

I

Until then I had thought each book spoke of things, human or divine, that lie outside books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves. In the light of this reflection, the library seemed all the more disturbing to me. It was then the place of a long, centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, a living thing, a receptacle of powers not to be ruled by a human mind, a treasure of secrets emanated by many minds, surviving the death of those who had produced them or had been their conveyors.

(The Name of the Rose, 286)

Comedy affords us the opportunity to explore how the world might look and feel with the dead weight of predominance and probability lifted from its shoulders. Whereas tragedy is preoccupied with the annihilation of the potential by the actual, comedy is leveled at the (pitifully) remote horizon of what could be, rather than absorbed in the immediate oppression of what is. The primary focus in comedy is to represent the surrender of the predominant to the possible, the victory of human benevolence over the rigid stratifications of historical actuality.

Comedy dramatizes the utopian within the historical. It allows us to dream of our release from history's constraints by providing us with provisional images, embedded in easily identifiable and thus more persuasive forms, of what such a utopian realization might feel and look like. However, comedy never allows us to lose our grasp on the real world's intransigence; rather, as Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose takes pains to caution us, the journey from the lives we tolerate to an ending of the dead weight of historical prevalence has yet to be completed. Brother William of Baskervilles would agree with all of this: indeed, his final words at the end of his first day at the abbey form a sort of synopsis for the notion of the utopian locked inside the confinements of historical actuality and authority. "Because," he says to his sidekick Adso, "learning does not consist only of knowing what we must or we can do, but also of knowing what we could do and perhaps should not do" (97).

The Name of the Rose takes place in the Middle Ages (1327, to be exact), a time when the Bible is thought to be the quintessential, authoritative text – against whose word all writing, and its relative quantity of truth, is measured. This biblical authority is premised on the existence

of an established, divinely imparted meaning and the potential for a retrieval of that very meaning. To people like William the Franciscan ex-Inquisitor, and to someone such as Russian polymath Mikhail Bakhtin, the dogmatic *auctoritas* pursued by absolutist interpreters of the Scriptures suggests a closed and stratified ideology that bars freedom of thought. In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin condemns the ideology behind religious absolutism by suggesting that it is devoted only to “terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety” (19). What he values instead is the Rabelaisian carnivalization of literature: the sociolinguistic fun-fair where, as in the medieval festival or carnival, a rigidly hierarchical social order which ordinarily demands deference, sobriety, and strict obedience to authority temporarily gives way to raucous rituals of inversion: young boys are crowned for a day as bishops and carried through the streets in mock religious processions; kings act like the populace; carnival “is revolution (or revolution is carnival): kings are decapitated (that is, lowered, made inferior) and the crowd is crowned.”¹

This paper deals with the presence of comedy and the carnivalesque in The Name of the Rose; it looks at four very important figures, four men who all are deeply affected by the language and the structure of comedy and by the presence of the carnivalesque in their lexicon, in their epistemologies, and in their unconscious. We will start with Salvatore, a Rabelaisian (or even Shakespearean) fool, whose physical appearance and language are both carnivalesque; we will find Brother William and his Moriarty-like opponent, Jorge of Burgos, in the very lengthy middle section – where comedy will be, in a series of bitter arguments, portrayed both as the ultimate subversive poison to the authority of the Bible and as the utopian ideal locked within the bonds of history; finally, we will talk with young Adso of Melk – or, more precisely, we will let him tell us how the blank slate of his mind has been affected by the many words, sights, smells, and sensations of his seven days at the monastery. If we are lucky, Adso will also share his dreams with us: the carnival that is his unconscious is too overwhelming and too full of signifiers

¹Umberto Eco, Carnival! (Chapter 1 – “Frames of Comic Freedom”), Berlin; New York; Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers, 1984 (pp.1-9)

for him to keep it a secret from us. We will see what happens when the authorized and unauthorized transgressions of the norms are brought to a bloody and fiery head after just one week at a northern Italian monastery.

II

(Salvatore)

We will then show how the ridiculousness of speech is born from the misunderstandings of similar words for different things and different words for similar things, from garrulity and repetition, from play on words, from diminutives, from errors of pronunciation, and from barbarisms.

(Aristotle, [from the missing] 2nd Book of the Poetics, also p. 468 in The Name of the Rose)

The first physical description that we get of Salvatore is also the description of his peculiar “language”: his “speech was somehow like his face, put together with pieces from other people’s faces, or like some precious reliquaries I have seen....fabricated from the shards of other holy objects” (47). In many ways, Salvatore foregrounds the vision of the novel that houses him. Certainly he is a curiously amphibious creature, dwelling in a borderland between the world of the story and yet outside of it, too. He is not attached to any particular identity, mode of language, or point of view. If he is a fool-like figure, by his very presence in the text (in Bakhtin’s words) “he makes strange the world of social conventionality.” For, he is invested with “the right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available.”² Admittedly, Bakhtin is talking about the role of a Shakespearean fool, here; clearly, he has very little “right” to be “other” or “different” in The Name of the Rose. But Salvatore is important to us *precisely because* he is not important to anyone in the novel. He is written off, at a stroke, as a vulgar, leering, winking, lubricious grotesque – the vulgar cellarer’s (Remigio di Varagine) lackey and purveyor of tricks and charms! He is important, though, because his gratuitous flights of verbal *bricolage* and

² Both from Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination (Austin, Texas and London, 1981), pp.404, 162.

manic-digressive equivocations expose the fluid, unfixable nature of language, and therefore the instability of the structures of meaning which encode and stand in for the conventions of contemporary life.

At the end of his conversation with Ubertino, William seems slightly perturbed by the fact that Salvatore often mutters the word “Penitenziagite” (64). A hybridization of Latin, Spanish, and Italian, Salvatore’s word is, we are told, probably a subconscious formation in his mind. William is automatically suspicious (and later on, his suspicions are proven to be somewhat correct – Salvatore is guiltily referring to his master and soon-to-be denounced heretic, Remigio); but Ubertino undercuts William’s suspicions when he says that “the sickness of the abbey is something else: seek it among those who know too much, not in those who know nothing. Don’t build a castle of suspicions on one word” (64). Later on, Severinus eerily echoes Ubertino’s advice when he remarks, “the line between poison and medicine is very fine; the Greeks used the word ‘pharmacon’ for both” (108). This equivocal image neatly and subtly foregrounds the comedy debate that will soak through the remaining pages of the novel: comedy seems to be a cure for some and a poison for others in The Name of the Rose.

In his very well-written Umberto Eco and the Open Text, Peter Bondanella points out that

William’s mistakes and his failure to understand the events in the monastery are based upon a misconception about language. Language does not necessarily refer to something in the *outside* world, something concrete that stands in a one-to-one relationship to the word which is a sign; language may be *metareferential* and refer to *itself*, just as Eco’s The Name of the Rose is both a novel and a book that refers to and is made up of many other novels. (119)

Later on, Bondanella points out that Eco “had come to realize that the semiotic principle of unlimited semiosis can also imply an expansion of human liberty” (125). And to the last critical reference (for now), Eco – in Carnival! – says that “humor is always, if not metalinguistic, metasemiotic: through verbal language or some other sign system it casts in doubt other cultural codes” (8).

Salvatore's language, and the way its authority is undermined, is a necessary beginning to a paper that discusses the subversive effect that comedy has in "making the truth laugh" (491). Because human experience is linguistically structured, yet the various structures of language possess no logical connection with any independent reality, the human mind can never claim authority over any reality other than that determined by its local form of life. Salvatore's lexicon, like carnival, resists order, closure and the sacrosanct. But it (and he) is important. When Salvatore generously offers Adso an oil lamp to take to William, Adso enquires why Salvatore would proffer such a gift to him; Salvatore responds, in his heteroglossic way, "Sais pas, moi... Peut-etre your magister wants to go in dark place esta noche" (220). Because we laugh a little bit as he speaks, we perhaps forget that Salvatore is well aware of the snooping that William and Adso are about to do; Salvatore is a little too big for the world of this novel, particularly because his unauthorized language amuses us so much that we question the authority of words (the Word) at the same time as we laugh at the truths he conceals and unravels.

III

(William and Jorge)

Fear prophets, Adso, and those prepared to die for the truth, for as a rule they make many others die with them, often before them, at times instead of them. Jorge did a diabolical thing because he loved his truth so lewdly that he dared anything in order to destroy falsehood. Jorge feared the second book of Aristotle because it perhaps really did teach how to distort the face of every truth, so that we could not become slaves of our ghosts. Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth.

(The Name of the Rose, 491)

If The Name of the Rose exploits the special freedom associated with comedy to turn the Medieval world upside down, it does so only to reinforce the rationale for keeping it the right way up. Similarly, the presence of the carnivalesque (in dreams, in texts, in language), the saturnalian reversal of social roles, does not have to threaten the social order in any way; in fact,

the temporary overturning of authority can in fact serve to consolidate the social order. This seems to be a very abridged synopsis of William's feelings about the effect that comedy can have in the clerical realm. But Jorge would disagree: he would agree that, yes – at the close of the “Carnival,” kings remain kings and clowns clowns; however, what *is* dramatically altered is our perception of the stratified structure of society. But that is precisely the point that William seeks to illuminate for the blind Jorge: comedy should not overturn, upset, destroy the social and religious order; but it definitely should make us question that authority, because that empowers the individual and because – actually – it makes us appreciate the need for (at the very least) a certain kind of authority. Moreover “books,” says William, “are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we mustn't ask ourselves what it says but what it means, a precept that the commentators of the holy books had very clearly in mind” (316).

In her very interesting article on sexuality and the plurality of meaning in Shakespearean comedy, Catherine Belsey discusses the necessary freedom to enter *and yet exit* logic (as well):

To fix meaning, to arrest its process and deny its plurality, is in effect to confine what is possible to what *is*. Conversely, to disrupt this fixity is to glimpse alternative possibilities....New meanings release the possibility of new practices.³

Soon after he and William have seen the tongue-blackened corpse of Berengar, Adso begins to discover the truth behind such a (Belsey's) remark. He notes:

I had always believed logic was a universal weapon, and now I realized how its validity depended upon the way it was employed. Further, since I had been with my master I had become aware, and was to become even more aware in the days that followed, that logic could be especially useful when you entered it but then left it.

(262)

But certainly the most important part of this discussion on William and Jorge must necessarily center around three texts: the *Coena Cypriani*, and Aristotle's second book in the *Poetics*, and on *The Revelation to John* in the New Testament. Jorge is deeply threatened by the first two, and endlessly quotes the latter throughout the novel, first as a warning, then ultimately

³ Catherine Belsey, “Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in the comedies”, in Alternative Shakespeares, ed. John Drakakis (London, 1985), pp.166-7.

as a weapon. The *Coena Cypriani* is a burlesque representation based upon the subversion of topical situations of the Scriptures; however, it can only be enjoyed as a comic *transgression* if one takes the Scriptures seriously. Jorge's fear that the monks may discover the *Coena* remains a puzzling mystery, long after one has finished reading the novel. Naturally, we understand – on the surface – why Jorge fears the subversion of comedy. But seeing comedy in, and the carnivalization of, the Scriptural writings is an *authorized* transgression of the norms: in this sense, comedy and carnival represent paramount examples of law enforcement – they remind us of the existence of the rule.

In Umberto Eco and the Open Text, Bondanella brilliantly points out that

...because The Name of the Rose is ultimately about freedom, about tolerance, and about respect for difference, it is appropriate that the lost book William seeks and Jorge conceals is Aristotle's treatise on comedy. Comedy, as Jorge of Burgos quite rightly understands, is always....a subversive force undermining authority and customs. It is mankind's best and sometimes only protection against fanaticism of all sorts.
(125)

William acknowledges that our perception of reality changes from moment to moment; Jorge, on the other hand, stresses the priority of fixed abstract principles over concrete experience, and he is convinced that the single a priori thought system that is biblical authority should govern both belief and investigation of belief. As the novel progresses, Adso's ideology makes a significant shift when he realizes that one is always and necessarily engaged in reality, thereby at once transforming it while being transformed oneself. He is, in fact, already grasping this truth early on in the novel when he describes William as a man "moved...solely by the desire for the truth, and by the suspicion...that the truth was not what was appearing to him at any given moment" (14). Later, William rightly points out that "Aristotle himself had spoken of witticisms and plays on words as instruments better to reveal the truth, and hence laughter could not be such a bad thing if it could become a vehicle for the truth" (111).

The discussion on William and Jorge is not complete without a brief word or two about how the detective and the murderer both use false systems of reasoning to arrive at the truth. Much of this essay is devoted to pointing out the many false systems of reasoning that dominate Jorge's ideology. But interestingly, William – too – arrives at his "truth" (for the detective, obviously, this means the solution of the crime) through a system of faulty reasoning. When William is propounding his solution to the crime (Poirot-like) to Jorge, he says: "I conceived a false pattern to interpret the moves of the guilty man, and the guilty man fell in with it. And it was this same false pattern that put me on your trail" (470). On the next page, Jorge rebuts: "I cannot follow you.... You are proud to show me how, following the dictates of your reason, you arrived at me, and yet you have shown me you arrived here by following a false reasoning. What do you mean to tell me?" (471).

What William is truly demonstrating is that life is not patterned after the logical rules of detective fiction; and, by admitting that he has been an utter failure as the "master detective," William is clearly underlining how dangerous it is to interpret the order of the cosmos in a certain way. In the same way that Plato's allegory of the Cave represents the search for the highest Truth, the journey to the world of seeing and of light in no way represents the Truth itself. Of course, this is not just a discussion about truth itself; it serves as a subtle metaphor for comedy as well. The structure of comedy is closely akin to a search for truth: comedy deflates the hegemonical structure(s) of epistemology and reasoning only to demonstrate, however, that the structure is necessary though flawed. Jorge cannot see this; indeed, William asks him why he is frightened by laughter: "You cannot eliminate laughter by eliminating the book" (473), William correctly observes. But Jorge has two gnawing fears: first, he says, "laughter frees the villain from fear of the Devil, because in the feast of fools the Devil also appears poor and foolish, and therefore controllable. But this book could teach that freeing oneself of the fear of the Devil is wisdom" (474); then, he anticipates Jacques Derrida by several centuries when he voices his second major fear. "On the day when the Philosopher's word would justify the marginal jests of

the debauched imagination,” Jorge hisses, “or when what has been marginal would leap to the center, every trace of the center would be lost” (475).

The best and last word on these two goes to Eco, himself, who – in his essay entitled “The Myth of Superman,” captures the essence of all of this: truth, our expectations of the truth, the deflation of reality, and the pleasure derived from upholding a traditionally-received point of view. (Try to picture Jorge consuming the book at the end of the novel, and you will have it):

The device of iteration is one on which certain escape mechanisms are founded, particularly the types realized in television commercials: one distractedly watches the playing out of a sketch, then focuses one’s attention on the punch line that reappears at the end of the episode. It is precisely on this foreseen and awaited reappearance that our modest but irrefutable pleasure is based. This attitude does not belong only to the television spectator. The reader of detective stories can easily make an honest self-analysis to establish the modalities that explain his “consuming” them. First, from the beginning the reading of a traditional detective story presumes the enjoyment of following a scheme: from the crime to the discovery and the resolution through a chain of deductions.

(873)

IV

(Adso)

And this morning, in your sleeping mind, there returned the memory of a kind of comedy in which, albeit with other intentions, the world is described upside down. You inserted into that work your most recent memories, your anxieties, your fears. From the marginalia of Adelmo you went on to relive a great carnival where everything seems to proceed in the wrong direction, and yet, as in the Coena, each does what he really did in life. And finally you asked yourself, in the dream, which world is the false one, and what it means to walk head down. Your dream no longer distinguished what is down and what is up, where life is and where death. Your dream cast doubt on the teachings you have received.

(The Name of the Rose, 437-8)

We will finally focus on the great dream that Adso has after Terce on his sixth day at the abbey. In his dream, he cannot understand whether he is “in hell or in such a paradise as Salvatore might have conceived” (427); in his dream, Jorge laughs uproariously (428), the abbot reminds Adso of the riddle over the door to the Finis Africae (“Age primum et septimum de quatuor”) (429), Jesus has blackened fingers as he hands out pages of books (431); the abbot

pouts because nobody has brought him any gifts (431), but then is kicked and battered about by his monks (434), and so on.

Adso's dream turns upside down the hierarchies of social and religious power: all fixed positions and settled assumptions are destabilized and laid open to dispute. Adso's experience of assimilating a discordant plurality of positions in his dream actually fosters a leveling mode of perception for him. He reacts to his dream by remarking that "one can also dream of books, and therefore dream of dreams" (437). This partially echoes and answers an earlier, astute remark that Adso makes about William: "I had the impression that William was not at all interested in the truth, which is nothing but the adjustment between the thing and the intellect. On the contrary, he amused himself by imagining how many possibilities were possible" (306) (William later says "All is possible" [456]). Eco's multivocal carnivalesque cuts across all lived divisions of class and gender, breaking down the barriers of language and ideology which protract their dominion. The escalating confusions of Adso's dream suggest that the identities of those in power are more plural, discontinuous and volatile than the official definitions and approved models can afford to admit. Indeed, by means of the many tropes present in Adso's dreams, this particular version of comedy undoubtedly undermines the fixed assumptions that Adso had previously held about apostolic and all other forms of authority.

There can be no doubt that Adso's dream is a direct reproduction of the many images that his impressionable mind has half-digested in such a short time. There can be possibly no more influential a series of pictures than those contained in Adelmo's psalter. Here, in full, is Adso's reaction reproduced. The most fascinating part of his reaction is italicized (*italics mine*), demonstrating that his subconscious is already forming a polemic, a subversive truth that he will painfully uncover over the next six days and sixty or seventy years of his life:

This was a psalter in whose margins was delineated a world reversed with respect to the one to which our senses have accustomed us. *As if at the border of a discourse that is by definition the discourse of truth*, there proceeded, closely linked to it, through wondrous allusions in aenigmat, a discourse of falsehood on a topsy-turvy universe, in which dogs flee before the hare, and deer hunt the lion. (76)

V

The good of a book lies in its being read. A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs, which in their turn speak of things. Without an eye to read them, a book contains signs that produce no concepts: therefore it is dumb. This library was perhaps born to save the books it houses, but now it lives to bury them. This is why it has become a sink of iniquity. The cellarer says he betrayed. So has Benno. He has betrayed.

(The Name of the Rose, 396)

The Book of Revelation was later assumed to be a prophecy of the future troubles of the Church, which left commentators on it free to identify its sinister images of Antichrist and Great Whore with whatever they were most afraid of in their day.⁴ Jorge of Burgos is deeply afraid of humor (far more than he is of carnival, even), because humor provides us with a picture of the utopian within the historical; it undermines limits from the outside; most important, rather than promising us liberation, humor actually reminds us of the presence of “the laws” that we feel we have very little reason to obey.

Carnival, too, is able to demystify the dominant ideology, but always within the context of being allowed and authorized to do so by the dominant authority of the time. Perhaps William of Baskervilles is a sort of postmodern detective: an interpreter of signs, signifiers, and signifieds, trapped inside the habit of a Franciscan monk. The Name of the Rose is variously described as a postmodern text, precisely because it is “all about” patterns of meaning where truth is encoded in between the lines (the subtext) of hegemonical, clerical authority. The monks die because they want access to the particular truth that is comedy; Salvatore is exiled from the world of the novel before he has even entered: but this is only because he is polysemantic and therefore a threat – he, more than anyone, if at all, is the embodiment of the word made flesh. William and Jorge try to murder each other over words; powerful words, but merely words, all the same. Adso knows, in

⁴ I borrow this appropriate formulation from Northrop Frye in his Great Code.

old age, that there is no postmodern world view, nor the possibility of one. The postmodern paradigm is ironically subversive of all paradigms, because it knows that reality – as we conceive it – is fluid, temporal, local, and without foundation. The only power we have is to laugh at the instability of the world, and of the world and word meanings, and to find solace in the fact that we can name all the roses in the gardens of our everyday world.