



What Can Economists Learn from Umberto Eco?

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Research article

Volume 5 Issue 2

Received Date: April 09, 2022

Published Date: May 06, 2022

DOI: 10.23880/phij-16000241

Abstract

Economists have much to learn from Umberto Eco, a philosopher by training, a semiologist by conviction, because semiology constitutes for him the modern form of philosophy. The most important thing in my opinion is his conception of language as an original, ingenious way of looking at things, of expressing them, including through humor and irony, which expresses a form of life, an art of exist, a search for meaning at a time when it is becoming more and more difficult to find meaning under the reign of money. In the end, Eco gives the impression of playing with language to neutralize it in one way or another. When you start paying attention to words, things don't seem so certain anymore. This explains his fascination with lies, because the strength of language, according to him, is not to be able to say what is, but what is not.

Keywords: Language; Economics; Knowledge interaction; Umberto eco

Introduction

Forty years ago, a professor of semiotics, notably well-versed in medieval studies which he considered to be a period of transition, published in Italy a novel that would mark the history of the contemporary bookstore by its incredible success: a murder story in 1327 in a Benedictine abbey based on the idea of "how to poison a monk?" [1]. *Il nome della rosa*, the novel in question, was not a likely bestseller on paper. But thanks to Jean-Jacques Annaud's film, the novel would captivate millions of readers in nearly fifty languages. The success of the novel does not depend on the 'novelist man' but on 'the man novelist'. "In this novel," the author says, "I put things about my soul that I had never mentioned before. I talked about things that touched me by attributing them to my characters" [2]. A novelist in general writes what he feels, experiences, and perceives.

Umberto Eco is a writer whose eclecticism makes the reader, the listener, the viewer dizzy. He took interest in everything from the Middle Ages to digital technology and its effects on memory and scientific production. In addition

to being a novelist, he is also a philosopher, semiotician, historian, communication theorist, editorialist, esthetician (p. 587) [3] and belongs to this handful of scholars known for their encyclopedic knowledge and sagacity. Reading, he liked to repeat, is like "reverse immortality", before adding: "A septuagenarian who does not read will have lived only one life. Whoever reads will have lived five thousand years" [4]. He will have five thousand years worth of memories inspired by the books he had read [5]. In this sense, reading is the basis of the art of writing, which consists in thinking and feeling well. One of his most remarkable talents is to reconcile stories and information, to transform learning into storytelling [6]. For him, the pleasure of telling stories outweighs everything else. This insatiable seeker of signs has always been convinced that it is in the hidden structure of a work, and not through its manifest content, that a certain vision of the world is revealed.

Starting from the confidence of not believing in the rupture between what he wrote in specialized books and what he wrote in newspapers, apart from the tone and the style [7], the raw material of this research is based on the

writings, audio, video and written interviews, as well as the debates that were held after his death, in order to better explore the subject, cross-reference information, update data and capture the themes that most often arise in the discussions. The goal, to borrow a key idea of Eco, is not to write what the reader expects, but to force him to want what he does not expect [1], to raise awareness among the new generations of economists about the need to leave the field of academic specialty by ‘reading everything and playing somehow against everything’—to use a formula of Michel Foucault (p. 16) [8]. Eco had fun deciphering everything, writing about everything, because, in his eyes, everything is a sign [9]. It is also noted by Paulo Coelho (p. 97) [10] in *The Alchemist*: “In life, everything is a sign.” This pushes us to go beyond the ‘science/ideology’ dichotomy [11] and the resulting binary divisions such as ‘orthodoxy/heterodoxy’, ‘mainstream/new thinking’. Eco liked to play with disciplines to bring together the most curious of readers on the planet, knowing that for him, as his long-time friend Julia Kristeva (p. 19) [12] notes, it is not social class that determines humans, as Karl Marx claims, but the language that liberates them. The word ‘language’ is to be taken here in the sense of an original, ingenious way of looking at things, of expressing them, including through humor and irony, which expresses a form of life, an art of existing, a search for meaning.

How can Eco’s thinking be useful to new generations of economists when it does not concern economics? This is the purpose of the paper, which is not a matter of circumstance, but arises from a research program; a kind of late style (p. 564) [1], which aims to raise the awareness of the economist man on what affects the human in the most profound way so that he can rise to the level of the man economist, to change the conception of the economics and upset the profession, so that it is sensitive to humans rather than things in order to identify logical relationships whether they are positive or negative correlations.

Historia Magistra Vitae

This quote from Ciceron (p. 32) [13], delivered by Eco at a conference entitled *Against the loss of Memory*’ at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 21 October 2013, generally translated as ‘history is the teacher of life’ (p. 5) [14,15] means that history is ‘the instructor of human life’ (p. 43) [16].

If humanity has always been confronted with problems, especially in terms of economic life, it is by looking back that it can draw inspiration to better solve its difficulties, meet its most basic needs, avoid repeating the same mistakes, especially by making unnecessary efforts to produce what has been ruled by the ancients [17], and give credit where it is due. The past teaches us that in the struggles between

nations, as was the case with the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens for nearly thirty years, neither of them had won anything in the end, it is a zero sum game as we say in economics.

For Eco, *‘the tragedy of our time is the flattening of the present. The current generation no longer has the notion of historical depth, which allows us to understand the present. And it is a terrible problem of our time: we don’t reflect on our past’* [18]. History refers to fundamentals in all aspects of the life of human societies, starting with the management of the city-state during Antiquity. As proof, in a speech of October 1, 1981, refuting the assertions of economists who claim to be the source of his supply policy, President Ronald Reagan mentioned that Ibn Khaldun postulated that “in the beginning of the dynasty, great tax revenues were gained from small assessments”, and that ‘at the end of the dynasty, small tax revenues were gained from large assessments” (p. 26) [19]. The exact passage of Ibn Khaldun (p. 230) [20] is: “It should be known that at the beginning of the dynasty, taxation yields a large revenue from small assessments. At the end of the dynasty, taxation yields a small revenue from large assessments.” The reference to history is therefore necessary to establish a relevant questioning.

A common observation, made by historians and economists alike, is that economic history has almost disappeared from universities, whether it be at the teaching or publishing level, whereas in the past it was perceived as useful not only to the economist but also to the historian in the sense that the spirit of history is of a military nature, while that of economics is more inclined toward peace (p. 26) [21]. This analysis is rooted in Montesquieu’s thinking on the peaceful effects of trade. As he writes in *De l’esprit des lois*: “The natural effect of trade is to bring peace” (p. 349) [22].

In fact, there are several ways of exploring the interaction between economy and history, which is not limited to the history of thought: to investigate the evolution of the place of the economy in the life of societies, to show the importance of the mastery of historical data in economic analysis [23], to follow the great authors and pioneer developments in economics [24], to address some of the positive and negative aspects of economists’ lives rather than focusing on their thinking [25], to change our approach to the study of history, by shifting the attention of big families or big battles to the daily life of ordinary people [26]; shed light on the myths and paradoxes that populate economic thought [27] and explain how the industrial revolution, by causing the growth of industrialized countries, at the same time led to the emergence of underdevelopment [28]. The radical transformation of our lifestyles, in particular a reinvention of chosen poverty, has now become the sine qua non of any

serious fight against the new forms of production of poverty [29].

The Mainstream Economic Theory under the Prism of Semiotics

Eco often confides in interviews that he is attracted by 'all false theories'. It is a pity he did not take an interest in neoclassical economic theory. During the first course on microeconomics as part of the master's degree in econometrics, Professor Alain Leroux confided to us that he did not believe in anything he was about to teach as he was simply doing it because the task had been entrusted to him. A few years later, the same professor founded a master's degree in economic philosophy and the *Revue de philosophie économique*. Today, he is considered as one of the main architects of the emergence of economic philosophy in the French-speaking academic landscape.

In the first chapter of his theory of semiotics, Eco says this: "We recognize a sign because it is something that allows us to lie." "So, he adds, *semiotics is a theory of lies. If this were a theory of truth, I would not be so interested in it. False theories are much more exciting than true theories [...]. How can a reality be born from a false theory? This is a question that continues to intrigue me, as well as the extraordinary ability of humans to lie*" [2]. The theme of forgery, its social influence, and the seductive power it exerts even on those who have been warned of its harmful nature is one of the major themes of his narrative work.

The word 'false' is not limited to what is contrary to the truth (p. 414) [30]. It could convey the idea of what does not reflect the reality of something, which is not enough in terms of analysis, which does not achieve what is expected to explain and enlighten, which misses its purpose by lack of skill, appropriate appreciation, who does not perceive the facts accurately, who is not in harmony with what he is referring to, who alters the appearance of the facts, who has no reason to exist, who is unfounded, who is not justified by the facts. But the first thing that comes to mind when talking about the false is the opposite of the truth. It is from this perspective that we must consider Eco's point when he makes a sad assessment of our world: not only does the false creep in everywhere, but it is now preferred to the true in more and more fields.

Beyond this first observation, his collection of essays 'La guerre du faux' does not speak of a confrontation between the false and the true and does not describe how lie masks reality. There is not a meaningful 'unsaid' that joyfully awaits to be unmasked by a skilled semiotician. Its purpose is not to show something that is false to make people understand

what is true or to justify it through a kind of distorting mirror. Rather, it is to show that certain speeches are masked by other speeches. In other words, what it means what is not said. "*The texts of this collection, he says, all revolve more or less around speeches that are not necessarily verbal or necessarily expressed as such or understood as such*" (p. 10) [7]. The word 'text' is understood here in its broadest sense as an adjusted assembly of signs aimed at a recipient.

If Eco places such emphasis on the false, it is because, among all the categories of existing signs, he chooses one quite singular, it being the category of falsities: signs which are used to speak lies. In other words, defining what a false is, explaining what allows a false statement to mean something, while not having the property of referring to something real. Developing a theory of the false would, according to Eco, be like outlining a general semiotic. "*I am, he says, fascinated by lies, because I am a semiotician, I deal with the languages, and the strength of language is not to be able to say what is there, but to be able to say what is not there*" [1].

From this perspective, the problem is not so much that the prevailing economic discourse is false —regardless of the theoretical referent— but that it is taken seriously. This reflects an affinity between positions to make people believe and dispositions to believe that deserves to be explored in-depth, beyond what may come to mind, at first sight, between those who occupy a privileged social position and those who hope to cut themselves a slice of the cake.

The Power of the False Beyond the Dichotomy 'Orthodoxy/Heterodoxy'

Ideas do not come by chance. They are the result of influence and power games exercised at the highest levels, to serve private interests that set up information and thought dissemination structures that enable them to exert a sufficiently strong influence to impose values and norms of behavior on their scale of action. Ideas then transform into a fully-fledged institution, a regime of knowledge and power that governs how humans should think and act [31].

Alongside this analysis, which generally attracts the public of economists who do not adhere to the mainstream economic discourse, the semiology of Eco's forgery raises a question worthy of interest: why is forgery such a powerful force in history? This encourages us to revisit history and take a critical look at the past. But all the goodwill of the world cannot do anything against the cultural and historical machine that crushes and integrates everything. In his collection of essays 'La guerre du faux', Eco (p. 33) [7] notes that "*the false is 'historical' and as such, it is already clothed in authenticity.*"

The fake, to be recognized as something rooted in time, must have its own narrative to show how it can make meaning and influence people, societies, and history. This invites us to think about how each speech builds its own reader, because the most important thing is not to tell the truth or the lie, provided that the act of 'telling' always involves a lie somewhere, even when 'these are irrefutable facts. As Edouard Herriot (p. 13) [32].

The discourse of heterodox economics which operates by reaction in the form of a distorting mirror does not seem more rigorous than that of orthodox economics. As Gilles Deleuze (p. 269) [33] rightly notes, no writing against anything ever matters, except writings that aim to bring in new ideas and can implement them. From this point of view, it is not only the conceptual intermediaries and the technical tools that constitute a smokescreen to deepen the understanding of the phenomena as such, but also dichotomies such as "orthodox / heterodox" that seem, at first glance, to stimulate critical thinking, as some works on the history of economic thought suggest. As Roland Jacquard (p. 13) [34] notes: "*Words are there to hide the truth: woe to those who do not feel it and who allow themselves to be hypnotized by language games.*"

The lexicographical requirement is more necessary here since the two words do not appear in dictionaries until toward the end of the 17th century. For example, Pierre Richelet's Dictionary [35] defines the orthodox as one who '*has a true and legitimate knowledge of the truth*' without retaining the word 'heterodox'. Antoine Furetière's Dictionary [36] defines heterodox as '*the heretic who believes a doctrine other than that of the Catholic Church*'. It is in the interest of research that this dogmatic dispute be surpassed. To think constructively, the researcher must not only free himself from his own culture by playing against it (p. 16) [8] and distance himself from the values and norms of his society (p. 275) [37], he must also go beyond the field of academic specialization by reading everything and making everything work in a certain way against everything.

Finally, it should be noted that for Eco, hatred towards someone or something unites people much more than love would do. This is one of the core ideas of his novel *The Prague Cemetery* [38]. Thus, "*love, like violence, abolishes differences*" (p. 363) [39]. What undermines the notion of heterodoxy, in the sense that what unites the many economic currents considered as such, is not so much a better scientific rigor as the mimetic desire toward the model to enjoy the same status. As René Girard [40] rightly notes, "*the mistake is always to reason in the categories of 'difference', whereas the root of all conflicts is rather 'competition'—the mimetic rivalry between beings, countries and cultures*". In this perspective, competition is "*the desire to imitate the other in order to obtain the same thing as him*". The two epistemological

postures, i.e. orthodoxy and heterodoxy, have something in common: their inability to adequately reflect social reality as it is (p. 32) [41]. One is driven by the preservation of an elitist academic power, the other by the imitation of the former's desire (p. 252) [42], it is based on a model desire; it elects the same object as this model (p. 217) [43]. In this rivalry, the two postures appear to be interchangeable and transformed into doubles symmetrical in a dual relationship.

The Simple Have Something More Than Do Learned Doctors, Who Often Become Lost in Their Search for General Laws

But criticism of mainstream theory in relation to Eco's writings is not limited to the semiotics of the false. In his famous novel *The Name of the Rose* he writes: "*The simple have something more than do learned doctors, who often become lost in their search for broad, general laws*" (p. 210) [44]. Throughout the novel, the author uses quotations from historical, philosophical and literary works, including from his own previous writings, both theoretical essays and literary criticism texts. Quotations are generally used to give value to speech, to embellish it and to reassure the reader. For Eco, they are openings to something else; they serve to recontextualize a thought in an original and new way [45].

On closer examination, it is striking to observe that Eco's quotation recalls another reflection by René Girard [46], broadcast on Belgian national television following an interview with Patrick Perquy, about his preference in his comparative analysis of a few novelists: Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust and Dostoyevsky, all of whom, despite their differences, depict the same face of Man: "*The explanation of my preference for dramatic texts and novels is very simple: it is that the staging itself forces writers to represent real relationships—relationships between people, which are what can be called small interactions, while conceptualization obviously forces generalization so vast that the meanings of relationships escape it.*" This methodological reflection of inestimable value, rarely found in the literature on the methodology of science, expresses the importance of René Girard's anthropology that pays special attention to the modes of human interaction on a daily basis.

Economics reflects this lack of concepts in relation to human relationships, although it has been defined by Alfred Marshall (p. 1) [47] as "*a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life*". In this sense, if the mainstream theoretical model has all the charms of mathematical scholarship that 'dry the heart out' (p. 64) [48] and an incomparable ability to reason according to learned patterns that reduce the human being to an 'economic animal' (p. 231) [49]. However, erudition is mainly nourished by knowledge that

is more accumulated through interaction than hierarchical and oriented. They “*know everything, but nothing else*”, said Georges Clémenceau about the engineers formed at the polytechnic school (p. 294) [50]. In other words, most economists, owing to their academic training, seem to know everything but understand nothing about human interaction patterns; while novelists, at least the most insightful, seem to know nothing but understand everything in this field. This is a real revenge on those who accuse some economists of being ‘literary’ because they did not use models derived from econometrics or data science whose horizon of analysis is to explore the relationships between variables meticulously chosen for their ability to be easily quantifiable.

For Eco, writing novels appears to be a way of linking scholarly production with mass culture. As his old friend the semiologist Paolo Fabbri [45] points out: “*Umberto would first analyze the texts with great originality, experiencing a shift in philosophical thinking as a result, and thus becoming the great writer that he is. In fact, the novels have been used by Eco to deal with difficult philosophical problems pertaining to the hard core of reality.*” Literary fiction is another way of delving into the philosophy of signs and the way in which they refer to both ordinary matters and a culture that is free from the conceptual requirements of academic production. The same subject is shaped differently according to the canons of academic tradition, or the codes found in detective stories. But whatever form of support is chosen, Eco remains above all a philosopher who has developed a new way of doing philosophy; one that rises above the system and the semantic analysis that was prevalent at the time. He knew how to be sensitive while remaining a philosopher and expressed many things —things he felt so deeply— as much in his novels as in his essays.

We Continue All Our Lives to Pursue, Under Different Appearances, Always the Same Idea

To the question “*If it were necessary to retain a single idea from your work, what would it be?*” Eco replied: “*My mentor at the university told me one day: ‘We continue our whole life to pursue, under different appearances, always the same idea and we do nothing else. I thought, “What a reactionary!” Thirty years later, I realized he was right. The only problem is that I have not yet discovered the idea that I pursue! I really like the statement of a friend and colleague who writes: ‘At the moment of death, everything will become clear.’ I am waiting for this moment with some impatience, to finally understand what the basic idea of my life was’* [2]. In another interview in which he says the same or almost the same thing, he reveals that the university’s mentor is Luigi Pareysón, his Ph.D. supervisor and the acknowledged author of a hermeneutical

theory of interpretation that deeply inspired his thinking. For Pareysón, the relationship between object and subject is interpretative: the cognitive grasp of the object by the individual is based on an unlimited interpretative process, because the individual who interprets does change, as does his grasp of the object (pp. 189-190) [51].

For Eco, each reading is an interpretation, knowing that translation is a particular interpretation in its own right. The basis of translation is the non-literal approach to the intention of the text and the inventiveness found therein. The breath from one world to another —an almost identical reflection— and still as beautiful as ever; yet never quite the same, never quite another [52]. In this sense, there are several interpretations: some coherent and others incoherent. It is an old idea of Saint Augustine, he recalls [53]. The thinkers of contemporary hermeneutics recognize in Augustine a forerunner of interpretation (p. 11) [54]. The idea is also found with Roland Barthes whereby any interpretation is justified as long as it is consistent [53]. Eco indeed admits that Barthes has had a remarkable influence on his academic career as a researcher [1].

For critical readers who contemplate the way in which the author conceives his works beyond what is written, strictly speaking, Eco always tells the same obsession, the same archetypal image forever fixed in his brain, his heart, or his entrails. It is a question of ‘space-time’ according to Jacques Le Goff [55], of ‘the limit’ according to Francesca Piolot [56], of ‘forgery’ according to Teri Wehn Damisch [1] and Tariq Oukhadda (p. 1) [57]. For Jean-Noël Schifano, “*the fog is the theme that runs through his entire work,*” with particular reference to his novel *La Mystérieuse Flamme de la reine Loana* [58]. The metaphor of the mist of civilizations, he adds, reflects everything that makes reason fail to break through [59].

For ordinary readers who limit themselves to what is written, perhaps Eco gives the impression of doing a lot of things without focusing on the same theme or even of getting lost. Some go so far as to say that everyone buys Eco’s books, but no one reads them. However, what matters is not so much the subject as the work experience involved in sharpening the analytical tools so that they can be used effectively. This is reflected in a passage from his book *How to Write a Thesis?* [60]: “*Writing a thesis means learning to organize data and your own ideas: it is a methodical work experience to build an ‘object’ that, in principle, also serves others. What matters is therefore less the subject of the thesis than the work experience it involves*” [61].

This shows the limits of the course on research methodology which makes students believe that by ingesting the proposed material they will master the art of writing a

research dissertation or paper. I try as best I can to explain to my students that the essence of the problem is not to write or to search, but to know how to read. In-depth reading allows me to ask in-depth questions, to choose in-depth subjects, to develop an in-depth analysis, to write in a thorough way. But this is not always obvious, with the spread of information and communication technologies, students tend to favor what is fast with less effort.

Great Scholars are not Discovered only many years after their Death

To the typically French question “What are, in your eyes, the great French intellectuals alive today?” Eco replies: *“The great intellectuals are discovered only fifty years later. It is at a distance that one discovers the true dominant values. When Roland Barthes was alive, the whole Sorbonne was against him. Today, he has become something of a legend”* [72].

His book *The Name of the Rose* was also, it must be remembered, initially rejected by Italian publishers on the pretext that it was neither an essay nor a novel. French publishers found the text less hybrid than untranslatable. Until the Italian wife of the boss of the Grasset publishing house, immersed in certain bloody scenes of the novel, disturbs her husband with her laughter [62]. In fact, what interests Eco the most is not so much the volume of sales as the opinion of readers over a long period of time. *“You’re still shocked at the diversity of opinions among critics,”* he says of his novel *The Name of the Rose* more than thirty years after it was first published, before adding, *“I think a book should be judged ten years later, after having read and re-read”* [63]. Interpretation changes with each reading as the reader’s skills change over time.

In an interview at Yale University, he states that *“a book must be judged a hundred years after the author’s death”* [53]. It is therefore less a question of a specific duration—ten, fifty, or one hundred years—than a long-term evaluation that differs not only for the same reader but also for the general public. This is reflected in his statement at the end of an interview on his book *Le Cimetière de Prague* in Paris: *“There are still questions to ask about this book. I am waiting for the next century”* [64]. Here, Eco alludes to the fate that befalls certain contemporary authors who are only mentioned posthumously before fading into obscurity, to the point where very few people refer to them today. No doubt he thought such authors should not be exploited and then cast aside. In other words: *“First read my books calmly and only then can you talk about them”* [45]. When asked whether he will be remembered as a novelist, critic, or polymath, he answered: *“I will leave it to you”*, before adding: *“Usually, a novelist has a longer life than an academic, unless you are Emmanuel Kant or John Locke. The illustrious thinkers of fifty*

years ago have already been forgotten” [63].

This shows that praise had little effect on him. As an example, while in his presence, the medieval historian Jacques Le Goff said in a cultural program which was broadcast on French television: *“The things I admire most about Umberto the novelist is the integration of encyclopedic knowledge into fiction—into the novel. Erudition is not in the novel as an ornament; it is incorporated into the characters—into the plot. That is what I think is beautiful and makes me include Umberto among those of very rare lineage”* [55]. For Bernard Pivot, star host of cultural programs on French public television: *“No one knows the biggest and richest libraries in the world better than Umberto Eco, but one of the best supplied is certainly in his head,”* as he writes in the *Journal du Dimanche*, included in the presentation of the book *‘Confessions d’un jeune romancier’* [65]. He worked tirelessly but did not take himself seriously. *“Genius is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration”* (p. 170) [66] he liked to repeat. Measurement in all things is a necessity, which seems to be the main lesson learned in the evaluation of human works regardless of their content and medium.

Technology Is What Gives Everything Right Away, While Science Proceeds Slowly

In a speech delivered in Rome in 2002, which can be found in his book *À reculons comme une écrevisse’* [15], Umberto Eco developed a sharp criticism of the quest for knowledge, which is based only on the support of digital technology. *“Technology is what gives everything right away, while science proceeds slowly”* [67]. In short, everyone is informed but no one is cultivated.

While in the past, researchers spent most of their time in libraries, nowadays most young academics not only abandon libraries, but they no longer read altogether. Reading is not simply taking notes of a text: it is attributing meaning beyond its literal sense, grasping thoughts and feelings that have not been formulated, and identifying events based on signs and clues. Reading is also attributing to each and everyone their due merit by rendering to Caesar what belongs to him. For example, the sociologist Gabriel Tarde (p. 157) [68] pointed out, before Joseph Schumpeter (p. 116-117) [69], through his notion of the creative destruction process the following idea: *“The root cause of war-crises is an invention, an improvement, an innovation that has just hatched and which, to grow, must drive back any industry based on an old invention”*. However, most economists, including those who won the Nobel Prize, attribute this notion to Schumpeter. This gives an idea of the level of reading and curiosity that does not explore the origin of ideas beyond what is told in the books on history of economic thought. When they refer to sociologists to make a good impression, economists usually limit themselves to

the classic ones: Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. In other words, those who have the most influence on the conceptualization of modern sociology. In his book *"Rahiq al-'Umr"* (The Nectar of Life), the Egyptian economist and writer Galal Amin (pp.125-129) [70] recounts that after agreeing to prepare a master's degree in economics at the London School of Economics, only a few days had passed when he discovered that the heart and soul of the school was the library itself. *"The many hours I spent in that library,"* he wrote, *"were far more useful than most of the lectures I've been able to attend at this school or elsewhere."*

For the work of an academic to be recognized, nothing beats publication in a prestigious scientific journal. This ensures recognition of the work done and allows it to be disseminated, at times, in other articles, which brings us to the subject of citations. The higher the number of publications and citations resulting from them, the more recognized is the importance of such published results. This is known as the impact factor (i.e., the number of times the article is cited over a specified period). This system increases the chances of obtaining private or public subsidies more easily, but also induces group publishing networks that exploit young Ph.D. students and researchers and induces the proliferation of companies that offer their services to publish in an international refereed journal. After obtaining substantial funding, some so-called 'highly cited' authors subcontract the execution of the projects to researchers in precarious situations. In general, the names of the latter do not appear in the publication; which reminds us of a passage from *The Name of the Rose*: *"When the possession of earthly things comes into play, it is difficult for men to reason according to justice"* (p. 58) [44].

Published studies should be reviewed by volunteer researchers who are responsible for assessing their quality. But in some cases, these researchers don't read carefully. The problem is that journal editors have difficulty finding volunteer researchers to review studies. As a result, they ask those submitting articles to provide them with the names of the reviewers, without checking the validity of the contacts and any possible conflict of interest. The author tends to give the names of people prone to complacency without necessarily having links with them because they know their ideological posture or their point of weakness. And even when a serious and independent researcher agrees to proofread and validate a study, he often goes through it by relying first and foremost on the reputation of the references cited.

A simple article published in a prestigious journal can really boost the career of an academic. A researcher with many publications acquires the status of star of the profession. The expression "publish or perish" has become

the motto of the academic world. This Machiavellianism, where the end justifies the means, leads to a frenzied race that negatively impacts the quality and ethics of research. Some data is sculpted to match preferred theory while others are downright rigged. The semiotics of counterfeiting finds here a field of study that perhaps never occurred to Umberto Eco's mind. But what should count above all is the joy of learning something new to think for oneself and to develop a living thought. Hence the need to distinguish three levels of research if I dare fail to find a more suitable term:

1. The one who meditates the phenomena as they are in their totality without conceptual intermediaries nor technical tools.
2. The one who reads for pleasure and publishes when he considers that it is necessary under institutional constraint.
3. The one who does not read - or rather just copy and paste most of the time -, his only concern is to publish.

Therefore, being well ranked in citations does not mean being the best, just having the ability to fit into a mold. The aim of a university should be to give its students a harmonious personality that allows them to meditate on the world around them with awareness and discernment, not just to be competitive in the citation market by any means possible.

Conclusion

Before he died, Eco wrote in his will that he was prohibited from giving a major lecture on his work within ten years of his death [45]. He hated being honored in a serious way because he always retained his sense of humor even when discussing serious matters. This message answers the question of limiting interpretation to academics, despite the capacity *"of any text to generate an infinite number of interpretations"* (p. 12) [71]. It perfectly reflects the spirit of this article: not to remain confined in the academic circles without dealing with the reality of everyday life with humility.

Through conferences, radio, and television programs, we discover that Eco was above all a fabulous storyteller. *"The theory may have been a detour,"* he confessed [2]; a non-anchor points of passage, something that the academic world should meditate upon, where every school of thought firmly stands on its positions, being convinced that it is the only one to hold the absolute truth. As if everything had been said and the most important had been discovered. As if the elders, in this case, the masters of each school of thought, had left the contemporaries nothing to complain about.

For Eco, success is not an end in itself. The most important thing is to do what we love— what gives us pleasure. *"If you only want to make money,"* he says, *"you tell what the reader*

likes" [72]. Moreover, he tells bibliophile Pierre Bergé that the publication of his book *The Name of the Rose* generated a substantial income, saying to himself: "What should I do with this money? If I buy treasure bonds, I don't see them, if I buy books I have them here" [5].

He also told one of his close colleagues at the University of Bologna, the oldest in Europe, that he hated *The Name of the Rose*, his best-selling book with nearly thirty million copies sold, and that he considered Foucault's *Pendulum* [73] as his best book, the reason being that no one wanted to read the latter with the same consideration due to the success of the former [74]. "But this," he notes in an interview, "happens to many writers. Gabriel García Márquez can write fifty books, yet he will always be remembered for *Cien Años de Soledad* [One Hundred Years of Solitude]. Every time I publish a new novel, sales of *The Name of the Rose* increase" [63].

His assiduity in listening to his readers reveals a sense of respect for human intelligence far from any elitist and meta-disciplinary claim. There are situations, he writes in 'Lector in fabula', where the "reader, by identifying deep structures, highlights something that the author could not mean to say and that yet the text seems to exhibit with absolute clarity" (p. 230) [75]. Moreover, he confides to the French television that "we always discover through our readers aspects of the book that we did not know" [76]. In an interview at Yale University, he further says: "The text is sometimes smarter than its author; saying things you had not considered" [53].

His theory of reader cooperation rejects recourse to the author's intention as the sole criterion determining the validity of an interpretation and makes the reader an essential part of the signifying process [77]. His book *The Open Work* [78] emphasizes the role of the reader as an extension of the writer's book. A book does not exist without a reader who represents things based on the signs given to him by the writer about his experience. In this sense, the representation from the books is different for each reader. Moreover, he explains, words take on different meanings over time. New interpretations inevitably end up in books and each generation reads literary works differently [79]. In addition, he warns against over-interpretation: this attitude by which the reader inscribes his personal positions in a text, ultimately causing him to no longer read the actual text, but his very own self instead [60].

Through his novels, Eco fought to give mass culture its due recognition. He never associated it with stupidity—always betting on the intelligence of his readers—and refused to take them for people who lacked judgment, reflection, reasoning, and understanding. He was not wrong, since his simplest novel *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* had the least success. To the question: "What did you want to create

through the novel *Number Zero*?" his reply was: "Forcing to think and reflect" [80]. According to him, only journalists and publishers think that a difficult book cannot attract public attention. "People are tired of easy things," he concluded [81]. And in another interview: "People have had enough of simple things. They want to be challenged" [63].

With his disappearance, humanity loses a fine observer of the news, an intelligent commentator of the contemporary world. According to his long-time friend Jean-Claude Carrière with whom he wrote *This is Not the End of the Book* [82], "he was very much aware of the current political, economic and social affairs" [83]. More than the novelist with his variety of genres (crime, mystery, travel) or the academic who managed to combine scholarly research (down to the smallest detail) and mass culture, it is the man himself who we will miss, with his erudite and humorous style that makes sense only when one is tempted to see the facts. "Let your heart speak, question faces, do not listen to tongues," he writes in *The Name of the Rose* (p. 68) [44]. This encourages the new generation of economists to problematize the relationship to the world through personal interpretation; to think the unsuspected possible beyond approaches that want to preserve only the regularities expressing fundamental traits, general laws, invariant principles, and higher tendencies. As Charles Péguy (p. 61) [84] said: "What is a thought that has no heart. And what is a heart that would not be illuminated in the sun of thought".

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