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Solutions of the Fantastic in Umberto Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*

Bonum est diffusivum sui.¹

This time it is not Umberto Eco's well-known anglophilia, his influence on English literature, or his being an authority on Joyce that brings up his name. It is his last novel, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2006, henceforth *QL*) that is worth a note in a project investigating the workings of the fantastic. Instead of trying to decode its vast network of intertextual references, for which the web offers the resourceful *Queen Loana Annotation Project* (Ketzan 2006), I will focus on the 'fantastic' qualities of the novel.

A weekend novelist by his own admission, Eco has made it his specialty to write fiction which brings together his two worlds as creative writer and critical theorist. Consequently, he has made it difficult for reviewers and critics to engage with his novels. When he self-reflexively ironizes the position both of author and reader, he also reminds critical commentators of their parasitic roles (Hutcheon, 2).

More encyclopaedic than any of his previous bestsellers, complete with an amnesiac protagonist, Yambo, who – due to his state – is especially alert to his senses, it is a repository of intermediality. *QL* is the memoirs of an (ex-)schoolboy from Fascist Italy, abundant in Italian, French and Anglo-American pop and high cultural hypertexts. Eco himself conceded that he wrote it with his own generation in mind and included his own personal memories and memorabilia.²

QL is also a fictionalized version of Eco's elaborate theory of intertextuality. After he presented the triad of *intentio auctoris*, *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris* in *The Limits of Interpretation* (Eco, 1981), he introduced a fourth level of intention, *intentio intertextualis* (Eco 2004, 121). Eco suggests that there are three additional levels within which such intention works: conscious direct intertextuality, subconscious intertextuality, and cultural intertextuality, all three of which are at play in the novel. Consequently, the intertextuality of *QL* is more than citationism – it comprises the foundational assumptions that form the basis of the text. The mnemonic associations of Eco's protagonist form an intertextual encyclopedia (Eco 1979, 21), the background for the intertextual dialogism of the text, which – with the inclusion of songs and scents – gives way to intermedial dialogism. These associations become the source of

¹ Originally, the motto comes from Thomas Aquinas, but it could be quoted from Eco (2006, 410). See Eco (2004, 121) and (2004, 233) on how intertextuality tends to run wild.

² As far as translation is not about comparing two languages but about the interpretation of a text in two different languages (Eco 2001, 14), a negotiation process (Eco 2003, 6), which involves a shift between cultures, Geoffrey Brock created the Anglo-American *Queen Loana*. All the more so, because the translator/negotiator, worked with Eco in close cooperation and was given a great deal of freedom. There are several passages in the novel in English, which are imitations rather than translations. He also omitted or changed lines that would not work in translation – one-liners, and allusions that only Italians could make sense of. On the other hand, with Eco's precision, he translated the song lyrics in a way that they could still be sung to the original melodies (Ketzan 2005).

intertextual irony³ when Yambo realizes that everything he thinks or says has already been said before.

Lastly, and somewhat similarly, *QL* is an experiment in wiki-technology, as Eco structured it to mimic the free-associative behaviour of electronic navigation. Indeed, Yambo's childhood memories emerge wiki-like, as random fragments, and form nodes in an exponentially expanding extranet. However, the differences of the two media, i.e. the physical finiteness of the book compared with the easy permeability of the wiki-world, question if Eco's idea is at all justifiable (Ng 2005).

Having considered analytical aspects that immediately offer themselves, my argumentation takes a different turn. To me, above all, *QL* is a combination of the previously introduced aspects, and thus, it becomes the show case of what I would call the laboratory of the literary fantastic.⁴ This laboratory is gradually built up during the novel and it is completed in the last chapter, which is to become my main focus of interest.

QL is a first-person novel, and Eco frequently references himself, especially his earlier novels *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*. He also enumerates such archetypal structures as the travelogue or the house metaphor of the personality. Of course, we have his favourite labyrinthine library, a library of Babel,⁵ in the old chapel at his boyhood country home (this time packed with comic books rather than manuscripts) and in a more abstract way, in the form of the novel itself.

Not only is the book a library of Babel, but within this library it takes the shape of the book of books. Even structurally, *QL* has its Old Testament: Part One ("The Incident") and Part Two ("Paper Memory") – an enumeration of the collection of memories and memorabilia, which occupy their true places in the New Testamental Part Three ("ΟΙ ΝΟΣΤΟΙ").⁶ This ends with the equivalent of John's Revelation, the aforementioned last chapter, in which all this is mixed up for good and all.

If this was not enough, *QL* is subtitled as an illustrated novel. For the majority of the book, the graphics have the function of an 'etcetera,' and they are there to create the impression of the abundance of material Yambo comes across (Ng 2005). It is also in the decisive last chapter that their interaction contributes to the 'laboratory circumstances.'

As usual with Eco, the protagonist's name stands for more than it first seems. Giambattista Bodoni, late eighteenth-century Italian printer and engraver was a conscious choice.⁷ His coldly elegant books were especially made to be admired for typeface and layout, not to be read, consequently, he was indifferent to the quality of the text he printed ("Giambattista Bodoni"). His mechanical perfection in typography is in line with the crisis of Eco's character: remembering everything (he has ever read) – being touched by nothing.

Yambo, a sixtyish antiquarian bookseller, suffers a cardiac event, which results in a targeted amnesia. He loses his autobiographic memory and is left with what he calls his "paper memory," a kind of cultural memory, which retains all he has ever read and seen, but nothing of his

³ See (Eco 2004, 212–35).

⁴ Eco (2004, 121) himself uses the chemistry metaphor to describe textual interactions in his imagination.

⁵ Eco (2004, 118–35) questions the intertextuality between his own work and the work of Borges. He queries whether such intertextuality is a conscious representation of a link or a subconscious interplay of references.

⁶ Οι νοστοι, i.e. the returnings.

⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly, Bodoni was a follower of John Baskerville, father of the type face Baskerville, a familiar surname from *The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1983).

personal history. His doctor⁸ and his family advise him to retire to his family's country home, where he finds himself faced with a large collection of old books, magazines, comics, newspapers, records, advertisements, elementary school notebooks, advertising posters, and postage stamps, embedded in a leitmotivic fog, and filtered through his "crumpled parchment lobes." Occasional experiences of, as he terms it, a *mysterious flame*, indicate that some important memory is on the way. Typically, the expression comes from a childhood comic book with a disappointingly insipid plot but a mesmerizing title:

In effect, what seemed to have fertilized my slumbering memory was not the story itself, but the title (...) Having forgotten the 'historical' Loana, I had continued to pursue the oral aura of other mysterious flames. And years later, my memory in shambles, I had reactivated the flame's name to signal the reverberation of forgotten delights. The fog was still, as always, within me, pierced from time to time by the echo of a title (253).

In his search through images and texts, Yambo does not heed his doctor's advice concerning rest, so when he discovers a copy of Shakespeare's 1st folio, an enormous value to a book dealer, he suffers a second incident.

In this first part of the novel, that is "Part One: The Incident" and "Part Two: Paper Memory", the reader witnesses how the text structure takes the place of Yambo's world structure⁹ and opens up his universe to explicit intermediality. An afternoon snack prompts him to quote Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985): "The distinctive scent of bitter almond ...," while his doctor's enquiry about his name inspires "Call me ... Ishmael?"¹⁰ What he sees is quotations all around,¹¹ and much rather than first hand experiences, these are his anchors in reality – a reality that is also to be questioned later on.

Among others, he comes across a poem he, as an adolescent, wrote about the nature of memory:

I build myself memories./I stretch/life into this mirage./With every passing moment,/with every instant,/I gently turn a page/with my unsteady hand./And memory is that wave/that ripples the waters briefly/and disappears". (280–1)

Prophetically, this becomes the script for his "crescendo of mysterious flames," as he calls his near-memory experiences. Let us, for example, take the alphabetic transcription of the *ffff* sound from comic strips:

Noises. I saw all of them, paging through comic after comic... Among the various noises, *ffff* came to mind, and my forehead beaded with sweat. I looked at my hands: they were shaking. Why? Where had I read that sound? Or perhaps it was the only one I had not read, but heard? (237)

⁸ Dr. Gratarolo, the first person he meets after his first incident – a somewhat unsettling frame to the novel, if we consider his name a reference to Guglielmo Gratarolo, sixteenth-century physician, editor of *Verae Alchemiae Artisquae Metallicae* (1561), a collection of alchemical texts (Ketzan 2006).

⁹ In his theoretical works, Eco (1979) also references the text-structure world-structure theory (Petőfi, 1978).

¹⁰ See Melville (1851).

¹¹ To make the reader's job easier, quotations are mostly printed in italics. When quoting from the novel, I kept the *italics* throughout my paper.

In vain does he master world literature if, similarly to the eighteenth-century Bodoni's elegant typeface, the quotations remain empty structures without content:¹²

My life as an encyclopaedia continues. I speak as if I were up against the wall and could never turn around. My memories have the depth of a few weeks. Other people's stretch back centuries. A few evenings ago, I tasted a small nut. I said: *The distinctive scent of bitter almond*. In the park, I saw two policemen on horseback: *If wishes were horses, beggars would ride*. (40)

The most intimate and personal experience he can have is his awakening body consciousness: brushing his teeth, making love to his wife and defecating in the garden. These are his most human moments and Eco apparently took pleasure in their sensual rendering. For the reader, too, these are moments of leisure, there is no urge to rack their memory for classic lines – personal experiences are always at hand.

An Odysseian title, ΟΙ ΝΟΣΤΟΙ, heralds Part Three, where all the ingredients listed before finally enter into reaction. At this point, the narrative shifts to a dream state in which Yambo himself does not know whether he is asleep, comatose, or dead.

Now I do not live in the stream of time. I am blessedly, in the eternal present. Angelo is before my eyes, the day of his obsequies and also the days of his triumphs. I can move from one memory to the other, and experience each as the *hic et nunc*. (315)

In this ambiguity, the reader is also presented with images that extend beyond those in the physical collection at Solara, and the story moves back in time to Yambo's boyhood and early adolescence, the visual and musical popular culture of Mussolini's Italy presented in lucid and sequential memories: "I have regained my memory. Except that now – when it rains it pours – my memories are wheeling around me like bats."

Paper memory finally triggers personal memory and offers solutions for previously inexplicable associations:

The tin frog and Angelo Bear. In the attic they had popped into my mind at the same time because Angelo Bear, too, became linked to my sister, when she later became an accomplice in my games – and a glutton for milk candies. (312)

It takes this second coma for Yambo to access his memories and for the reader to learn how the fog, the stamps from Fiji, and the alphabetical transcript of the sounds from comic books are all inextricably linked.

He remembers now that *ffffi* was the sound of his childhood friend cutting his own neck on a foggy night – a horror he had been fleeing all his life. We also learn that his search began long before his first incident – in the jungle of images he has always been looking for only one, that of his lost first love, the angelic *Lila Saba*.¹³

And Lila's face? Now I should be able to see it, but it is as though memories were coming to me of their own accord, one at a time, in an order they have chosen. I simply must wait. I have nothing else to do. (315)

¹² Ironically, Eco puts (less well-read) readers in the same shoes: they can only remember that they should remember.

¹³ An anagram for Sibilla, Yambo's Polish assistant back in Milan. She is the source of an absurd inner conflict since he can not remember whether they were having an affair before the incident. Later, he learns that Lila Saba's real name was also Sibilla.

The familiar fog still hovers over the sequences of condensed memory complete with self-reflective detours. "This is fog: not read, not described by others – real fog, and I am in it. I have returned." The ingredients, however, are still chemically pure and the reader can not help thinking that the first three hundred pages were mere preparation for what is in store. The ultimate answer, Lila's face, is missing and is nowhere to be found. What Yambo calls for is a solution, a solution of his memories in the laboratory of the fantastic.

"Lovely thou art as the sun," a hymn to the Virgin Mary, is the title of the climactic last chapter, free of the burden of self-reflection, in which Yambo finally surrenders to images and sounds. Throughout the majority of the novel, the integrity of the plates of artifacts from Second World War Italy is fully kept and the relationship between the written text and the images retains the narrative dominance of the text.¹⁴ This ceases to be the case when Yambo senses himself rising out of the fog of his altered state, and memories begin to mingle and merge within him. At this point, the illustrated novel turns into something like a graphic novel without inserted speech bubbles. An evocative series of full-page montages brought together in single panels finally makes use of the images' potential and results in narrative synergy.

Although the whole novel borders on the fantastic, it only starts to unfold in this last chapter. "Why make distinctions between Mamma, Angelo Bear, and Queen Loana?... I have the supreme power to create my own gods, and my own mothers." With the ultimate declaration: "My Ontology is out of joint," what I would call the 'chemistry of the fantastic' comes into play.

Yambo's relationship with religion, specifically Roman Catholicism, is not without ambiguity throughout the novel. The psychological vicissitudes he experienced as a young boy at the Oratory are positively Joycean.¹⁵ In this respect, the last chapter is a compensation that he provides for himself, at the level of imagination, for what he lost at the level of faith (Jackson 1981, 18). The climactic vision starts with a proper evocation of Queen Loana:

O good Queen Loana, in the name of your hopeless love, I do not ask that you reawaken your millenary victims from their stony sleeps, but merely that you restore to me a face... I, who from the nethermost pit of my enforced sleep have seen what I have seen, ask that you uplift me higher, towards a semblance of health. (Eco 2006, 421)

And Queen Loana does not let him down. Like a visionary, a John of Revelation, he starts to see all at once – the Alpha and the Omega of his personal universe. With this, the text turns into a film script. "And at last, great God, I saw. I saw like the apostle, I saw the centre of my Aleph from which shone forth not the infinite world, but the jumbled notebook of my memories" (ibid.).

The spectacle refuses to observe units of time, space and character; inverts elements of this world; recombines its constitutive features transformed according to the author's historical position; merges incompatible elements (Jackson, 1–8); and all this in a carnivalesque staging. Eco's self-made full-page collages envisage the surreal juxtaposition of external images. These, rather than personal memories, are reflections of Yambo's mind trying to reintegrate past events (Stewart).

A rapid sequence of characters appears from diverse sources on a Wanda Osiris fashion rising staircase with a black background, most of which have been presented in their original layout earlier in the novel. An apocalyptic variety show starts with characters from pop and high

¹⁴ See McCloud, 152–161.

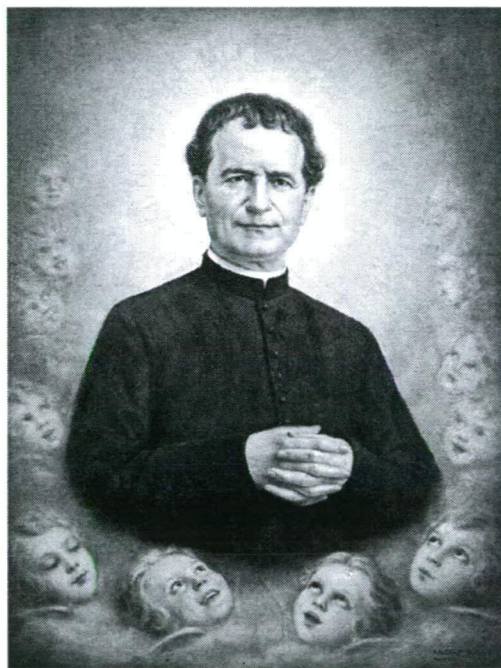
¹⁵ See Joyce 1917.

culture: the Book of Revelation is rendered as a Flash Gordon melodrama. The cast is as follows: at the top of the stairs, upon the throne, Ming the Merciless, Lord of Mongo; with the symbols of the four Evangelists replaced by other Flash Gordon characters; among them the Witch Queen Azura, who resembles a great harlot. The language turns Biblical, too: “when I saw her I was amazed with great amazement” (Mark 5: 42). Then begins a fight and finally, with the help of a swarm of Vespas, Ming the Merciless, Lord of Mongo is defeated.

The show goes on, in Yambo’s high school setting, featuring a character from an aspirin advertisement, Mandrake the Magician singing *A Stairway to Paradise* from *An American in Paris* (the kind of melody Yambo was always irritated by); the Dragon Lady with *Sentimental this autumn evening sky*; and the Flash Gordon characters on their victorious return with *Blue skies, smilin’ at me*. To mention some of the most illustrious guest appearances: the Seven Dwarfs are here in the company of other Disney characters, fifteen of Yambo’s uncles tap-dancing for *I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy* with Mary Poppins wearing the cap of the Paul Street boys and a Pinocchio nose; Sandokan and Cyrano; Josephine Baker in a banana skirt (Fig. 1) humming a penitential hymn, and many more, including his family and his friend with his neck cut wearing the brace from the Renoir movie *Grand Illusion*, when at last, Queen Loana appears who welcomes Don Bosco of the holy cards (Fig. 2), who is chanting the influential war melody *Lili Marleen* – in Latin.



Figure 1



Angelo Enrie, Ritratto di Don Bosco circondato da angeli, Torino, 1928

Figure 2

When the two give their consent to Yambo to finally see the face of his lifelong obsession Lila Saba, there is some prolonged suspense with Yambo guessing what Lila will be like. He quickly regains his self-control and the new flow of quotes is cut short in the following manner:

No, no what wicked literature am I letting myself be seduced by, I am no longer a prurient adolescent... I would simply like her as she was, as I loved her then, just a face above a yellow jacket. (Eco 2006, 447)

And abruptly, the novel ends with “a faint, mouse-coloured *fumifugium* (...) spreading from the top of the stairs, veiling the entrance.” ‘Base’ and ‘acid’ – Baker and the penitential hymn, Don Bosco and *Lili Marleen* – merge only to extinguish each other and leave us with the solvent: the omnipresent fog.

Throughout the novel, we have witnessed how intermediality became the doorway to the fantastic. It is in its nature, I might add, as it does not only mix but at the same time also thematizes media – channels through which we access reality. And reality is what the fantastic feeds on. Thus, *QL* is not only a monument to a generation, a fictionalized theory, and a printed experiment in wiki-technology, but also the schoolbook of the laboratory of the fantastic.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Stanislaus Walery. 1928. "Josephine Baker in Banana Skirt from the Folies Bergère production *Un Vent de Folie*". Gelatin silver print (5 1/2 x 3 5/16). Private collection, St. Louis, Hulton Archive. Source: < http://www.sheldonconcerthall.org/presspix/baker/Baker_Banana_OLG.jpg>.

Fig. 2. Angelo Enrie. 1928. "Ritratto di Don Bosco circondato da angeli." Source: <<http://santiebeati.it/immagini/?mode=view&album=22600&pic=22600BA.JPG&dispsize=Original&start=20>>.