the UN - I realized that he was regarded by the Americans like a true living legend ; in the academic world as well as by ordinary people.

The entire world of 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 almost 40 years ago, while he was writing *Il nome della rosa*, when 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 graduated with a thesis about Thomas Aquinas' aesthetics.

In his masterpiece he wrote: "*The library is a great labyrinth You enter and you do not know whether you will come out... A monk should surely love his books with humility, wishing their good and not the glory of his own curiosity; but what the temptation of adultery is for laymen and the yearning for riches is for secular ecclesiastics, the seduction of knowledge is for monks*".

I used to share many things with Eco, beside our love for books, the pleasure of playing with *calembours* and puzzles. Even the fact of having the same name has helped the relationship: I still preserve the letters which he entitled "*Dear Omonimo*", those in which he pointed out some inaccuracy in my catalogue, and even his complaints because a book he was looking for was already sold to others. A certain friendship began between us, sealed with mutual exchange of information and I for one am certain that his intellectual contributions to the book trade have been infinitely more valuable than his commercial ones, however much money he used to pay for a rare first edition. "*Since I made my money with a book, I spent it buying other books*" he used to say.

What was his opinion of us, the antiquarian booksellers? "*Usually they are people with whom you can chat for an entire afternoon, and they don't even expect to sell you anything . And I was pleased, for example, when Umberto Pregliasco has noticed that almost all the chapters of "The Island of the Day Before" coincide with XVIIth century book titles by Galileo, Kircher, Huygens, Copernicus*". In fact, he wanted even the index of that novel to become a downright hymn to bibliophily.

I have been wondering for years which came first in Eco's novels, *the chicken or the egg*: I mean, I always tried to understand if it's the writer 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 were supported by a deep study of antique texts, as shown in *Il nome della rosa* 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 *Poetic*, the one about *laughing* which causes Jorge's homicides and the fire in the library - surely the source of the worst nightmares for any antiquarian bookseller. The same meticulous research on rare books about every subject of his next novel. 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 to me a copy of his latest work with the dedication: "*so you'll understand why I needed that book...*".

During our chats, Umberto shared with me his ideas of book-collecting : "*There are collectors who even read the books they collect. But they want the object, and possibly the first edition. At such a point that there are bibliophiles, whom I can understand but I don't approve, who - finding an untrimmed copy - don't even cut the pages.... It would be like for a collector of watches, to open them to check the mechanism. A library of rare books is not a sum of books, it is a living organism with an independent life. It is not only the place of your memory, where you keep what you read, but the place of universal memory, where one day you will find the books which others have read before you... I own a total of about fifty thousand books. But as a rare books collector I am fascinated by the human propensity for deviating thought. So I collect books about subjects in which I don't believe, like kabbalah, alchemy, magic, invented languages. I am interested in fakes, in falsity. I don't have Galileo, but I have Ptolemy, because he was wrong*".

I think I am among the happy few in the world who had the honour of giving 5 lectures together with Umberto Eco, the last one at Yale, for the fiftieth anniversary of the Beinecke Library. The ALAI, whom I served as President for 7 years, had the great honor of having as its patron the most important Italian intellectual of the last century, the man who received forty honorary degrees from universities around the world. Even if chased by journalists, courted for his cultural commentaries, revered for his expansive erudition, Eco has always been extremely available to the ILAB events, opening with is lectures two International Bookfairs in Milan and two in Bologna, the last one on the occasion of the International Congress of the ILAB in 2010, in an *Aula Magna* of the University crowded by almost one thousand people.

At Yale, he told: “Sometimes it happens that a neglected book comes to my hand, and suddenly I realize that I already know everything it says. This peculiar phenomenon has only three reasonable explanations. The first one is that I absorbed its knowledge by touch, as if it was written in Braille. Simply by moving the book from shelf to shelf, dusting it, my fingertips gained understanding of its contents, and then they passed it to my brain. The second explanation is that I read that book because every time I moved it I gave a look to its pages or its pictures; because little by little, its paper, its colours and its ink talked to me of different and far away ages, places and ideas. The third explanation is that, as times went by, I read other books that talked about that other one. Sometimes those books I read, they actually quoted the one I didn’t. Actually I think that all the three explanations are true. They somehow magically match and together they concur to make us intimate to those pages that we have never truly read”.

One of Eco’s essays on bibliophily is titled *The vegetal 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 record – *mineral* again – this time on silicon chips.

I tried to commemorate him here not as the best-known living Italian writer, nor as the greatest professor of semiotics: I did my best to present Umberto Eco as a bibliophile, revealing the *Liaisons dangereuses* between the collector and his own "pusher" of rare books. As he wrote *How to Travel with a Salmon* and *Kant and the Platypus*, I do hope not having played here the part either of the salmon or of the platypus, towards such a philosopher.

Jorge Borges, whom Eco loved much and who inspired him the character of the blind librarian Jorge, said that “*when a writer dies he embodies the books he has written*”. The antiquarian booksellers are confident that Umberto Eco will become not only the books he has written, but also the books he has collected.

And, to paraphrase one of his essays, *we’ll never get rid of books*.

Umberto Pregliasco
ILAB Committee member - ALAI, Past-President