

# interpretation

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# interpretation

Volume 14 numbers 2 & 3

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# On Eco's *The Name of the Rose*

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**The Name of the Rose.** By Umberto Eco. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. 502 pp.: cloth, \$15.95.)

This is no mere medieval detective story. It is a paean to the particular, a lustration of laughter, a celebration of cerebration, a laudation of Levellerism, and an epistemological epiphany . . . all ending in a holocaust of *books*! It is, in sum, a religious tract in the guise of a literary feast.

The story by now is well known, so little can be lost by briefly summarizing it. Adso of Melk, the Ishmael-Watson of this adventure, is a young Benedictine novice assigned as amanuensis to William of Baskerville, a Franciscan friar sent, in 1327, by Emperor Louis the Bavarian to arrange a meeting between the Franciscans and the representatives of Pope John XXII of Avignon ("Heaven grant that no pontiff take again a name now so distasteful to the righteous" [p. 12]) at an abbey in northern Italy. They arrive on a Sunday in November and remain for a week, during which time about a half dozen monks die violent deaths, Adso has a brief fling with a peasant girl on the floor of the refectory kitchen (Wednesday night), the convocation of clerics ("a fraternal debate regarding the poverty of Jesus" [p. 335]) erupts in a hilarious brawl (Thursday morning), and a mad monk commits suicide by stuffing the pages of a forbidden book into his mouth with glee (Friday night). The week ends (Saturday, the seventh day) with a total "ecpyrosis" of the abbey, starting in and taking with it the Library around which everything revolved.<sup>1</sup> And all throughout, the Rule of Silence is shattered, smashed, pounded, and pulverized by endless conversations, rememberings, debates, discussions, gossip, and whisperings—not to speak of meaningful glances. This is, we must remember, an Italian monastery.

*The Name of the Rose* presents itself as a detective story: a tall thin Englishman with a name we cannot disengage from the Hound or the typeface, traveling with a sidekick whose name (Adso) lacks only the "W" (which is not, after all, an Italian letter) and who is as stuffy as a young man could be . . . this lanky, languid, and apparently drug-taking Franciscan (p. 213) *deduces*, in the first few pages, in theatrically Holmesian fashion, the name, the appearance, and the probable whereabouts of a runaway horse he has never seen; then in a conversa-

1. Echoing, in the process, the last paragraph of Hume's *Inquiry*: "When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc we must make? If we take in our hand any volume — of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance — let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

tion with the abbot he is presented with an unsolved murder (it turns out to be a suicide of sorts) which soon becomes the first of an apparent series of homicides. And therein lies the reality and the mystery: there *is* no series!

The “seriality” of the deaths, the “order” in which they are located, is essentially fictive, residing initially in the investigative intentionality of the “detective” (and of the reader, the first time around) and, at the end, in the retrospective rationalizations of the main villain of the piece (Jorge of Burgos), who permits himself to become convinced “that a divine plan was directing these deaths” (p. 470), and who makes use of the “Seven Trumpets” of the *Apocalypse*, a pattern first suggested by a somewhat dotty old monk, Alinardo,<sup>2</sup> (p. 159), the toothless Tiresias of this tragicomedy. The deaths do *fit* the “Seven Trumpets,”<sup>3</sup> but they are not the pattern; “There was no plot,” says William at the end (p. 491), and the whole mystery is a triumph of Nominalism!<sup>4</sup>

The fabric of this often gorgeous tapestry is woven of a woof of detective story crisscrossing a warp of philosophy (epistemological and political), the interstices crammed with a nap of details about things medieval. There is something here for everyone, nuts and raisins and bits of citron scattered all through this literary panettone to provide nuggets of recognition for any reader ever subjected to a course in “Western Civ.”: the bull of Phalaris (p. 486), “the castrate Abelard,” with his *Sic et Non* (p. 132), “the idea of a golden mountain” (p. 188), the syllogistic figure Darii (p. 261), Occam’s razor (p. 91), Buridan’s ass (or horse, p. 24), and finally Wittgenstein’s ladder (p. 492), making it a sort of intellectual coffee table book. There is even comic relief, especially the convocation of friars and prelates which ends in a *melée* of boasting and namecalling,<sup>5</sup> a scene whose theatrical or even cinematic potential cannot be ignored.

The list of such “accidental” delights could go on, but not everyone will agree with Adso that “there is nothing more wonderful than a list” (p. 73). We must

2. His gumming of the chick-peas (p. 159) is pure Italian, a kind of peninsular family-joke.

3. Consider, for example, the Seventh Trumpet—which is *not* mentioned in connection with Jorge’s cramming of the “forbidden book” into his mouth:

And I took the little book out of the angel’s hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey; and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter. *Rev.* 10; 10.

Jorge enjoys eating the Second Book of Aristotle’s *Poetics*—it’s the only time he laughs in the entire book (p. 481)—but of course it kills him.

4. The final clue, p. 457, entails taking words as *things* and not even as signs.

5. A personal note. At one point in the “martyr-dropping” interchange, “The Dominican Bishop of Alborea, red in the face, . . . stood up. ‘I can prove that before any Minorites [i.e., Franciscans] were in Tartary, Pope Innocent sent three Dominicans there.’” (p. 343) The reference here can only be to Piano Carpini (no relation), a *Franciscan* friar sent with two others of that order by Innocent IV on a mission to the Mongols in 1245. The comedic intention here may well be to point up the ignorance of the bishop’s Franciscan opponent, who does not challenge his facts. But insofar as Adam Smith makes his own mistake about poor Piano (conflating him with another Franciscan, sent by Louis IX in 1253 [as per the Modern Library *Wealth of Nations*, pp. 389–99]), we can only suspect that there is some plot afoot to obscure the efforts of old Carpini.

turn rather to essentials, to the particular *form*<sup>6</sup> of the novel, its philosophical content, and must forego completely any indulgence in the detective-story "matter." Echoing, therefore, the wonderful list of fundamental philosophical questions offered by Kant, we shall approach *The Name of the Rose* in terms of the following concerns:

1. Deciphering of puzzles
2. The political program
3. The vision of the simple
4. Laughter<sup>7</sup>

## 1. DECIPHERING OF PUZZLES

The very first thing that William of Baskerville does, his "act of address" to the abbey, is to discover the location of a horse he has never seen (p. 23). William's *Seinsverhaltung*, in other words, is that of an investigator, a solver of mysteries (p. 304), a decipherer of codes (p. 166), indeed, an inquisitor:

... as inquisitor I am . . . [even] better than Bernard Gui,<sup>8</sup> God forgive me. Because Bernard is interested, not in discovering the guilty, but in burning the accused. [But] I, on the contrary, find the most joyful delight in unravelling a nice complicated knot.<sup>9</sup> And it must also be because, at a time when as a philosopher I doubt the world has an order, I am consoled to discover, if not an order, at least a series of connections in small areas of the world's affairs (p. 394).

And from that consolation a whole epistemology is made to flow, a notion of truth modeled on the solving of puzzles. The procedure is packed into a peculiarity of translation (there are several such) in a passage occurring just after William has explained to Adso the principles of solving a mystery (pp. 304–305):

I had the impression [muses Adso] that William was not at all interested in the truth, which is nothing but the *adjustment* [l'*adequazione*] between the thing and the

6. That forms can be particular, that individuation can be formal, is a characteristic theme among the Franciscan Scholastics, and it is no accident that the protagonist and his favorites (Roger Bacon and William of Occam) are all Franciscans — although Duns Scotus, whose "specialty" is *haecceitas*, never appears in person. Scotus, however, had little or nothing to say politically.

7. Laughter, of course, is the classical "property" of man and the central concern of the book. For surely it cannot be an accident that the Eskimo expression for the conjugal act is "to laugh together" and that such laughing together, between Adso and his peasant girl, occurs at the "geographical" midpoint of the novel — pp. 245–50 of a 500-page book!

8. One of the many historical figures appearing in the book, and a really *grand* inquisitor, if ever there was one!

9. William had in fact been an inquisitor, but "abandoned that noble activity" (p. 31) because he was interested only in the "simple chains of causes" connecting a victim with his prisoner and not with diabolical intervention (p. 30). ("I don't want to know who is good or who is wicked. . . ." [p. 207]) Reasoning about such ultimate causalities, he says, "is a very difficult thing, and I believe the only judge of that can be God" (p. 30).

intellect. On the contrary, he amused himself by imagining how many possibilities were possible (p. 306; p. 309. Emphasis added.)<sup>10</sup>

“Adjustment” of course is precisely what William was doing, and it is what the investigator into puzzles must do, but the formula being echoed by Adso is usually rendered as the *adequation* of (even—you should bite your tongue—the “correspondence” between) thing and intellect. Needless to say, when puzzle-solving is made the model of learning (i.e., of coming to know), “adjustment” is the appropriate term, and truth becomes *success*. But only men make puzzles.

There are two elements, one might say, in the solving of puzzles, and they are inevitably problematic for a science built on the paradigm of puzzle-solving: particulars, clusters, “sets,” even *manifolds* of particulars; and the patterns, “orders,” or *concepts* according to which they are to be arranged or “understood.” The relationship is suggested in a couple of lines omitted from the translation. William is speaking of “the science [Roger] Bacon spoke of” (p. 207):

Observe, I speak of propositions about things, not of things. Science has to do with propositions and their terms, and the terms indicate singular things.<sup>11</sup>

First the particulars, then their ordering.

Early in the tale, when he was expatiating to Adso on the epistemology of his discovery of the missing horse (pp. 27–28), William describes the process by which a vague and general idea is gradually replaced by more specific ones as we come closer to the object of inquiry.

. . . When you come closer, you will then define it as an animal. . . . And finally, when it is still closer, you will be able to say it is a horse. . . . And only when you are at the proper distance will you see that it is Brunellus. . . . And that will be full knowledge, the learning [l'intuizione] of the singular [pace Aristotle!]. So an hour ago I could expect all horses, not because of the vastness of my intellect, but because of the paucity of my deduction [intuizione]. And my intellect's hunger was sated only when I saw the single horse. . . . Only then did I know that my previous reasoning had brought me close to the truth. And so the ideas, which I was using earlier to imagine a horse I had not yet seen, were pure signs, as the hoofprints in the snow were signs of the idea of 'horse'; and signs and the signs of signs are used only when we are lacking things (p. 28; p. 36).

Brunellus appears again, in a disquisition on hypothesis testing:

. . . solving a mystery is not the same as deducing from first principles. . . . I line up so many disjointed elements [tanti elementi sconnessi] and I venture some hypotheses.

I didn't know which hypothesis was right until I saw the cellarer [looking for a horse] . . . Then I understood that the Brunellus hypothesis was the only right one. . . . I won, but I might also have lost . . . (p. 305; p. 308).

10. That is, p. 306 of the English translation and p. 309 of the Italian (*Il nome della rosa*, Bompiani, Milano, 1980). Subsequent dual references will be arranged in this manner.

11. “ . . . Bada, parlo di proposizione sulle cose, non di cose. La scienza ha a che fare con le proposizione e i suoi termini, e i termini indicano cose singolari.” *Il nome della rosa*, p. 210.

At this point Adso contrasts William's procedure with the "usual" one: "I understood at that moment my master's method of reasoning, and it seemed to me quite alien to that of the philosopher, who reasons by first principles, so that his intellect almost assumes the ways of the divine intellect" (pp. 305; p. 308).<sup>12</sup>

William's rejection of this "method of the philosopher," who "reasons by first principles" and "almost assumes the ways of the divine intellect" is grounded in his tender concern for the prerogatives of the divine will:

You understand, Adso, I must believe that my proposition works, because I learned it by experience; but to believe it I must assume there are universal laws. Yet I cannot speak of them, because the very concept that universal laws and an established order [un ordine dato delle cose] exist would imply that God is their prisoner, whereas God is something absolutely free, so that if He wanted, with a single act of His will He could make the world different (p. 207; p. 210)<sup>13</sup>

Adso sympathizes:

"Yours is a difficult life," I said.

"But I found Brunellus," William cried, recalling the horse episode of two days before.

"Then there is an order in the world [un ordine del mondo]!" I cried, triumphant.

"Then there is a bit of order in this poor head of mine," William answered (p. 208; p. 211).

Order, in short, is a function of the individual mind; and the way of discovering it, the type and paradigm, the very "form" of inquiry, is the process of deciphering. The page or two devoted specifically to cryptography and code solving (pp. 165–67) are particularly revealing. William offers some examples of code systems (p. 166) and then turns to the ways of breaking them:

But the first rule in deciphering a message is to guess what it means.

But then it's unnecessary to decipher it! I laughed.<sup>14</sup>

12. Earlier Adso had remarked on the ways of "divine reason, which has built [costruito] the world as a perfect syllogism (p. 279; p. 282)," and on the contrasting temperament of his master: "On other occasions I had heard him speak with great skepticism about universal ideas and with great respect about individual things; and afterward, too, I thought this tendency came to him from his being both a Briton and a Franciscan" (p. 28; p. 36).

13. "Universal laws," of course, is quite equivocal. As Occam says, "[The divine intellect] understands all necessary principles naturally, as if before the act of the divine will (since their truth does not depend upon that act and they would be understood even if, *per impossibile*, [the divine will] were not willing)." William Ockham. *Predestination, God's Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents*. Trans. Marilyn McCord Adams and Norman Kretzmann. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Meredith Corporation, 1969, p. 84 (brackets in the original). But the creative intentions of the divine will are no more bound by their effects than ours are. Again, Occam: "For our will, as naturally prior to its act, elicits that act in such a way that it could at one and the same instant elicit its opposite. In the same way the divine will, insofar as volition itself alone is naturally prior to such an intention (*tendentia*), intends the object contingently in such a way that at the same instant it could intend the opposite object." (*Ibid.*, p. 83) In other words, God's freedom to make another world is not compromised by the laws of this one. The problem, we must assume, is not science but miracles.

14. The echo, here, of Meno's conundrum, *Meno* 80d, can hardly be accidental, because nothing less is involved, here, than the possibility and nature of learning, of *coming to know*.

Not exactly. Some hypotheses can be formed on the possible first words of the message, and then you can see whether the rule you infer from them can apply to the rest of the text. . . [He gives some examples, concerning the cipher before them.] . . . Perhaps this is the right tack. But it could also be just a series of coincidences. A rule of correspondence [una regola di corrispondenza] has to be found.

Found where? [asks Adso.]

*In our heads.* Invent it. And then see whether it is the right one. . . . remember this—there is no secret writing that cannot be deciphered with a bit of patience (p. 166; p. 171. Emphasis added).

Lest we be lulled by the Holmesian flavor of this apostrophe—the detective showing off his expertise in the techniques of his trade—into thinking that the topic here is the deciphering of codes, William’s very next sentence is: “But we risk losing time, and want to visit the library” (p. 167). It is the *library* which must be deciphered, the library which is “a great labyrinth, sign of the labyrinth of the world,”<sup>15</sup> as old Alinardo says (p. 158); and the library is the heart of the abbey (p. 36), which is itself a “mirror of the world”<sup>16</sup> (p. 120), all in a sequence of infoliated symbols of symbols. Upon their emergence (by accident!) from their first frightful night-visit to the library (it may not be entered by day) Adso remarks to William, “How beautiful the world is, and how ugly labyrinths are,” to which William replies:

How beautiful the world would be if there were a procedure [una regola] for moving through labyrinths (p. 178; p. 182).

Again we must not dally with the obvious: the world, for Adso the cloistered young monk, is a place to get out of; for William, the worldly old friar, it is a puzzle to enjoy. Rather, by what will be a somewhat tortuous winding and turning among the pages, let us now try to discover the “regola” by which order is to be found in the world.

While they are wandering around the library in the darkness of that first night, William recites, “from an ancient text I once read,” a complicated scheme for finding one’s way out of a labyrinth, involving making a mark with charcoal at every juncture unless it already has three marks . . . or something like that.

And by observing this rule [questa regola] you get out? [Adso asks.]

Almost never, as far as I know, [William replies] (p. 176; p. 180).

15. Its wings and branches are arranged and stacked in terms of the areas of the world from which the books or authors supposedly came, so it is quite literally a “sign of the world”—not unlike ancient and medieval maps, with the Mediterranean Sea in the center and all places located in a circle around it. Thus the anthropomorphism of all cosmic representations!

16. With a condition:

If this abbey were a speculum mundi, you would already have the answer. [says William.]

But is it? [Adso asks.]

In order for there to be a mirror of the world, it is necessary that the world have a form, concluded William, who was too much of a philosopher for my adolescent mind (p. 120).

So much for the rules of “ancient texts.” But how *do* our heroes solve the puzzle of the Library, and from what standpoint? From outside, and by means of mathematics. “We must,” says William the next day, “find, from the outside, a way of describing the Aedificium as it is inside. . . .” “But how?” asks Adso.

Let me think, it shouldn't be so difficult. .

And the method of which you spoke yesterday? You don't want to walk through the labyrinth making signs with charcoal?

No, he [William] said, the more I think about it, the less I am convinced. Perhaps I didn't succeed in recollecting the rule well, or perhaps to get around in a labyrinth one needs to have a good Ariadne who awaits you at the door holding the end of a thread. But threads so long don't exist. And also if they were to exist, that would signify (often fables speak the truth) that one can get out of a labyrinth only with outside assistance. The laws of the outside must be equal to the laws of the inside.<sup>17</sup>

How then will we figure it out? “We will use the mathematical sciences. Only in the mathematical sciences, as Averroës says, are things known to us identified with those known absolutely [in modo assoluto] (p. 215; p. 219).” Adso jumps to the obvious conclusion: “Then you do admit universal notions. . . .” (cf. p. 208). Not quite.

Mathematical notions are propositions constructed by our intellect in such a way that they function always as truths, either because they are innate or because mathematics was invented before the other sciences. And the library was built by a human mind that thought in a mathematical fashion, because without mathematics you cannot build labyrinths. And therefore we must compare [confrontare] our mathematical propositions with the propositions of the builder, and from this comparison science can be produced [e di questo confronto si può dare scienza], because it is a science of terms upon terms [di termini su termini]. And, in any case, stop dragging me into discussions of metaphysics (p. 215; p. 219).

There is one more piece to the puzzle. A few days later, after William has reconstructed the floor plan and layout of the library, Adso asks him admiringly,

But how does it happen that you were able to solve the mystery of the library looking at it from the outside, and you were unable to solve it when you were inside?

Thus God knows the world, because He conceived it in His mind, as if from the outside, before it was created [*pace* Hegel!], and we do not know its rule [la regola], because we live inside it, having found it already made.

So one can know things by looking at them from the outside! [exclaims Adso.]

17. Lasciami pensare, non deve essere così difficile. . . .”

E il metodo di cui dicevate ieri? Non volevate percorrere il labirinto facendo segni col carbone?

No, disse, più ci penso, meno mi convince. Forse non riesco a ricordare bene la regola, o forse per girare in un labirinto bisogna avere una bona Arianna che ti attende alla porta tenendo il capo di un filo. Ma non esistono fili così lunghi. E anche se esistessero, ciò significherebbe (spesso le favole dicono la verità) che si esce da un labirinto solo con un aiuto esterno. Dove le leggi dell'esterno siano uguali alle legge dell'interno (pp. 218–19 of the Italian). For some reason this passage is omitted from where it belongs on p. 215 of the English translation.

The creations of art [Le cose dell'arte], because we retrace in our minds the operations of the artificer. Not the creations of nature [le cose della natura], because they are not the work [non sono opera] of our minds (p. 218; p. 222).<sup>18</sup>

And there we have it, the Charter of Modern Science.

“Ancient texts” are of no use in solving the puzzles of this world. Only some “outside assistance,” whose laws are “equal” to the internal laws, only some point of view like God’s, Who conceives the world “as if from the outside,” only such a rule will permit us to make our way in the labyrinth of this world. And that “regola,” that Ariadne’s thread, that *equivalent to God*, is “the mathematical sciences.”

We must be forgiven this serpentine sorites, this shuttling through the fabric of the text, pulling at a thread from here and there to weave a swatch of simple doctrine, but this, as must be said again, is no mere detective story.

Nominalism was the inevitable consequence of a creational cosmology, where the Measure and the things It made were all particular. The ancient problem was the problem of individuation: how can particular beings be intelligible, when the proper mode of intelligibility as such is timeless and unchanging, permitting the wise man (who sees) and even the philosopher (who seeks) a kind of divinity? The ancient solutions, generally speaking, made some accommodations with chaos, regarding the particular as at least partly meaningless. The modern problem—and it emerges early in the middle ages (the Franciscans did not discover the particular, they merely popularized it)—is the problem of universals: In a world where “Divinity” is a proper noun and everything else an intelligible particular (God being unable to make anything meaningless), what “mode” is left to intelligibility as such? Where and what, one asks, are the universals?<sup>19</sup> To what, in short, do common nouns refer? There *is* no separate “world” of Forms, and God’s absolute simplicity *excludes* their multiplicity and mutual exclusivity

18. Adso then asks, “But for the library this suffices, doesn’t it?” (p. 218), and William replies “Yes. . . . But only for the library” (p. 219). The implication for the story-line is that mathematics will not solve the homicides, but the larger application would be to exclude free acts from the analytic power of “mathematical science.”

19. See, for example, the ending of Chapter III of Aquinas’ *On Being and Essence*: “Human nature, then, can have the character of a species only as it exists in the intellect. . . . And although the nature existing in the intellect has the character of a universal from its relation to things outside the intellect, since it is one likeness of them all, nevertheless as it exists in this or that intellect, it is a certain particular species apprehended by the intellect. The Commentator was thus clearly in error in his exposition on the third book of the *De Anima*, for he wanted to conclude that the intellect is one in all men from the universality of the form in the intellect. For the universality of that form does not come from the existence which it has in the intellect, but from its relation to things whose likeness it is. In the same way, if a material statue represented a great number of men, it is agreed that the statue’s image or likeness would have an individual and proper act of existing as it existed in this particular matter, but it would have community inasmuch as it would be the common representative of many men.” (*On Being and Essence*. Trans. A. A. Maurer. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949, pp. 41–42.) St. Thomas tends to be circumspect about these things, but insofar as he bases this rejection of Averroës’ Agent Intellect on the particularity of the universal, he must have meant it to be taken seriously.

—as though, as was first suggested, his “concepts” could be the “Ideas” which Plato sought—so what can words be but an intention to *use* them in a general way? In fine, Nominalism, with all its pomps and virtualities.

But Nominalism must have floundered aimlessly for years until a flexible number-system appeared, to provide an armature for scientific inquiry. (Imagine Galileo trying to work with Roman numerals!) And the verities of “mathematical science” are so self-assured that their provenance (“either because they are innate or because mathematics was invented before the other sciences”—p. 215) can be bracketed off (“... stop dragging me into discussions of metaphysics”—p. 215) with no detriment to the success of experimental inquiry (“I won . . . ” p. 305).

There is perhaps one more metaphor that can be squeezed for meaning, in this involuted attempt to show the medieval roots of modern thought. Can it be completely accidental that the protagonist had been by trade an inquisitor? Ancient science did not *inquire* of being or put it to the torture (as in scientific experiments); it accused, imputed “categories,” and then followed their histories, awaiting results that were “largely and for the most part” true. But to inquire of being is to expect an *answer* from it and, unable to check its veracity, to be satisfied with anything that “works.” Thus, technological science. The categorizing mode, on the other hand, confronted with the sullen silence of the accused (being doesn’t speak; we speak, and maybe God speaks), too often retired to its chambers and the somber consolations of skepticism. Modern nihilism is a different thing; it is a “misology” resulting *not* from a disappointment with argument (as Socrates would have it in the *Phaedo*) but from a bitterness over the loneliness of a reason which finds itself so often unrewarded by the now-Godless Nature it inquires of (as Kant suggests in the *Fundamental Principles*).

But that is all metaphor, words about words, and not even books speaking of other books (pp. 286, 396). Suffice it to say that when inquisition is taken as the model of the judiciary mode, when heretical conspiracies and labyrinths and ciphers (as in “the book of nature”) and puzzles and even languages<sup>20</sup> are taken as the paradigm for being itself, then inevitably the methodologies of investigative reporting and of decipherment become the rules for the achievement of knowledge, and success, even “winning,” is all.

The labyrinth is not, could not be, a model of the universe for pagan philosophy. Labyrinths (and puzzles and conspiracies and languages) are made by people, but for a non-Creational consciousness the Measure does not *make* anything; it simply *is* as *what* it is; indeed, it *is* a “what.” A Jew or a Christian might *well* regard the world as a cosmic puzzle — it certainly presents itself that way — but the puzzlement occurs within the context of belief in an ultimately benevolent if

20. Socrates’ example, in the *Theaetetus* (202–206), of the syllable and its elements, has nothing to do with languages in their variety and complexity. But the hilarity of his etymologies in the *Cratylus* indicate precisely the impossibility, in ancient thought, of using language as the model for being. *The Name of the Rose* also has some very amusing derivations (e.g., pp. 282, 283, 288), but their intention is only historical — a little fun-poking — and not epistemological.

not immediately benign Puzzler. Our author reportedly no longer shares that faith;<sup>21</sup> we must wonder what the context of his puzzlement could be? A memory? A wish? A cruel hoax? A cosmic joke, perhaps. For, as Adso writes, at the very end, “stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus.”<sup>22</sup>

## 2. THE POLITICAL PROGRAM

The political thrust of this “medieval detective story” is deep and passionate, and the “moments” of its dialectic are present from the start. Adso of Melk is of the nobility (p. 13) and was even born in a castle (p. 335). William of Baskerville, if not clearly of peasant stock is basically British (apparently Scottish, p. 15) — which is almost as good. And we soon realize that the “bad guys” (this is, after all, a detective story) all come from aristocratic backgrounds (Abo the abbot,<sup>23</sup> and Jorge of Burgos, the blind old keeper of the secrets, to name the main ones), while the victims — not the suicidal monks, but the cellarer and the girl caught in the inquisitorial web of Bernard Gui — are all peasants and from “i simplici,” the simple folk. And it finally dawns on us, after reflection, that the absence of Duns Scotus in all the laudatory references to Franciscan doctors can only be due to his virtual silence on political matters, whereas all the others — Roger Bacon, Occam, Grosseteste (a semi-Franciscan) — were outspoken, and sometimes quite active, politically.

The ostensive topic of the convocation which provides the *raison d'être* of the action is a “debate” on the poverty of Christ. If Christ can be shown to have been poor, or to have advocated poverty, then the Pope at Avignon is wrong in his condemnation and prosecution, *as heretical*, of all the groups of Fraticelli and Poverelli that had preached and pillaged throughout Italy in the recent past. Of course,

. the question is not whether Christ was poor: it is whether the church must be poor. And “poor” does not so much mean owning a palace or not; it means, rather, keeping or renouncing the right to legislate on earthly matters (p. 345; p. 349).

Heresy and poverty, in other words, are not a matter of theory and fact, but of practice and principle, and the “heresy” at issue — the illegitimacy of wealth — as particularly dangerous to the social order. The abbot, speaking as it were for the Establishment, makes the connection:

. The Fraticelli derive from that doctrine [of the poverty of Christ] a practical syllogism: they infer a right to revolution, to looting, to the perversion of behavior (p. 150; p. 155).

21. Cf. *Current Biography*, April 1985, Vol. 46. No. 4. p. 14b.

22. Which has been translated “approximately” as: “the rose of an earlier time stands only as a name, we hold names alone.” *Ibid.*, p. 15b.

23. *Abbone*, in the original, which *might* be rendered as “Big Daddy,” if we mix languages a little.

. . . [all heretics] . . . jeopardize the very order of the civilized world . . . (p. 151; p. 155).

. . . I know that heretics are those who endanger the order that sustains the people of God (p. 153; p. 158).

This is a very political book, and it presents in no uncertain terms the “ideological” function of theology in the Middle Ages (a thing unknown, thank heaven, in our own time), when the poor and downtrodden made use of the faith to justify their rebellion and the powerful used theology to support their dominion. As William says:

Every battle against heresy wants only this: to keep the leper [i.e., the outcasts, the lower classes] as he is. As for the lepers, what can you ask of them? That they distinguish in the Trinitarian dogma or in the definition of the Eucharist how much is correct and how much is wrong? Come, Adso, *these games are for us men of learning* [questi sono giochi per noi uomini di dottrina]. The simple have other problems” (p. 203; p. 206. Emphasis added).

William of Baskerville is very concerned for what he calls “i semplici,”<sup>24</sup> the simple folk.

“So the cellarer was right [says Adso]: the simple folk always pay for all, even for those who speak in their favor, even for those like Ubertino and Michael, who with their words of penance have driven the simple to rebel!” I was in such despair that I did not consider that the girl [Adso’s brief encounter, soon to be burned as a witch] was not even a Fraticello, seduced by Ubertino’s mystical vision, but a peasant, paying for something that did not concern her.

“So it is,” William answered me sadly. (p. 406; p. 409)

What is to be done?

The solution is *not* to be a matter of Christian charity, benevolence on the part of the ruling class. After he has been imperiously dismissed from the case by the abbot, William, in his frustration, blows up at Adso:

“. . . Proud, proud, all of you Cluniacs, worse than princes, more baronial than barons!”

“Master . . .” I ventured, hurt. . . [Adso is the son of a baron].

“You be quiet, you are made of the same stuff [della stessa pasta]. Your band [Voi] are not simple men, or sons of the simple. If a peasant comes along you may receive him [as the abbot received the cellarer], but as I saw yesterday, you do not hesitate to hand him over to the secular arm. But not one of your own, no; he must be shielded.

. . . Have a Franciscan, a plebeian Minorite {i.e., William}, discover the rat’s nest of

24. His interest in and knowledge of medicinal herbs (pp. 66–67, et passim), also called *semplici* (simples) in Italian, must be just one of those accidents of language, with no apparent ideological significance—other than the fact that the villain is killed by the poison he himself spread on the pages he finally eats.

this holy house? Ah no, this is something Abo [the abbot] cannot allow at any price. . . . But now the challenge is not just a matter between me and Abo, it is between me and the whole business [tutta la vicenda]. ” (p. 450; pp. 453–54).

“The whole business,” of course, is not just the homicides or even the conflict between “Cluniacs” (wealthy monastics) and mendicant friars; rather it is a matter of social systems, of “orders.” Earlier, in speaking of Roger Bacon, scientist, theologian, politician, William enlarges:

Bacon believed in the strength, the needs, the spiritual inventions of the simple. He wouldn’t have been a good Franciscan if he hadn’t thought that the poor, the out-cast, idiots and illiterate, often speak with the mouth of our Lord.<sup>25</sup> . . . What must be done? Give learning to the simple? Too easy, or too difficult. (p. 205; p. 208) [Bacon] thought that the new natural science should be the great new enterprise of the learned [dei dotti]: to coordinate, through a different knowledge of natural processes, the elementary needs that represented also the heap of expectations . . . of the simple.

So I think that, since I and my friends today believe that for the management of human affairs it is not the church that should legislate but the assembly of the people, then in the future the community of the learned [comunità dei dotti] will have to propose this new and humane theology which is natural philosophy and positive magic (p. 206; 209).<sup>26</sup>

Not yet a political program, but at least a preamble, and one which makes manifest the role of *i cognoscenti*:<sup>27</sup> “Those learned in divine things are in their way the voice of the Christian people” (p. 297; p. 300). The program, to the extent that there is one, is presented mainly in William’s speech to the friars and prelates on Thursday (pp. 352–56). Pope and Emperor stand on opposite sides in the matter of Christ’s “poverty,” with the Emperor backing the Franciscans—for his purposes (p. 13). “But . . . we [Marsilius of Padua and William of Baskerville] would like the empire to support our view and serve our idea of human rule” (p. 346).

The plan was that as advisors to the Emperor, the two Williams (the one of Occam, the other fictional) and Marsilius would exchange theological ammunition (for the Emperor in his struggle with the Pope) for improvements in the conditions of *i simplici*. Unfortunately it didn’t quite work out that way. For

25. “The voice of the people is as the Voice of God.” Midrash Samuel on *Pirke Abot*, quoted in Leo Rosten’s *Treasury of Jewish Quotations*. Bantam, 1980; p. 346. William must have been a voracious reader, truly catholic in his interests.

26. This is the “holy magic” spoken of earlier in connection with the spectacles, “where God’s knowledge is made manifest through the knowledge of man, and it serves to transform nature, and one of its ends is to prolong man’s very life” (p. 87; p. 95).

27. Professor Eco may share some of William’s views on the role of the learned. Cf. the reference, in *Current Biography*, April 1985 (p. 14a), to his association with a “Gruppo 63,” “a group of writers concerned with social change” in the 1950s and 1960s. In that same brief biography our author’s analysis of popular diversionary culture is spoken of: “He objected not to occasional escapist amusement but to an exclusive diet of the kind of entertainment that neither provokes social criticism nor points to the possibilities for needed reform.” (*ibid.*)

waiting in the wings, ready to destroy the whole medieval order of things, was the emerging mercantile, manufacturing, and civic tidal wave which later became, in Italy, the Renaissance. (Cf. Aymaro's complaint, pp. 124–27.) The new force is *money*.

Money, in Italy [says William], has a different function from what it has in your country, or in mine. . . much of life elsewhere is still dominated and regulated by the bartering of goods. . . In the Italian city, on the contrary; you must have noticed that goods serve to procure money. And even priests, bishops, even religious orders have to take money into account. That is why, naturally, rebellion against power takes the form of a call to poverty. . . and the whole city, from bishop to magistrate, considers a personal enemy the one who preaches poverty too much (pp. 126–27).

*Money* will be the nexus of the future, sweeping away in its path all prior distinctions, and the specter of it on the horizon makes William's mildly Marsilian parliamentarianism seem more naïve, even passé, than a revolutionary adumbration of things to come. Adso provides only a paraphrase of William's proposals at the meeting.

He cleared his throat, . . . and suggested that the way in which the people could express its will might be an elective general assembly. He said that to him it seemed sensible for such an assembly to be empowered to interpret, change, or suspend the law, because if the law is made by one man alone, he could do harm through ignorance or malice . . . (p. 352; p. 357).

Even Aristotle could live with that; but there is also the church, a problem Aristotle could not have foreseen. William proposes a separation of church and state, with all coercive power, in this world, in the hands of the prince.

[Christ] did not want the apostles to have command and dominion, and therefore it seemed a wise thing that the successors of the apostles should be relieved of any worldly or coercive power. . . But what should the prince do with a heretic? . . . The prince can and must condemn the heretic if his action harms the community. . . But at that point the power of the prince ends . . . (p. 354; pp. 358–59).

In other words, some of the elemental principles of Enlightenment political philosophy can already be found in medieval thinkers who, if not precisely "mainstream," were no less real. (William mentions Marsilius of Padua and John of Jandun at this point [p. 355], but there were others.<sup>28</sup>) This may startle readers totally unacquainted with the period, but as there is nothing new in William's acedia for anyone who has read the words of *Carmina Burana*, so also one does not have to be a medievalist to realize that, for good or ill, not *all* of the roots of the eighteenth century go back to classical antiquity. A lot of work was put into the unearthing of what later became self-evident principles.

28. See, for example, the off-handed remark of Aquinas, that "Hence the making of a law belongs either to the whole people or to a public personage who has care of the whole people. . . ." S.T., Ia IIae, Q. 90, art. 3, corpus.

What we ought to do, then, is to strive for the elimination of injustice in this world and the institution, again in this world, of more equitable — i.e., “democratic” — political systems. What *is* somewhat new, in William’s presentation, is the metaphysical and epistemological grounding for this by now rather standard secular ethic.

### 3. THE VISION OF THE SIMPLE

William’s abiding concern is for “the simple folk,” *i simplici*, and this in two respects: their status as outcasts, as the despised of the earth (e.g., pp. 201–203); and their role as epistemological “lens,”<sup>29</sup> providing insight into the really real (pp. 205, 206, et passim). The first concern is doubtless grounded in his Christianity, there being no classical philosophical counterpart to compassion for the downtrodden.<sup>30</sup> It may therefore be set aside as religious sentimentality — or as *mere* sentimentality — and of no import for a purely rational and natural political program.<sup>31</sup> More important, and fairly unique, is the “gnoseological” function of *i simplici*.

Following the lens experiment (p. 205) and his brief presentation of Roger Bacon’s sociological proposals, William expands upon the role of “the simple”:

The simple have something more than do the learned doctors, who often become lost in their search for broad general laws. The simple have a sense of the individual [l’intuizione dell’individuale], but this sense [intuizione], by itself, is not enough. The

29. Right after showing Adso how a lens can magnify without changing what is seen through it (p. 205), William says “I’m saying more than I seem to be,” and immediately launches into his discussion of Roger Bacon’s political program (pp. 205–206) and Occam’s epistemology (pp. 206–207).

30. Aristotle, for example, will concede the possibility of a kind of collective wisdom in an assembly of the freeborn: “. . . for where there are many, each individual, it may be argued, has some portion of virtue and wisdom. . . .” (*Politics* III, vi, 4; Loeb translation, p. 233.) Taken individually, of course, they are not to be trusted with the highest offices (vi, 6; p. 225), but “for them not to participate [at all] is an alarming situation, for when there are a number of persons without political honours and in poverty, the city then is bound to be full of enemies” (*ibid.*). The many, in other words, must be handled, even manipulated, but surely not loved.

31. No sentimentalist himself, however, William offers an intriguing explanation of that most charming of medieval images, St. Francis preaching to the birds. After speaking of lepers as the ultimate outcasts, he says:

“The lepers are a sign of exclusion in general. St. Francis understood that. . . . Have you been told about his preaching to the birds?”

“Oh, yes,” [says Adso.] “I’ve heard that beautiful story, and I admired the saint who enjoyed the company of those tender creatures of God.”

“Well, what they told you was mistaken, or, rather, it’s a story the order has revised today. When Francis spoke to the people of the city and its magistrates and saw they didn’t understand him, he went out to the cemetery and began preaching to ravens and magpies, to hawks, to raptors feeding on corpses.”

“What a horrible thing!” I said. (p. 202)

simple grasp a truth of their own, perhaps truer than that of the doctors of the church . . . (p. 205; p. 208).

The lens, we remember, made things more visible,<sup>32</sup> and now the simple folk are “bearers of a truth different from that of the wise” (p. 285), their natural insight into “the individual.” William continues:

. . . How are we to remain close to the experience of the simple, maintaining, so to speak, their operative virtue [la virtù operativa], the capacity of working toward the transformation and betterment of their world? This was the problem for Bacon (pp. 205–206; p. 208).

And Bacon’s solution — legislation by the people under the direction of those learned in the “new Magic” — is a “splendid enterprise” (Adso’s expression, p. 206) which Bacon and William both think is possible.

But to believe in it we must be sure that the simple are right in possessing the sense of the individual [l’intuizione dell’individuale], which is the only good kind [l’unica buona]. However, if the sense of the individual [l’intuizione dell’individuale] is the only good [l’unica buona], how will science succeed in recomposing [ricomporre] the universal laws through which and, interpreting which, the good magic will become functional [operativa]? (p. 206; p. 209)

Adso asks how it can be done. William says he “no longer know[s],” and refers to “my friend William of Occam.”

He has sown doubts in my mind. Because if only the sense of the individual is just [giusta, = correct], the proposition that identical causes have identical effects is difficult to prove. How can I discover the universal bond that orders all things if I cannot lift a finger without creating an infinity of new entities? For with such a movement all the relations of position between my finger and all other objects change. The relations [relazioni] are the ways [modi] in which my mind perceives the connections [il rapporto] between the single entities, but what is the guarantee that this [questo modo] is universal and stable? (pp. 206–207; pp. 209–10)

“Intuition of the singular,” he had said, when talking about his discovery of the horse (p. 28), is “full knowledge.” But now the individual breeds *other* individuals, like frost upon a windowpane, and the mind, in its effort to discover the laws of their interconnections, is overwhelmed by the multiplicity of its own perceptions. This is not Nominalism at its simplest (where it cannot be distinguished from what Engels will call “metaphysics”<sup>33</sup>), but it is surely an outgrowth of it. Practice is not at issue:

32. The dramatic *and* epistemological function of William’s spectacles is only one of the many leitmotif — like mirrors, and even light itself — which shimmer through the text. For example, p. 208: “And when this fork [the spectacles] is on my poor nose,” William says, “perhaps my poor head will be even more orderly.” (Order a function of vision, and vision a function of technology?) But how the abbey’s glazier can grind and polish a new set of lenses for William in a matter of days, even hours, is itself something of a mystery!

33. Or, for that matter, from what Kant calls “dogmatism,” but coming at it from another angle.

In fact, I have worked out this proposition: equal thickness [of lens] corresponds necessarily [deve corrispondere] to equal power of vision. I have posited it because on other occasions I have had individual insights [intuizione individuali] of the same type. To be sure, anyone who tests the curative property of herbs knows that individual herbs of the same species have equal effects of the same nature on the patient, and therefore<sup>34</sup> the investigator [lo sperimentatore] formulates the proposition that every herb of a given type helps the feverish, or that every lens of such a type magnifies the eye's vision to the same degree (p. 207; p. 210).

But what has this to do with the insights of the simple and their political vision? In a way, everything. For what remains untouched by all this perplexity is the status of names; interconnecting "laws" are up for grabs (as the simple might put it), but all agree, both simple and learned, that individuals may be named. We return to William's political statement at the meeting of friars and prelates. He mentions Adam, "encouraged" by God "to give things names."

In fact, though some in our times say that *nomina sunt consequentia rerum*, the book of Genesis is actually quite explicit on this point: God brought all the animals unto Adam to see what he would call them: the whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And though surely the first man had been clever enough to call, in his Adamic language, every thing and animal according to its nature, nevertheless he was exercising a kind of sovereign right in imagining the name that in his opinion best corresponded to that nature. Because, in fact, it is now known that men impose different names to designate concepts, though only the concepts, signs of things, are the same for all. [How would we know *that*?] So that surely the word "nomen" comes from "nomos," that is to say "law," since *nomina* are given by men *ad placitum*, in other words by free and collective accord (p. 353; p. 357).

The derivation (*nomen* from *nomos*) is much too wild to have been offered without historical justification; but it's backwards! For surely naming comes first, generalized imposition "by free and collective accord" (like money, in Locke) and then, by legislative decree, impositions on behavior, or positive law. And only the simple have no illusions about this. With their native insight into the singular, their unconcern for word games or for dalliance with universals, the simple folk know that laws too are imposed, and when all the bets are in they want their cut of the pot.

The faith [i.e., the theology which] a movement proclaims doesn't count: what counts is the hope it offers (p. 203).

The *hope* that is offered by this "new science, the new natural magic" (p. 206) is nothing less than unlimited creature comforts for the many, "the elementary needs that . . . [are] also the heap of expectations . . . of the simple" (*ibid.*), or, as

34. The "therefore" which connects antecedent and consequent, here, is *not* the same as the "therefore" by which the experimenter generalizes his experiences. There are *rewards* for "correct" inductions; but the step from the manifold of experience to the unity of "law" is of a different order completely, a kind of compulsion specifying the human being. But that is a side issue.

Jorge puts it, in another context, “the idea that man can wish to have on earth . . . the abundance of the land of Cockaigne” (p. 475). For if all words are imputed names, all laws imposed connections, then — as Protagoras implied — the majority rules (or should rule, because given the right kind of “leadership,” it *can*); and Nominalism (l'intuizione dell'individuale) emerges as the epistemological foundation for Populism!

Hope by nature overrides the given, but it cannot be grounded in itself. The genius of Hobbes was to ground his hopes in human selfishness, in the expectation that though “words are wise men's counters,” their *fears* will provide a bed-rock of certitude beneath the swamp of vanities. William's hopes are grounded in compassion for “the simple folk,” and his universe is a kind of polenta with an anticlerical (i.e., Italian) seasoning. The distinctions in it are all spoon-made, ultimately quantitative and subjective; there is nothing for the fork of reason, the either/or of moral condemnation, to dig out for chewing on.<sup>35</sup> That's the *problem* of a cosmologically disengaged Nominalism, its inherent relativism, reducing moral judgment to sentimental indignation.

For all its weaknesses, Christianity provided the many with ontological grounds for hope for a millenium or so, along with and perhaps at the cost of its latent support for Nominalism. Now only the hope remains, politically, and with it the residue of merely naming as the mode of science. William reflects, towards the end:

I have never doubted the truth of signs, Adso; they are the only things man has with which to orient himself in the world. What I did not understand was the relation among signs. . . there was no plan [connecting the deaths, but only] 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 [da ostinato], pursuing a semblance of order [parvenza di ordine], when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe (p. 492; p. 495).

And then he quotes “a mystic” from Adso's homeland, who had said that “the order our mind imagines” is like “a ladder, built to attain something. But afterwards you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless (p. 492).” Use *is* of course the “meaning” of ladders, but there's a larger issue. William goes on:

It's hard to accept the idea that there cannot be an order in the universe because it would offend the free will of God and His omnipotence [cf. p. 207]. So the freedom of God is our condemnation, or at least the condemnation of our pride (pp. 492–93; p. 495).

We must not be put off by this lightning shift from Wittgenstein to Sartre; William's tender regard for God's prerogatives has communicated itself to Adso, who finally begins to think:

35. This reviewer must be forgiven these lapses into gastronomical metaphor, but that too is Italian. (Cf. all the delightful digressions on food, e.g., pp. 94, 220, 288, 307).

I dared, for the first and last time in my life, to express a theological conclusion: “But how can a necessary being exist totally polluted [intessuto] with the possible? What difference is there, then, between God and primigenial chaos? Isn’t affirming God’s absolute omnipotence and His absolute freedom [disponibilità] with regard to His own choices [miracles?] tantamount to demonstrating that God does not exist?” (p. 493; p. 496)

William’s response, and Adso’s “unpacking” of it remind us of all the references to secrecy that bestrew the text:<sup>36</sup>

William looked at me without betraying any feeling in his features, and he said, “How could a learned man [un sapiente] go on communicating his learning [il suo sapere] if he answered yes to your question?” I did not understand the meaning of his words. “Do you mean,” I asked, “that there would be no possible and communicable learning [sapere] any more if the very criterion of truth were lacking, or do you mean you could no longer communicate what you know because others would not allow you to?” (p. 493; p. 496)

And of course at that point the roof caves in (literally!) and William cannot answer: “There is too much confusion here,” he says, and the mystery ends with a final double-entendre, a little grammatical joke: “Non in commotione, non in commotione Dominus.” (*ibid.*) It looks like the echo of a prayer, but it’s an assertion!

#### 4. LAUGHTER

This is a very funny book, in places, and laughter ripples through *The Name of the Rose* as a recurrent theme. It must therefore finally be dealt with, and seri-

36. For example: “But often the treasures of learning must be defended, not against the simple but, rather, against other learned men [sapienti]. . . .” (p. 88; p. 96). And then, a little below that: “You see?” William said. “Sometimes it is better for certain secrets to remain veiled by arcane words. . . . Aristotle says in the book of secrets that communicating too many arcana of nature and art breaks a celestial seal and many evils can ensue. Which does not mean that secrets must not be revealed, but that the learned [sapienti] must decide when and how” (p. 88; p. 96). He explains further: “I meant that, since these are arcana from which both good and evil can derive, the learned man [il sapiente] has the right and the duty to use an obscure language, comprehensible only to his fellows” (p. 89; p. 97).

There is later a brief recapitulation of much the same thing, but it is omitted from the translation. After saying (p. 97) that learning (scienza) consists “also of knowing what we could do and perhaps should not do,” William explains: “Look, that is why I said to the master glazier today that the learned man must in some manner conceal the secrets that he discovers, in order that others not make wicked use of them, but [he] needs to reveal them, and this library [like the world?] appears to me rather a place where secrets remain hidden.” [Ecco perché oggi dicevo al maestro vetraio che il sapiente deve in qualche modo celare i segreti che scopre, perché altri non ne facciano cattivo uso, ma bisogna scoprirli, e questa biblioteca mi pare piuttosto un luogo dove i segreti rimangono coperti (p. 105, Bompiani edition).]

On p. 132, Jorge reminds his listeners that “the fathers . . . had considered that such things should have been subdued rather than raised [piuttosto sopite che sciolte]” (p. 132; p. 139).

And finally, putting God above all this exoteric-esoteric interplay, William tells us: “The hand of God creates; it does not conceal [nasconde]” (478; p. 482).

ously, because as the blind old Jorge says, in an early interchange with William, "With his laughter [Cosi ridendo] the fool says in his heart [implicitamente], 'Deus non est'" (p. 132; p. 139).

This is a book about a book,<sup>37</sup> "a story of theft and vengeance" all because of a book, "A forbidden book!" (p. 394) The book in question, as must be well-known by now, is the supposed long-lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, on Comedy, the only extant copy of which is somewhere in the monastery's library.

Jorge of Burgos, one-time Librarian and the gray eminence of the whole piece, will not allow anyone access to it. Jorge is against laughter, not just because he's a puritanical sourpuss, but for apologetical and political reasons, as we shall see.

The theoretical climax of the book (as opposed to the final monastic holocaust and the central orgasm on the kitchen floor) is the last debate, in the hidden room of the Library, between Jorge and William of Baskerville (pp. 467–48; pp. 471–82). The topic is Comedy and the role of laughter. First William reads from the "text" of Aristotle:

In the first book we dealt with tragedy and saw how, by arousing pity and fear, it produces catharsis, the purification of those feelings. As we promised, we will now deal with comedy (as well as with satire and mime) and see how, in inspiring the pleasure of the ridiculous, it arrives at the purification of that passion. [And so forth, to include a listing of what the ridiculous includes.] (p. 468; pp. 471–72)

And then, a few pages later, William spells out what he thinks will be important about the book:

... Comedy is born from the Komai — that is, from the peasant villages — as a joyous celebration after a meal or a feast. Comedy does not tell of famous and powerful men, but of base and ridiculous creatures, though not wicked; and it does not end with the death of the protagonists. It achieves the effect of the ridiculous by showing the defects and vices of ordinary men. Here Aristotle sees the tendency to laughter as a force for good, which can also have an instructive value [un valore cognoscitivo]; through witty riddles and unexpected metaphors, though it tells us things differently from the way they are, as if it were lying, it actually obliges us to examine them more closely, and it makes us say: Ah, this is just how things are, and I didn't know it. Truth reached by depicting men and the world as worse than they are or than we believe them to be, worse in any case than the epics, the tragedies, [and the] lives of the saints have shown them to us. Is that it? [he asks Jorge.]

Fairly close, [replies Jorge] (p. 472; p. 475).

But what can be so terrible about that? "Because it was by the Philosopher," says Jorge:

37. Needless to say, "the book" is also a cosmic metaphor here, like mirrors and the rose itself. Adso muses at one point: "... the whole universe is surely like a book written by the finger of God ... in which every creature is description and mirror of life and death, in which *the humblest rose* becomes a gloss of our terrestrial progress [cammino terreno] ..." (p. 297; p. 282. Emphasis added). Of course these are all meaningless images in a pagan context, where there is no one to write and nothing to mirror; and the rose, even the compass rose, for all the egalitarianism among its petals, goes nowhere; it only looks up.

Every book by that man has destroyed a part of the learning that Christianity had accumulated over the centuries. . . . Before, we used to look to heaven . . . ; now we look at the earth. . .

But what frightened you in all this discussion of laughter? [William asks.]

laughter is weakness, corruption, the foolishness of our flesh. It is the peasant's entertainment, the drunkard's license; . . . Still, laughter remains base, a defense for the simple [i.e., relaxation for the mob] . . . . But here, [in the Second Book of Aristotle's *Poetics*], here . . . the function of laughter is reversed, it is elevated to art, the doors of the world of the learned [dotti] are opened to it, it becomes the object of philosophy, and of perfidious theology . . . (p. 474; p. 477).

Jorge is a preacher (see his sermon on the last days, pp. 398–405), and this, his argument against laughter, is the book's final sermon, albeit, of course, *in modo negativo*. It cannot be escaped.

. . . Laughter frees the villein [villano] from fear of the Devil . . . . But this book [ostensibly Aristotle's] could teach that freeing oneself of the fear of the Devil is wisdom. When he laughs, as the wine gurgles in his throat, the villein feels he is master, because he has overturned his position with respect to his lord [i rapporti di signoria]; but this book could teach learned men [dotti] the clever and, from that moment, illustrious artifices that could legitimize the reversal. Then what in the villein is still, fortunately, an operation of the belly would be transformed into an operation of the brain [intelletta] . . . . To the villein who laughs, at that moment, dying does not matter: but then, when the license is past, the liturgy again imposes on him [i.e., after Mardi Gras], according to the divine plan, the fear of death. And from this book there could be born the new destructive aim to destroy death through redemption from fear. . . . This book could prompt the idea that man can wish to have on earth . . . the abundance of the land of Cockaigne. But this is what we cannot and must not have. . . . if one day somebody, brandishing the words of the Philosopher and therefore speaking as a philosopher, were to raise the weapon of laughter to the condition of subtle weapon, if the rhetoric of conviction were replaced by the rhetoric of mockery, if the topics of the patient construction of the images of redemption were to be replaced by the topics of the impatient dismantling and upsetting of every holy and venerable image — oh, that day even you, William, and all of your knowledge, would be swept away! (pp. 474–76; pp. 478–79)

William feels he would manage. Jorge goes on to say that “we are not afraid” of the blasphemy, violence, and destruction of heretics; “their impiety makes our piety shine” (p. 476).

But if one day — and no longer as a plebeian exception but as ascesis of the learned [ascesi del dotto], devoted to the indestructible testimony of Scripture — the art of mockery were to be made acceptable, and to seem noble and liberal and no longer mechanical [meccanica]; if one day someone could say (and be heard), ‘I laugh at the Incarnation,’ then we would have no weapons to combat that blasphemy. (pp. 476–77; p. 480)

And there we have it. Jorge is of course quite mad, and in his madness he forgets that the art of mockery, the use of ridicule in debate, had already been spo-

ken of, variously and at some length, by ancient works on rhetoric. The difference, to be sure, is that the ancients used ridicule to defeat an opponent, a *particular individual*, where Jorge fears the use of ridicule to destroy an idea — unless, by some stretch of the imagination, “the Incarnation” is to be taken to signify some Particular.

Two things are involved here: Comedy, a dramatic form; and Laughter, the property of man (pp. 131, 197, 78, 95) — which flows, traditionally, from the rational *differentia* and *not* from “the dark powers of corporal matter” (Jorge, p. 477); animals don't laugh. First, Comedy.

Aristotle may well have dealt with Comedy (and, as he says, with hexameter verse) “later,” in a second book (as per *Poetics* v. 1), and it is indeed a pity that no copy of his treatment remains. Comedy is for him one of two kinds of poetry, distinguished “according to the poet's nature,” the “more serious” representing “fine doings and the doings of fine men, while those of a less exalted nature represented the actions of inferior men” (*Poetics* iv. 7, 8). And in the only real paragraph we have, he summarizes:

Comedy, as we have said, is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable [i.e., the ludicrous] is a species of the base or ugly. It consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster, an obvious example being the comic mask which is ugly and distorted but not painful (*Poetics* v.1–2).

And that's about it, for Comedy in Aristotle. It “was not at first treated seriously” (v.3), perhaps because it was not to be taken seriously; but even if Aristotle did treat seriously of Comedy in some subsequent book of the *Poetics*, we can hardly expect, from what we do have, that his treatment would have given much comfort to Levellers of any time or type.

Laughter is another matter.

For Socrates, laughter is a “mixed pleasure,” our reaction to the ridiculous posturing of our friends (*Philebus* 49e–50a). The paradigm is a mild derision, tinged perhaps with pity, a looking down on the foolishness of mortals. There are some very amusing passages in Plato, and they must have been hilarious to his contemporaries; but at no point does laughter provide insight into anything deeper than human ignorance (cf., perhaps, *Gorgias* 509b). For Aristotle, laughter is a polemical technique:

As for jests, since they may sometimes be useful in debates, the advice of Gorgias was good — to confound the opponents' earnest with jest and their jest with earnest. We have stated in the *Poetics*<sup>38</sup> how many kinds of jests there are, some of them becom-

38. Not in what we have. He also speaks, at *Rhetoric* 1, xi, 29, of having discussed the ridiculous in the *Poetics*, but that too is lost. On the offchance, however, that his discussion was still available to Cicero, the presentation through the mouth of Julius Caesar of the role of wit in oratory might be of some interest (*On the Orator*, Bk. II, chs. LVIII–LXXIII). Caesar begins with: “for neither great vice, such as is united with crime, nor great misery is a subject for ridicule and laughter” (ch. LVIII); a little later he cautions: “so in this, all scurrilous buffoonery is to be studiously avoided by the orator” (ch. LX). And he refers repeatedly to kinds of jesting which are “not suited to us,” and are “far from be-

ing a gentleman, others not. Irony is more gentlemanly than buffoonery; for the first is employed on one's own account, the second on that of another (*Rhetoric* III, xviii, 7; Loeb p. 467).

Laughter is a rhetorical device, for ancient thought, and never "revealing of being" (to employ a barbarism) or even a sign of the human condition. There is no laughing at oneself (that's buffoonery) and the jesting that *is* permitted "a gentleman" has always a hard edge to it.

In his reaction to Jorge of Burgos — who hates laughter and insists that Christ never laughed (pp. 95, 132, 133) — William of Baskerville suggests that

Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh*, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from [the; dalla] insane passion for truth (p. 491; p. 492).

That is perhaps going too far, contrasting as it does, a presumably rational "love [of] mankind" with the "insane passion" for truth. And we would not want to go along with "an African alchemist" quoted by Jorge, who attributes "the creation of the world to divine laughter" (p. 467). But it remains true that laughter, the "property" of man, has been treated in step-sisterly fashion by philosophy, which has always preferred to deal with the species-differentiating "rationality." Laughter should be taken more seriously.

Science presumes to report on being in a systematic manner. Philosophy, a second-level theoretical endeavor, attempts to analyze "reports on being," also in a disciplined way. But humor is a third and perhaps more primal "theoretical modality," and laughter a visceral response to some "report on being."<sup>39</sup> Laughter flows from the sudden and fortunate cancellation of the set of expectations that have permeated the neurons (i.e., *theoria*). Animals may giggle (they seem to) but not at the antics of clowns; for that *thought* is required, foreseeing, expecting, and then a sudden *seeing*, with relief.

But unlike philosophy (and science) the object of laughter is very particular.<sup>40</sup> *This* pompous twit does not achieve the essence of great-souledness to which he aspires . . . and his actions prove it. Reason notices the discrepancy between the particular and its concept *and* that the discrepancy does not compromise the universal . . . and it rejoices. (Wickedness *does* compromise the universal; that's what is "evil" about it!)

That is what is different about the theoretical posture of humor: it is not systematic. Like poetry, humor reveals and then moves on; there is no analysis, no demonstration, and indeed unlike poetry, there is seldom even a rereading of it.

coming to a man of education" (ch. LXII). *Cicero on Oratory and Orators*, trans. J. S. Watson. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1860. Pp. 151, 153, 156. Throughout, jesting is what the superior do *at* and *about* the inferior.

39. Kant alludes to the *reflective* character of laughter, that its object cannot be *directly* a cause of gratification; the enjoyment must result therefore from the "play of representations." *Critique of Judgment*, Book II, 54.

40. We may laugh at particular groups of people, but never at logical classes.

The gentle lightning flashes, something is seen, and the moment is gone. Laughter is theoretical, but it is not contemplative.

Consider, for example, the near-fist-fight between the Franciscans and their opponents at the meeting (pp. 346–47), a bit of comic relief “made for the movies”—although, to be sure, an Italian movie. What does it say except that piety is *not* an objective structure of being about which one might boast, and that those who would boast of it are fools, in error about something important—but not in error as the wicked are in error (we note that Bernard Gui remains aloof throughout)? Piety as such is untouched by the squabble.

Of course there may be a larger intention in the incident. The friars may be in error not merely because piety cannot be an objective possession but because there is nothing to be pious *about*. The battling brothers are fools either because they have forgotten they are human . . . or because there is no God. In either case, however, the humor has a metaphysical purport.

But that is what humor *is!* Humor is a metaphysical “comportement,” and laughter the visceral response to its revelations. The problem is that it is not “systematic,” and that by nature it eludes the nets of analysis. (Can it be accidental that the great anti-Systemists of modern thought, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, are also its only humorists?) Laughter is a living thing and dies under the knife.

There is another reason for the virtual absence of laughter in the history of philosophy (aside from the natural *gravitas* of philosophical “types”). Philosophy is the examination of the utterances of a putative wisdom. This means *not* proverbs, whose context is life—that’s why they often contradict each other—but *formulas*, like “Man is the measure . . .,” whose context is theory, an already reflective mode, systematic if not a complete system. But the context of laughter, like that of proverbs, is life itself, the whole fabric of lived experience with all its sounds and smells and hopes and fears and trying once again, a context which *resists* the abstractive and generalizing instrumentalities of philosophy. In other words, philosophy can deal with “Virtue is knowledge” because the utterance is already in the same reflective ball park; but what can it *do* with *In vino veritas*, or with “You wanna buy a duck?”

“The fabric of life” was not a system, for classical philosophy, not even a proper theoretical context, and it could not have been; there was too much chaos in it, too much of the particular. And besides, there was too much raw hope in it, and there can be no hope (or despair, it must be added) in a philosophical universe.

The thin and bitter laughter of the gods and their human counterparts, the derisive laughter *at* the foibles of mortals (that’s us, folks!) is not real laughter—mainly because it’s no *fun!* That kind of humor—the biting wit, the ironic aside—is quite possible in the most hope-less theoretical empyrean,<sup>41</sup> but from

41. As in Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, Bk. II, the beginning: “pleasant it is, when over a great sea the winds trouble the waters, to gaze from shore upon another’s great tribulation. . . .” He goes on to say how easy it would be, by right thinking, to remove pain and anxiety. In a fundamentally hopeless universe, knowledge is *technique*, the oil upon the sea of dread.

Aristippus to Oscar Wilde, the great wit is feared, not loved, even by his friends, who laugh with their teeth, not with their bellies.

Real laughter requires hope. In a hope-less universe humor reveals *only* particulars, *this* foolishness, *this* ignorance, *this* discrepancy with the universal. For laughter to have a metaphysical function the individual must have a cosmic significance—because that's what hope *is*, in the long run, the conviction that we particulars are *not* mere instances, more or less defective, of some universal. Such a thing is not accessible to classical science or philosophy, for which the universal is the object, and the particular is barely thinkable.

Of course for those with “no tincture of natural philosophy,” for the simple folk of whom William of Baskerville speaks, there has always been laughter (and tears as well, it must be said). Of these it may be asked: If humor is theoretical, what is their “theory”? And if laughter needs hope, what have they to look forward to but suffering and death?

A distinction can be made between “rational life” and “the life of reason.” Rationality as such is theoretical; it puts particulars into a context. And life as such overrides the given, does not accept what is but pitches it into the future. Between the two there is theory enough and the “raw hope” of vitality itself to provide between them a basis for laughter when the work is done.

But a “life of reason” is another thing. As the real luxury of wealth is pessimism (the Sadducees, we remember, were not poor folk and could *afford* their materialism), so too the special privilege of the learned—that is, of academics generally—is their transcendence of the hopes and fears of the many, their “impartiality.” Living as they do in the timeless generalities of their disciplines, they need not fear death and can *afford* a universe in which the particular has no cosmic significance.

But for Jews and Christians, whether by circumcision or in the spirit (*or* from forgetfulness, living on borrowed cosmology, as it were), and for *both* learned and simple among them, the particular is of absolute significance; they are measured by a Particular and their particularities will be attended to by the Measure. The question is not whether or not Christ ever laughed—William *also* believes he did not<sup>42</sup>—but whether or not the sparrow's fall will be broken.

Only when the universe itself is a system—a labyrinth, to be sure (“The maximum of confusion achieved with the maximum of order” [p. 217]), but a system nonetheless—the production of a cosmogenic Will giving significance to parts and whole, only then can the individual have universal significance and laughter an epistemological function.

Such a thing, of course, was unknown to pagan consciousness—especially the more philosophical—and Professor Eco is well aware of it (although perhaps

42. “. . . because, omniscient as the son of God had to be, he knew how we Christians would behave” (p. 161). Again, aside from the implicit Monophysitism, the sweet pessimism of the learned, who have no need of God's *omnipotence* to make it all turn out all right, observing as they do, already from an upper tier.

not William, in his dour enthusiasms). We must assume, therefore, that *The Name of the Rose* is itself an enormous hoax, theological deadpan, in which an evangelical enterprise masquerades under the appearance of apocalyptic exhortation.

One of the few Latin passages translated in the English edition (it is *not* translated in the Italian) appears in the course of Adso's reflections upon the coincidence of opposites (a characteristically medieval theme) in metaphors:

Is it possible that things so equivocal can be said in such a univocal way? And this, it seems, is the teaching left us by Saint Thomas, the greatest of all doctors: the more openly it remains a figure of speech, the more it is a dissimilar similitude and not literal, the more a metaphor reveals its truth (p. 248).<sup>43</sup>

The passage occurs in the midst of Adso's ecstatic union with the peasant girl—the center piece of the book, one might say—and its most obvious function is to call into question the possibility of any other kind of “igneous ardor” (as in the raptures of Saint Hildegard, p. 239; cf. also Ubertino, on p. 231), but it *must* have some larger significance.

Irony is one form of saying what is not the case; but so too is humor: “through witty riddles and unexpected metaphors . . . it tells us things differently from the way they are, as if it were lying” (p. 472). Could there be *any* more implausible metaphor by which to convey the essential dependence of modern political and scientific thought on Medieval theology than this vast and rollicking panorama “of theft and vengeance among monks of scant virtue!” (p. 394)? For as William says near the end:

“There was no plot . . . and I discovered it by mistake [per sbaglio].”[!] (p. 491; p. 492)

43. The Italian: Possibile che cose tanto equivocate possano dirsi in modo così univoco? Eppure è questo, pare, l'insegnamento che hanno lasciato i massimi tra i dottori [N.B.: plural, and no mention of Saint Thomas]: omnis ergo figura tanto evidentius veritatem demonstrat quanto apertius per dissimilem similitudinem figuram se esse et non veritatem probat. *Il nome della rosa*, p. 251.