

The Neo-Baroque of Our Time: A Reading of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*

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Abstract: Eco's *The Name of the Rose* reflects the Neo-baroque aesthetics, such as intertextuality and seriality, instability and untrustworthiness of reality, a strong sense of openness, and a reader's active role. *The Name of the Rose* expresses its preference for a 'labyrinth' structure through an encyclopedic sign system with seriality to demonstrate a fluid, constantly changing signification. In addition to that, this novel requires readers to interpret signs and messages from their own perspectives, enjoying interpretative freedom. Understanding the present era through examining Eco's novel by considering diverse aspects from the Neo-baroque perspectives, can contribute to expanding the understanding of not only the past but also ourselves today.

Keywords Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, seriality, labyrinth, open text

According to Omar Calabrese, "the term 'postmodern' has lost its original meaning and become a slogan or label for a wide variety of different creative operations" (12). In this sense, he points out in his *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* (1992) that the concept of Postmodernism might not be sufficient to define complex groups of artistic, scientific, and social phenomena existing today (14). Criticizing the conceptual limitation that 'Postmodernism' reveals, therefore, Calabrese offers the alternate term, 'Neo-baroque.' He contends that the prefix 'Neo-' introduces the idea of repetition, return, or recycling of a specific historical Baroque period, in contrast to the 'post-' in postmodernism, which indicates only a reaction 'after' the fact and 'against' the idea of modernism (15). The Baroque as a theoretical concept for Calabrese involves a general attitude and formal quality that transcends the boundaries of historical periodization, as he sees that "many cultural phenomena of our time are distinguished by a specific internal form that recalls the [B]aroque" (15) in their shape of rhythmic, dynamic structure, but without rigid, closed, or static boundaries (5). Postmodernism is a unified, inflexible framework, Calabrese believes, especially for understanding aesthetics sensibilities of our time, while the Neo-baroque serves as a more productive formal model to characterize the cultural phenomenon that encompasses the breadth of cultural diversity across chronological confines.

(Neo-) baroque critics and historians¹ including Calabrese, view the seventeenth century Baroque not as a phenomenon of the specific historical period but as a transhistorical state.

¹ In recent years, a number of historians, philosophers, and critical theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Henri Focillon, Omar Calabrese, Gilles Deleuze, Francesco Guardini, José Antonio Maravall, Peter Wollen, and Mario Perniola have also emphasized significant qualities of the (Neo-) baroque art and literature (Ndalianis 14-15). Noting the impact of the seventeenth century Baroque on nineteenth and twentieth century art movement, Deleuze considers the Baroque as "radiating through histories, cultures and worlds of knowledge" including areas as diverse as art, science, costume design, mathematics and philosophy (Conley xi). In his historical and cultural study of the seventeenth century Spanish Baroque, Maravall observes that "it is possible to establish certain relations between external, purely formal elements of the Baroque in seventeenth century Europe, and elements present in very different historical epochs in unrelated cultural areas... [Therefore] it is also possible to speak of a Baroque at any given time, in any given field of human endeavor" (4-5).

With its Baroquean interest and exploration, therefore, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* can be called as a Neo-Baroque novel, as it mirrors Baroque mentality and aesthetics that have again become crystallized on a grand scale within the context of exploring and understanding contemporary culture. The Neo-baroque can be characterized as having an appetite for frantic rhythms, instability, polydimensionality, enforced circuitousness, regulated disorder, planned chaos etc. Fascinated with the Baroque period, Eco understands the Neo-baroque and the Baroque as kindred spirits, seeing the close parallel between the postmodern age and the seventeenth century, thus calling the postmodern era, "Neo-baroque." He defines the Baroque aesthetics as "dynamic," a reflection of "an indeterminacy of effect" that "never allows a privileged, definitive, frontal view" as if it were in a state of perpetual transformation (*Open Work*, 38-39). Eco's first novel, *The Name of the Rose* reflects the Neo-baroque aesthetics and, especially its inherent 'avant-garde properties'.

The 'Neo-baroque' has not drawn much theoretical interest among critics, which would probably explain why it is hard to come by any study that attempts to connect Eco's *The Name of the Rose* with the Neo-baroque. Focusing on Umberto Eco's theoretical concerns with aesthetic strategies adapted from the seventeenth century Baroque tradition, this paper attempts to discuss Eco's artistic exploration of the notions such as intertextuality and seriality, instability and untrustworthiness of reality, a strong sense of openness, and the reader's active role.

Seriality as organized differentiations, polycentrism, and intertextuality expresses fundamental aspects of the Baroque aesthetics.² Baroque seriality has no clear beginnings and endings. Regarding seriality, the (Neo-) baroque shows its preference for a multiple and fragmented structure that recalls the form of a 'labyrinth.' In relation to seriality and polycentrism within the system of the labyrinth, the Neo-baroque explores issues of narrative and spatial formations, in particular, the serial structures and serial-like motions. Seriality as organized differentiations, polycentrism, regulated irregularity, and intertextuality thus can be said to represent the fundamental aspects of the Neo-baroque aesthetic. Eco's encyclopedic sign system of seriality and labyrinthine intertextuality reflects this Neo-baroque characteristic. As Eco claims that a serial thought is intent on producing new signs and concerned with new forms (*OW*, 59), Eco's encyclopedic sign system dissolves itself into a highly complex network of changing relationships, while at the same time reconstructing a new sign system. In Eco's semiotic world, his signs do not have a unique identity or essence but only have autonomy, just enjoying the game of "displacement." In *The Name of the Rose*, the (Neo-) baroque's metaphoric/metonymic seriality and intertextuality among signs can be seen through Adso of Melk's efforts to find a proper language for recording his passionate love and one name ('a' sign) for the girl.

Before Adso encounters the girl in the kitchen, he has a chance to talk with the saintly Franciscan Ubertino di Casale. After listening to Ubertino's monastic teaching on love, Adso was in the "grip of contradictory thoughts" (228), thus decides to go to the library on his own,

² Henri Focillon mentions that "[B]aroque forms pass into an undulating continuity where both beginning and end are carefully hidden---[The baroque reveals] "the system of the series"--a system composed of discontinuous elements sharply outlined, strongly rhythmical ---[that] eventually become "the system of the labyrinth," which, by means of a mobile synthesis, stretches itself in a realm of glittering movement and color (67).

feeling puzzled about the ambiguous connection between spiritual and carnal passion that must be in a deeper connection than the causal relationship that Ubertino explains to him. Hence, it is natural that Adso has difficulties in finding the perfect language (either the sacred language or the profane language) that will best convey his sexual experience with the peasant girl. Identifying his experience of passion with the heretic's transport of body and spirit, he tries to use Biblical language and commentary to record his passionate experience. He feels a lot of pressure at this moment in interpreting the material transgressions of the body into spiritual terms, but only finds "the sign of rapture in the abysses of identity" (231). Moreover, he is not able to escape from a semiotic ambivalence embedded within the saints' writings due to the overlapping, associative quality of monastic works: "Words similar in sound to other words produce a "chain reaction" effect that brings together words with only chance connections; words group themselves together like theme and variation" (Leclercq 91).

Adso's desire is acute and strong because he does not have any satisfactory language to speak his love perfectly. Feeling frustrated, Adso then develops his account of passionate love in terms of clear distinctions between sign and thing and sign and sign, raising a significant question about how metaphoric transference actually works:

I realize that to describe my wicked ecstasy [---] I have used the same words that I used, not many pages before, to describe the fire that burned the martyred body of the Fraticello Michael. Nor is it an accident that my hand [---] why did I as a youth depict the ecstasy of death that had impressed me in the martyr Michael in the words the saint had used for the ecstasy of life, and yet I could not refrain from depicting in the same words the ecstasy of earthly pleasure? [---] But if love of the flame and of the abyss are metaphor for the love of God, can they be the metaphor for love of death and love of sin? Yes, as the lion and the serpent stand both for Christ and the Devil [---] and in the case that torments me, I have no auctoritas to which my obedient mind can refer, and I burn in doubt. (NR, 247-48)

Adso's meditation on the metaphoric propensities of language shows his recognition that the hidden meanings of a monastic, allegorical hermeneutics may be double or even multiple.³ In probing the language of love, Adso eventually realizes that the meaning of words is unstable, shifting, multiple, and radically context-bound, i.e., "the sign can not represent what it signifies, produced the signified as present, *because a sign for something must imply that thing's absence*" (Young 15, emphasis added). Adso has to accept the possibility of ambivalent readings and multiple meanings embedded in the linguistic sign. According to Cuban post-structuralist Severo Sarduy, the (Neo-) baroque is:

"[A]n overflowing cornucopia, renowned for its prodigality and dissipation...a mockery all functionality of all sobriety. . hence, its mechanism of periphrasis, of digression and detour, of duplication and even of tautology. Verbiage, squandered forms, language which, because of its excessive abundance, can no longer designate things but only other designators of things [...signifiers] which enfold other [.....signifier] in a mechanism of signification which ends by designating only itself, revealing its own grammar.

³ Adso's inner debate on "dissimilar similitudes" dramatizes Eco's observation that every discussion of metaphor is founded on a view of language:

[E]ither language is by nature, and originally, metaphorical, and the mechanism of metaphor establishes linguistic activity.[...] it is a predictive machine that says which phrases can be generated and which not, and which from those able to be generated are 'good' or 'correct', or endowed with sense; a machine with regard to which the metaphor constitutes a breakdown, a malfunction, an unaccountable outcome (SP, 88).

As Sarduy remarks, the (Neo-) baroque language system is an infinite chain of signifier, which “progresses metonymically and finally circumscribes the absent signifier, tracing an orbit all around it” (118). The Baroque proliferation of signifiers through the substitution of metaphors by other metaphors is supposed to clarify the meaning, but only to obscure meaning by amplifying the distance/gap between sign and meaning. Ironically, however, it is the proliferation of metaphor that the (Neo-) baroque language subject takes pleasure or playfulness by delaying the fixation of meaning with ‘a’ fixed signifier.

When Adso tries to give the girl in the kitchen ‘a’ name, he might experience pleasure as well as confusion, as he struggles to find the perfect language to convey his sexual experience through metaphoric discourses. When the girl is charged with being the accused heretic, he laments her fate, “[T]his was the only love of my life and I could not, then, or even after, call that love by name” (407). Titling his novel as *The Name of the Rose*, Eco remarks in his Postscript that, “I liked it because the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it hardly has any meaning left” (506). Adso likewise cannot endow his lover with only ‘a’ fixed sign because signs for representing his lover are but temporal, equivocal, determined by changing circumstances, and continuously refer to other signs. Hence, every effort to confine her within ‘a’ finite sign or referent is destined to fail. Discovering the fluidity of the signification system, Adso confesses later that he still does not know her name, but only remembers her face. Since the girl as the ‘presence’ has so many meanings that he cannot (or, does not want) fix or define her with ‘a’ sign. More importantly, if he names her something as ‘a’ finite sign, it might mean that she can never exist as the object of his desire. Since filling an empty gap between him and her with a finite sign can make it impossible for him to continue to attribute various possible signs to her, Adso thinks that he had better leave her as the object of ‘the absence of stable meaning.’ While doing so, Adso seems to enjoy the play between ‘expectation’ and ‘fulfillment’ of meaning in the chain of signifiers that surround the girl.

The desire of Adso can be understood psychoanalytically in terms of Lacanian notion of desire. In Lacan’s theory, subject is based upon the primary of a repression, experienced by the subject as a lack, around which meaning (language) is constructed as a form of defense, while language consists in hiding a lack (split) of a subject produced from the loss of identity which is posited at its origin. As an process of compensating for the loss of identity, therefore, “metaphor is erected in the place of a repressed origin as a ‘return of the repressed’ signified, i.e., as the very creative act of the work of language to return and to recover, to cover over and to restitute, to forget and to remember in the same figure” (Echevarria 122). Sarduy explains this process with *Barroco* in psychoanalytic (primarily Lacanian) term:

The baroque metaphor would identify itself with a mode radically different from suppression: repression, a mode that consists of a change of structure. It is at the level of the system of the Unconscious that the process unfolds. Through it, the representation of representations which are tied to certain drives are pushed away or kept at a distance. *In the measure in which repression is identified with the organization of an 'original' deficiency or lack, repression sets off a sort of metonymic reaction which implies an indefinite flight of the object of the drive.* But, in the measure in which, through the symptom, it allows a glimpse of the return of that which has been repressed – in economy of neurosis the symptom is its signified- it blends exactly into metaphor. (74, emphasis added)

As Sarduy discusses above, through the process of metaphor, the original repressed can be 'partly' recovered, which allows "a glimpse of its return under its metonymic representations" (Echevarria 122). Language of insufficiency thus contributes to driving the language subject forward towards the fulfillment of desire. Therefore, metaphoric and metonymic signs can be seen not only as a lack of subject, but also as movements of the subject's desire. Projecting the double-edged relationship between language (the Baroque metaphor) and desire into the Adso's struggling to discover the perfect language for fixing the meaning of his passionate love, the Neo-baroque novelist Eco tries to show the Neo-baroque seriality which manifests "the working of metaphor are metonymic of the workings of language itself": Metaphor's substitution of one sign for another, its making equivalent seemingly disparate signs, constitutes a paradigm of linguistic multivalence, i.e., *language is always empty, always a movement of 'desire'* (Coletti 69-71, emphasis added).

The metaphor of the labyrinth and its semiotic and intertextual implications is clearly displayed in the structure of the library in the novel. For Eco, the labyrinth is a perfect model for the universe of semiosis, "which is structured according to a network of interpretants and is virtually infinite" (SP, 83). In depicting the monastery library, Eco invokes his favorite metaphor for the aesthetic text: "Like a large labyrinth garden, a work for art permits one to take many different routes, whose number is increased by the criss-cross of its path" (TS, 275).⁴ Eco's library in *The Name of the Rose* reminds the readers of the image of the Baroque multicursal labyrinth.⁵ As Alinardo comments in the novel, the monastery library is constructed as "a great labyrinth, sign of the labyrinth of the world. You enter and you do not know whether you will come out" (NR, 181), which indicates that one may enter and come out, depending on the level of one's own encyclopedic competence. In Eco's novel, there is no such thing as pure dictionary descriptions, since semantic representations rely on their context and do not take the form of a hierarchically structured tree, but instead that of a network or the rhizomatic labyrinth. In *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Eco outlines the characteristics of the rhizomatic structure as, "the rhizome is multidimensionally complicated [...] in a structure in which every node can be connected with every node, there is also the possibility of contradictory inference" (83). Eco does not think that knowledge can be classified in a definite and permanent way. Developing ideas on the encyclopedia as cultural knowledge and its rhizome-like structure, he sees a code not as a tool for a static interpretation but as a system of possible inferences.

Reflecting on this Eco's perspective, his readers can see that the library has intertextual and labyrinthine connections, thus showing a fluid, constantly changing, indeterminate working of signification. In his interviews, talks and articles, Eco has repeatedly underlined that his

⁴ According to Eco, the motif of the multicursal labyrinth which emerged in the wake of the Renaissance, was taken to new limits during the seventeenth century. This Baroque multicursal labyrinth is different from unicursal labyrinth in that the former which is characterized as a maze or a puzzle displays choices between alternative paths, while the latter consists of a single and prolonged path (SP, 81).

⁵ Seventeenth-century culture's fascination with the form of the multicursal labyrinth is especially evident in labyrinth poems. They were written during the Renaissance but reached their peak of popularity actually, during the Baroque era. Portuguese poets such as Luis Nunes Tinoco, Conde de Villafior, Sancho Manuel, and Manuel de Fariae Sousa were masters in constructing poems that both visually and textually traversed labyrinthine paths. In these poems, a seemingly random and decorative arrangement of letter from the alphabet confronts the reader with a "complexity and the profusion of paths" that can be deciphered (Hatherly 52).

novel is a tale of books, a book made of other books, a mosaic of books, a book about books. As Capozzi points out, the labyrinthine library in *The Name of the Rose* is undoubtedly “an echo chamber, filled with words such as sign, book, labyrinth- all interrelated, all echoing each other” (422). According to Deleuze, moreover, the labyrinthine complexity that characterizes the Baroque form can be visualized by the metaphor of the fold, or endless folds that double over one another in continuous motions. As in the monadic structure proposed by the Baroque philosopher Gottfried Leibniz and the Baroque “folds” described by Deleuze, each unit relies on other monads endlessly producing folds over folds:

The baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds. [...] The baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other. The baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity. [...] A labyrinth is said, etymologically, to be multiple because it contains many folds. The multiple is not only what has many parts but also what is folded in many ways. [...] if Descartes did not know how to get through the labyrinth, it was because he sought its secret of continuity in rectilinear tracks, and the secret of liberty in a rectitude of the soul. (Deleuze, *The Fold*, 3)

The Baroque labyrinth with its temporal and spatial complexity for Deleuze is like a paper that can be easily folded and then unfolded (*The fold*, 34). This Deleuz's folds share a Neo-baroque seriality and labyrinthine intertextuality with Eco's library; as in Deleuzian folds, books in Eco's maze-like library are folded and unfolded upon other books, and every story is infinitely told upon a story that has already been told. Through constant changing and relative signification that does not operate within fixed boundaries, none of sign elements is fixed in Eco's library, as Tancheva describes its process as, “(Eco's) signs interact with other signs from their own discourse and with signs from alien discourses, which accounts for their additional vacillation” of the Baroque (532).

In addition to that, Deleuze highlights that the Neo-baroque does not try to prioritize compossibles, and therefore, there exists no original or best world. Instead, there is a world of multiple originals that intersect at certain points and diverge at others. In connection with Deleuze's philosophy of ‘as many worlds as possible,’ it is William of Baskerville that mirrors this Neo-baroque mentality in Eco's novel. What is so special about William is that he exhibits the power of his abductive reasoning, rejecting the simple use of reason.⁶ William starts making broad hypothetical inferences to solve the mysterious murder case. He collects every element on the ground and adjacent shrubs such as the footprints in the snow, the pool around the blood. By keeping an open mind and following his own pure intuition, he even observes trivial marks carefully. Although they look meaningless, insignificant, or trivial, they might lead his hypotheses to truths. Unlike Jorge, Gui, Ubertino, and the abbot who believe in certainty, a truth that is fixed, total, and univocal, William never tries to prioritize one over another between the opposite entities. He is well aware of the fact that structures and codes serve just as an operative technique, or a fictive hypothesis. In this regard, William's search for the truth can be said to reflect the Neo-baroque ideas regarding the relativistic nature of truth and meaning as appears in the phrase, ‘signs are understood to be historically and culturally determined, and there is no fixed truth in the universe.’

⁶ Especially, among four kinds of Eco's abduction- overcoded abduction, undercoded abduction, creative abduction, and meta-abduction, William uses meta-abduction: the testing of a hypothesis, which is “an adventurous walk in the rhizomatic labyrinth, with new significations as a result” (Schilleman 266).

The Neo-baroque narratives naturally draw the audience into potentially infinite, or multiple directions as it does not allow any meaning to override another in seeking of a single Truth. Neo-baroque storytelling strategies are in favor of “differentiation, polycentrism and rhythm,” and the Neo-baroque with open structures prefers “a dynamic and expanding polycentrism” that has no center (Ndalianis 25). As the Neo-baroque is concerned with complex, dynamic motions, and multiple perspectives and narratives, therefore, it is the readers that should produce a coherent meaning traversing multiple texts riddled with intertextual references and allusions with their own interpretations. *The Name of the Rose* is thus an avant-garde ‘open text’ in which the readers are required to interpret the author’s signs and messages from their own perspectives, enjoying interpretative freedom. In Eco’s open text, textual hermeneutics depends heavily upon the level of the reader’s encyclopedic competence of literature, semiotics, philosophy, history, fine arts, as it is the reader’s responsibility to solve the mystery decoding and recoding an intertextual pattern that is woven between the successive deaths in the abbey and the prophecy of the seven angels with the seven trumpets in the book of The Revelation of John in the Bible.⁷

Both the 17th century Baroque and the Neo-baroque can be seen as the breaks from the Renaissance culture, periods of crisis or moments of transition, and the space for inaugurating new beginnings. Both eras also find their most striking manifestations in their own forms and experiences in similar ways, creating intermediary spaces where tensions, antinomies and opposites such as ‘the singular and the multiple’ or ‘self and world’, remain unresolved, but interconnected with each other. As Ndalianis suggests, “[L]ike the precious baroque mirror, culture and its cultural products nurture and reflect back on one another in a series of endless folds, producing reflections that fracture into multiple, infinitesimal pieces, which finally also comprise a single entity,” it is clear that a mutation and vibration of the seventeenth Baroque have revealed and recurred themselves as the Neo-baroque in our era.

The Name of the Rose is the best proof of Calabrese’s picture of our time as “being distinguished by a specific internal form that recalls the baroque,” as it crystallizes the prototype of the Neo-baroque aesthetics. Eco’s novel is a “fresco of semiotic, narrative, and figurative invariables in which everything is quotation, and where the presence of the author survives in the combination and insertion of [a] system of variables adapted to the different types of model reader envisaged by the reader” (Calabrese 45). As Deleuzes writes of the “new baroque,” what we learn from Eco about our present time is a “new way of folding, akin to new envelopments” (137).

⁷ Eco creates two kinds of texts, closed and open. A closed text is designed by the author to elicit a specific response from the reader. A text is considered closed when it does not adequately take the reader’s hermeneutic power into account (RR, 8). On the other hand, an open text allows the reader to feel comfortable with its maze-like structure. However, Eco maintains that no matter how open a text is, “it cannot afford whatever interpretation” a reader might try to force on the text (RR, 9).

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