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## Eco's Echoes: Fictional Theory and Detective Practice in *The Name of the Rose*

### Abstract

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is a serio-comic pastiche of the detective story set in the middle ages, which uses history as "a distant mirror" to comment, from a Western Marxist perspective, on contemporary political issues. Structurally, however, *The Name of the Rose* is a fictional enactment of many of the semiotician's recent critical and philosophical ideas. (1) Eco's discussion of "abductive" reasoning in C. S. Peirce and Aristotle appears in a detective not only more fallible than Sherlock Holmes but more aware of what his powers consist of and why they work and fail. (2) Eco's explanation of what he calls the "iterative scheme" in popular fiction—ways of handling time that allow for indefinite *sequelae*—appears negatively here, where time and time's passage are given their full durational weight. (3) Eco's discussion of closed and open texts, and of a third category "of which the chairman is probably *Tristram Shandy*," which evades both modes of reading and forces one into consciousness of the reading process itself, is enacted in *The Name of the Rose*, in a traditionally closed genre (the mystery) which is first opened but finally given an ending that deconstructs the mystery novel by forcing the reader into the third, Shandean, mode.

### Keywords

Umberto Eco, Italian literature, fictional theory, *The Name of the Rose*, detective story, Western Marxist, marxism, philosophy, reasoning, reason, C.S. Peirce, Aristotle, iterative scheme, consciousness, mystery novel, Shandean mode

**ECO'S ECHOES:  
SEMIOTIC THEORY AND  
DETECTIVE PRACTICE IN  
*THE NAME OF THE ROSE***

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Structure I. Eco and the Semiotics of Detection

omnis mundi creatura  
quasi liber et pictura  
nobis est in speculum

Alain de Lille (1130-1202): "Anticlaudianus"<sup>1</sup>

*The Name of the Rose* can be said, in effect, to trace the stages in the long line between Alain de Lille, the twelfth-century antischolastic, and modern structuralists like Umberto Eco himself. Separated by eight centuries, Alain and Eco would agree that the world is like a vast text, "quasi liber et pictura," and that our task on earth is learning the rules for reading it.

*The Name of the Rose* has been treated as an unusually clever pastiche of the Sherlock Holmes novels. This is a misreading, but one that Eco has courted. He has, after all, named his protagonist William of Baskerville, made him a native of Ireland (like Doyle's ancestors), given him the height, the sharpness of eye and beakiness of nose associated with the sleuth of Baker Street. The narrator's name, Adso, is the middle four phonemes of "Watson" (as close as one could come in a Latinized name), and though a cloistered monk, Adso shares Watson's unascetic gusto for the pleasures of the table and his predilection for romance, along with a talent for muddling up the clues.

The structure of Eco's novel, however, owes very little to Doyle, whose longer detective fictions usually tended to split into two novelettes: one a tale of crime and detection, the other a sensational

melodrama about Mormons or East Indian convicts or labor racketeering in the industrial Midwest. (Only *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, to which William's name obviously alludes, has the unity of plot and tone Eco has achieved here). In its plotting *The Name of the Rose* seems to owe less to Doyle than to Dorothy Sayers, John Dickson Carr and Ellery Queen. Despite the medieval setting, Eco has collected the complete paraphernalia of a classic mystery of the 1930s: maps, cryptograms, unbreakable alibis, a locked room, a labyrinthine library, clues in a variety of foreign languages, all surrounding a series of grisly murders, carefully spaced one per day, with an elaborate textual patterning to them. It was apparently Eco's intention to write the mystery to end all mysteries.

But there is another sense in which *The Name of the Rose* is a mystery to end all mysteries: it is also a critique and a parody of the form. This is true in obvious ways—merely setting a murder mystery in the late middle ages suggests either more or less than entirely serious intentions. Part of the book's pleasure comes from watching the conventions of the form crop up, regular as fate, in the most unexpected settings. As a result, the reader seems to be reading two novels at once: a classic detective story, and a detective story in quotation marks—the latter a post-modern fiction which calls attention to its very fictionality.

Perhaps Eco is merely spoofing the mystery form. But the parody has its serious side where it connects with Eco's professional interest in detection as a semiotic activity. It is only in a superficial sense that *The Name of the Rose* presents a Holmes-figure in characteristic action: for William of Baskerville is far more self-conscious and self-critical than Doyle's self-aggrandizing detective who, in *A Study in Scarlet* (his debut novel), writes a magazine article boasting of his infallibility.<sup>2</sup> As a philosopher, Eco is more aware than Doyle was of the logical status of detective ingenuity.

Throughout the Holmes stories, the detective's abilities are explained as "the science of deduction." One *locus classicus* explaining the Holmesian method occurs in *The Sign of Four*:

"But you spoke just now of observation and deduction. Surely the one to some extent implies the other."

"Why, hardly," [Holmes] answered. . . . "For example, observation shows me that you have been to the Wigmore Street

Post-Office this morning, but deduction lets me know that when there you dispatched a telegram.”

“Right!” said I. “Right on both points! But I confess that I don’t see how you arrived at it . . .”

“It is simplicity itself,” he remarked, chuckling at my surprise—“so absurdly simple that an explanation is superfluous; and yet it may serve to define the limits of observation and of deduction. Observation tells me that you have a little reddish mould adhering to your instep. Just opposite the Wigmore Street Office they have taken up the pavement and thrown up some earth, which lies in such a way that it is difficult to avoid treading in it in entering. The earth is of this peculiar reddish tint which is found, as far as I know, nowhere else in the neighbourhood. So much is observation. The rest is deduction.”

“How, then, did you deduce the telegram?”

“Why, of course I knew that you had not written a letter, since I sat opposite to you all morning. I see also in your open desk there that you have a sheet of stamps and a thick bundle of postcards. What could you go into the post-office for, then, but to send a wire? Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth.” (pp. 138-39)

Holmes—and Doyle—probably thought that this was a perfect demonstration of deductive logic, but when one examines it a bit, it is rather less than impeccable. The syllogism upon which Holmes’s inference relies would run, according to his explanation, as follows:

Men who enter the Post Office will invariably get red  
mould on their boots.

Watson has red mould on his boots.

Therefore Watson has entered the Post Office.

But this syllogism is invalid: the middle term is undistributed. A syllogism in *barbara* could be constructed if the major term were given as “All those and only those who enter the post office have red mould on their boots.” But this is not what Holmes actually asserts, and detectives in general do not make their assertions in such a form. One *might* step in red earth walking *past* the post-office; one *might*

step into it and clean one's boots afterwards. Similarly with Holmes's "deduction" of the telegram: if there were three and only three reasons for entering a post office (sending a letter, buying postage, dispatching a telegram), then eliminating the first two possibilities would demonstrate the third. But is it possible to catalog and eliminate *all* the *possible* reasons for entering a post office? The point is not that Holmes is a charlatan, or that Doyle was, but that logical deduction, of the sort whose regulations are presented in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, has very little to do with what Holmes is doing. It is noteworthy that the philosopher who best described the art Holmes practiced—the art upon which scientists, doctors, and real detectives all depend—was a contemporary of Doyle's, the American Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>3</sup> To the previously established logical methods of deduction and induction, Peirce added a third, which he gave the perhaps unfortunate name of "abduction." Whereas deduction proceeds from a general rule (or a definition) to a particular case, and whereas induction proceeds from a series of facts to a general rule, "abduction" is "the provisional entertainment of an explanatory inference, for the sake of further testing."<sup>4</sup> In abduction—a mode of reasoning we all probably use far more often than strict syllogistic deduction—both the general rule and the particular conclusion are held only tentatively; they are conjectures to be confirmed or refuted, not certain truths.

One does not need to read Eco's philosophical essay on abduction to understand its relevance to detective fiction. Much of it is explicitly presented in *The Name of the Rose*:

"Adso," William said, "solving a mystery is not the same as deducing from first principles. Nor does it amount simply to collecting a number of particular data from which to infer a general law. It means, rather, facing one or two or three particular data apparently with nothing in common, and trying to imagine whether they could represent so many instances of a general law you don't yet know, and which perhaps has never been pronounced. . . . Take the case of animals with horns. Why do they have horns? Suddenly you realize that all animals with horns are without [incisors] in the upper jaw. This would be a fine discovery, if you did not also realize that, alas, there are animals without [incisors] in the upper jaw who, however, do not have horns: the camel, to name one. And finally you realize that all

animals without [incisors] in the upper jaw have four stomachs. Well, then, you can suppose that one who cannot chew well must need four stomachs to digest food better. But what about the horns? You then try to imagine a material cause for horns—say, the lack of teeth provides the animal with an excess of osseous matter that must emerge somewhere else. But is that sufficient explanation? No, because the camel has no upper teeth . . . but does not have horns. And you must also imagine a final cause. The osseous matter emerges in horns only in animals without other means of defense. But the camel has a very tough hide and doesn't need horns. . . . The search for explicative laws in natural facts proceeds in a tortuous fashion. In the face of some inexplicable facts you must try to imagine many general laws, whose connection with the facts escapes you. Then suddenly, in the unexpected connection of a result, a specific situation, and one of those laws, you perceive a line of reasoning that seems more convincing than the others. You try applying it . . . to use it for making predictions, and you discover that your intuition was right. But until you reach the end you will never know which predicates to introduce into your reasoning and which to omit. . . .”<sup>5</sup>

William's theory here is one of the major “problematic anachronisms” that I shall discuss in the next section of this essay. As a theory, it owes a great deal to Peirce, and nearly as much to Sir Karl Popper's explanation of the scientific method as a series of conjectures and refutations in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1952). But the example William gives is straight out of Aristotle's *On the Parts of Animals*, a text Eco also analyzes at length in “Horns, Hooves, Insteps,” showing that 2300 years ago “the master of those that know” intuitively understood the essential tool of scientific method which Eco calls “creative abduction” (“Horns,” p. 215).

In *The Sign of Four* Holmes is permitted suavely to assure Watson, “I never guess. It is a shocking habit—destructive to the logical faculty” (p. 138). But in *The Name of the Rose* Eco's detective, the superlatively Holmesian William of Baskerville, is well aware that in the exercise of his logical faculty he needs to guess constantly, and that the world—made up as it is of “everything that is the case”—will confirm or deny his hypotheses, make him seem a genius or a fool.

It is significant that the opening demonstration of William's detective abilities—his description and location of the abbot's horse Brunellus (pp. 23-25)—though a convention of the detective novel since Doyle, does not directly allude to the Sherlock Holmes canon. Instead of using a displaced version of one of Holmes's feats, Eco began *The Name of the Rose* with a revision of part of chapter 3 of *Zadig*. There the Chaldean hero of Voltaire's *conte philosophique* dazzles the servants of the King of Babylon by telling them that the horse they are looking for, and which Zadig himself has never laid eyes on, "is the fleetest horse in the King's stable. . . . He is five feet high, with very small hoofs, and a tall three and a half feet in length; the studs on his bit are gold of twenty-three carats, and his shoes are silver of eleven pennyweights."<sup>6</sup>

My first notion was that, in this detective-story-to-end-all-detective-stories, Eco thought it clever to begin with a proto-detective fiction written a century before Poe's pioneering tales. But after looking at "Horns, Hooves, Insteps," it becomes clear that Eco had something else in mind as well—what he calls "meta-abduction," the problem of testing for correspondence the world of one's mental constructs against the world outside one's head. The reason *Zadig* is only one of the forerunners of the detective story and not its first exemplar is that Zadig himself refuses to take that step. When the huntsmen ask where the horse is, Zadig refuses to guess as Holmes would do, but instead replies "I have not seen him . . . and never heard talk of him before" (p. 11). And, Zadig is first condemned for stealing the horse and then, when the horse is found, for lying to the huntsmen about not having seen the beast whose characteristics he had actually abducted. Eco's meditation on *Zadig* is that, while the philosopher is willing to speak about his abductions as mental constructs of his own, he resists being trapped into asserting an identity between the *possible* horse of his inferences and the *actual* horse the huntsmen are seeking: "Unable to accept his fate as a Sherlock Holmes, Zadig was frightened by meta-abduction" ("Horns," p. 215).

Holmes, of course, is never frightened. Though as Eco points out, he often guesses with far less reason for certainty than Zadig had, he never guesses wrong. This is because "he has the privilege of living in a world built by Conan Doyle to fit his egocentric need, so he does not lack immediate proofs of his perspicacity" ("Horns," p. 218).



There is always faithful Watson, ever ready to admit to having acted or thought as Holmes guesses; nor is the outside world of crime ever so unkind as to falsify Holmes's abductions. Eco goes on to suggest that, "Whereas in criminal stories an omnipotent God verifies the hypotheses forever, in 'real' scientific inquiries (as well as in real criminal, medical, or philological deduction) meta-abductions are a frightening matter. *Zadig* is not a detection story but a philosophical tale because its deep subject is exactly the vertigo of meta-abduction" ("Horns," p. 219).

As we shall see more clearly in the last section of this essay, *The Name of the Rose* stands midway between the detective story and the philosophic tale. More like a Sherlock Holmes than a *Zadig*, William of Baskerville defies the "vertigo" and volunteers his guess about what Brunellus looks like and where he has gone. And as though he were in a literary world protected by Doyle, the guess is right on target. But unlike the detectives who attribute their infallibility to logic rather than authorial kindness, William knows that his was merely a lucky guess:

In the case of the horse Brunellus, when I saw the clues I guessed many complementary and contradictory hypotheses. . . . I didn't know which hypothesis was right until I saw the cellarer and the servants anxiously searching. Then I understood that the Brunellus hypothesis was the only right one, and I tried to prove it true, addressing the monks as I did. I won, but I might also have lost. The others believed me wise because I won, but they didn't know the many instances in which I have been foolish because I lost, and they didn't know that a few seconds before winning I wasn't sure I wouldn't lose. (*Name*, p. 305)

While the Holmesian whodunit proceeds on the Cartesian assumption that there is an order to the universe that can be mirrored in the constructs of an orderly mind, Eco's mystery takes a more modern, post-Kantian tack. William never doubts that mental constructs may possess clarity and order: but there is always a leap of faith to the decision that the outside world does. And Eco, as we shall see, is less kind to William than Doyle is to Sherlock Holmes. In this sense *The Name of the Rose* is based upon a semiotic theory that is essentially subversive of the mystery genre. And in setting such a

semiotic quest within the middle ages, Eco's novel is structurally underpinned by a global anachronism, within which local instances of intellectual time-warp are set as textural motifs.

### Texture I. Problematic Anachronisms

In *The Name of the Rose* we are not allowed unselfconsciously to lose ourselves in a historical novel. We are again and again made aware by the work's inherent contradictions—or apparent anachronisms—that we are reading one. In a sense, there was no way Eco could have preserved “suspension of disbelief.” The reader is bound to be brought up short from time to time by the inescapable anachronism of the novel—a whodunit set in the middle ages. The strategy taken up by many contemporary historical novelists (e.g., Mary Renault or Robert Graves), of attempting as far as possible to convey the life of the narrative past in language and narrative technique roughly appropriate to that period, is foreclosed for Eco. To be a detective at all, his protagonist, William of Baskerville, must be essentially a modern man, but he must also be placed within a medieval setting that is as authentic as possible. There is an inherent self-contradiction in this, but instead of trying to deceive the reader about this, Eco chose a playful way of writing historical fiction that would keep the reader off balance; it would fall somewhere between pastiche and serious narrative.

One way of playing with the reader is the phony anachronism. The game to which Eco invites us involves matching wits with the author, and so is structurally similar to the game in the detective story proper except that it can be played again and again. The pattern runs in this way: the author allows the “thoroughly modern” William of Baskerville to use a phrase that recalls a quotation from a later date, or to mention some fact or some process we associate with a more modern period. Then the reader recalls—or looks up—the actual historical situation, and the apparent anachronism is eliminated.

Take, for example, William's statement: “We are dwarfs . . . but dwarfs who stand on the shoulder of those giants, and small though we are, we sometimes manage to see farther on the horizon than

they” (p. 86). This is an all-too-familiar quotation. The classic formulation is: “dwarves that stand on the shoulders of giants can see farther than the giants themselves,” usually ascribed to Isaac Newton in the late seventeenth century. Eco is probably familiar, though, with the work of the sociologist of knowledge Robert K. Merton, who wrote a very entertaining little book called *On the Shoulders of Giants*. It traces the quotation back considerably *before* 1327—to the twelfth-century philosopher Bernard of Chartres—and Eco even includes the detail that his William of Baskerville had studied at Chartres.

A more convoluted instance involves Adso's heartfelt remark on Jacques of Cahors, later Pope John XXII: “and heaven grant that no pontiff take again a name so distasteful to the righteous” (p. 12). The first level of the joke is fairly obvious: it is well-known that Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, on ascending the throne of St. Peter, took the title of John XXIII as a way of disinfecting a name that had remained unused since the middle ages. The second level of the joke is rather more obscure: the bad smell in the name of John had been left at least as much by a previous John XXIII (Baldassare Cossa, 1410-15) as by the John XXII who appears in *The Name of the Rose*. The fifteenth-century pope (he was one of two anti-popes—the other was Benedict XIII—who had been elected by a faction during the official pontificate of Gregory XII) was accused of so many crimes, including heresy, simony, piracy, sodomy, rape, incest and the assassination of his predecessor, that he was deposed by the Council of Constance as *scandalizor ecclesiae*.

Not all the anachronisms turn into jokes on the half-learned reader. Some of them remain anachronisms. Most of these are intertextual jokes, like the hints (p. 16) that William gets high chewing the leaves of some mysterious forest herbs (whose effects—lethargy and visions—sound suspiciously like those of cannabis). Here, of course, the point is an allusion to Sherlock Holmes's dalliance, at times of intellectual vacuity, with the cocaine-bottle. Substituting cannabis for coca is at least mildly anachronistic, since around 1327 Indian Hemp was used as a drug only in the Orient and was apparently unknown in the West till the 1580s. We could make the favorable assumption that William is familiar with Eastern sources now forgotten, but cocaine itself would have been utterly impossible, as the coca plant is native to the Americas and would be unavailable in Europe for nearly two hundred years.

Some of the anachronistic jokes, though, are not intertextual in any very specific sense: they pertain rather to the general tradition of learned wit to which this novel belongs. At one point William recites a few gnomic lines from a text called *Hisperica . . . famina*, apparently a medieval poem about the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s (p. 311). At still another point William makes what we cannot fail to interpret as a mocking allusion to Freud (“We have so many truths in our possession that if the day came when someone insisted on deriving a truth even from our dreams, then the day of the Antichrist would truly be at hand” (p. 438). And on what is nearly the novel’s last page (p. 492), William quotes for Adso “a mystic from your land” (Germany), who wrote “somewhere, I forget where” about philosophical constructs: “‘Er muoz gelichsame die leiter abwerfen, sô er an ir ufgestigen’ ” (p. 438). It means “One must throw down the ladder as soon as he has climbed up it,” and it was written—though not in Middle High German, of course—by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921).<sup>7</sup>

The novel is filled with this sort of amusement—a sort of PhD-level Trivial Pursuit. Out of hundreds possible let me give one last example, which is not a joke but rather an homage to the greatest master of the learned wit tradition, François Rabelais. The “maguffin” of *The Name of the Rose*, the manuscript containing Aristotle’s lost treatise on comedy, is bound together with several other manuscripts in various languages; one of these is “Expositio Magistri Alcofribae de coena beati Cypriani Cartaginensis Episcopi” (p. 439)—a commentary on the porno-satiric *Coena Cypriani* by one “Master Alcofribas.” “Alcofribas Nasier,” of course, was the anagrammatical pseudonym under which Rabelais began in 1532 to publish his porno-satirical histories of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. There are a number of connections here: like William of Baskerville, Rabelais was a Franciscan friar who transferred for political reasons to the Benedictines. Adso and William’s pleasure in lists—lists that go on long after you expected them to be exhausted—comes directly from Rabelais. But the central issue, I suspect, is the “carnivalization” (as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it) of history and scholarship Rabelais brings to fiction. This carnivalization is precisely what Eco is attempting in *The Name of the Rose*: not a parody of the detective story, precisely, nor a pastiche, but a witty and learned game which not only solicits but demands the participation of the reader, and deals out rewards in proportion to his own learning and wit.

Texture II. Time in *The Name of the Rose*: The Black Death

In *The Role of the Reader*, Eco has analyzed the way Time is structured in series detective stories, like those involving Sherlock Holmes or Nero Wolfe: he calls this “the iterative scheme.”<sup>8</sup> In each novel or story, the “event takes up again from a sort of virtual beginning, ignoring where the preceding event left off” (*Role*, p. 119). A series, like the Nero Wolfe stories of Rex Stout, contains a vast number of *topoi*, which are repeated again and again. On the one hand there are “infinite variations of the theme” in that each new crime “has new psychological and economic motivations” (*Role*, p. 119); on the other hand, the memorable moments are the ones that recur from book to book (e.g., Wolfe getting up to tend his orchids when the case is at an obvious crisis point). The point is that *as a series*, it ignores the way time is consumed by the events of the story: for over forty years—from the early 1930s when the series began to the late 1970s when it ended—Wolfe always seems to be a man in his forties, Archie Goodwin in his late twenties. Rare cases may fall into an ordered series, and occasionally a novel will refer to one of its predecessors or to a topical event, but generally each novel constitutes a new beginning that is connected only vaguely to historical time or to the continuous pasts of the series characters.

Historical detective stories like *The Name of the Rose* must be set at some definite time (i.e., they cannot be set in a vague narrative present like the Nero Wolfe series, but there is no reason that Eco’s “iterative scheme” may not apply to them. Indeed, the “Sergeant Cribb” series of Peter Lovesey is a sequence of Victorian *romans policiers* with eminently predictable *topoi*. Most historical whodunits, even when they happen to be singletons (like John Dickson Carr’s *The Demoniacs*), fail to consume the lives of the narrator and/or the detective; unlike most novels, they might be continued indefinitely, in that nothing unalterable occurs to characters other than the disposable victims and villains.

In *The Name of the Rose*, however, Eco reverses this narrative convention of the detective story. Though the story takes up only a week or so in the lives of William and Adso, the novel is set within a restrictive time-frame that “consumes” the characters and prevents any sense of possible continuation. Most important for this aspect of

the story is the framed beginning and ending of the story, in which Adso the narrator, old and perhaps dying toward the end of the fourteenth century, places in context the events of the novel, which are set within his youth in the year 1327. The effect is not solely a matter of age and youth: between Adso the writer and Adso the character there looms the great event of the fourteenth century, the Black Death of 1348-50. Before the Black Death were the high middle ages, the renaissance of learning of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; after it came a century of chaos as Europe recovered from the death of over one third of its population. William, Adso tells us, perished during the plague—which perhaps we are to see as a less than tragically premature end for a man who is well into his fifties in 1327. The point, though, is that Adso, who survived, tells us of a society which largely did not: he tells us of “the disaster of an aging world” (p. 15).

In terms of the “distant mirror” aspect of *The Name of the Rose*, the intertextual play between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries, the Black Death is an equivalent of atomic holocaust—a close equivalent, if one adds the proviso that the latter is less likely to leave monastic chroniclers like Adso to record it. What is probably most important about it, for Eco’s purposes, is that in Adso’s retrospective narrative (and the reader’s historical perspective) the echo of the Black Death invests the action with the sense of impending chaos, of an apparently ordered and balanced intellectual and social system whose doom is already pronounced.

### Texture III. The “Distant Mirror” Theme

Barbara Tuchman’s popular history of the fourteenth century was entitled *A Distant Mirror* and she was by no means the first historian to see “phenomenal parallels” between that age and our own. When this century was only two decades old, James Westfall Thompson was ready to compare the aftermath of World War I with that of the Black Death. Thompson saw both the fourteenth and the twentieth centuries as exceptionally disordered: in both he found running rampant “economic chaos, social unrest, high prices,

profiteering, depraved morals, lack of production, industrial indolence, frenetic gaiety, wild expenditure, luxury, debauchery, social and religious hysteria, greed, avarice, maladministration, decay of manners.”<sup>9</sup> The advent over the past forty years of weaponry capable of depopulating the world faster and more dependably than the bubonic plague has only deepened the sense that we have something to learn from that unhappy period.

Just as the tone of *The Name of the Rose* owes a good deal to the overhanging shadow of the Black Death, Eco's secondary purpose in setting his detective entertainment in the early fourteenth century may have had more to do with the pestilential politics of Emperor and Pope than with the apocalypse of rats and lice that came later. The suggestive analogy, I think, for a liberal European socialist like Eco, is the cold war between Louis the Bavarian and John XXII on the one hand, and that today on the other between capitalism and communism, America and the Soviet Union, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. In both cases, I think Eco deplors the insistent division of the political and moral powers of the known world, a division that implicitly brooks neither independence nor neutrality, which claims that all who are not for me are against me. I would argue that Eco has drawn such an analogy, and has developed it at a length that—detracting formally from *The Name of the Rose* as it does—indicates the strength of his personal commitment to it.<sup>10</sup>

The general structure of the political allegory, which is not explored with absolute consistency, would equate the party of Holy Roman Emperor Louis of Bavaria with the massive might of the USSR, with the ideology of socialism, perhaps with the alliance of Warsaw Pact and socialist movements in Europe and the Third World; conversely, the party of Pope John XXII might be identified with the USA, with the ideology of capitalism, with the NATO alliance. This alignment would put the Franciscans—who were in doctrinal opposition to the Pope, though ostensibly his own order—in the approximate position of the European socialist movements. Perhaps I have this backwards. Since the Emperor had the habit of using, then abandoning his allies and since the Pope was the more obviously ruthless of the two men, it may be that we are to link Louis with the Western and John with the Eastern bloc. In fact the orientation of the allegory makes very little difference. What is important for Eco is the absolute nature of the confrontation, the way the political

battle raged over Europe for decades with final victory ever elusive, and the fact that the outcome of the battle, for both sides, was the destruction of the authority of the institutions they represented.

For an Italian socialist like Eco, in fact, the central problems of the international scene have to do less with the USA and the USSR, with their half billion inhabitants, than with the impact of their struggle on the three billion people elsewhere in nations that might prefer to be unaligned but who are inexorably forced to take sides, if only to give them standing to help mediate the conflict. While there are no certain limits to the application of Eco's political allegory in *The Name of the Rose*, I think there are at least three major issues that haunt him: (1) the nominally "socialist" revolutionary movements in the Third World, (2) the attraction of intellectuals to terrorism, and (3) the international penetration of other nations by clandestine political organizations like CIA and KGB. Let me briefly indicate the connections between Eco's fiction and these three problems.

1. The fourteenth century was a fertile period for heresies of various sorts: Fraticelli, Catharists, Waldensians, Arnoldists, Patarines, and countless other groups sprang up and were ruthlessly extirpated by the Papacy. Around pp. 196-207, William holds a platonic dialogue with Adso on what he calls "the great river of heresy." William rejects the idea that most heretics are convinced adherents of particular mistaken doctrines. In fact, he points out, most heretics are simple folk who might join the Catharists in one village and the Waldensians in another—though the two heresies are doctrinally quite distinct. In the Church's view a heretical doctrine is first proclaimed by a renegade cleric and then taken up by the simple. In William's view it is the condition of being "simple" rather than the doctrine that causes heresy, for the simple—those landless peasants without a stake in the State, who were equally excluded from the intellectual and social protection of the Church—join heretical movements not because they believe but because the movements give them hope: the hope at least of violently overthrowing the order that excludes them.

The parallel is obvious between William's "simple" heretics and the peasantry today who join, and willingly fight and die for socialist or communist movements in the Third World. Their doctrinal commitment to Marxism is scant at best: they believe in whatever opposes the native or colonial powers that be, whatever gives them hope to overturn the order that keeps them hungry. Eco seems to be



suggesting that the West, and the USA in particular, is paranoid about such "communist" movements; it misunderstands them as an overt threat to join the Soviet enemy, when the cause is not an affection for the ideas of Marx but the hunger of the people—a hunger for inclusion within the international polity no less than for bread.

2. One rather memorable character Eco took from the pages of history and transferred to *The Name of the Rose* is Fra Ubertino of Casale, author of the *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae*. Ubertino was one of the Spirituales, a rather mystical religious movement deriving from the prophecies of the twelfth-century apocalyptic thinker Joachim da Floris. Ubertino's personal history and that of his movement appear in *The Name of the Rose* at pp. 41-64; for most of the rest of the novel, Ubertino is relatively undeveloped as a character, neither a suspect nor a victim. The point of his introduction, in a way, can be fully understood only after the passages on heresy, for Ubertino is an intellectual whose preaching led the "simple" to join heretical movements (like the Dolcinians and the Fraticelli), movements that the Papacy crushed with fire and the sword. But Ubertino somehow managed to keep himself clear of the taint of heresy, speaks with horror of the Fraticelli, and evidently believes that there is some quintessential difference between the beliefs of Fra Dolcino, who suffered at the stake, and his own—but what that difference is the reader will be at a loss to determine.

I can make sense of this episode as a displaced commentary on a group of European leftists who glorify revolution but who have little stomach for the violence of terrorists that would put their programs into practice. These "limousine liberals," like Ubertino, have no intention of losing their privileged places in the societies they attack, much less of suffering for their beliefs. Eco may have in mind the crowds that idolized Herbert Marcuse or Frantz Fanon in the sixties; perhaps Ubertino is a satire on the grand-daddy of them all: Jean-Paul Sartre. In any case, Eco quietly exposes their hypocritical habit of theoretically advocating violence while remaining noncommittal about savage terrorism of the Black September type.

3. Finally there is another character out of history: the Papal Inquisitor Bernard Gui (1261-1331), author of the *Practica Inquisitionis*. In a sense, Bernard assumes a place within *The Name of the Rose* that the traditional structure of the detective story assigns to the dumb cop, the unimaginative official policeman who flails about, baffled by his inability to solve the crime. But Bernard is more than a

structural locus and a foil for William. It is hard to forget that, unlike the usual behavior of cops in whodunits, he has three innocent people executed for crimes they have not committed. One point Eco makes about Bernard's methods is that, seeking out heresy, he invariably finds it, as the accused's words and deeds will ineluctably be twisted against him. The other point is that the Inquisition, in trying to extirpate heresy by the most arbitrary and limitless methods, ends by causing more than it cures. The analogue could be simply to the modern version of the Inquisition, the secret police, which, under various names in both Eastern and Western bloc nations, provokes the opposition it aims to still. But given the international slant to Eco's analogues, Gui and the Inquisition may also stand for the international organizations (like the CIA) specializing in covert activities whose effect is equally perverse: as with Bernard's methods, failure (as in Cuba and Nicaragua) breeds contempt, while success (as in Chile) turns potential friends into renegades. Meanwhile the institution is an international embarrassment to the nation that wields it.

One might seek even more topical parallels between the events and institutions in *The Name of the Rose* and those in the contemporary world. But Eco has created neither a mere history lesson nor a sermon on contemporary international politics, but a system of mirrors by which the present and the past are allowed to reflect, distort and parody each other.

### Structure II. The Denouement of *The Name of the Rose*: Between the Modern and the Post-Modern Detective Story

There is a peculiar tension all through *The Name of the Rose* between creation and parody, between the apparently sincere imitation of the topoi of the classic mystery novel and the carnivalization of its forms. This tension explodes in the denouement. It requires a backward glance, though, at the standard ending of the detective story and the way its post-modern revisionists have turned it inside out.

In its standard manifestations the form of the detective story is almost entirely ritualized: a murder is committed, the detective is called in to investigate, clues are followed up, stories checked,

hypotheses presented and discarded; finally the villain is unmasked and the crime explained to the subsidiary characters—and to the reader. Or as Dennis Porter has put it: “In the process of telling one tale, a classic detective story uncovers another. It purports to narrate the course of an investigation, but the ‘open’ story of the investigation gradually unravels the ‘hidden’ story of the crime.”<sup>11</sup>

The ultimate *desideratum* of the final explanation—the obligatory section of the novel that turns the fragmented clues of the original crime into the material of narrative—is that it be both astonishing and predictable at once. In the “golden age” of the detective story between the wars, when its writers belonged to guilds and wrote up sets of rules governing the form,<sup>12</sup> the chief point of the regulations was fairness—allowing the reader to match wits with the author on terms that both parties could understand. In more modern terms, Roger Caillois tells us that the author of the whodunit “triumphs by *explaining the impossible*. He first presents an event as inadmissible, and then accounts for it easily, elegantly, without forcing anything or using elaborate contrivances. . . . At bottom the unmasking of a criminal is less important than the reduction of the impossible to the possible, the inexplicable to the explained, the supernatural to the natural.”<sup>13</sup> When the explanation is over, the detective hands the criminal over to justice or, not infrequently, allows the criminal to take his own life.

This pattern is so strongly marked that it was parodied almost as soon as it was established. Even before the so-called “golden age” between the wars, E. C. Bentley’s *Trent’s Last Case* (1913) had exhibited a false-bottom ending, in which the detective’s explanation of the death of Sigsbee Manderson turns out to require several major revisions. In the conventional first ending Trent reveals that what at first had appeared to be a political gang murder was actually a sordid domestic crime. But then the tables are turned: after confronting the young man he had accused, Trent admits error and instead comes to the conclusion that the death was a suicide, till in the final chapter it is revealed to have been the result of an accident.

All this, however, makes less difference than it might seem, for while *Trent’s Last Case* was fatal to the convention (derived from Poe and Doyle) of the superman-detective, Bentley had less rejected the conventional ending than he had triplicated it. For each new ending confirms the essential process of detective hermeneutics, merely adding a few extra clues which had been previously produced within

the purview of both detective and reader, but which Trent, certainly, had not taken into account.

Throughout the golden age and after, practitioners of the whodunit worked out variation upon variation on the static topos of the deductive denouement. Where the case is genuinely altered is in the postmodern versions of the detective story—what I have called the antimystery. In the major avatars of this subgenre—including works like Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Pledge* and Jorge Luis Borges's "Death and the Compass"—the expected conclusion is wrenched around, not merely to a surprising twist, but to a deconstruction of the form.

Borges and Robbe-Grillet use opposing gambits. In "Death and the Compass," the detective carries out the deductions in the purest Holmesian fashion and predicts a fourth murder to complete a complex geographical, mystical and numerological scheme: what he does not foresee, fatally, is that the murder will be his own.<sup>14</sup> The Robbe-Grillet *nouveau roman* is longer and less lucid, involving the play of surfaces and distortions of time and space. But within that surrealistic texture the plot, reminiscent of the *Oedipus*, concerns a detective who is sent to investigate a shooting. He is misinformed that the assassin's target is dead; twenty-four hours later the victim is indeed shot dead, but it is the detective who has become his accidental assassin.

Dürrenmatt's version is less slick and more pathetic. In *The Pledge* the super-detective, Inspector Matthäi, though about to leave the country on an overseas assignment that was to have been the climax of his career, begins investigating a set of gruesome sex-murders of children. In a moment of genuine passion, he swears to the mother of the latest victim that he will not rest until he has brought the monster to justice. Obsessed with his pledge Matthäi sacrifices fame and success to stay on the case: he sets a trap for the killer using another little girl as the bait. But Matthäi waits and waits and the killer does not appear. Years pass, Matthäi himself goes to seed, the little girl grows into a warped and unhappy adolescent. The ending bespeaks hideous waste of life and energy—but what has gone wrong? Were Matthäi's deductions mistaken? Not till long after both detective and girl have in effect been destroyed by Matthäi's zeal is the truth revealed: that Matthäi had been a perfect detective, had been correct in every detail, but that the killer's rendezvous with justice was prevented by that most banal of chance events, a fatal auto accident.

In Robbe-Grillet, the detective's semiotic investigations lead him to an inadvertent murder; in Borges, to a triumph that is his own destruction; in Dürrenmatt, to a dead end. The denouement of *The Name of the Rose* partakes of all three topoi of the antimystery.

First of all, William and Adso had been called in to investigate a case of sudden death at the nameless abbey where the story is set for what might be called political reasons. The Benedictine order is hoping to stay neutral and more or less independent of the struggles between Pope and Emperor, Ghibelline and Guelf, and the abbot fears that the disorder of an unexplained homicide will put the abbey into the power of the Pope's inquisition. But the effect of the investigation is to stir up suspicions that lead to further homicides, and to the false and irrelevant but politically damaging arrest of two monks for heresy and witchcraft by the papal inquisitor.

This is only a foreshadowing of the eventual solution of the crimes, which leads to the effective destruction of the abbey as a whole. This ending, as dramatically gripping as it is philosophically fascinating, involves the final confrontation of William, the apostle of positivism and enlightened rationality, with the blind sage Jorge of Burgos, who like Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor seeks to enslave his fellow-creatures' minds in order to rescue them from too much knowledge and freedom. While the Abbot himself suffocates in a coffin-like passage below them, the confrontation takes place in the *finis Africae*, the secret room in the monastic library where Jorge has hidden the Aristotelian treatise on comedy that symbolizes his terror of knowledge. There Jorge proudly admits that he poisoned the book's pages to keep its contents forever from spreading, thereby entailing the deaths of two monks who insisted upon reading it. But to the book-loving reader, the horror of this confession pales before what follows: in the course of the struggle and the darkling pursuit through the midnight library subsequent to Jorge's confession, Adso's oil lamp is dashed from his hands, lands on a dry pile of parchment, and "as if for centuries those ancient pages had been yearning for arson and were rejoicing in the sudden satisfaction of an immemorial thirst for ecpyrosis," the Aristotle manuscript and with it the entire library, the wonder of Europe, burns to the ground. Jorge is dead, and in a technical sense justice has been done, but William's is a pyrrhic victory in which no one could take any satisfaction.

But the principal victim of the denouement is neither the Abbot nor the library itself, but the hermeneutic process of detection that

underlies the novel and its entire genre. As William himself is honest enough to admit to Adso, amid the burning carnage of the library, he discovered Jorge's guilt via a train of reasoning that was in fact completely mistaken. While there were many clues that William read rightly, the trail that led him most directly to Jorge was an intertextual pattern—the connection that seems to be woven between the successive deaths in the abbey and the prophecy of the seven angels with the seven trumpets in the book of Revelation (8:6 to 10:10).

The first death, that of Adelmo the illustrator, who is found fallen from a high window into a bloody patch of snow, resembles the first angel whose trumpet brings “hail and fire mingled with blood” (p. 159). The next day Venantius is found drowned in a tub of blood, recalling the prophecy of the second angel, at the sound of whose trumpet “the third part of the sea became blood.” And similarly through the three mysterious deaths that follow: the third angel poisons “a third of the rivers” and Berengar is found poisoned in the balneary; with the fourth trumpet “a third of the sun was struck and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars” and Severinus is found with his head bashed in by an armillary sphere portraying the sun, moon and stars; the fifth trumpet brings locusts with “power like the power of scorpions of the earth,” and on the fifth day Malachi falls dying of poison, with the mysterious last words “he told me . . . truly . . . it had the power of a thousand scorpions. . . .”

Eco's use of the seven angels of the apocalypse is itself intertextual. This literary pattern recalls many classic detective stories: including S. S. Van Dine's *The Benson Murder Case*, where a series of murders is based on nursery rhymes; Agatha Christie's *The ABC Murders*, with an alphabetical pattern; Ellery Queen's *Ten Days Wonder*, where the crimes follow the Ten Commandments. In classic mysteries, the pattern is a red herring: it is a way of concealing another, more significant pattern. This is what Borges parodies in “Death and the Compass,” where Lönnrot the detective sees through a specious numerological pattern of threes to a genuine pattern of fours—and so keeps the appointment in Samarra with his own murderer.

In *The Name of the Rose*, it is the connection of the deaths with the book of Apocalypse and with Jorge's violently apocalyptic sermon that leads William to link the Spanish monk and the murders. To a reader familiar with the topoi of detection, it seems quite reasonable: Jorge is, as a blind man, the “least likely person” to have

committed the crimes, and therefore, by the conventions of mystery, an excellent candidate. Furthermore, Jorge is one of very few monks with the temperament to have committed a ruthless series of crimes, and the only one made on sufficiently grand an intellectual scale to be a worthy foe to William—no one else could play Moriarty to his Holmes.

The penultimate revelation, of course, is that William's reasoning is based on paralogism. If the murders are a connected and concerted plot, then Jorge must be behind it. But as William admits to an astonished Adso, "There was no plot . . . and I discovered it by mistake" (p. 491). Jorge poisoned the *Poetics of Comedy*, right enough, but the apparent connections among the deaths—and of the deaths to the prophecy—were meaningless coincidences:

"I arrived at Jorge through an apocalyptic pattern that seemed to underlie all the crimes, and yet it was accidental. I arrived at Jorge seeking one criminal for all the crimes and we discovered that each crime was committed by a different person, or by no one. I arrived at Jorge pursuing the plan of a perverse and rational mind, and there was no plan, or rather Jorge himself was overcome by his own initial design and there began a sequence of causes, and concauses, and of causes contradicting one another, which proceeded on their own, creating relations that did not stem from any plan. Where is all my wisdom, then? I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe." (p. 492)

Like Matthaï in *The Pledge*, William has been cheated by chance, and though evil is not finally triumphant, the semiotic rationale of literary detection is decisively defeated.

What I hesitatingly would call the ultimate revelation is something that occurred to me after I had completed the novel—and while one perhaps might grasp it as it happens it is not marked or noted within the text. I am referring to the fact that the phony apocalyptic pattern William follows on the trail of Jorge continues unbroken right to the end. The sixth victim, the abbot, suffocates, as we said, in a sealed passageway—recalling the prophecy of the sixth angel and death by suffocation, the monstrous horsemen who kill by "smoke and sulphur" which "issue from their mouths." And the last death is appropriately that of Jorge himself, who succeeds in killing himself and foiling William's desire to read the lost manuscript by cramming

the poisoned pages down his own throat. This recalls the last angel of Revelation, who gives John a scroll and tells him "Take it and eat. . . . And I . . . ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter."

In a playful way, then, Eco rejects the semiotic faith that one may accurately read the world through patterns, but continues nevertheless to impose upon the story the patterns we are warned against trusting. Has Eco rejected the play of signs or affirmed it? Is this an anti-mystery—or an anti-anti-mystery? If I am correct, in the ending of this astonishing novel the careful reader is set uneasily adrift between the radical rationalism of the detective story and the radical deconstruction of that rationalism. And the purpose of the reverberation between these ways of reading might be to make us conscious of the special kind of text this is and the way we must decode it.

Here as elsewhere in *The Name of the Rose* one may detect an enactment of Eco's earlier criticism, in this case the 1975-77 essay "Lector in Fabula," first printed in *The Role of the Reader*. After an analysis of the contradictory sign-structures and demands made on the reader's inferential capacity within "Drame" (a metafiction by Alphonse Allais), Eco concluded that

there are different types of fictional texts. Some ask for a maximum of intrusion . . . and are called "open" works. Some others are mealy-mouthed and, while pretending to elicit our cooperation, in fact want us to think their way and are very "closed" and repressive. "Drame" seems to stay half-way: it lures the Model Reader into an excess of cooperation and then punishes him for having overdone it.<sup>15</sup>

Now what I have here called mystery and anti-mystery are, in effect, what Eco has called "closed" and "open" texts. *The Name of the Rose* is neither; like "Drame," it "is neither open nor closed: it belongs to a third category of works, to an exclusive club whose chairman is probably *Tristram Shandy*. These works tell stories about the way stories are built up . . ." (p. 256). Like "Drame," *The Name of the Rose* "asks us . . . to extrapolate from it the rules of the textual discipline it suggests" (p. 256). Learning these rules has always been what Eco's work has been about.



NOTES

1. Alain is given his Latin cognomen, *Alanus ad Insulis*, in Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace-Jovanovich, 1983), p. 23. All future references within the text are to this edition.
2. We are given selections from Holmes's essay, "The Book of Life," which Watson reads skeptically, unaware of its authorship, in *A Study in Scarlet*, chapter 2. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of the Four* (New York: Berkley Books, 1975).
3. Peirce may be regarded as one of the founders of semiotics—which may account for the interest taken in him by semioticians like Thomas Sebeok and Eco himself. In his private life Peirce (like Doyle himself) was an accomplished amateur detective. See Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok, "'You Know My Method': A Juxtaposition of Charles S. Peirce and Sherlock Holmes," in Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, eds., *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 11-54.
4. Umberto Eco, "Horns, Hooves, Instepts: Some Hypotheses on Three Types of Abduction," in *The Sign of Three*, p. 206.
5. *Name*, pp. 304-5. A minor emendation to the translation is placed in brackets.
6. François Arouet de Voltaire, *Zadig, or Fate*, trans. Tobias Smollett, in *Candide and Other Tales* (London: Dent, 1937), p. 11.
7. One of the readers of this essay adds that Wittgenstein's "ladder image comes from a philosopher of language, Fritz Mauthner, who is famous for his 'gottlose Mystik'—the mystery of what sustains the world of speaking and of how words 'fit' their referents. This reference-within-reference is, of course, one of Eco's techniques elsewhere."
8. Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," in *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 117-20.
9. Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror* (New York: Knopf, 1978), p. xviii.
10. To say that the political theme detracts *formally* from *The Name of the Rose* is not to say that I would wish it away. Quite the contrary: as a textural element it is very largely responsible for the novel's success—especially on a second reading when mysteries so often fail to hold the reader's attention. I mean only that the theme functions neither to advance nor retard the conclusion—it neither makes the solution of the mystery clearer nor distracts us with red herrings—and is therefore structurally independent of the central mystery around which the novel is composed.
11. In *The Pursuit of Crime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 37.

12. Msgr. Ronald Knox published a "Detective Story Decalogue" and S. S. Van Dine a set of "Twenty Rules" for writing whodunits, both in 1928. They are reprinted in Howard Haycraft, ed., *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1983), pp. 189-96.
13. "The Detective Novel as Game," from *Le Roman Policier* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1941), reprinted in Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe, eds., *The Poetics of Murder* (New York: Harcourt Brace-Jovanovich, 1983), pp. 1-12.
14. Eco has included a rich pattern of allusions to Borges within *The Name of the Rose*, most obviously in the name of the antagonist, Jorge of Burgos, his sightless condition, and the nearly infinite, labyrinthine library (like that in Borges's "The Library of Babylon") in which so much of the memorable action in the novel takes place.
15. Umberto Eco, "Lector in Fabula," in *The Role of the Reader*, p. 256.