

## “Ephemera as Evidence”: Re-workings of History in Umberto Eco’s *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*

Anu Sundev

### Abstract

History, a record of facts and fiction, an imaginative representation of facts never intersected and remained mutually exclusive terms for a long period. But the basic concepts of new historicism and postmodernism questioned the authenticity of historical records. Terms like historiography and historiographic metafiction combined the concepts of history and fiction and thereby opened up new avenues of literary experimentation. Umberto Eco’s *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* presents the story of Yambo, who is affected by a curious case of aphasia which erased all his personal memories. He possesses a “paper memory” as he remembers everything he had read. As Yambo embarks on the memorabilia to reconstruct his past, the history of a generation also is unveiled before the readers. Eco deals with the complex question of historiography and the interrelations of subjective and objective memories in this novel. This paper analyses the use of ephemera as evidence in the reconstruction of the past and also the relevance of *petis rectics* or personal narratives in the whole process of historiography.

**Keywords:** Aphasia; Detective Fiction; Ephemera; Historiographic Metafiction; History; Memorabilia; *Petis Rectis*.

History, a record of facts and fiction, an imaginative representation of facts never intersected and remained mutually exclusive terms for a long period. Traditionally historiography was seen as faithful documentation of events and was considered as a scientific search for truth. But the concepts of new historicism and postmodernism questioned the authenticity of historical records. Historians can trace past events from documents, records, and archives but they cannot revisit the context of the historical

past. So, he has to recreate the context to make his observations valid and meaningful. This act emphasises the role of the historian and his *petis rectis* or personal narrative as determining factors because he valorises certain historical facts by inserting them and trivialises others by ignoring them. As E.H. Carr observes, "It is used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor and in what order or context" (11). As a result of this "emplotment" history can be treated as a kind of fiction rather than a scientific investigation of buried truth.

The inclusion and the treatment of history in the recent postmodern novels are reshaped by the postmodern notions of history. The postmodern historic novels or historiographic metafiction questioned the division between history and fiction, and as a result, history has become literary and literature more historicised. They reject the primacy of the text, give importance to literary and non-literary texts, question the authenticity of historical documents, and promote an objective perspective on history. This article deals with the complex question of historiography and the interrelations of subjective and objective memories by analysing the historiographic metafiction *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* by the Italian maestro Umberto Eco. It analyses the use of ephemera and non-literary texts as evidence in the reconstruction of the past and also traces the relevance of *petis rectics* or personal narratives in the whole process of historiography.

Umberto Eco stands apart from the predominant Crocean school of Italy of his time with his admiration for both the popular and the high culture. Eco's ideological stance stands somewhere between the academic high-brow culture followed by the Italian academicians and the contemporary mass culture. Even at the beginning of his career, Eco appreciated the genre of detective novels: "the detective novel is not only a youthful sin; it is a perpetual temptation" (qtd. in Bondanella 91). He firmly believed that detective fiction often denigrated as pulp fiction has great mettle to raise serious philosophical and academic interest. *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, the fifth novel of Umberto Eco is a mystery set in a quite different milieu. It discusses the memory loss of Yambo, a dealer of ancient books in Milan. He is affected with a curious case of aphasia which has erased everything personal and autobiographical to him. He forgets his personal relations, his habits, his friends and even his face remains alien to him. He recognizes and recalls what he had read in the past; quotes profusely from Dante, Shakespeare, Rilke, Rimbaud, and many others in original

and from translation. Yambo who possesses only “paper memory”, as Eco calls it, embarks on old newspaper magazines and writings to unfurl the past. While rummaging through the old papers and texts, Yambo relives not only his story but the story of a generation. The memories and flashbacks are deployed graphically in the pages of this novel. Though the catalogue of miscellaneous objects in the attic triggers his memory, he fails in the project and suffers a fatal stroke. In the coma stage, he manages to “recall” his old lover but her face eludes his memory like the mysterious flame.

In an interview, Eco states that every person will have an urge to write about his memories when they grow old. Eco also wants to write about his childhood but does not want to make it a simple autobiography:

If you write a book of memories, you have immediately the image of Proust and what Harold Bloom would call the anxiety of influence to do the contrary. Proust is working upon personal souvenirs coming from inside. Yambo on the contrary is dealing with the sort of mineral memory: oblique objects.

The hero Giambattista Bodoni or Yambo, born the same year as the author in 1932 re-experiences the things that influenced his youth. The character is named after Giambattista Bodoni, a famous editor and typographer of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who designed the famous Bodoni font. Friends and family call Bodoni Yambo, which echoes the name of a central character in an Italian cartoon. As Yambo loses his memory his doctors advise him to go back to some familiar places that will trigger the past experiences. His wife Paula suggests him to visit his ancestral home in Solara where Yambo spent his childhood days. There Yambo rummages through his grandfather’s collection of books, old periodicals, posters, and other souvenirs to get back his significant past and deepest feelings.

Yambo explores the attic of the house in Solara and each paper he comes across triggers the “paper memory” in him. He enters the house and recognizes the objects and paraphernalia to piece together the memories attached to them. Yambo’s attic is a cellar “subterranean, dark, damp, and always cool with natural underground passages where one needs candle or torch” (Spruyt). There he feels the comfort of his mother’s womb with the embryonic dampness and enjoys the long-lost security. He spends many days in the attic immersed in reading and he even forgets to take medicine, bath, or even food at the right time. With the help of the memorabilia stacked there, he succeeds in rediscovering the experiences of

the elementary and middle school years. The fragmentation of the hero's stream of consciousness is captured by Eco to create a stream of consciousness novel.

Eco's novel succeeds in representing both the private story of Yambo and a history of a generation who are born and brought up in a war-torn era. As he explores the extensive attics of his childhood residence the nostalgic artifacts stored there serve as signs that help the amnesiac to trigger the memory. Along with the glimpses of personal memory a generation's experience gets mixed with fiction, truth, and history. The memorabilia Yambo explores becomes a clever intertextual document of the details of war, cultural hegemony, and fascism of that age. Yambo declares:

What I had rediscovered were things I had read, which countless others had also read. All my archaeology boiled down to this: except for the story of the unbreakable glass and a charming anecdote about my grandfather (but not about me), I had not relived my own childhood so much as that of a generation. (272)

The attic teaches him a lot about the history of the world and the history of Italy in particular. It presents the ideological battle waged in the minds of Italians in the early 1930s and 1940s under Mussolini's regime. The collage and montage of illustrations in the text provide accurate documentation of Italian culture and events during the fascist era. It emphasizes the fact that the historical events come to historians only through "paratexts". Whether it is newspaper accounts, diaries, travelogues, parliamentary documents, or private letters, history is available only through a network of prior texts.

The postmodernist writers are sceptical about the grandeur of the grand narratives and have tried to dismantle the authority of grand narratives. They acknowledge the disruptions and omissions made by the dominant and privileged historiographers and try to incorporate the marginalised voices into history. Representations from the hitherto unrepresented subalterns, marginalised groups, and ethnic societies redefined the nature and scope of history. It is at this juncture that the use of 'ephemera' as evidence becomes significant in historical studies. Maurice Richards the founder of the ephemera society of Great Britain describes ephemera as

. . . the transient everyday items of paper. . . vital when they are needed, wastepaper immediately after. They flourish for a moment and are done. . . . Above and beyond its immediate purpose

it expresses a fragment of social history, a reflection of the spirit of its time. (7)

Printed ephemera is one of the most important primary resources to gather information about the economic conditions, social customs, cultural practices, and traditions of a community. The dominant history and literature represent the elite history while the informal ephemera like notices, posters, and brochures give an authentic record of the events that happen during a particular period. The importance of these “throwaways” as primary sources is recognised only in recent years with the acceptance of popular culture.

Eco always has a fascination for popular culture and unofficial memory and he uses them as historical intertexts in his novels. The memorabilia Yambo excavates in his grandfather’s attic is nothing but the carefully retained reading list and ephemera of Umberto Eco. Reconstructing these memorabilia was a difficult task. Eco’s family maintained a good library with his old books and the rest he procured from used book stores and markets. He focuses upon the memorabilia of Yambo as the artifacts of popular culture in the protagonist’s past. He underscores the highbrow culture of the immediate past because he wishes to document how cultural hegemony permeated Italian culture during the Fascist era. Even from his first novel *The Name of the Rose* Eco tries to please two types of model readers through his fiction. The first is the erudite academic group who can easily recognise the intertextual, metafictional, semiotic, literary, and philosophical issues raised in the work and the other, the general audience who are familiar with comic books, cartoons, pop music, and television. Eco makes the audience happy by, as Leslie Fiedler says, “crossing the border” and “closing the gap” between the highbrow and popular cultures.

In the second part of the novel termed “paper memory”, Yambo discerns from the printed ephemera a set of contradictory messages that bombard-ed his generation in the 1930s and 40s. As Eco testimonies in an interview:

We are overwhelmed, bombed by different messages and contradictory messages that living under a dictatorship risked to be overwhelmed by the messages that arrived from the boss. But we are saved by the most stupid radio songs, comic books, by movies because they were telling us that there existed other worlds.

Thus, the popular culture offered resistance and hope to the young chil-

dren against the dominant ideology. Yambo's favourite character is Gordon, an American superhero, who conquered Italian minds through translation. Gordon provides the children an alternate sense of values different from the views propagated by the fascist government. He acknowledges, "Gordon was different, he fought for liberty against a despot". Moral values and alternative ideologies seep into the young minds through comic books and ephemera as the state censors do not consider animal stories and comics to be realistic or dangerous. Eco, through Yambo, clearly states how he got the notion of freedom of press capable of breaking all censorship from a comic series titled *Mickey Mouse Runs His Own Newspaper*.

It was unthinkable that the regime would have allowed an article about the freedom of the press. . . in any case with scant resources Mickey mouse manages to set up his newspaper . . . and continues fearlessly to *publish all the news that's fit to print*, despite unscrupulous gangsters and corrupt politicians who want to stop him by any means necessary. (241)

The novel highlights unofficial memory or ephemera to celebrate popular culture and shows how children who live in a fascist society can "laboriously construct an alternate social conscience" through them.

Yambo succeeds in unfurling the history of his generation through his efforts in the attic but still, he cannot recreate his experiences of personal and emotional development during his adolescent period. He feels as if he is "missing some link perhaps, many links" (211). Our identity pivots on what we remember and what we forget, and our past is necessary to provide certain meaning and purpose to our lives. Personal history is a method of creating identity, a way to impose order and continuity upon human life. Hence Yambo goes deep inside the attic through a trap door into a hidden chamber where his albums and comics in his adolescent period are stored. He relives there the world of fantasy filled with comic, and superheroic characters of his boyhood days. Amongst them, he recreates the idea of an eternal feminine from a series of women's magazines with pictures of actresses. One day while standing in a bookstore his eyes fall on a beautifully illustrated album with a cover titled *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. The picture along with the melodious title rekindles in him a particular kind of emotion. He feels as if he got the explanation for all the journeys and explorations he has made ever since his reawakening. However, Yambo explains that he is bewitched by the title, not by the story or characters in the book.

I had spent all the years of my childhood –perhaps even more-cultivating not an image but a sound. Having forgotten the “historical” Loana. And years later, my memory in shambles, I had reactivated the flame’s name to signal the reverberation of forgotten delights. (253)

Yambo tries to equate queen Loana to his maiden love Lila Saba and then to his later attraction Sibila. Though he is able to make some associations; the reconstruction of his own past remains an unsolved puzzle. He has made some links with the past, but nothing connects him with the present and future. Finally, he decides to go back to Milan and engage in his present and future and it is exactly at this time he suffers the second stroke, the fatal one.

In the last part of the novel, Yambo is in a coma. Though he does not show any cerebral activity he has internal memory. He unlocks his suppressed memories and his unrequited first love Lila to his latest infatuation Sibila. His search for a lost identity becomes successful and then a thin fog envelops him and the light fades. The story of Yambo foregrounds the question of the relationship between national history and personal history. History functions for a society like memory do for the individual; it conveys experience offering a new means to deal with the present and future. By examining personal memorabilia Eco tries to give an alternate history of Italy in the fascist period. The history he recreates is nostalgic, revisionist, and subversive at the same time.

Eco in all his novels and essays tries to foreground the role of popular culture and pulp fiction in formulating an era’s social and political consciousness. Throughout his career, he tries to dismantle the cultural hegemony or the history and ideologies formulated by the elite class. In Eco’s terms “the postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, it must be revisited, but with irony, not innocently” (67). History cannot be deleted but can be retold and when retold it becomes another history. Eco through this fiction repudiates some of the fundamental assumptions of the received account of the history and tries to rewrite history by showing the limits and biases in historiography. By resorting to a “*petis rectis*” or personal history and ephemera, Eco reinforces the fact that history is a network of stories and we can explore the meaning of history through individual stories. Through this thinly veiled memoir, Eco declares that the function of history should be renegotiated and rethought to suit the postmodern age.

---

**Works Cited**

- Bondanella, Peter. *Umberto Eco and the Open Text*. Cambridge UP.1997.
- Carr, E.H. *What is History?* Penguin,1971.
- Capozzi, Rocco. "The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana: A Postmodern Historiographic Illustrated Novel of a Generation", *Forum Italicum* 40.2, 1 Sep. 2006, pp 462-86.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*. Trans. Geoffrey Brock. Vintage, 2006.
- . *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*. Minerva.1985.
- . Interview by Tom Vitale. Author Interview. NPR. June 2005. Web.
- Hutcheon, L. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988.
- Inkanyiso Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. "Culture, Consciousness and Cognition", Vol. 2.1, 2010.
- Jameson, Frederic. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke UP, 1991.
- Kolbet, M . Richard. "Publish and Perish: Printed Ephemera and Social History", University of IOWA. November 1991.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester U P, 1984.
- Maurice, Richards. *This is Ephemera*. VT : Gossamer Press, 1977.
- McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1987.
- . *Constructing Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1992.
- Spruyt, M. "Umberto Eco's The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana: A Conduit for