

**THE ERRANT AUTO-BIOGRAPHER
REFLECTIONS OF THE AUTHOR IN UMBERTO
ECO'S *THE ISLAND OF THE DAY BEFORE***

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A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he populates a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.

Jorge Luis Borges
The Maker

To err is probably this: to go outside the space of encounter.

Maurice Blanchot
The Infinite Conversation

Umberto Eco's third novel, *The Island of the Day Before* (originally published in Italy in 1994), examines the notion of narrating or romanticizing a life. In this highly complex and layered novel, Eco explores the role between author-text-reader. Needless to say, the relationship between writer and world takes on the form of a projection. This projection constitutes a degree of fiction imposed upon the "real" world of the novel; the Daphne, a ship Roberto finds himself stranded upon. This essay will explore the projection of a fictional world where the romance allows the *possible* to intrude upon the daily life of the main character, Roberto della Griva. I also wish to suggest that the projection of a world is not just carried out by Roberto in the novel, but by the chronicler, and Eco as well. That is, Eco writes himself into the narrative just as Roberto places himself in the role of hero. In each case we have the multiple mirroring of author and hero.

The plot of *The Island of the Day Before* takes as its point of departure the notion of the castaway. However, true to Eco's style and thinking, this castaway finds himself in the most extraordinary

predicament: he is stranded upon a deserted ship which lies at anchor in a bay that is within sight of an island. I would ask that you attempt to visualize this particular scene: We have a castaway stranded upon a sixteenth century vessel that lies marooned within sight of a beautiful island somewhere in the South Pacific. The two images I would like you to focus on are that of the ship, the *Daphne*, and the island, Roberto's predicament is further complicated by the fact that he is unable to swim. Therefore, he finds himself stranded upon the ship with little hope of reaching an island that is within sight. While this basic plot is interesting in itself, Eco goes one step further and places the island on the other side of the international date line, which, quite literally, places the island in the day before. Therefore, Roberto is both spatially and temporally stranded in a symbolic purgatory. Eco begins *The Island of the Day Before* with an excerpt of a letter written by Roberto to his "lady": "I take pride withal in my humiliation, and as I am to this privilege condemned, almost I find joy in an abhorrent salvation, I am, I believe, alone of all our race, the only man in human memory to have been shipwrecked and cast upon a deserted ship" (Eco *Island* 1). It seems to me that if we are to approach Eco's novel with a critical eye, we must first acknowledge Roberto's purgatorial existence upon the *Daphne*. The very essence of purgatory implies a slowing down of time almost to the point of suspension. This waiting room of existence condemns Roberto to a life where time is slowed to such a degree that Roberto seems to exist in a state of "suspended animation." That is, by finding himself "condemned" to the *Daphne*, Roberto is outside the space of encounter. By "space of encounter" I mean to suggest that "space" which allows people to interact with others. The space of encounter represents the public area of encounter where one finds oneself "in the midst" of others. Moreover, that interaction with others (which defines the space of encounter) constitutes a fundamental aspect of the creation of our self identity, the "social I," to use Lacan's phrase. The "social I" is a projection of the self onto society which is ultimately "inauthentic." I am using the term inauthenticity in the Heideggerian sense which is defined by the rule of how you are perceived by others. With that in mind the question must be asked, in regards to this novel, what happens when there is no "other" to perceive you? Hence, Roberto's predicament. His condemnation to the *Daphne* can be read as a "salvation" through his use and misuse of memory. Therefore, finding himself outside the space of encounter, Roberto has no choice but to encounter others through the agency of narrative; of storytelling. What results, what is projected is a cosmology based upon the chivalric romance.

It is the narrativization of his life that leads Roberto into the realm of the fantastic, or the “romance” as the “chronicler” (Eco’s narrator) states. To romanticize his life, to turn it into a story which has a clear beginning (the siege at Casale), middle (his education first by Saint-Savin, then in the salons of Paris, where he meets and falls in love with Lilia, his lady, as well as his education with father Caspar, the German Jesuit he discovers hiding aboard the *Daphne* (which I suggest is part of a hallucinatory state Roberto undergoes aboard that ship), and finally an end with his descent into the sea. But before I discuss the importance of symbolism in this novel, I would like to pause over the function of narrative as such.

Narrative is the attempt to spatialize time; to turn it into a picture so that it may be beheld, grasped, conquered. The function of narrative in Eco’s novel is fundamentally related to the attempt by the author to gain mastery over time. One of the subplots to this novel (and there are many) revolves around the seventeenth century quest to discover the secrets of longitude. Cardinal Mazarin, who is about to take the place of the dying Richelieu, sends Roberto on a secret mission as a spy for France to discover what an English doctor by the name of Byrd is up to in regards to the secret of longitude. It is not so much the plot which interests me here as the motivation and correspondence between narrative and time. Roberto’s purgatorial existence following the wreck of the ship *Amaryllis*, leaves him nothing but time. In order to fill up his days he writes fictionalized letters to his “lady” (after all, in a good romance the hero must always have a lady) recounting his life and the events which lead up to, and going beyond his shipwrecked state aboard the *Daphne*. Since time has all but ceased aboard the *Daphne*, Roberto’s purgatorial existence cannot come to a completion as such. Theoretically, story-telling must have a completion; something must be resolved. As readers we are promised an arrival to the end in the story through that unspoken contract which writers and readers engage in. However, Roberto breaks this contract in the sense that he places himself in the role of hero in the story. Thus, his double task is one of author *and* hero. Yet the rules of the romance dictate that we can never be the authors of our own stories; that is a role assigned to destiny or fate. Thus, one aspect of Roberto’s errancy is his attempt to write himself into the role of hero for a narrative which tells the story of his life. By placing himself in the story Roberto is also placing himself back into the linear momentum of time. Writing his life story is the only way he can re-enter the space of encounter and escape the crushing solitude which he finds himself at the mercy of aboard the *Daphne*. This crushing solitude forces Roberto to carry on a conversation with

himself through the agency of the romance. According to Bruno Bettelheim in his marvelous book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, tales (he is speaking of fairy tales, but I believe that Roberto's story works as well) can have a therapeutic affect on helping the child overcome what he calls "separation anxiety." Separation anxiety, according to Bettelheim is, "...the fear of being deserted—and starvation fear, including oral greediness, are not restricted to a particular period of development. Such fears occur at all ages in the unconscious, and thus this tale also has meaning for, and provides encouragement to, much older children" (Bettelheim 15). It seems to me that Bettelheim's articulation of "separation anxiety" and its relationship to the tale (Roberto's turning his life into narrative) compliment a part of Eco's novel in a way that has not been thought before. Roberto's errancy allows him to regress into a childlike role of playacting which is fundamental to the growth of his psyche. But Roberto is errant in what particular sense? According to the American Heritage Dictionary (Third Edition) *errant* is defined as "Roving, especially in search of adventure." Likewise, that dictionary defines to *err* as "to sin." The English word "err" derives from the Latin *errare*, meaning "wanderer." Roberto is a wanderer who, in an attempt to gain mastery over time through the agency of narrative, wanders into a fictionalized story of his life. What is ironic about this is his physical condition of being shipwrecked aboard a deserted ship. Once he finds himself aboard the Daphne Roberto can only wander through the re-creation of his life as he presents it in a series of letters to his lady in order to combat his separation anxiety. Could we not say the same, albeit in a slightly altered form, of the novelist and his or her work? In a way, is not Roberto also a literary mirror of Eco in the form of hero?

What may begin as a need by Roberto to reach out to his lady is in fact an attempt to stay within the space of encounter. Roberto begins writing to put off the feeling of intense isolation that he finds himself in. Eco: "To judge by the date of his first letter, Roberto begins writing immediately after his arrival, as soon as he finds pen and paper in the captain's quarters, before exploring the rest of the ship" (Eco *Island* 5). It is only by accident that Roberto stumbles into the captain's quarters early in his shipwreck. Indeed, it seems that it is only "by accident" that Roberto finds himself in many situations and predicaments throughout the novel. In the Land of Romances, which Roberto begins projecting onto the page almost as soon as he arrives upon the Daphne, the author must supply a hero. Roberto breaks the contract by placing himself into that role. But we must ask the question, what harm could that do since Roberto was writing aboard a presumably deserted ship? Eco: "So Roberto was writing

for himself; this was not literature, he was there truly, writing like an adolescent pursuing an impossible mirage, streaking the page with his tears, not because of the absence of the lady, pure image even when she was present, but out of fondness of himself, enamored of love" (Eco *Island* 6). Thus, I ask the question once again, what is the harm, given Roberto's situation, of placing himself as hero into a story that he is authoring? The harm lies in the possibility for madness. We need only remind ourselves of that other great man who saw himself as the hero of some vast and fantastic romance, Don Quixote. Quixote, as we know, read far too many chivalric romances, and transferred his love for that genre onto the "real" world. Dressed as a Knight-errant (the potency of an errancy once again comes into play) he rode out across the fields of Spain to defend the honor of his lady Dulcinea (who was really just a peasant woman) by helping those "less fortunate". It has been commented elsewhere that Quixote is indeed one of Roberto's precursors. Likewise, Dante's composition of the *Commodia* is dedicated to his lady Beatrice. What is ironic about both of these precursors is that Quixote and Dante hardly exchanged a word with their respective "ladies". We are told that Roberto exchanges only a few words with his lady Lilia. The real Dulcinea thought Quixote an old mad fool. History tells us that Dante spoke hardly a word to the "real" Beatrice, and in that word she all but snubbed him. In *The Island of the Day Before* we get the impression that Lilia is, at best, slightly amused by Roberto, but certainly not intrigued enough to fall hopelessly in love with him. In each of these cases the love which inspires the creative act is unrequited. But perhaps an unrequited love is the most powerful form of love one can experience because there is always the hope that that love will be returned.

The inspiration derived from unrequited love, however, is not the only narrative bridge which joins *The Island* to those other two masterpieces. While Roberto may not have been familiar with *Don Quixote* and Dante's *Commodia*, we know that Eco is. Therefore, another type of errancy is coming through in the form of the author—Umberto Eco—placing himself, at least in part, into the text. This is a fundamental yet often misunderstood aspect in understanding Eco's fiction. In *Post-script to The Name of the Rose*, Eco states: "...I rediscovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): *books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told* (emphasis mine). Homer knew this, and Ariosto knew this, not to mention Rabelais and Cervantes" (Eco *Name* 511-512). Eco's statement is perhaps the most clear declaration on postmodern fiction we have. Every story,

every book, constantly refers to a myriad of other stories and books always already. Within this formula for postmodern fiction (which could very well be “opened up” to include postmodern art and architecture as well), it becomes impossible to create something totally original. Everything has already been said, and new stories, new narratives are in fact being retold based upon older models. In Eco’s first novel, *The Name of the Rose*, Brother William of Baskerville states: “In order for there to be a mirror of the world, it is necessary that the world have a form” (Eco *Name* 120). The “mirror of the world” must reflect that model from which it draws form. This is precisely what Eco is doing with *The Island of the Day Before*. *The Island* is a novel that is, quite literally, a reflection of a series of ontological sites. Not only is Roberto constructing a mirror of his life through his “adventures” in the Land of Romances, but he is also peopling his world with aspects of everything he has encountered up until his shipwreck aboard the *Daphne*. The *Daphne* functions not only as Roberto’s physical prison, but a spatial one as well. He is stranded upon a motionless ship that lies within reach of an island which exists in the past. Moreover, until Roberto meets Father Caspar he cannot venture outside the ship in daylight due to an injury he sustained during the siege at Casale, which rendered him sensitive to light. What Roberto sees up until that point are only slight nuances of the island and the vast body of water which surrounds the ship. I would like to argue that it is the symbolism attached to the sea which can be read as the dominant factor in Roberto’s construction of himself.

The sea which surrounds the *Daphne* contains multiple meanings in regards to Roberto. First and foremost we can speculate that the sea represents Roberto’s subconscious. His inability to swim forces him to construct a narrative (based upon actual events, but only becoming heroic in the Land of Romances, which is, after all, the realm of fiction—Eco’s role as cosmologist once again becomes prominent) which theoretically allows Roberto to assume the role of hero and author simultaneously. As I’ve stated earlier in this paper, this dual role constitutes an errancy. But let us delve more into the symbolic. The sea contains the vastness of possibility for Roberto. It is off the reflection of that sea that Roberto begins to construct an altered cosmology based upon the “form” of his real life. It is out of the sea that his evil twin, Ferrante, will emerge to pursue the beloved Lilia and thus, supply a hauntingly familiar rival for Roberto. This dualness of personality which Roberto uses to counter his “heroic” self, also functions as that amoral part in all of us (we who think ourselves moral) we constantly try to repress. It is only perhaps in

fiction that we can “safely” manifest our most sinister desires. After all, when asked how he began thinking about writing a novel Eco has stated that he had the image of a poisoned monk. Ferrante is the mirror-image of Roberto, who in turn is the mirror image of Eco.

It is inaccurate to think that once Roberto finally descends into the sea and disappears under the waves that he is never heard from again. The chronicler is careful to inform us that he speaks to us through the centuries, and most likely will continue to do so. By composing a narrative surrounding his life Roberto sought to escape from the solitude of his prison on the Daphne. It is only through narrative that he could complete the task assigned to him by Cardinal Mazarin, and win the hand of his lady as a result. Likewise, it is only through narrative that the author (Eco as well as Roberto) can hope to come to some sort of logical conclusion. However, in life conclusions are hardly ever “logical.” Therefore, the fabrication of a life allows the author to carry out his or her desires to their completion. While aboard the Daphne Roberto is completely cut off from the space of encounter. While writing the novel the author is completely cut off from the space of encounter as well. The differential dynamics of temporality have ceased once Roberto is washed upon the deserted ship. In order to find his way back (again, the island standing as a symbol for the past, for History as such) Roberto must write himself into the past. In his essay “The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I,” Jacques Lacan states:

This development is lived as a temporal dialectic which decisively projects the formation of the individual into history; the *mirror phase* is a drama whose internal impulse rushes from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, captive to the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality which we shall call orthopaedic—and to the assumption, finally, of an armour of an alienating identity, which will stamp with the rigidity of its structure the whole of the subject’s mental development (Lacan 96).

Perhaps there is no better way to approach the subject of the mirroring of the self in *The Island of the Day Before* than through a Lacanian interpretation. I would add that Lacan’s essay can be read as an outstanding companion to Eco’s novel and vice versa.

Eco’s novel is not only a mirroring of the self through Roberto’s manifestation of Ferrante, and Eco’s manifestation of Roberto, but it is also a mirroring of Eco’s knowledge and life as such. When we read novels we inevitably learn something of the author, despite what has been written concerning the death of the author. Telling stories is one way of mirroring our errancy as wanderers in the world.

It is through that very errancy that we come to develop the cultural artifacts we leave behind; a trace of ourselves declaring that “we were here.” Perhaps this is most tellingly revealed by Eco’s chronicler some two hundred pages in the novel when he states, “Per sopravvivere bisogna raccontare delle storie,” or as William Weaver so brilliantly mirrors those words in his English translation, “To survive, you must tell stories”. We tell stories in order to leave a trace which says that “we were here.” The auto-biography is an attempt to contain our lives through the agency of narrative. Moreover, narratives are much more than just artifacts; they are artifacts which speak.

Works Cited

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