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Essay

Reconstructing History: An Exercise in World-Building

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Abstract

Still of young age and far from developed, world literature presents itself as an avenue for innovation for the upcoming generation of literary theorists and academics. Theorists including Edward Said, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch have all followed Goethe in his inception of *Weltliteratur* by posing their respective views and modes of analysis. This essay is an attempt to pave way to help define how world literature attempts to answer its main question: "What is the World?". Using a text, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, a historical novel and postmodern text that has travelled and is deemed "worldly" by many, the concept of historical reconstruction through world building is presented. A short overview and critique of some of the underlying theory and ideas relevant on world literature is also presented. Through an overarching analysis of the chosen text and comparison to existing theory, it is argued that the creation, or "building", of the "world" in world literature is done through an open yet meticulous imagining in the form of a rigorous rehistoricization. It is this imagining, which is rebellious and, by definition, creative, that both shatters an existing canon and defines one anew.

Often reviled by intellectuals, commonly moralists, as relativist drivel, statements like "the world is what you make of it" may in fact be the key to cracking the world in world literature. It is this "making" that is at the core of what world literature, or any attempt at that dreaded question [the world?], aims to accomplish. No better



alternative, if any, exists to describe the events of people and their existence in the dimensions, both spatial and temporal, than history. History is the omni-binding action, with an emphasis on this *active* nature, that allows one to connect to one's heritage and, ultimately, one's self, to find the macrocosm and the microcosm within it. This action is that of a reimagining of the world or, preferably, a rebuilding. The act of writing in the aim of accessing the world or being worldly becomes then an act of reconstructing history. Other than its obvious use as a precursor to criticism, history is then directly a creating of the world and, consequently, implicitly a description of it. Rather than being a mere reaction to the human condition, writing then becomes the building of such condition, the building of a, the, world. It follows, then, that worldly texts need not only be adherently historical but creatively so. This view of an active and conscious time winding may seem derivative of Edward Said's evocations on criticism, and that is because it is. However, in an aim to lay down a new path of discovery for world literature, a deeper emphasis on the need for total "rebuilding", as opposed to Said's proposed "foundational assessment", must be made. As a display of the power and, potentially and excitingly, the danger that comes from this proposed reconstruction, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* will be broken down for the "historical" novels it is and the world building it undertakes (or sets up for), in aims to demonstrate what such an attitude towards writing about the world can yield.

Before moving on to the relevant text, it is imperative that the theoretical ground be detailed and solidified

first. The key word, if there could be just one, to Said's view on criticism and how to view the world is undoubtedly: context. Said strives to inject the world of literary criticism specifically with the instinct of contextualization. Said poses that the proper way to criticize texts, which he sees as events in history, is to properly contextualize them through politicization and hegemonic analysis. For Said, the spatial and temporal environments of events are equally as important as the event itself. It is from this point that Said arrives to his image of the secular critic is who is both simultaneously removed from and part of the world. Although paradoxical, this positioning of the self can help allow one to truly, properly address a certain text, or world. This removal allows an untainted gaze onto the text-event at hand whilst also admitting to and being aware of any internally carried biases. The general goal of Said's ideas is to aid in the demarginalization of the culturally oppressed and the providing of agency to those without any, in search of more meaningful, less preordained insights. It is then the duty of the critic to fight the popular but overwhelming and exclusive culture, but from where exactly? Here is where a certain hypocrisy arises in Said's theory. Said implies and, to an extent, necessitates that this critic be situated in intellectual high society. For to destroy the canon and rebuild it anew, one must be within the canon, have access to it. In attempt to postulate the mechanics of cultural evolution, Said himself may have taken part in the process of exclusion himself. By restricting the role of resistor to the learned, he has excluded a countless many from partaking in the arguably quite essential activity of world-building.

Another shortcoming of Said's model of resistance is its overall strength. By aiming to contextualize a certain event or text, one must accept it and its accompanying posed history upon which one must then work. This is where the nature of reconstruction's overhaul is superior. Said must initially accept a certain history, a certain context and then work on changing it by working around it. In reconstruction, there is not a need to adhere to any canon or specific accepted historicization. Worldly writers in this case do not need to conform to a popularly accepted truth or reality but can instead build their own, further empowering themselves with regards to the sort of insights that can be made as will be evident in coming sections. In his essay "An Essay in the Philosophy and Theory of World History", Heinrich Bortis notes that "in so much as it represents a list of supposed plain facts, a history yields null. It is in the adoption of history as an occurred reality and material for quasi-academic inspection that its value is fulfilled." Nevertheless, there are many things reconstruction and Said have in common. Both share a goal to bridge the gap between the external and the internal. Said emphasizes a need to resolve an individual's filiation and affiliation, what one is bound to by nature and what one chooses upon one's self. This is mirrored in reconstruction in the concept of cosmic mirroring. It is the idea that the external world can be represented in an internal microcosm and vice versa. Moreover, both strive towards empowerment and a search for truth, just at arguably different levels.

A genre given little to no attention in the academic world, as experienced by the American Western and (until recently) science fiction, the historical novel

represents a perfect application of world building in literary form. *The Name of the Rose* is such a form. Set in a 14th century Italian monastery, the novel incorporates two of Eco's main fields of interest: medievalism and his home nation, Italy and its history. It is in this general sense that Eco displays elements of reconstruction, of which basic time-setting is. The first step of reconstruction, and the one Eco spends the most time doing, is the initial deconstruction. To rebuild one must first demolish. Eco's demolition comes in the form of two major tools, both of which contain obvious underlying postmodern messages that do not necessarily, as shall be seen, conflict with reconstruction. The first tool employed is the common allegory. Through the plot directly, Eco sends his readers a very obvious message. The ending aims to deposit a sense of uncertainty and to scramble any possible avenues for meaning or finality. William of Baskerville, our story's protagonist, solves the mystery of the novel basically by chance. William erroneously perceives a pattern, as most master detectives do, that did not in fact exist. A combination of suicide and coincidental and circumstantial evidence had led him to the secret library room and in it Jorge. William concludes, tiredly so, that ultimately there "was no pattern". Consequently, in a ruthless attack on the modernist and the modernist's need to find meaning and structure, Eco constructs the overall plot as a consequence of chance and arguably without meaning. Eco's next tool is allusion. A common premise in postmodern theory is that all texts perpetually refer to other texts as opposed to a direct external reality. In literature, this is framed as intertextuality, the concept

that texts are all linked to and references of each other, to the point that arguably no direct primary description exists, or even can. This is referenced through endless and almost comically abundant allusions. To start, the book's entire premise is inspired, fictionally of course, by, as told by Eco, a book written by 19th century French abbé who in turn had based his book on a 14th century manuscript authored by an Adso of Melk, a German monk. Eco claims to initially had planned to acquire the original manuscript but after failing to find it he settled for the Frenchman's version. Eco then presents to us his "Italian version of an obscure, neo-Gothic French version of a seventeenth-century Latin edition of a work written in Latin by a German monk toward the end of the fourteenth century." The absurd yet common situation of having to deal with references to a lost text, which may itself have been a referential text is at the core of Eco's deconstruction. One similar act of fictionalization that reiterates this problem of reference was his inclusion of Aristotle's treatise on Comedy. Of course this book is currently and has been for a very long time lost. All that remain, from which study of the text arises, are commentaries, again references, to the text. However, this does not stop Eco from building the world he wishes. Cheekily placing the keys to the solving the several hundred page murder mystery in this book, Eco feels comfortable to describe the text and paint his characters' reactions to the text, as appropriate to the medieval setting. Although these depictions are fairly reasonable, they are nevertheless fictional and based on Eco's experience in medieval study and own historical-literary imagination. It is this mixture of fiction and

conjecture with fact and history that is instrumental to reconstruction. More satirical, and honestly quite amusing, allusions also exist in the text. The protagonist William's description as being of Baskerville is a nod to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a later installation in the Sherlock Holmes series. Even Adso's description of William is almost identical to the one Dr. Watson gives of Holmes, the tall, thin, long-faced, hawk-nosed world class detective and deductionist. Eco even at one point goes full meta and alludes to himself on the 4th day as the infamous "Umberto of Bologna", of book of whom William excitedly stumbles upon. A final element to examine in Eco's text is the library itself. The library adds on to the themes advanced the blatant meaningless in the physicality of structures and their perishing. The library, in being a focused location of knowledge that collects and absorbs texts from all around the globe, represents clearly the microcosm discussed earlier. The library becomes a mirror that represents the world which represents man which represents the world and so on until the initial image has faded to obscurity in the infiniteness of the facing mirrors. It is this paradoxical duality that is iterated in Said's writing, the displacement and placement of critic, that represents the inherent difficulty in world-building. Man imagines the world in which he is placed. Man then becomes both a subject and object. Only by accepting this inherent duality can proper reconstruction occur.

It must be said, though, that there is quite a bit of extrapolation in the application of Eco's *The Name of the Rose* to reconstruction. As discussed by Cristina Farronato in her essay "From the Rose to the Flame:

Eco's Theory and Fiction between the middle Ages and Postmodernity", the Rose is predominantly a postmodernist text. Focuses are placed on quotes like "books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told" that iterate direct postmodern ideas. Even the title choice for the novel reiterates this theme, with Eco commenting in the post script he picked the Rose "because the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it hardly has any meaning left". Even the ending line, "Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus." literally translates to "Yesterday's rose endures in its name; we hold empty names." As the library perishes, we retain "ideas", but do these ideas contain any primary inherent value. The rose represents both what dwindles and what never was. The obscurity here is intentional. Language is nebulous in nature and fundamentally referential. Eco's seemingly skeptical views have been used to imply a path forward from deconstruction onto building, but what if Eco destroys with no intention of reconstructing and what little reconstructing he actually does perform is for ... *fun*. It is absurd, yes, to imply that an academic like Eco would publish a text so dense and filled with vague linguistic content that there are entire manuals, "The Key to the Name of the Rose", dedicated to breaking down his unnecessarily obfuscated text merely to dabble in the pleasures of linguistic obscurity. However, a point need be made is that a thorough continuation of Eco's thoughts into reconstruction are made, to quite an extent, artificially. It must also be pointed that Said's, regardless of its inherent exclusiveness, theory on the source of rebellion is accurately demonstrated in Eco, who is

himself an academic. Moreover, Said goes above and beyond to confront the problems in the world and in literature. He doesn't take the easy way out and concern himself with easily sellable and simple themes like the market, nor does he obsess with expanding his insights to point of fruitlessness.

Returning to an image encountered earlier in our studies, one can't but marvel at a single image, that of the Vitruvian Man. Perfect in dimensions, geometrically binding, man becomes that which sets the world, perhaps not just physically, but abstractly as well. It is this world setting that is at the core of why the term world is used in world literature. It is the expansion and application of the internal microcosm that is man to all that is around him. The tools proposed to engage such an expansive aim to go beyond the, when compared to the grandiose nature of world-building, somewhat grounded goals of Said aim to destroy any shackles presented by the canon and those who benefit from its stability. World literature is unique in that it by definition aims to debate the common premise of canonicity. Ultimately, the world becomes, in Weltliteratur, how we imagine it. Alternatively, the world becomes how we *build* it.

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Nabil: *Reconstructing History*

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