William of Baskerville’s spectacles and the shaping of modernity

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I have seen new works made of glass which suggest a future world where glass will serve not only for holy purposes but also as a help for man’s weakness ... a creation of our own times, of which I am honored to own a very useful example.

*William of Baskerville speaking about his spectacles*¹

Since their invention around the year 1300,² eyeglasses contributed to shape modernity in at least three ways. First, spectacles improved the painstaking book copying process of the Middle Ages, facilitating the access to the knowledge attained by ancient cultures, and fostering therefore the development of science and technology, two landmarks of the modern age. In addition, eyeglasses contributed to the formation of the individual identity by promoting the introduction of silent reading, a practice that had significant repercussions on the character of modern men. Finally, spectacles favored the propagation of modern values and ideas by spontaneously embodying them, as eyeglasses converted themselves in an emblem of order, peace, and life in a world marked by apocalyptic prophesies of chaos, violence and death. In the next paragraphs, I’ll focus my attention on the references to William of Baskerville’s spectacles in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, in order to support these assertions.

Copying was, by all means, a painful and demanding task: “It extinguishes the light from the eyes, it bends the back, it crushes the viscera and the ribs, it brings forth pain to the kidneys, and weariness to the whole body,”³ according to the account of a medieval scribe. At least one out of four copyists needed enlarged letters to decipher a text,⁴ among other things because of the

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² The invention of spectacles is attributed to an Italian monk named Spina. However, this seems to be not a definitive fact, as a lot of controversy still remains around this matter. See Encyclopaedia Britannica, Volume 4, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1994), 642.


⁴ Manguel, 292.
poor lighting conditions available in the scriptorium. The introduction of eyeglasses to the scriptorium therefore supposed a major improvement in the work conditions of medieval scholars. They eased and expedited the process of reading and commenting on books in such an extraordinary way that shortly after their invention eyeglasses were hailed as “the most useful device in the world.” This process, in turn, speeded the absorption of the information contained in the books of ancient cultures, and contributed to the “classical revival” that marked the beginning of modernity in Italy. In *The Name of the Rose*, Nicholas, the glazier, also acknowledges the usefulness that this device has for a reader, and recognizes that he would like to build a pair of spectacles for himself. William of Baskerville enthusiastically approves Nicholas’ wish, and confirms that indeed eyeglasses are a helpful tool to read the books that contain the “many secrets of nature … revealed to the Hebrews, the Greeks, … and … to the infidels (and I cannot tell you all the wonderful things on optics and the science of vision to be read in the books of the infidels!).” Spectacles here are the ultimate vehicle to enter the ancient cultures, and their books the ultimate source of scientific knowledge. As the single owner of a pair of eyeglasses in the whole abbey, William of Baskerville embodies the proto-modern spirit of the Middle Ages that so clearly saw the enormous potential of science and technology. William shares this interest for optics with Roger Bacon, a Franciscan scholar for whom optics—and its by-product, spectacles—provided the only and supreme method through which a man

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6 Manguel, 293.
7 Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in the Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 113. It is also worthwhile to note that the story of *The Name of the Rose* is set in Italy. Eco, 49.
8 Eco, 87.
9 Eco, 87.
10 Adso takes pride in the fact that only his master, William of Baskerville, has a pair of eyeglasses in the whole Abbey, a place devoted to reading and writing. Eco, 74.
could attain the truth, as they enhanced the sight and sharpened the rest of the senses.\textsuperscript{11} Bacon’s passion for optics marked the coming of what would later become the modern scientific method, one that emphasizes the importance of experimental investigation as a main tool to prove a given hypothesis. Not coincidentally, William of Baskerville –a Franciscan scholar as well– confesses to “venerate Roger Bacon more than any other [of his former masters].”\textsuperscript{12}

As eyeglasses helped people read more effectively, this device permitted the introduction of books in smaller formats. In turn, smaller books allowed for a reduction of their production cost and increased their attractiveness among readers.\textsuperscript{13} The popularization of books, together with the orderliness of texts brought by printing, facilitated the emergence of silent reading. Books became not only more affordable, but more portable as well, enabling a man to read almost anywhere with the help of his spectacles.\textsuperscript{14} Consequently, silent reading awoke the notion of uniqueness in each individual, as readers became aware of their capacity to discern and reason. Aided by their spectacles, silent readers were able to navigate more easily through the texts, divide them into pieces, and unveil their underlying suppositions. This intellectual exercise helped create the concept of individual identity –“probably the most striking and important shift from the medieval to the modern cosmology”\textsuperscript{15}– because it created the belief that an individual reader is capable of mastering a text by exercising his own reasoning and discernment, and not the other way around. Aided by their spectacles, silent readers were able to exert their own judgment in the freedom of their own rooms, afar from the influence of their communities.

\textsuperscript{12} William of Baskerville was Roger Bacon’s student at Oxford. Eco, 63.
\textsuperscript{13} Eisenstein, 43.
\textsuperscript{14} Manguel, 294.
\textsuperscript{15} Deibert, 95.
William of Baskerville –the proprietor of a pair of eyeglasses and a silent reader as well\textsuperscript{16}– approaches the text with the coolness of the future modern readers, and exercises his personal judgment at will: in the passage where Jorge of Burgos, the librarian, finally hands him over the second book of Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics}, he just navigates through the text with his eyes, avoiding touching or tasting it.\textsuperscript{17} In this passage, William exerts his faculties as a free reader –namely discernment and reasoning– and avoids being killed by a poisoned text. Survival here is the ultimate tribute to individuality and self-affirmation.

In the Middle Ages, reading and writing became spontaneously associated with the existence of an orderly world where human beings coexist in peace. Life in the monasteries was devoted to copying books in the relative comfort and security that only those privileged places could provide at that time.\textsuperscript{18} As Adso of Melk put it: “… since the sight of the beautiful implies peace, and since our appetite is calmed similarly by peacefulness, by the good, and by the beautiful, I felt myself filled with great consolation and I thought how pleasant it must be to work in that place [the scriptorium].”\textsuperscript{19} In contrast, life was utterly violent and chaotic for the vast majority of illiterate Western Europeans of the Middle Ages\textsuperscript{20} –a reality that was explained by apocalyptic prophesies that announced as imminent the coming of the Antichrist and the end of the world.\textsuperscript{21} Accordingly, William of Baskerville equates the impossibility of reading and writing with death,\textsuperscript{22} but unlike the fatalistic vision of his time, he contends that death can be

\textsuperscript{16} “He [William] read the first page aloud, then stopped,” recalls a puzzled Adso. He was intrigued, because his master continued looking at a text as if he was reading it, but without uttering a word. Eco, 468.
\textsuperscript{17} Avoiding therefore the synesthetic experience that reading used to be at that time. Besides, William knew that the edges of the book were poisoned. Eco, 469.
\textsuperscript{18} Deibert, 50.
\textsuperscript{19} Eco, 72.
\textsuperscript{20} Deibert, 53.
\textsuperscript{22} Eco, 74.
deferred, since spectacles have provided the solution “to prolong the life of the learned men beyond their fiftieth summer.” Eyeglasses allowed literate people to continue reading and writing, and by so doing they not only preserved their life, but fought the Antichrist and avoided the end of the world. Hence optics are depicted by William of Baskerville as a “holy magic to which the learned must devote themselves more and more,” because mystical experience can be achieved only “through the eyes, as God can be perceived as light, in the rays of the sun …and in the image of mirrors.” Sight, optics and, by extension, spectacles have been conferred holy powers, as they have become instruments to fight the Antichrist and extend the peaceful and orderly world of monasteries outside them.

Eyeglasses represent the enthronement of sight as the dominant sense through which men started absorbing and processing information into knowledge. They literally provided men with a new lens through which to interpret themselves and the outside world. By so doing, eyeglasses contributed to the shaping of modernity by facilitating access to the ancient cultures and thus enabling them to view themselves as individuals with enough autonomy and acumen to observe and transform nature with the aid of science and technology. Spectacles, therefore, favored the propagation of modern values and ideas and converted themselves into the emblem of that new coming era.

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23 Eco, 74.  
24 Eco, 87.  
25 Eco, 58.