

The Library Under the Sun
Knowledge and Vanity in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*

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By
Elizabeth R. Lamont
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Liberty University
College of Arts and Sciences
Master of Arts in English

Student Name: Elizabeth Lamont

Thesis Chair

Date

First Reader

Date

Second Reader

Date

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Introduction: Into the Labyrinth

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? ... All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. (ESV Ecclesiastes 1:2,3,8)

Umberto Eco's debut novel *The Name of the Rose* is both a brilliant novel and also a subtle and thorough work of literary theory. Novels do not come equipped with a complete guide to their own interpretation, but they do assume a certain stance toward literature and toward the world—some more overtly than others. *The Name of the Rose* in particular presents a fairly thorough literary theory by embodying images and ideas that relate to established theories in the plot, the architecture, the characters' dialogue, and the overall texture of the work. The literary theory appearing throughout the book can be used reflexively to interpret the novel itself, which in turn sets an interpretive precedent for approaching other works. This thesis seeks to identify the main components of the novel's theory, and then to evaluate that theory based on biblical principles. The main theorists used are Julia Kristeva, whose writings on margins, intertextuality, and the semiotic *chora* are strongly reflected in *The Name of the Rose*, Jacques Derrida, whose writing on deconstruction and the de-centered text provides a reference for the structuralist and post-structuralist ideas in the novel, and Peter Leithart, who both critiques and applies postmodern literary theory according to a biblical, Trinitarian worldview. Although *The Name of the Rose* does not claim to be a Christian novel, it does not present the hope of the gospel, nor does it present a view of the world as created by the unerring and unending Word, and casts doubt on any such certainty. However, the ideas presented and the questions asked in the novel are supported and enhanced by a biblical understanding of literature and of the world. In turn,

The Name of the Rose offers an approach for issues that are vital for a thorough Christian interpretive theory.

Background of *The Name of the Rose*

Since its publication in 1980, *The Name of the Rose* has puzzled, frustrated and, most of all, delighted readers from a wide range of cultural and educational backgrounds. The Sherlock Holmes-style murder drama and clue-hunting appeal to the thrill seeker and detective aficionado in everyone. The vast array of allusions to all kinds of texts—historical, fictional, religious—keeps scholars riveted and occasionally smug, and the novices enthralled. The religious and philosophical speculation may seem peripheral at first, intended to flesh out the scenery and amuse the theologians, but is really the surface layer of what turns out to be a literary inquiry into epistemology that is shaped by the layered aspects of the novel. Perhaps a large part of the novel's popularity is that it appeals to the basic desire to know – to figure it all out, whether it be the facts in a murder case, the intricacies of history, or the ultimate questions of truth and man's ability to apprehend it.

The plot of *The Name of the Rose* at first seems to follow a fairly straightforward detective fiction pattern (the classic modern epistemological adventure), augmented by pages and pages of context-setting asides. Essentially, William of Baskerville, accompanied by the novice Adso who is the narrator of our story, arrives on diplomatic business at a Benedictine Abbey where one of the young monks has just died. The Abbot enlists William to discover the cause of death before a delegation from the Pope arrives to resolve a theological and political dispute about whether or not Christ owned property, and consequently whether the clergy should do the same. William and Adso's detective attempts provide the excuse for them to explore the Abbey's magnificent forbidden library. After a number of additional monks' unfortunate deaths, and after

Adso has a romantic encounter with a peasant girl in the Abbey kitchen, William and Adso discover that the majority of the murders have been driven by the blind ex-librarian Jorge de Burgos in an overly zealous attempt to censure Aristotle's lost book of comedy and to protect the stability of the teachings of the church. In the course of William's encounter with Jorge, a lamp is knocked over, and the whole library burns to the ground along with the adjacent church building.

As complex as the basic plot is (and here I have simplified it nearly to the point of mischaracterization), it feels even more complex because of the frequent excursions into theology, or horticulture, or medieval art. This complexity is in many ways the heart of the novel, and the search for the novel's true meaning amongst such a sea of fascinating facts drives the reader to the final page. In Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, the narrator describes the same feeling evoked by such copious information and ideas as "the dimly excited fantasy of children listening to fairy tales they do not understand, even while their tender minds are nonetheless enriched and stimulated in some strangely dreamlike, intuitive fashion" (61). *The Name of the Rose* creates the same sense of mystery by introducing so many ideas that full comprehension remains just out of reach, but that still seem to have important and attainable meaning. In Mann's novel, the narrator goes on to ask, "Might this be considered the most intensive and proud, perhaps even the most beneficial kind of learning—anticipatory learning, learning that leaps vast stretches of ignorance?" (61). The core question of *The Name of the Rose* is whether learning, at least of ultimate things, is even possible. If the answer to this question is an affirmative, the novel takes the reader miles ahead in his journey. If the answer is a negative, then the novel is little more than a sea of meaningless facts.

It would take volumes, indeed, it has already taken volumes, to exhaust all that could be said about every facet of Eco's intricate novel. Several collections of essays such as two volumes bearing the same title *Naming the Rose*, as well as the anthology *Reading Eco* have been dedicated primarily to this work, and individual articles about it have been published on topics ranging from Feminism to architecture, to library science. But throughout the body of criticism, the one question emerges more frequently and with more fervor than any other: Does the novel mean? Of course the question is not put in exactly these terms, but many articles address the ambiguity of the novel towards the possibility of discovering and conveying meaning. The field is split between those who see no hope in *The Name of the Rose* for determinate meaning, and those who see in the novel's ambiguity a hopeful perspective on man's ability to discover and communicate meaning. This question is integral to any literary, scientific, or theological inquiry. In a world where many people are comfortable relegating meaning to the idiosyncrasies of personal opinion, it is more important than ever to think critically about what can be known and how. Eco's novel introduces heavy political, social, and theological concerns, and thus does not shy away from the weighty implications surrounding the possibility of true knowledge.

The novel is ambiguous in declaring answers to the questions it raises, but as open as it is, *The Name of the Rose* does present a literary critical theory that is to some extent compatible with a Christian worldview and does not fall into the danger of overestimating the ability of man to comprehend his state. Because *The Name of the Rose* is a novel and not a treatise on literary theory, the work can at most suggest a direction along which theoretical interpretation might proceed. Some aspects of the novel such as the frame story and certain plot devices, as well as the conversation of the characters, imply a worldview that is at odds with the Christian one. However, since the form of the novel is not entirely self-interpreting, a Christian perspective can

make sense of the questions raised by the novel and can provide the structuring frame questioned throughout. It is as if the novel were asking the rhetorical question “is there any meaning here?” expecting the answer “no,” but because it is a rhetorical question and not a declaration, a reading of the novel from a Christian perspective can supply the answer “yes, there is an abundance of meaning here” because the Christian faith recognizes the significance of even small things as pieces of God’s ongoing works of creation and providence.

Overview of Theoretical Approach

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the theoretical assumptions implicit in the novel, and then to evaluate these assumptions based on biblical principles. The primary function of a literary critical theory is to approach a text with a set of assumptions about the world and about writing. These assumptions raise specific questions that enable the reader to access what that theory considers important in any given text. Most works discernably assume a certain theoretical framework. Through the plot, style, dialogue and other components, they imply something about literature and about the external world that in turn can be applied to other works. Some works are more overt in this process than others. For example, in the field of art, Frederick Church’s paintings of the Catskill Mountains imply certain assumptions about the value of nature and of beauty that carry meaning beyond the boundaries of the canvas. One of Van Gogh’s cypress paintings implies a different set of assumptions, which likewise can shape the way a person views the world around them and interprets other paintings. Both collections of paintings can also be evaluated by a third standard: the viewer’s own assumptions about what is valuable in the world and in art based on his or her cultural, religious, and artistic beliefs and experiences.

This inquiry could take various routes that might be valuable courses of study but fall outside of the scope of the current project. One of these directions is to compare the critical theory implied by *The Name of the Rose* with the theories explained in Eco's critical work, or to try to discover how those ideas are embodied in the novel. This approach is not used here at length in part because it would expand the scope of this project too far, and because imposing Eco's explicitly stated theoretical framework onto the novel would heavily obscure the way in which the novel implies its own theoretical framework. Eco himself said that the novel should be interpreted on its own grounds, in keeping with his ideas presented in his earlier book *The Open Work* where he argues that all communication, especially the best of contemporary literature, is open to multiple interpretations because of the background knowledge and experience of various readers. In the article "Prelude to a Palimpsest" he wrote, "I believe that a text – as an object (a textual linear manifestation), insofar as it is referred to in an encyclopedic background, comprehending in some way both the encyclopedia of the time in which it was written and the encyclopedias of its readers – can work as the public parameter of its interpretations" (xi). In referring readers to a general encyclopedic knowledge, Eco does not pretend to have secret information that he is simply unwilling to share with his readers. Rather he recognizes parameters for interpretation that he may share in, but does not have a monopoly over:

[T]he author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work to be competed. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and, at the end of the interpretative dialogue, a form which is *his* form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not

have foreseen. The author is the one who proposed a number of possibilities which had already been rationally organized, oriented, and endowed with specifications for proper development. (19)

This thesis takes up Eco's challenge and seeks to "discover the public parameter" of the novel's interpretation using the guides that the author recommends.

Another project that would be helpful would be a thoroughly developed system of biblical literary criticism. Instead of trying to exhaust everything that the Bible has to say about literary criticism, which ranges from the roles of author and reader, to the significance of genre, and much more, this thesis pursues the more limited goal of trying to explain a significant amount of what the Bible has to say about the literary theory propounded in *The Name of the Rose* in relationship to what and how a text can mean, and how these specific issues contribute to biblical literary analysis.

My explanation of the theory presented in *The Name of the Rose* strongly emphasizes the role of the reader, not according to traditional Reader Response theory, but recognizing that the reader's horizon of knowledge will influence interpretation. The biblically based interpretive framework that one assumes in reading *The Name of the Rose* shapes the way that one understands the interpretive clues latent in the novel. A reader who thinks that language is unstable to the point of meaninglessness and that the world has no ultimate meaning could easily interpret the same clues to support his own interpretive framework (as is seen in much of the critical work on the novel such as the readings of Helen Bennett, Rocco Capozzi, Leora Cruddas, and many others). *The Name of the Rose* is often ambiguous, and does not force one reading or the other, as sometimes signs seem to lead to truth, and sometimes such connections are shown to be arbitrary. But *The Name of the Rose* is not the ultimate guide, even to questions concerning

itself. If a biblical hermeneutic is true, then it will support the best elements of the theory presented by the novel and expose those that are weak.

Chapter One Overview: History: The Truth is [Lost] in the Recreation of the Past

The first chapter addresses the view of history presented in the novel. Religious and philosophical beliefs shape the way history is recorded and interpreted. History plays an integral role in Christian belief in particular. Gresham Machen argues that without the fundamental facts of Jesus' life and death in real, historical time, the entire religion of Christianity would crumble—a belief shared by most Christians (*Christianity and Liberalism*). Not only does the Christian faith fall if the historical discipline proves that Jesus never existed, Christianity also falls if history is completely unreliable to bear witness that Jesus did exist. The whole Christian faith turns on the historical facts of Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, and ascension, along with the assumption that these facts are knowable.

My first chapter argues that while the view of historical reliability presented in *The Name of the Rose* is ambiguous and at best skeptical, the novel's presentation of history does show the importance of a sound historic framework based on sound philosophical and religious principles rather than a naïve acceptance or denial of coherence and meaning in history. The novel sheds doubt on the reliability of historical discourse through presenting the main body of the narrative as an extremely unreliable manuscript, one that went through numerous translations for various purposes, and was written to begin with by a person who did not even understand the whole story. The novel also blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, which is a common trait of historical novels. But *The Name of the Rose* draws attention to this blurring of lines self-consciously in regards to its theoretical ramifications. Another critique of naïve trust in history's reliability comes through the mouth of William, ever the skeptic, who also draws attention to the

constructed nature of history in his conversations with Adso about heretical movements. All of these factors taken together imply that historical narrative might be merely an artificial construct, created by those who have the skill or the power to shape it to their own ends.

Despite this possible interpretation, if the questions raised by *The Name of the Rose* are considered from a biblical perspective they provide fruitful discussion that can strengthen a biblical stance against postmodern doubt. History may be narratively constructed in part, but the meaning of the main plot points and story arc has been revealed. *The Name of the Rose* does not supply all of the answers, but it raises the questions in such a way that they are open to being answered by the truth of Scripture.

Chapter Two Overview: Intertextuality: The Truth is [Lost] in the Texts

While the theoretical concerns of history are more implied by the setting and frame story of the book than explicitly stated and form a fairly unobtrusive background, the theoretical concerns of intertextuality beg to be addressed throughout the whole book and advertise themselves unabashedly.¹ The novel references countless other works, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes so subtly that the reader is caught between congratulating himself on discovering a connection and questioning whether he is just imagining an allusion where he sees only the ghost of one. The most overt allusion is easily the main character William of Baskerville, who is a very thinly veiled medieval manifestation of Sherlock Holmes, complete with a storytelling side-kick and a semi-secret drug habit. Another character allusion is the blind librarian Jorge du Burgos, who is modeled on the blind librarian Jorge Borges. The plot itself is loosely based on one of Borges' short stories, "Death and the Compass." These and many other references lead Rocco

¹ The definition of Intertextuality will be further explored in the chapter, but the most basic definition is that found in Julia Kristeva's "The Bounded Text" where she describes the workings of intertextuality, saying, "in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (36).

Capozzi to call *The Name of the Rose* a “collage of signs and quotations, or as a literary and linguistic pastiche” (415). This interplay between numerous texts is in a way another reference—a reference to the many literary theorists and semiologists grappling with the problems of intertextuality.

This chapter addresses three main intertextual concerns that appear in *The Name of the Rose*. First, when the novel references other works, a deconstructive reading would say that any meaning that was discernable in one text invades the other text, and the resulting conflict and contradiction between meanings results in the deconstruction of the texts. Alternatively, the relationship of two texts might not cause the loss of meaning between texts, but rather such an abundance of meanings that no singular truth can be found. Instead, the result of the relationship is a chaos of possible meanings, which means as little to a reader as no meaning at all. The second intertextual relationship is that of the book with itself. This novel, like all good novels, is a multi-textured work wherein multiple characters and multiple narrators interact to construct, or deconstruct, the meaning of the novel. A third theoretical concern with intertextuality is not the relationship of the meaning of the text with other texts, but the relationship of all texts with the outside world. Some, as Adso observes, would say that the texts have meaning only in relation to each other, but that meaning has no real connection to non-textual reality, and thus little meaning of value to any reader.

The question of what happens when different texts interact with each other is as relevant to the Christian reader as the historical question. The books of the Bible reference and build on each other in highly complex relationships, and different interpreters have dealt with the interpretive difficulties posed by these interactions for centuries before Kristeva coined the theoretical term intertextuality. If the relationship between two texts results in the total loss of

meaning or the proliferation of meaning beyond comprehensibility, then the Bible is an impossible book of no use to anyone. In order to interpret the Bible well, readers must address the issues of Intertextuality. They need to know the interpretive significance of the string of quotations from the Psalms in the book of Hebrews, or the new understanding of the words of the Old Testament prophets as explained by Jesus or Paul. Conversely, in order to approach the difficult issues of intertextuality in all literature, the example of the Bible—and the Bible’s internal teaching on the way texts relate—can offer a standard and a guide for literary interpretation.

The second chapter of this thesis analyzes some of the intertextual relations in *The Name of the Rose* to show how the allusions affect the meaning of the novel. The key intertextual relationships examined in this chapter are Sherlock Holmes, works by Borges, and the Bible, specifically the many references to John’s Apocalypse. These three works represent highly contrasting perspectives on epistemology and interpretation. The symbol of the library used in *The Name of the Rose* is highly evocative of the different theoretical implications of intertextuality, especially considering the influence of Borges, author of “The Library of Babel.” As with the topic of history, the conversation of the characters addresses the theoretical issue. While the statements of the characters do not completely coincide with the final meaning of the novel, their clearly articulated propositions influence the way the implicit assumptions of the rest of the book are read. On the one hand, the opinions and actions of the characters, particularly William, and towards the end also the narrator Adso, point to the conclusion that texts sometimes relate to each other in meaningful ways where one work explains or augments the meaning of another, but that this textual proliferation of meaning has little significant relationship to the real world. These characters’ opinions, along with the heavy reliance on Borges and the many

deconstructive elements, swing the evidence toward a view of intertextuality in which meaning is lost or inaccessible. On the other hand, certain intertextual relationships in the novel push the evidence in another direction. At the beginning of the main narrative of the novel, Adso opens his story with a quote from the gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (17). Though Eco may have intended the quotation ironically, the reference to the Word becoming flesh overpowers the elements of the novel that foster pessimism in regards to meaning. Introducing the intertextual relationship of Scripture is a dangerous move if one wants to conclude that texts do not relate to the world, or always deconstruct in relation to other texts.

Chapter Three Overview: Comedy: The [Lost] Truth is Cause for Laughter

The third chapter is titled Comedy, though it is really the most serious chapter in the thesis—Jorge was right when he estimated that laughter was the most dangerous threat to the stability of the Abbey. Although the novel is hardly a comedy itself, the comic thread runs through *The Name of the Rose* in a few different ways, each building on the others and showing the importance of the comic for understanding the novel. Much of the value of the novel, and also many of its shortcomings, are encapsulated in its approach to comedy. A biblical analysis helps to reveal both the novel’s strengths and weaknesses in this area.

The first thread of the comic (first in simplicity, though it does not appear clearly until the end of the novel) is Aristotle’s lost book of Poetics on the comic that has resurfaced and found its way to the Abbey. Jorge’s attempts to censure the book, and other monks’ passion to read what it contains drive the main action of the story. The second thread is the seemingly innocuous conversation that resurfaces from time to time about whether or not Christ laughed. The third thread of the comic is multifaceted, and has to do with everything marginal: Adelmo’s

grotesque marginalia, Salvatore as representative of the margins of society, and the woman that Adso encounters as a member of a group marginalized by the male dominated culture. These related elements permeate the novel and are arguably the most important keys in discovering the best interpretation.

In some ways *The Name of the Rose* shows the importance of a comic understanding, but primarily by showing the sorrow and unsettledness of a tragic sensibility. Whenever the comic raises its outlandish head in the Abbey it is always suppressed. The woman and Salvatore (comic by association as marginalized members of society) are condemned to death, the book of comedy is burned, and Jorge gets the last laugh as he perishes in the conflagration he creates and successfully keeps Aristotle's book from being read forever. The unsettled feeling that the reader is left with is enough to show that this is not the way it is supposed to end. The implication is that perhaps if the authorities had listened to the voice of the weak and marginalized, if the monks had been freely allowed to study all of Aristotle, if everyone had been able to understand God's sense of humor, then all of the tragedy and loss could have been avoided. The world of *The Name of the Rose* is a tragic one because those in authority do not recognize or humble themselves before the power of laughter.

My three chapters hopefully provide a fairly thorough coverage of the critical theory presented in *The Name of the Rose* and its relationship and contribution to a biblical understanding of literary criticism. The novel does not present a rosy picture, but then in many ways the Bible does not present such a rosy picture either. Eco's novel mirrors the attitude of Ecclesiastes, and even though it does not have the same resolution of faith, it clarifies the issues that Christians have to grapple with in coming to this resolution in the field of literary criticism.

Chapter One: History: The Truth is [Lost] in the Recreation of the Past

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See this is new"? It has been already in the age before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after (Ecclesiastes 1:9-11).

The Name of the Rose is a historical novel. It is set at a specific point in history, 1327, populated with historical figures, and carefully researched and crafted to accurately portray the theology, the culture, the mode of thinking of the people who lived at that time. At the same time, the key characters and events of the novel are clearly fictional, thus blurring the lines between history and story, as so many historical fiction novels do. In *The Name of the Rose*, however, the effect of the meticulous historical accuracy is not so much to lend confidence and authority to the novel as it is to undermine the idea of concrete historical retelling itself. *The Name of the Rose* questions historical narrative in multiple ways, highlighting the subjective element of historical analysis in a way that, though it does not support the Christian view of history, shows that the Christian view of history beautifully fills a gaping need that must somehow be met in any attempt at historical discourse.

Historical Perspective in the Frame Story

The Name of the Rose questions the possibility of accurate historical discourse in three different ways: in the way that the novel is set up with a complex frame story, in its identity as a work of historical fiction, and in the dialogue of the characters. First, the frame story of the novel, with lost and rediscovered manuscripts and multiple translations, shows the tenuous path of accepted historical documents, calling into question the reliability of all such documents. The narrator of the frame story is unnamed, presumably supposed to be taken as the narrator

counterpart to Eco. This narrator says that in 1968 he “was handed a book written by a certain Abbé Vallet, *Le Manuscrit de Dom Adson de Melk, traduit en français d’après l’édition de Dom J. Mabillon*” (Eco 7). The use of the passive voice here is significant. Our unnamed narrator is handed a book by an unnamed benefactor, which is written by a certain Abbé Vallet of shadowy identity. When the narrator tries to find Vallet’s original version, it is nowhere to be found. The ease with which the text is lost (specifically in the case of the manuscript being missing from the alleged source) makes one question what other texts or part of the text is missing.

As it turns out, though it is rather difficult to trace, the main events of the narrative happen in the year 1327, and are recorded by Adso around 1385. Dom J. Mabillon somehow acquires the manuscript and created an addition in 1721, which is then translated into French by Abbé Vallet in 1842. The narrator then translates it into Italian in 1968. *The Name of the Rose* is published in 1980, and translated into English by William Weaver and published in 1983. The last stage of course was not part of the original novel, but could have been foreseen and is a real factor for many readers today. This discernable line of the history of Adso’s story, shadowy and difficult to trace as it is, is further complicated by an alternate source – an Italian translation of Milo Temesvar’s *On the Use of Mirrors in the Game of Chess*, which was originally written in Georgian (1934). Temesvar’s version is supposedly based on a source by Athanasius Kircher, though Kircher’s version is nowhere to be found. The whole Temesvar and Kircher tangent does not actually affect the supposed translation presented as *The Name of the Rose*, because the narrator completes his translation before he discovers it. The corroborating story is completely unrelated to Abbé Vallet’s version except in content, and serves to push the reliability of the manuscript further back into the shadows because it adds confusion without clarifying where the

story came from. The tortuous route that the alleged manuscript of Adso's tale travels in the frame story before it reaches the hands of the narrator implies an unreliable text. By analogy, highlighting the accidental nature of discovering this particular historical text questions the reliability of all such historical documents.

In addition to the possible accidents of translation and transportation, the manuscript's unknown translators with unknown motives introduce the possibility of deliberate forgery or inaccurate translation for personal motives. Adso's story is plagued by uncertainty at every level. Though Adso himself appears to be sincere in his desire to tell the truth, he still says that he does not know "whether the letter he has written contains some hidden meaning, or more than one, or many, or one at all" (559), which calls the very original into question. Little is known of Dom Mabillion's version except that it is unverifiable that he actually wrote one. The narrator believes, based on his understanding of the medieval world and its writing, that Abbe Vallet of Paris – took "stylistic liberties" and also includes anachronistic descriptions of herbs and plants (Eco 10-11). By the time the manuscript comes to the unnamed Italian narrator, he says that he can "find few reasons for publishing [his] Italian version of an obscure, neo-Gothic French version of a seventeenth-century Latin edition of a work written in Latin by a German monk toward the end of the fourteenth century" (10), but eventually decides to share it with the public "for sheer narrative pleasure" (12). The various authors' intents – to argue a point, to entertain, to record history – are crucial to understanding their work. For this reason the stylistic liberties of Abbé Vallet, the wavering intentions of the narrator and Adso, and the difficulties of multiple translations make it almost impossible to accept that this particular story is reliable. This conclusion about the fictional manuscript that *The Name of the Rose* is based on causes one to reflect on the possible range of polemic, entertainment, or other motives of non-fictional,

accepted historical documents.

Historical Perspective and Genre

The historical fiction form in which the main narrative is finally presented also raises questions about historical certainty. The invisible line in the novel between what is history and what is fiction, especially given the genre of detective story, presents a postmodern fragmentation of the idea of history by drawing attention to the same blurry line between reality and construct that appears in history books, just in a much more disguised fashion. The genre of historical fiction, as innocuous as it may seem, is itself a controversial subject filled with assumptions and theoretical tensions – tensions which the novel does not fail to explore. Linda Hutcheon proposes that the *The Name of the Rose* falls into a category of “Postmodern historiographic metafiction” rather than the less theoretically loaded “historical fiction” because of its intertextual relationship with anachronistically modern texts like Sherlock Holmes and works of Borges (qtd. in Glynn 99). Ruth Glynn further argues that classic historical fiction is compromised by the appearance not just of modern characters, but of modern ideas in the medieval setting and in the mouths of historical characters. She quotes Brian McHale, who argues that “the author’s anticipation of modern thought in his fictional medieval world produces in the reader a type of disorientation or ‘ontological ‘queasiness’ which is symptomatic of an inability to discern the precise boundaries between historical fact and fiction” (Glynn 100). Even though Glynn furthers Hutcheon’s argument about the Postmodern anachronism, she still argues that the thoroughness and believability of the medieval world are enough to categorize the novel as historical fiction despite the frequent intrusions of the modern world (100). Whether the book is classified in Hutcheon’s category of “Postmodern historiographic metafiction,” or simply in the category of historical fiction, the anachronistic elements of the story draw attention to the

problem of whether it is possible for an author to write without being immersed in the bias of his own time.

The genre of historical fiction often uses a historical setting to explore issues of current relevance. Eco is in good company in using a fictional medieval setting to shed light on present questions. John Burke, in "The Romantic Window and the Postmodern Mirror," compares the medieval world that Eco creates with that of Sir Walter Scott, concluding that Scott glorifies the present by its comparison to the dark and divisive past (560), whereas Eco uses the past setting as a way of revealing similar instability and uncertainty of the present (565). The comparison between Eco's use of the medieval setting and Scott's earlier use of a very similar period confirms the implication of Glynn and Carr, that any recounting of the past will be heavily influenced by the circumstances of the present and the author's own bias about the meaning of both.

This question of the author's temporal bias is not unique to the writing of historical fiction. The historian Edward Carr argues that the author of history always sheds light on his own time in the way he interprets the past. Carr uses the example of Theodor Mommsen's History of Rome, which although it is a great history, according to Carr is just as much about the ideas and struggles of 1848 when it was written as it is about Rome (44). Similarly, *The Name of the Rose* is historical in the way that it presents and clarifies ideas and conflicts of the past, but is also very much tied to the issues that Eco's contemporary culture is concerned with. The fictional element of the story is not the only part that encourages the encroachment of the present on the past. The historical nature of the novel, as accurate as it is, questions whether books written primarily for historical reasons without the added element of fiction are actually significantly more reliable.

Aside from the main character William of Baskerville being based on Sherlock Holmes (and isn't it always forgivable to base a character on Sherlock Holmes?) the most significant inconsistency in the strict historicity of the novel is that the characters expound modern ideas and tropes. In one sense this anachronism compromises the time period of the novel, but in another sense raises the question of whether history is progressive as many consider it to be, both in terms of culture and of thought (cf. Comte, Hegel, or any given sample of modern liberals). In other words, it is not clear what elements of the novel are modern philosophical questions projected backwards into the fiction, and what elements are accurate representation of questions that the modern world has inherited. Glynn says that this confusion questions "the traditional perspective of history as a progressive shaping force" (101). Eco depicts medieval men thinking like modern men, which is confusing because we like to think that history should have brought us beyond the questions that people were asking centuries ago. Even considering the fictional nature of the book, the way Eco presents uprisings of the heretics under various religious auspices cannot help but bring to mind the more recent uprising of the proletariat. The monks' obsession with books mirrors the modern obsession with textuality. It is not surprising *prima facie* that a fictional character would talk like a modern man in a medieval world, but Eco makes the fiction realistic enough to show that perhaps the medieval man in the medieval world was essentially the same man as the one considered modern.

The Historical Novel is not the only category that *The Name of the Rose* seems to fit in. It is also very much a detective story. Detective fiction, because it relies throughout the plot on reliable discovery and knowledge of past events, naturally raises questions of historical epistemology. Nishevita Murthy, in *Historicizing Fiction/Fictionalizing History* says, "for the historian and the detective alike, the past is recoverable predominantly in the form of

representations, where the most plausible explanation for events determines the perception of reality” (101). The detective and the historian perform the same function of seeking to create an accurate and unified story from the scattered facts available to them. Most detective fiction confirms the historian’s process by presenting the detective as fully capable of fulfilling his detective duty of discovering all the proper facts and organizing them in the proper order. However, even though the plot of *The Name of the Rose* structurally follows the expected episodes of clue discovery that belong to detective fiction, William and Adso do not solve the crime in the sense that the genre would predict. The frustrated detective fiction genre of the book questions a world that can be understood according to the framework that most detective novels assume, which primarily sees the world and human interaction in terms of problem and solution.

Problematizing the detective fiction genre is not the only way the novel questions the individual historian’s ability to accurately discern and relate facts and events in a meaningful way. The authorial statement of the aged Adso, which clearly indicates a decline in clear memory, and also the dialogue between William and the other characters in the main plot also highlight the constructed nature of all historical narratives. Perhaps the weakest point in the credibility of Adso’s tale is Adso himself, whose understanding seems to have been limited to begin with, and whose memories have been clouded by time, doubt, and guilt. Even without the problematic frame story, the perspective of the main narrative is still historically suspect. Every fact and interpretation that is manifested in the novel first goes through the filter of Adso’s consciousness, a filter he himself admits is insufficient, and one in which the reader can see more gaps than perhaps Adso himself is aware of. Given his novice status and his necessarily limited perspective as a stranger to the Abbey, Adso could not possibly be fully informed about the context of the murders, the impetus driving interpersonal relationships, and the theological and

political background.

On top of these quite natural limitations, Adso frequently admits his own ignorance. At the end of the story, long after the library burns, Adso recounts his pitiable attempts to make some sense of what happened, saying, “the more I repeat to myself the story that has emerged from [the fragments], the less I manage to understand whether in it there is a design that goes beyond the natural sequence of the events and the times that connect them” (559). Based on this statement, and a few other similar remarks that Adso makes, Thomas Catania argues that an honest reading of the novel is obligated to be skeptical of him because he completely undermines his own authority (158). Either Adso is too confused to tell a coherent story, or the story he finds himself telling is so perplexing in itself that it addles his brain. Catania goes on to explain the important difference between factuality and a true story, saying that a story can be true without being factual in the sense that Shakespeare’s *Richard III* tells the truth about the meaning and character of a person even though many of the facts are wrong (158). On the other hand, a story can be factual without being true, as in a child’s recounting of a fight with his brother, in which the fact “he hit me” might be true, but not encompass the reality of the situation in which the talebearer repeatedly antagonized the accused party. Catania recognizes that Adso does not at all appear to be deliberately falsifying the facts, but that his lack of understanding renders him just as incapable of telling a true story as if he were deliberately lying (159). Perhaps an ignorant narrator is worse than a deceitful one, because the reader cannot re-evaluate an interpretive bias that is not present to begin with. Adso’s position as unreliable historian is clear because he confesses plainly to the reader. Many other historians are just as ignorant, but not nearly as self-aware or as humble. By drawing attention to Adso’s limitations, Eco implicitly draws attention to the very similar limitations of non-fictional historians.

Additionally, Adso does not write down his account of the events surrounding the murders immediately after his experience. As ignorant as Adso may be, it would be completely possible for him to accurately set down the contents of conversations without understanding their meaning. A stenographer does not need to understand the intricacies of a complex legal argument to accurately record courtroom proceedings. But memory of events and conversations is inevitably shaped by subsequent knowledge. Reading the story from page 29 on the morning of the first day through page 551, the last page of immediate narrative, the ancient Benedictine toiling away on a manuscript is almost entirely forgotten, but it is still his shaky memory that the whole narrative is filtered through. At the time of the writing of the original narrative, Adso is old and world-weary: “it is a hard thing for this old monk, on the threshold of death, not to know whether the letter he has written contains some hidden meaning, or more than one, or many, or none at all” (559). Given the way the story is presented, it is easy to assume that the dialogue, the descriptions, the impressions, are entirely accurate. However, the frame story, even the more immediate frame of Adso’s age, cannot be ignored as a meaningful part of the work, and implies that the facts should perhaps not be taken at their apparent face-value.

Even if the book were written by the most highly informed and wise narrator possible – if the narrator were William for instance – the limited perspective of one finite person would still not be able to represent the complexity of the events that took place at the Abbey and their meaning. This limitation of course is present not just in first person narration, but in any recounting of a history. The first person pronoun scattered throughout the text simply draws attention to the necessarily limited perspective of any historical account. All historical interpretation involves some level of creativity and authorial bias. For example, Jonathan Key points out that the map of the library that William and Adso discover corresponds to how

medieval people always drew maps, “with the Holy Land at its center and the lands of the classical world ranged about it” (17). Key uses this seemingly innocuous detail to show that even facts that seem stable, like the physical geography of the world, are completely conditioned by the current historical framework through which they are understood. Adso or anyone else recounting his same story, as a member of the medieval world that drew maps in a certain way, would likewise see the events of his narrative in a certain way. Even the most qualified historian is still limited by the perspective of his or her own time, convictions, and angle of vision.

Historical Perspective in Character Dialogue

The Name of the Rose raises implicit questions about historical narrative through the structure of the frame story as well as the character of the narrator, but the novel also raises similar concerns explicitly through the dialogue of the characters. William is the great doubter in the story, and Adso, as his disciple, has opportunity to ask him numerous questions about the possibility of accurate historical knowledge. As seen in William’s conversations with Adso, specifically in the two conversations regarding heresies and unicorns, he also believes that facts without interpretation are meaningless and that the interpretation of an overarching narrative always guides the selection of dates, events, names, places, and other details to be recorded in the first place. William does not seem to have much faith that he can be sure which overarching narrative is the correct one.

At one point in the story Adso (typically scrambling to try to understand what is going on around him) comes up to William and says, “I understand nothing, ... First about the differences among heretical groups. But I’ll ask you about that later. Now I am tormented by the problem of difference itself” (222). Adso is confused that William at one time can insist to the Abbot on differences between heretical groups, but within a short time insist with equal vehemence to

Ubertino about their similarity. William's answer shows great understanding of the difficulties of the historian, who must first determine the purpose of his narrative before he can know what to highlight as "facts," and what differences he can allow to merge into the blur of the past. William says that to the Abbot he must point out differences, because it would be wrong to burn the Waldensian for the sins of the Catharists, but that he must insist on similarities to Ubertino, who is not able to see the broader historical and human landscape because of his focus on the particular. In this instance William appears confident in his own ability to discern relevant difference, but his self-confidence in this regard is sporadic, which is why he long ago left the position of inquisitor, and why he struggles so deeply in his role as fact-finder in the murder mystery.

Another scene presents a different facet of William's uncertainty regarding historical accuracy. He and Adso are trying to discern the organizational pattern of the forbidden library, and William mentions a book containing a picture of a unicorn being shelved along with other books about mythical creatures. When Adso asks why, if unicorns are not real, they have been spoken of as real by ancient and revered authors, William explains to him that the ancients perhaps described some ugly beast with one horn accurately, and that illustrators, copyists, and translators falsified the image and transformed it into the beautiful conception that Adso is familiar with. In response, Adso asks a very honest question: "But then how can we trust ancient wisdom, whose traces you are always seeking, if it is handed down by lying books that have interpreted it with such license?" to which William responds, "Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we mustn't ask ourselves what it says but what it means" (356). William's perspective here is very similar to the discussion of true as opposed to factual stories presented by Catania, but unlike Catania he

implies that the *only* truth is the generalizable meaning behind the facts, and that particulars cannot be preserved accurately through time and text.

The above analysis presents a dismal prognosis for historical inquiry. Through explicit discussion about inaccurate accounts and the meaninglessness of individual facts, and through implicit critique of historical certainty by exaggerating common obstacles, *The Name of the Rose* fairly condemns simple acceptance of historical accounts. This criticism can be unsettling to anyone that believes that history can be a moral and spiritual guide, that history shapes culture, or in any way values history as a discipline.

The Name of the Rose Invites a Christian Response to Historical Uncertainty

However, the novel's critiques are not unfounded or simply based in godless postmodern skepticism. Although the traditional historical interpretation that *The Name of the Rose* undermines is founded on the confidence in truth fostered by a Christian society, the novel's undermining of this framework reveals real problems with naïve conceptions of historical knowledge and reopens the field to Christian historical interpretation that secular historical writing has co-opted.

The main reason that a Christian might be unsettled by the novel's questioning of history is that the traditional assumptions of historical narrative are based on ideas about truth developed in a Christian world. Herbert Schlossberg says in his book *Idols for Destruction* that the Hebrew and Christian worldview is uniquely concerned with history, and that its linear view of history differs greatly from the largely cyclical and deterministic conceptions of the rest of the world. He writes that "[t]he doctrines of creation and of eschatology are explicit statements that history has both a beginning and an end and that it is possible to say something intelligible about both." He goes on to say that the intelligibility of the overarching structure of history lends meaning to

particular events that lie between the beginning and the end (Schlossberg 5). In *The Name of the Rose*, the deconstruction of traditional history – a product of Christian belief – appears to be an attack on Christianity.

However, a broader look at Eco's cultural context shows that what he is doing in questioning history is not nearly as simple, and not nearly as devious, as attacking Christian belief. Because much of his criticism is implicit rather than explicit, the critique is all the more subtle, and the reader who enters into the questioning becomes complicit in it. Secularism in the West has for the most part held on to the method of historical narrative that Christianity allows because of its Christian heritage, while attempting to discard the philosophical and religious underpinnings that make the methods tenable. As Schlossberg says, the meaning of time is religious in nature and that philosophies that deny a power outside of and above history make an idol of history itself (12). Any framework that holds on to the reliability or even the supremacy of historical narrative while ignoring a transcendent storyteller has already done the work of subverting Christianity. In attacking the widely accepted ideas of the predictability and reliability of history, *The Name of the Rose* is not attacking the foundation of Christianity, but toppling the edifice of historical thought that turns out to no longer have any foundation at all.

In questioning various assumptions about the progress of history and the recording of history, *The Name of the Rose* helps to undo false structuring systems that attempt to fill the meaning gap that only true faith can really fill. Schlossberg says that although the many secular historical frameworks differ in manifestation (Spenerian evolution, Enlightenment progress, Marxism, Western social engineering), they all propose a means of salvation through historical inevitability rather than through repentance and belief (13). Schlossberg references Reinhold Niebuhr, saying that these historical frameworks "elevate some 'principle of coherence' to the

central meaning of life and this is what then provides the focus of significance for that life” (6). In contrast, the framework presented in *The Name of the Rose* does not posit a “principle of coherence,” but rather destroys the idols of false principles of coherence. It may fall short in giving credit to the God who does provide coherence, but at least it does not replace him with a false idol. The novel empties the pedestal and makes it ready for the true organizing principle. The novel rightly questions the possibility of an accurate history on purely human terms, and although it questions all history, it does show that the Christian view of history is a meaningful and plausible alternative to settling for meaninglessness.²

As *The Name of the Rose* shows, all history is constructed. But the fact that all historical narratives are constructed does not mean that all, or even most, of the constructions are inaccurate or misleading. As Murthy says, mirrors distort, but to say they distort is not to say that they lie, because we know they distort. We just have to know that we are dealing with a mirror (111). Novels, mirrors, labyrinths, historical frameworks, and various structuring systems all misrepresent reality to some extent, but in a predictable and discernable way. Murthy says that as long as they are consciously taken as fallible representations of reality, we can learn to understand the contours of how they reflect and so gain valuable knowledge from what they show (112). Yes, Adso does construct his narrative with limited knowledge and understanding. Yes, the various translations and dubious journey of the manuscript do raise significant concerns. But these factors can be offset by the reader’s outside understanding of the ways that these factors can affect a narrative.

The concern with authorial bias is closely tied to the concern of authorial limitation, but

² Herbert Schlossberg says that the Christian view of history sees the story of the world as a linear progression from creation towards the eschaton, governed by God. Events along the course of history have meaning as they relate to the greater story (5).

this barrier to complete objectivity is likewise mitigated by the readers' outside knowledge of the situation and of the nature of historical narrative. Just because Adso is missing information does not mean the information he has is insufficient to tell a complete enough story to convey important truth. No one person could possibly compile all the facts on a given situation. This necessary limitation is not one of the weaknesses of recounting history, however, but a tremendous strength. According to Carr, what distinguishes "historical facts" from meaningless accidents of experience is their careful selection from the myriad of possible facts as significant events in a discernable broader story (136). If every single "fact," even of a single day, were recorded, the resulting document would be impossibly unwieldy and also next to meaningless. This idea is depicted in the short story "Funes, His Memory" by Jorge Borges, a clear influence on *The Name of the Rose* even though this particular short story is not explicitly referenced. In this story, the character Funes remembers with complete accuracy and detail everything that he has ever experienced. One would think that he would be the ideal historian, but over the course of the story this turns out not to be the case at all. In his complete memory of every particular, Funes is not able to grasp the generalizations that make life coherent. Every experience for Funes was unique because he was not able to forget the accidental and focus on the essential, and so he was not able to draw a generalized meaning from any of his experiences.

Unlike Funes, the historian must selectively forget in order to bring to the surface meaningful pieces of information. As Lytton Strachey puts it, "ignorance is the first requisite of the historian, ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits" (qtd. in Carr 13). More important than having comprehensive facts of an event is having a coherent and helpful framework to present them in, although having sufficient and accurate information is still very important. The tension here, one that appears repeatedly in different contexts in the *The Name of*

the Rose, is the relationship between the particular and the universal. Herbert Schlossberg argues that different philosophical trends have attempted to overcome this tension in different ways, the rational Greeks dismissing particular facts as inconsequential when compared with the universal laws of reason, and the Eastern philosophies conflating all particularities in one great unity (12-13). Both of these approaches, for opposite reasons, fail to allot adequate meaning to the particular. If everything is unified, then history has no meaning because there is no need to recognize the succession of particular events. If everything is completely fragmented then history has no meaning because no one event has any bearing on another. Only if particulars relate to each other in a repeatable, predictable form can history be meaningful. As the events of the novel unfold, William as detective and Adso as narrator struggle to identify how to draw generalizations from facts without conflating important distinctions. Although they fail in many ways, their struggle indicates that a possible resolution might be found. Adso's ignorance as a narrator is concerning not so much because he is missing information as because he appears to be missing an adequate structuring system to organize the information that he does have. A large part of his struggle is that he presents too many facts, and attributes the same level of importance to all of them. In doing so, he illustrates the necessity of structuring frames, and at the same time transfers some of the responsibility of the historian to the reader.

Another uncomfortable aspect of *The Name of the Rose*—the failure to properly resolve the detective element of the story—also shows a much more accurate understanding of how the world works than do perfectly resolved mysteries. A classic detective story with every loose thread gathered and tied in a lovely bow may seem to support the Christian belief that events have meaning and that concrete truth exists. However, over-simplification can be as harmful as denying the possibility of the true simplification that comprises good history. The human

experience can rarely be understood in the problem/solution framework that much detective fiction assumes, and recognizing life's complexity by leaving some problems unsolved can be a way of acknowledging that some truth lies outside the grasp of easy understanding.

The alternative to having a humble perspective of the individual's ability to accurately discern all the facts is the authoritarian Bernard Gui, the inquisitor who comes to the Abbey and falsely condemns Salvatore and the woman that Adso falls in love with. Gui believes that he can come into a situation, assess the facts, and render proper judgment, when in reality he is distorting the situation even more than William, who constantly doubts his ability to draw final conclusions. Catania points out the temptation for readers to think like Gui in saying that “[p]erhaps Bernard is the grotesque of our own impatience with the apparent random meandering of our novelist—and surely with the randomness of our experience” (160). Though at times complete control of the facts of situation seems attractive, Gui's deceitful self-assuredness warns that many situations do not allow for such simple summation and evaluation. In all contingent human situations a little doubt and a healthy dose of humility may postpone understanding, but will likely bring more full and clear understanding in the end.

Although she herself wrote very tight and satisfying detective stories, Dorothy Sayers criticizes the distorted vision of the world that the traditional detective plot can easily fall into. She gives four different criteria for detective plots, all of which she says belie the complex nature of human life and creativity, and “falsify our apprehension of life as disastrously as they falsify our apprehension of art” (194). She says that as a general rule the central problem that confronts a detective 1) is always soluble, 2) is completely soluble, 3) is solved in the same terms in which it is set, and 4) is finite (Sayers 194-204). These constraints work perfectly well in a constructed world, but are not the natural constraints of the real world, which can be problematic for people

who attempt to answer their own life “problems” in the terms that they encounter in their reading. Sayers humorously inserts into her argument a fragment of a scene as if it were the President of the Detective League interviewing a candidate:

PRESIDENT: Do you promise that your Detectives shall well and truly detect the Crimes presented to them, using those Wits which it shall please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance upon, nor making use of, Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo-Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence or the Act of God?

CANDIDATE: I do.” (202)

The problem, of course, with this method of proceeding is that Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, etc. (possibly omitting Mumbo-Jumbo, but certainly including Jiggery-Pokery) are very real factors that influence situations outside of the detective plot.

The problems in *The Name of the Rose* do not fall into these constructed categories. For the most part they are not completely soluble, they sometimes open up questions, if not infinite, at least far reaching and difficult. The problems in *The Name of the Rose* also are not defined in limited terms, but rather in terms very similar to those set by life outside the novel. This honesty in defining the problem extends from the very basic murder mystery to the theological and philosophical conversations that William engages in with Ubertino, Adso, the Abbot, and other characters. One particular conversation that William has with Adso clearly illustrates the danger of trying to solve a problem using artificial parameters. William has just discovered that the fingers of the murdered monk Berengar, like those of Venantius before him, are black, and posits the hypothetical syllogism, “a substance exists that blackens the fingers of those who touch it, ... Venantius and Berengar have blackened fingers, ergo they touched this substance” (295).

Adso, who completed the syllogism that William implied, is delighted that they have made such a wonderful move forward on the case, but William reminds him: “What we have, once again, is simply the question. That is: we have ventured the hypothesis that Venantius and Berengar touched the same thing, an unquestionably reasonable hypothesis. But when we have imagined a substance that, alone among all substances, causes the result (which is still to be established), we still don’t know what it is or where they found it, or why they touched it” (296). William thus points out to Adso the danger of setting artificial terms wherein a question can be answered by showing that the real questions require much more complex historical and psychological answers that no logical syllogism can comprehend. This example is typical of the approach to questions throughout the book, where every oversimplifying question is pushed aside to reveal the many more puzzling questions behind.

Compounded with the repeated questioning of accessible truth and the shakily solved mystery, the destruction of the Abbey at the end of the novel might be read as a statement about the final deconstruction of meaning. If that were what the burning of the library means, then this despairing ending would certainly be one of the greatest divergences from a Christian worldview in which the end of time will bring a full revelation of meaning. Alternately, depending on the historical framework used for interpretation, the same event could be viewed as divine judgment for the sins of pride and lust rampant in the Abbey. Schlossberg says that this idea of judgment is the most important difference between the various secular conceptions of history and the Judeo-Christian one is the idea of judgment. He says that whereas the various frameworks can often supply spatial or biological analogies – rise and fall, birth and old age – for the life of a nation, the Christian perspective of history does not posit such a deterministic framework. Instead, the life of a nation is described in terms of obedience to God, or disobedience, and the cataclysmic

events are described in terms of judgment (6). The life of a people, a city, or an Abbey will not necessarily follow a pre-determined arc, but has the opportunity to be obedient to the law of God, or disobedient. Disobedience will eventually be met with judgment. Schlossberg says that when people do not understand this framework, the often terrible consequences of judgment look like meaningless suffering, which leads these people towards nihilism (33). The concept of viewing catastrophe as judgment is so foreign that readers of *The Name of the Rose* (and the characters in the novel) rarely consider the idea of judgment. Yet this explanation would make more sense of the facts than does a nihilistic explanation. According to biblical principles, the Abbey was ripe for judgment. It is a Benedictine order, but the rules of discipline can barely be discerned in over 500 pages. Lust runs rampant throughout the Abbey, where the novices read almost pornographic material, the cellarer and his assistant (and who knows who else) take sexual advantage of poor peasant girls, the Abbot disguises greed with religious fervor, and the majority of the Abbey is filled with a passion for knowledge and prestige rather than passion for God. There could be no more fitting punishment for this range of sins than the literal burning of the fruit of all of this godless labor.

History cannot be understood except through the lens of God's plan of redemption and judgment, and even then the ultimate meaning of individual events is usually not clear. From a Christian perspective, even though the meaning of certain events in history can be completely elusive, because of Revelation the story of history as a whole has a discernable telos. The meaning of the individual events may be misinterpreted, lost, or completely unrecognized, but the hope of having a glimpse of the final end of history lends validity to the search for meaning in minor movements in the overarching theme. If the end of history is assumed to be meaningless chaos, then individual events will be interpreted as meaningless and chaotic. If the

end of history is assumed to be the culmination of the Kingdom of God in re-creation, then individual events will be interpreted as foreshadowing or cases in point of creation and re-creation.

The novel effectively deconstructs historical discourse, leaving two options for interpretation. 1) it leaves historical discourse in a state of total ruin, in need of the Christian framework to come in and replace it, or 2) the novel presents, in seed form, the beginning of a better way. Different critics have read the novel in both ways, and many approach the novel with a worldview that contains little hope outside of the progress of history. But regardless of their worldview, the majority of critics find some ray of hope even after the destruction of the Abbey and the doubts of the aged Adso. Glynn says that the novel “represents an antithesis to the extreme skepticism characteristic of much poststructuralist thinking” (113). Key concurs, saying, “*The Name of the Rose*, despite its reservations about the ultimate ability of the human mind to map the world accurately, nevertheless remains positive about the ambition of creating a meaningful and useful map of reality” (18). Catania, from a Catholic perspective, says that the novel “provides us the ‘light’ (as faint but as necessary as Adso's and William's in their wandering through the labyrinth of the ‘world’), the ‘spectacles’ (more powerful even than William's but just as threatened) whereby we can, falteringly, sense-not inductively, not deductively, not by dogmatic bullying and never without joy—the mystery that alone is ‘truth’” (161). These evaluations differ in reasoning from each other in perspective, but all point to an understanding of *The Name of the Rose* as at least asking the right questions to lead the reader to epistemological hope.

Watching the beautiful structure of historical certitude and knowledge burn to the ground is unquestionably and rightfully uncomfortable. The structure is one that should be carefully

built, well-fortified, and beautifully adorned. But if the building is erected on a shaky foundation or no foundation at all, then better for it to crumble now so that it can be built again rightly than for its sturdy exterior to continue to deceive people who rely on its strength. A novel is a set of facts like any other set of facts, but presented with their own set of interpretations already written in. *The Name of the Rose*, on the other hand, makes every effort to not impose its own interpretation, and so requires the readers to supply their own historical framework for interpreting the facts of the story. A reader who brings to the novel the conception that truth does not exist or is not accessible will see his belief confirmed in the burning pages of Aristotle, the collected Apocalypses, and riches of the library. A reader who believes history is the driving force of civilization will be challenged by the mingling of ideas from different eras, but may see the destruction of the superstructure making room for the rise of the proletariat. A reader who brings to the novel a belief in God can see his hand at work in the life of the Abbey. The novel will challenge both readers to re-assess their beliefs and examine the foundation on which they stand.

Chapter Two: Intertextuality: The Truth is [Lost] in the Text

Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them!...Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. (Ecclesiastes 4:1, 12:12)

One of the most delightful (and sometimes the most frustrating) features of *The Name of the Rose* is the constant interplay between the novel and a host of other texts through quotation, direct allusion, and the hint of a lost dream of another work. Most of the characters in the novel are either historical figures whose real lives carry a weight of meaning, or figures based on other literary characters. The plot line, themes, and narrative style draw on a variety of sources. Throughout both the weighty theological conversations and everyday exchanges, William, Abbo, Severinus, and others refer to outside texts and bring into the novel a whole new set of ideas. Even aside from the references, the novel is thoroughly polyphonic as a result of its multiple narrators and character interactions. Some theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva would argue that the flow of meaning between novel and sources and between different internal voices does not lead to enrichment or discovery, but rather to the simple celebration of multivocality at best or the loss of meaning at worst. By some accounts, if the two texts contradict each other in any way, then the allusion serves to cancel out what each interacting text is attempting to say. Alternately, the allusions point to the belief that the only reference for the conversation is other conversation, and that all dialogue is simply the play of language with no real connection between the signifying word and the signified.

Contrary to this pessimistic view of the effect of intertextuality on meanings the view that the interplay between texts actually enhances meaning. Often the meaning accrued through intertextual allusions grows faster than the average reader, or even the meticulous and brilliant

reader, can keep up with. But the reader's limited ability to comprehend does not limit the work's ability to mean. Quite the opposite – the more copious the meaning of a work, the more it can spark the readers' imagination and their desire to pursue different avenues of thought. A world with endless possible paths to pursue towards knowledge of ideas and facts and people and stories is a humbling and inspiring world because although all is knowable, one person cannot possibly comprehend it all due to the sheer magnitude of meaning. Humbling, because the superabundance of meaning highlights the finitude of the individual, but inspiring because the little slice of reality that a person can grasp hold of offers him a true taste of what could be discovered were there world and time enough. Children and scientists tend to approach the world with this attitude, but for some reason in the world of literature theorists have taken the plentitude of multi-vocality for un-meaning. Perhaps the alternative is too overwhelming.

In contrast to the preponderance of most literary theory, biblical exegesis sets an example of how to interact with textual multi-vocality without capitulating to the pressure to give up the search for the holy grail of meaning: biblical exegesis. Some biblical scholars study the Bible with the same postmodern presuppositions that are commonly found in the field of literary theory, but for the most part biblical scholars approach the text with the assumption that it conveys a stable, knowable, message from the divine author to the reader. Though biblical exegesis is not always conducted with the height of literary sophistication, the way some interpreters have understood source reference and multiple narrators in the Bible offers a much needed alternative strategy for interpretation that encompasses the positive features of a postmodern understanding of the intertextuality found in *The Name of the Rose*. Though *The Name of the Rose* ends with an ambiguous view of the nature of meaning and the effect of interplay between texts, the novel attests to the need for a constructive view of intertextuality.

Because of its use of countless sources and a wide range of authorial voices, a thorough reading of *The Name of the Rose* must decide how to resolve the interpretive issues that the multiple voices create. The novel's images and dialogue, as well as Eco's historical context, invite interpretation along the lines of postmodern intertextuality theory, but the worldview implicit in this theory is not adequate to make sense of all the elements of the novel. Instead, reading the novel more in keeping with the treatment of multiple voices and sources in biblical scholarship can provide a fuller reading of *The Name of the Rose* than does postmodern intertextuality theory.

Eco's Novel and Postmodern Theory

The Name of the Rose is open to a reading along the lines of postmodern theory, and if the themes and images of a work ever call for the application of a particular school of critical theory, then this would be such a case. Because of Eco's cultural context and the themes and images in the book, the multiplicity of voices that appear in *The Name of the Rose* implies ambivalence about stable interpretive possibilities and pushes the novel towards interpretation along the lines of post-structuralist theory like that espoused by Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva. Before Eco wrote *The Name of the Rose* he wrote for the avant-garde magazine *Il Verri*, and was also published in the journal *Tel Quel*, a journal that Kristeva also contributed to. Eco's own piece *The Open Work* highlights and lauds the ambiguity of interpretation in artistic work, arguing for "open" literature where multiple interpretations from various perspectives are equally valid (15). Given his involvement with the avant-garde literary scene and his extensive work in semiotics, he was certainly well acquainted with the influential theorists in this group, and the themes and images that appear to reflect their theories cannot be simply coincidental. All

apparent connections were not necessarily completely thought through by Eco, but are still part of the cultural and literary context of the work.

One key idea of this group, and one particularly relevant to *The Name of the Rose*, is the concept of Intertextuality. Intertextuality is more than just source quotation and allusion, though the term is commonly misused as a fancy way to refer to these devices. Instead, Intertextuality is a way of describing the multi-voiced nature of a novel (or any text), whether these voices come directly from other works or are original to the text at hand. Accordingly, the voices at play in *The Name of the Rose* can be separated into two main categories: the clearly external source works that are quoted or alluded to, and the internal voices that are part of Eco's fiction. In her 1969 essay "The Bounded Text," Kristeva says that any one text is "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (36). Kristeva is making this predication about all texts, but it is easy to see how this statement applies to Eco's novel because of the overtness of the intersection of texts. In the book *Intertextuality*, George Allen clarifies that "for Kristeva, ... the intertextual dimensions of a text cannot be studied as mere 'sources' or 'influences' stemming from what traditionally has been styled 'background' or 'context'" (35). Thus, all texts are "intertextual," at least to some degree, some to a greater degree, and some like *The Name of the Rose* to a greater degree and in a more self-aware manner. Even though an apparently completely original and non-allusive work can embody the intertextual tensions that Kristeva describes, the dialogic situation is made much more explicit when the text at hand does in fact draw from outside sources. While the subconscious is still at play in the language, so also are the power and the assumptions of the source text. This interaction with another text touches on a dominant theme of both structuralist and post-structuralist theory, which is that language is a system complete unto

itself with no real relationship to the actual structure of reality (which is probably unknowable or nonexistent). Though systems of language are not grounded in reality, cultures build them up as an artificial means of structuring and understanding their experiences. The network of texts and philosophical conversations is internally consistent, but not true in any kind of ultimate sense. As a result, new pieces of the conversation are not derived from reality or empirical experience, but are rather drawn from other pieces of the textual edifice. Roland Barthes explains this process:

The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is only a ready-formed dictionary, its word only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely. (qtd. in Allen 13)

The understanding of the world of thought as purely textual without authority, and the understanding of the textual as unstable through multi-vocality, is a large part of the theoretical climate surrounding the composition of *The Name of the Rose*.

Though the interaction of textual sources and voices is supposedly present in all writing, certain types of literature foreground these ideas more than others. Kristeva praised the French avant-garde movement for foregrounding the presence of the subconscious in their works, and minimizing the dominating effect of the logical. *The Name of the Rose* in many ways falls into this category of works. Although his detective historical fiction style is completely different from the poetry of Mallarmé or Lautréamont, for example, Eco does at a thematic level with the novel what these other artists did at the linguistic level with poetry and short stories. Whereas these poets evoked the subconscious and exhibited multi-vocality in their poetic language, Eco

accomplishes this feat by composing his tale predominately from recognizable sources, and by deliberately drawing attention to conflicting voices through the frame story, through the cosmopolitan setting, and through characters' conversations.

The external sources quoted or alluded to in Eco's novel comprise a lengthy list, conveniently catalogued in *The Key to the Name of the Rose*, and Thomas Stauder's "Naming the Rose-Petal by Petal." Any of these sources could yield fruitful results upon investigation, and their sheer abundance is not insignificant. However, for the sake of space, while acknowledging all the sources' relevance I will here focus only on the most notable sources: Sherlock Holmes, Jorge Borges, and St. John. These three carry with them literary, cultural, and epistemological packages that span the broad range of perspectives represented in the various sources. These three sources are particularly fruitful to analyze because the worldviews implied in the originals are so different and contradictory. Holmes implies that a completely rational approach to understanding the human experience is adequate, Borges implies that all approaches are inadequate, and John teaches that the human experience can only be understood by what God has revealed. The epistemology of *The Name of the Rose* is shaped by the influence of these sources, and also by the very fact of their interplay in the text.

Sherlock Holmes

One of the most widely recognized source allusions is wrapped up in the novel's protagonist. Eco is clearly paying tribute to the great detective Sherlock Holmes in the name and the character of William of Baskerville. The first name William is a nod to William of Ockham, whom Eco originally considered as a candidate for his protagonist, later discarding the idea in favor of a more malleable fictional persona. Eco's substitute much more closely resembles Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's iconic character Sherlock Holmes, whose crime solving powers have

continually inspired and entertained readers from 1886 to today. The name of Eco's narrator also points to Doyle's Watson, with the Italian sounding closer to Adso than the rounder English Adso. The names of the characters are the most obvious connections, but similarities continue throughout the novel. The narrative form also connects Eco's murder mystery and Doyle's stories. Both are told through the eyes of a more naïve narrator who marvels at the skills of a brilliant friend while not quite grasping the complexity of his thought. Both William and Sherlock indulge in a little extra-sanctioned cognitive stimulation. Benjamin Fairbank points out that the language Adso uses to describe William's drug use is almost a direct quotation of Watson's language describing Sherlock's habit, especially considering the passage was translated into Italian and then back into English (84-85). Many more delightful connections are buried throughout, from personality traits to detection practices.

While Sherlock Holmes is the most popular detective of all time and is thus a perfectly logical model to base any other fictional detective on, more is going on here in Eco's novel than a simple tip of the hat to a great predecessor. The world of Sherlock Holmes operates according to a very specific and very consistent set of rules and assumptions. The laws of Holmes' universe play out in the predictability of every plot – a client comes to Baker Street and describes a problem, Holmes and Watson do a little sleuthing, after an optional confrontation and the apprehension of the criminal, Holmes describes the rational steps he followed to solve the mystery, which were perfectly obvious to him and which he implies could have been noticed by anyone if they had adequately applied the rules of observation and logic. Case closed. The entire world of Sherlock Holmes speaks with the voice of modernism, rational empiricism, and the knowability of the universe. Noting this pattern, John Cox questions Holmes' true greatness as a detective, saying, "Holmes's keen observation of particulars enables him to unravel crimes

unerringly, but his "success" is really that of an author who created a fictional world in which signs pointed unerringly and univocally beyond themselves" (129). Referencing Sherlock Holmes brings into the world of *The Name of the Rose* not just the character, but also the world that he belongs to. Eco does not just refer to Holmes a couple of times though; he weaves his personality and his detective methods throughout his novel. As a consequence, the epistemological assumptions of Holmes and his world challenge the other assumptions and perspectives on the limits of human reason presented in the novel.

Jorge Borges

One of *The Name of the Rose*'s other most prevalent influence provides the alternative perspective to Holmes' hyper-rationality. Slightly more veiled than the Holmes allusions, though much more pervasive and complex, are the allusions to the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges. Whereas the hero was named for Sherlock Holmes, the villain Jorge du Burgos is named for Jorge Borges. In addition to this obvious reference, in the article "Jorge Borges, Author of *The Name of the Rose*," Leo Corry argues that *The Name of the Rose* is clearly closely related to Borges' corpus, but not simply by referring to phrases or characters, though some such details do occur. Instead, Eco primarily alludes to Borges' penchant for allusion. Part of the invocation of Borges is the very fact that he is alluded to and not directly quoted, because the characteristic style of Borges is allusion (428). These elusive allusions include the form and style of the frame story that comprise the opening chapters, which closely model the style of Borges' stories like "The Garden of the Forking Paths," or "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," which include elaborate historical and textual background that is all part of the fiction. Eco also uses some of the same images that Borges uses, like mirrors and the library labyrinth. For Borges, the library signifies actual chaos behind the apparent order of predictable room arrangement and

consistently shelved books. Eco's library labyrinth is very similar, but instead the chaos is on the surface, with blind dead ends, and trick mirrors, trap door mirrors, and hallucination inducing incense.

Borges' understanding of what can be known and how it can be known stands in sharp contrast to the world of Holmes. Borges speaks with the voice of atheistic despair, but also shows the need for structures to organize the chaos, as false as these structures may be. Eco himself says that Borges can only be read in the context of structuralism, because all his works have to do with the building up and tearing down of structures. These are not necessarily linguistic structures, but theoretical structures that carried linguistic structuralism to its logical conclusion ("Borges" 124). Neil Isaacs agrees in his article "The Labyrinth of Art," arguing that the labyrinth in Borges's work represents the universe (most explicitly seen in "The Library of Babel"), and that the mystery of the labyrinth signifies irrationality at the core of the universe's structure (384). One way in which Borges illustrates this irrationality is by allowing his characters to arrive at perfectly consistent and logical conclusions that turn out to be false. This pattern is most clearly seen in his detective-like stories "Death and the Compass," (which, incidentally, the plot of the *The Name of the Rose* is based on). In the story, Lonrot, the detective protagonist of "Death and the Compass," comes to the end of what he thought was a logical trail. There he discovers that his nemesis, Scharlach—another allusion to Sherlock Holmes (Cooksey 225)—has arbitrarily left clues along the trail that he perceived Lonrot was already following. Lonrot's system of interpretation was internally coherent and consistent given all the facts available to him at the time; however, Lonrot was not privy to the most important fact that Scharlach was modeling his crimes on the hypothesis of the detective himself. By consistently portraying small systems like this one where the structural logic is meaningless,

Borges implies that the structural logic of the universe is also meaningless. However, although Borges espouses a worldview with no absolute meaning or internal logic, his pessimism does not lead him all the way down the road of despair. He rejects totalizing systems that pretend to discover a transcendent order, but, according to Marianne Kesting, believes that art can offer aesthetic unity and purpose where logical unity and purpose break down (Isaacs 384). Borges believes that language and human understanding is a closed system of signs wherein aesthetic value is the only meaning. These beliefs seem particularly relevant to *The Name of the Rose* because of the ubiquity of Borges allusions, especially the symbol of the library.

St. John

The last body of work with particularly relevant worldview assumptions that appears throughout *The Name of the Rose* is the writing of St. John the apostle. For the most part references to John are limited to the Apocalypse, or the book of Revelation, but the very first quote in Adso's manuscript is taken from the famous opening lines of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (qtd. in Eco 17). After the johannine stage is set with this opening quote, references to the Apocalypse abound throughout. Adso spends a great deal of time inspecting a carved door which has scenes depicted on it of Christ sitting in final judgement (53-56). The abbey where the action of the novel takes place is famous because it houses the most extensive and elaborate collection of Apocalyptic texts in the world (342). Every room of the library has a verse from Revelation inscribed over the door, which turns out to contain the key to navigating the library as well as organizing the shelving system. The language and imagery of the Apocalypse has a strong presence in the abbey, which makes plausible Alihnardo's postulation that the murderer is basing the crime scene on the seven trumpets of judgment found in Revelation (342). The series of murders do

indeed appear to follow this pattern for some time, and it is only at the end that William and Adso discover that Jorge fell in with the Revelation hypothesis and made subsequent deaths appear to conform to the pattern as an afterthought. Additionally, unnoticed by Jorge, unnoticed by William, and perhaps unnoticed by anyone until Joan Delfattore pointed it out, the apocalyptic pattern actually continues as the library burns, the “twenty four elders” fall, and the horses of the Apocalypse are rescued out of the stables.

In the case of Doyle and Borges, little allusions scattered here and there are fairly easy to recognize for those familiar with their work. Specific references to John are somewhat harder to isolate, though, because the conversations around the abbey, the political debates, even the one love scene, are all shaped around biblical language. Since John chronologically preceded the setting of *The Name of the Rose*, references to his work can be read as adding realism to the texture of the setting as much as they can be read as deliberate source reference. The Gospel and Apocalypse of John, as well as the whole canon of scripture, is so much a part of both Eco and Adso’s cultural fabric that its epistemological significance could easily be ignored or written off as part of the texture of the setting. But if the allusions to John are read with the weight that they deserve given their cultural and religious weight as well as their ubiquity in the novel, then they present a whole new perspective on textuality and epistemology. John speaks with the voice of fire and brimstone, but also with the only hope for the chaos of endless textuality, which is the incarnate Word.

For similar reasons that it is difficult to pinpoint where the biblical allusions end and the fabric of culture begins, it is difficult to pinpoint in a brief paragraph precisely what is the biblical position on epistemology or the nature of textuality. Centuries of Christians and thinkers in a Christian world have presented various nuanced and sometimes contradictory arguments on

issues such as these. Despite its nuances and complexity, even the most basic assumptions that everyone can agree on about the worldview that John is presenting in his writing hold to a completely different picture than Holmes and Borges. Unlike Borges, John assumes that the meaning of events can be known through revelation. It is orchestrated by an all-knowing and all-powerful God and known to men to the extent that God reveals this meaning. Unlike Holmes, John assumes that the meaning of events is outside the reach of man's reason. Man needs divine revelation to achieve understanding about the ultimate meaning of events. This meaning is not "open" in the sense of Eco's *Open Work* where interpretive ambiguity creates aesthetic pleasure. However for John the infallible, unequivocal meaning of history is "closed" in a way that gives much deeper joy to men than the simple concerns of aesthetic pleasure, but still leaves room for ambiguity in matters of less than cosmic or salvific significance.

Internal Voices

The second layer of intertextuality is made up of the dialogue between the different characters, cultures, and classes in the fictional world of the novel. As with any character-dense novel, the voices in dialogue are many, and the perspectives in *The Name of the Rose* are multiplied as a result of the cosmopolitan nature of the abbey as well as the layering of narrators in the frame story.

The first voice that is heard in the novel is that of the unnamed contemporary narrator. The initial narrator, the one closest to the surface in the fiction, has a scholarly romantic voice, speaking seriously of the origin and accurate translation of the manuscript he receives, but also in cliché terms of "my beloved" and the "great emptiness in my heart" at her departure (7-8). He claims to present to the world his translation of Adso's manuscript "for sheer narrative pleasure" instead of out of "commitment to the present, in order to change the world" (12). His is the voice

of the aesthetic – art for art’s sake. The voice of this unnamed narrator’s source, the Abbe Vallet, is difficult to distinguish from Adso’s because they are merged together in one act of translation. However, some clue is given to his character and values through the chapter summaries. The nameless narrator assumes that Vallet added all of the chapter subtitles (13), which gives him a slightly ironic voice distinct from that of Adso. For example, many of the chapter headings describe accurately what happens, but with a dry, humorous tone, like the caption for night on the second day “In which the labyrinth is finally broached, and the intruders have strange visions and, as happens in labyrinths, lose their way” (193). After the brief set-up of a double frame, the preponderance of the novel reads as if it were filtered through just one voice – that of the aged Adso reflecting back on an experience of his younger self. The voice of young Adso dominates the novel and gives it the voice of one inquiring after truth, but his authorial statements as an old man compromise this voice. In addition to the voice of the narrators, the individual characters whose conversations Adso reports present a wide range of conflicting perspectives and opinions. The voice of William as well as other significant characters like Jorge and the Abbot, are all filtered through the voice of Adso, but still influence interpretation. Two characters, Salvatore and the woman that Adso finds in the kitchen, contribute to the dialogue of the novel, not so much through their voice, but rather through their significant lack of one. All of these voices carry with them social, political, historical perspectives that shape the perspective of the novel as a whole as they interact.

Interpretive Possibilities

Identifying source references in *The Name of the Rose* and understanding the interpretive framework implied by those sources is fun and interesting, but simply identifying contradictory voices does not resolve them into a coherent interpretation. According to Charles Bressler, the

deconstructive approach that the novel's cultural context seems to require would argue that "[t]he meaning of a text cannot be ascertained by examining only that particular text; instead, a text's meaning *evolves* from that derived from the interrelatedness of one text to an interrelatedness of many texts... Never can we state a text's definitive meaning because it has no 'one' correct or definitive interpretation" (115). A deconstructive reading would not seek to find the synthesis or ultimate truth out of the contradictions between Holmes, Borges, and John, but would postpone interpretation and instead revel in the differences, or *différance*.

Interpretations along Derrida's lines would lead to concluding that this complex of sources either cancels meaning out, or multiplies meaning beyond the realm of any useful summarization. Evelyn Cobley comes to this conclusion in an article comparing *The Name of the Rose* with Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, where she says that both novels imply a world with undecidable meaning because of the "excess of signification" that they present through the "iterability of signs" (344). She says that while both novels present about the same prognosis for the survival of meaning, unlike Mann's novel, *The Name of the Rose* seems to revel in this play of meaning and look for no way to overcome it (357). Cobley comes to the conclusion that all interpreters of *The Name of the Rose* must work with the tool kit that deconstruction provides. Jocelyn Mann concurs by saying that the novel upholds a view of the world in which there is no center – no transcendental referent – and that all structures useful at arriving somewhere must be discarded (143). The disparate sources in a text like *The Name of the Rose* cannot be synthesized into a knowable meaning, and those sources themselves do not have a coherent meaning to begin with.

Just as Derrida's theory provides an excuse to settle for non-meaning in the interaction of source texts, Kristeva's theory encourages a reading that simply recognizes and celebrates

difference in voices without attempting to resolve their conflicts. Her ideas are played out on a concrete level specifically in the interaction of the voices of the woman, Salvatore, and Adso's subconscious. The woman in the story significantly does not have a voice, but her presence speaks loudly in a non-verbal way. Thomas Frenzt, in "Resurrecting the Feminine in *The Name of the Rose*," argues that the world of the abbey stands for the logical and symbolic masculine world. Characters like the abbot and Jorge strive to maintain order and control, but still the feminine semiotic *chora* breaks through in uncontrollable ways (125). According to Frenzt's argument, wherever the feminine appears it invokes this idea of the semiotic *chora*, which Kristeva defines as "[t]he drives [that course through a subject], which are 'energy' charges as well as 'psychical' marks, articulate what we call a *chora*: a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (93). Even though there are few actual female characters in *The Name of the Rose*, the feminine does appear often. Ubertino talks passionately about Clare, and then with disgust about Margaret of the Dolcinians (70). In a distorted way, the feminine appears in some of the monks as manifested in their homosexual desire. Most clearly, the feminine appears in the form of a beautiful peasant woman that has been let into the abbey illicitly and who completely overthrows the reason of Adso's little world.

The feminine in the novel is treated in these images as Kristeva's language theory would suggest. The system in power mistrusts it and seeks to suppress it. Ubertino with his fanaticism is treated with careful distance. Adelmo and Berengar's relationship is regarded with disgust and spoken of in circuitous whispers. The woman is treated with great disrespect by those who brought her into the abbey, and then when her presence is discovered by those in power she is tried as a witch and condemned to be executed. These reactions are in keeping with Kristeva's

idea that the symbolic logical aspect of language seeks to suppress the semiotic, but also in keeping with her theory is that this suppression of the semiotic is death to the life and creativity of the abbey.

Salvatore is another character that reflects a more Kristevan perspective of intertextuality in that he speaks with the language of every people that he has come in contact with. His speech is almost unrecognizable as human language, and certainly not as any one human language. This polyglot composite echoes back to one of Kristeva's influences, Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin focused on the dialogic nature of language specifically in reference to different social classes in communication. Salvatore represents all these classes at once, one subverting the other until no language is dominant. Salvatore too is condemned, in keeping with Kristeva's analysis wherein the logical will always seek to suppress the less ordered urges.

Adso's dream also invokes Kristeva by illustrating her conception of dream-work. Kristeva's theories are strongly influenced by both Marxist political philosophy and Freudian psychoanalysis, influences which surface in her comparison of the capitalist profit-centered conception of "work," and the work that is done in dreams. As Philip Lewis describes it in his famous review of *Revolutionary Semiotics*, in dream work, "production is represented, not as a process of exchange or usage, but as a premutational play which models production" (29). For Kristeva, literature functions in a similar way to this work, where logocentric writing is comparable to the profit-centered model, and highly semiotic writing enjoys the free-play of dream work. Adso's dream models this theory, first because it is quite literally a dream, and also because it shows the subconscious, non-logical side of the ordered events that happen in the novel. Thomas Frenz argues for this point, saying that Adso's dream shows the way that the semiotic *chora* interacts with the logical word (136). The dream reflects the logocentric process

of coming to truth, but does not operate on the same principles, nor does it arrive at the same truth that William would have arrived at using his logocentric techniques.

Adso's dream that he has as he nods off during the singing of the "Dies irae" occupies almost a whole chapter, and pulls together images of everything that has happened in the abbey, along with scenes from biblical and church history. Just as it pulls together images from the whole novel, it also sums up the key elements of intertextuality as it appears in *The Name of the Rose*. As with most real dreams, the images flow together in weird and illogical ways with random associations of ideas that almost make sense, like Jesus being Adam at the same time, and Even taking a nap in the middle of dinner on a leaf (480). In the course of the dream, every component of the murder mystery is mentioned. At one point in the dream a woman comes in carrying a goblet with the potion in it that later is discovered to be the means of multiple murders (479). Later the abbot says "'Age primum et septimum de quatuor,' and all chanted, 'in finibus Africae, amen'" (480), which is the riddle William and Adso have been trying to solve. In another scene the abbot gets worked up into a fit because the guests steal a precious book (483). Like the semiotic *chora*, the dream is illogical, highly associative, and image based over logic based. The whole chaos of the dream helps to solve the mystery by jogging William's memory about a hypothesis that he had already formulated. Frenzt argues that Adso's dream is purely semiotic, and that when he narrates it to William he reminds him of the more logical form of comedy (137). After being reminded of the comedy *Coena Cypriani* by Adso's dream, William is able to discover which book is causing so much upheaval in the abbey. The dream shows that the semiotic and the logical must work together to discover the answer to the riddle of the *finis africae*. Truth is not discovered when the powerful and the logical attempt to suppress the feminine and the subconscious, but when both impulses are allowed to work in harmony.

Because the imagery and structure of the book, the dialogue of the characters, and the cultural context of the novel all line up so closely with post-structural theories, the novel appears to be arguing for this same method of reading. The imagery fits, the cultural context fits, and everything makes sense, even though the “sense” is that meaning is indeterminate and the logical is always undercut by the illogical, except perhaps in the case of the dream where the logical is informed by the illogical. As Goh points out, plot, story, discourse, villain, deduction, everything dissolves into textuality (27). The textuality is enjoyable and entertaining, and implies that other texts can be enjoyed in the same way.

An Alternative “Open Work” Approach

The above interpretation may leave readers feeling disappointed. If they were looking for meaning in the novel, the only meaning there according to this interpretation is rather flat, or at least too ephemeral to grasp. But although this approach to reading the novel makes sense, it is not the only way to do so. In his book *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton illustrates worldviews as complete circles wherein everything encompassed by that circle is perfectly coherent. Chesterton’s argument against materialism, or Marxism, or any other worldview besides the Christian one is not that they are not coherent, but that they are just too small. They make sense of all the facts that they address, but they cannot address all the facts. He says that only the Christian worldview can make sense of the almost infinite variety of the human experience because its shape is not a circle, but a cross: “the circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is fixed forever in its size...But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape” (Chesterton). In a similar way, the post-structuralist magnifying glass is a neat circle to look at *The Name of the Rose* through, but

the glass is not large enough to bring the whole novel into focus. Instead it needs light through the window of the Christian worldview.

Although Derrida and Kristeva seem to have a corner on the modern intertextual market, and seem to provide the logical theoretical referent for Eco's fiction, theirs are hardly the only theories about how to interpret a complex pattern of voices and sources. Long before theorists were concerned with the play of voices in novels, interpreters of the biblical texts had to develop practices for interpreting the intricate web of allusion, foreshadowing, and interpretation that makes up the Bible. The reading practices with the assumption that the interplay of the texts creates meaning used to interpret biblical allusion offer an alternative reading method for *The Name of the Rose* (and any other highly allusive text) instead of the practices of Kristeva and Derrida while still acknowledging the texts' complexity and dialogic nature.

The Bible is easily as internally allusive as *The Name of the Rose*, but does not push readers towards ambivalent conclusions about the relationship of ideas and voices. Biblical scholars interpret the complex interplay of texts without subscribing to the ideological position implied by intertextuality. Some of the assumptions made about the interpretation of Scripture must clearly be discarded in approaching *The Name of the Rose*, namely, that the interplay of quotations, allusions, and voices comprises a perfect whole, and that the end result is authoritative for readers' lives. However, even setting aside the assumptions of a perfect text, the principles developed in the study of Scripture provide more stable ground for analyzing the dynamics of *The Name of the Rose*, which rescues the novel from a state of un-decidedness.

The model that Peter Leithart formulates for biblical exegesis in *Deep Exegesis* can be fruitfully applied to *The Name of the Rose*. Leithart writes about how the play of texts in John chapter nine brings a host of associations into the passage that create a full and coherent

meaning. He then further shows how the meaning of John 9 influences the interpretation of other texts, even ones like *Oedipus Rex* that were composed with no thought of John. In Leithart's exegesis of John nine he focuses on the theme of sight and blindness, and argues that the chapter shows the contrast between spiritual blindness and physical blindness. This same theme also appears in *The Name of the Rose* in the characters of Jorge and William. In John, Jesus heals a man that has been blind from birth. Over the course of the chapter, the man progresses from being both physically and spiritually blind to being fully able to see in both senses. His newly opened eyes contrast with the Pharisees, who think that they see, but really are blind. Leithart says that "[f]or John, sight does not unproblematically offer access to reality as it is" (192). Leithart uses the teaching of John to critique cultural ideas of seeing throughout history. He says that Enlightenment thinking made the sense of sight the chief means of knowledge, but then that postmodern theory, with its denial of empirical understanding, "has attempted to revive the wisdom of Oedipus, the wisdom of the blinded" (191). In contrast to the Enlightenment which focused on physical sight as a means of knowledge, and postmodernism's denial of that knowledge, John shows that Jesus is the only one who can provide sight, and that he provides both physical and spiritual sight.

Sight and blindness also plays a role in *The Name of the Rose*, where the chief antagonist is completely blind, and the chief protagonist is dependent on his spectacles. Jorge's blindness has an element of the wisdom of Oedipus in it. He is almost omniscient in regards to the goings on in the abbey. He navigates the space better than anyone both in the light and the dark, and he has deep knowledge of the secrets of the abbey and of the monks who live there. Jorge is spiritually blind though in regards to laughter. He is not able to see the funny side of God, which also blinds him to understanding of God's ability to speak through the lowly and the grotesque.

William's partial physical blindness mirrors his partial spiritual blindness. William holds to some Enlightenment ideals before their time, trusting in the power of science to enable him to come nearer to the truth. But even before the dawn of the Enlightenment, William discovers its limitations as postmodernism would do centuries later. William's spectacles enable him to read see what is written on the page found in Berengar's desk, but the glasses do not give him the understanding to provide an interpretation. Always his empirical sight brings him closer to the answer, but the answer eludes him. William relies too much on the power of his own sight, and is not able to rely on the faith that comes without sight. Both men are spiritually blind in proportion to their physical blindness because of their misunderstanding or lack of true faith.

This reading of the perspective on sight based on John 9 is just one example of how the John intertext can influence the reading of the novel. The specific example of blindness and vision is not as important as the framework of assumptions that John provides that is grounded in the word made flesh. This assumption is also necessary for the reading of history presented in the first chapter, and the reading of comedy in the following chapter. The incarnate Word that the Johannine intertext introduces unites the world of textuality and experience and thus gives validity to individual and interacting utterances. Applying a biblical frame instead of a post-structuralist frame provides the literary backbone necessary to interpret the novel, but also provides a moral background by which to evaluate actions and situations. Biblical interpretation understands the importance of the marginalized, of women, of the voiceless, but not in a way that keeps these people at the margin. Biblical interpretation also provides a range of "encyclopedic knowledge" that informs all of literature.

Allusions that can barely be grasped give the feeling that the world has meaning beyond human comprehension. For some, that "meaning" is ultimate chaos. For some, it is completely

unknowable. For others, allusions and quotations can add to the meaning of a work in consistent and discernable ways, so that the search for the author's purpose in alluding to a source will bear fruit. And for those who have been given the grace to see it, allusions that multiply meaning beyond human grasp point beyond themselves to the one who does understand, and who has given his people the power to enjoy the unending search.

Chapter Three: Comedy: The [Lost] Truth is Cause for Laughter

The historical setting of *The Name of the Rose* provides perspective, and the intertextual elements help to define the book's theoretical and philosophical stance, but the real heart of the novel is the theme of comedy. Comedy is discussed, condemned, applauded, defined, and redefined throughout, and presented by characters and also by the novel as a whole as a means of understanding both God and humanity. Though *The Name of the Rose* offers no definitive final analysis about whether meaning exists or is accessible, it does point to a way of understanding the world through laughter, an understanding which is confirmed and deepened by a scriptural understanding of comedy.

Comedy as Understood in *The Name of the Rose*

It takes William the greater part of the novel to discover that the object that has been causing so many tragic and mysterious deaths is Aristotle's lost book of Poetics about comedy. Nevertheless, by the time he does make this discovery and is able to question Jorge about the book's contents, it turns out that William, Venantius, and some of the other monks have already arrived at a similar theory of comedy through their conversations about marginalia and laughter. In the very first conversation about laughter, Venantius defends Adelmo's illustrations, saying that Aquinas himself condoned the use of lower things to speak of higher things, and argued for speaking of God via the way of negation—implying God's positive attributes through depicting the opposite (98). Later William carries on Venantius's argument, saying that laughter is proper to man, and that great saints have use laughter to confound their enemies (141). This definition of comedy, though it seems tangential at first, turns out to explain a large part of the subject matter that is presented elsewhere in the book. Often the elements that can be viewed as comic are the same images and characters that represented intertextuality or the *chora* as presented in

the previous thesis chapter. Re-analyzing these elements as comedy does not undermine their previous status as multi-vocal, but reinforces the same ideas of subversion and reversal. Both by overt references to laughter and also by associating the comic with the semiotic, *The Name of the Rose* implies that comedy may provide a way of understanding, or at the very least of enjoying, the human experience and the knowledge of the ages, even though the novel is not itself a comedy.

The theory of comedy that William and the monks articulate, and later discover to have already been written in Aristotle's lost book, is based on the classical idea of comedy partially developed in the real Aristotle's real book of poetics, and centers on subversions and reversals of norms. Towards the end of the novel, William is actually able to hold Aristotle's book and read a portion of it that summarizes the book's essential points:

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... We will show how the ridiculousness of actions is born from the likening of the best to the worst and vice versa, from arousing surprise through deceit, from the impossible, from violation of the laws of nature, from the irrelevant and the inconsequent, from the debasing of the characters, from the use of comical and vulgar pantomime, from disharmony, from the choice of the least worthy things. We will then show how the ridiculousness of speech is born from the misunderstandings of similar words for different things and different words for similar things, from garrulity and repetition, from play on words, from diminutives, from errors of pronunciation, and from barbarisms.

(522-23)

Aristotle's definition reconstructed here locates the soul of comedy in the reversal of expected norms, primarily by depicting low and vulgar characters. The theory is corroborated by conversations about comedy interspersed through the book, primarily between William and Jorge. The first conversation in response to Adelmo's grotesque marginal drawings establishes the idea that the surprising and comical can point people to greater truths (94-96). A later conversation establishes that laughter is proper to man, as Aristotle also says, because only man can reason and thus observe aberration from reason (112-13). The third conversation establishes that comedy can offer needed doubt about rationality, leading to humility (152-54). These conversations combine to present a fairly thorough working theory that shows both the power and the benefit of comedy.

Surprisingly, the definition of comedy here has nothing to do with plot structure, but only focuses on the characterization and humorous devices. No mention is made of comic happy endings as opposed to tragic closure. Eco's characters could have been familiar with their fellow Italian's *Divine Comedy* based on the date, and Eco himself as an Italian author writes in the shadow of the great poet, but any mention of Dante or of the kind of comedy that he created is conspicuously absent. Even if Eco simply chose to ignore the monks' contemporary and to limit the discussion of comedy to Aristotle, it seems as if some mention of plot would be necessary to contrast the technique of comedy to the highly plot-driven structure of tragedy, as Aristotle devotes significant space to that element in his *Poetics*. Leon Golden, in his article comparing Eco's reconstruction of Aristotle's comedy with his own, argues that Eco gets important elements of the theory wrong. Golden says that "Aristotle deals with comedy as part of his optimistic and heroic quest for a complete understanding of all human action; Eco creates in the name of the Rose a dark and bitter comedy in which savage dogmatism conspire to violate the

fragile nature of the human spirit and we do not know if there is Truth, or God, or Certainty anywhere” (249). Golden points out a number of differences between his and Eco’s reconstruction that lead him to this conclusion, but one of the most significant differences is Eco’s omission of an “unjustified good fortune” (245), a highly plot-shaping element that Golden includes in his own reconstruction of Aristotle’s comic *Poetics*. Golden argues that the reason Eco gets Aristotle wrong is because Eco (and William) are plagued by religious agnosticism (248). Golden’s insight appears to be sound here, and regardless of Eco’s motivations, he does omit to include in his definition of comedy what Northrop Frye calls a “U shaped plot structure” (169). This theoretical gap in the definition of comedy resurfaces later in the way the story of *The Name of the Rose* plays out the comic vision that it identifies.

Because the novel does not delve into the theory of plot and macro perspective, the elements that the novel does include in a theory of comedy are for the most part any features that are humorous or subversive. Comedy and humor are not strongly delineated. The theory includes verbal irony, vulgar humor, grotesque, and essentially any ruse that might make someone laugh or does not conform to the expected norm. Because of this broad definition, anything that provokes laughter is subsumed into this category of comedy. Even though the theory of comedy is not as far reaching as it could be, it is consistently shaped by the idea of reversal. Glenn Hartz, in the article, “Humor: The Beauty and the Beast,” offers a helpful and very similar basic explanation of humor, saying that a situation is funny if a person has some contextual background upon which to form expectations, becomes aware of some incongruity with those expectations, and then feels pleasure (299-305). This definition of humor, though quite dry and limited, captures most of the essentials of Aristotle’s theory of comedy as reconstructed by Eco and reinforces the significance of reversal.

Once a theory of comedy is articulated that highlights the grotesque, the margin, the reversal of expectations and norms, it becomes clear that these characteristics permeate the novel. Verlyn Flieger, discussing the predominance of the theme of reversal in the novel, says that “[l]aughter, in fact, is the main motif of the book, and gradually emerges as the most important form of reversal” (180). Even aside from the conversations about comedy, the theme of reversal is everywhere in *The Name of the Rose*. On the macro-level, the plot of *The Name of the Rose* reverses many expectations of a traditional detective fiction novel. Aram Veesser says that *The Name of the Rose* “challenges the firmly established plot points of the traditional detective genre, instead bringing back a medieval countertradition: the laughing satire that informs works by Lucian, Rabelais, and others” (101). Eco uses enough tropes from detective fiction, not least of which is borrowing the genre’s god for a main character, to create expectations just in time to subvert them. William does not follow an ordered pattern of clues to their logical end, but settles on an Apocalyptic pattern that ends up influencing the criminal rather than leading William to discover and original plot. The series of deaths are related, but not in a neat design as one would expect of a detective novel. The final clue that leads William to a fuller understanding of the truth is a dream—breaking one of the chief laws of detection which is that the supernatural is off limits. The conclusion of the book is the final reversal of detective fiction, because the criminal escapes justice (at least at the hands of the law), and the detective and narrator both fail to discern any meaning in the events that they have witnessed.

Aside from the reversal of expectation on the macro level, many of the images and characters show reversal and subversion. The most overt example is Adelmo’s grotesque marginalia. Adso describes the illustrations as “a world reversed with respect to the one to which our senses have accustomed us. As if at the border of a discourse that is by definition the

discourse of truth...a discourse of falsehood on a topsy-turvy universe, in which dogs flee before the hare, and deer hunt the lion” (92). He further describes all manner of odd combinations of body parts and actions, all imaginatively reversing expectations. As Nishevita Murthy points out, Adelmo’s illustrations show how liminal spaces can challenge the center (115). Not only do the figures in themselves defy reality, but their placement in a holy book – here a Psalter – can be seen as undermining the serious message originally intended.

The marginal illustrations are a tangible example of the margin humorously subverting the center that stands as an example of how the marginalized members of the abbey like Salvatore and the peasant woman can fulfil a similar function. Salvatore, the not-exactly-polyglot assistant to the cellarer is marginalized for his lack of intelligence in an academic environment, and even more for his association with heretical groups. Salvatore is almost as starkly grotesque as Adelmo’s images. He is short, extremely ugly, and can barely speak a coherent language. When Adso first meets Salvatore, he describes his voice as coming from the earth. He says that his face looks like a gargoyle, and then proceeds to describe a horrific beast-like figure (57-58). Salvatore’s first words are “Penitenziagite! Watch out for the draco who cometh in futurum to gnaw your anima! Death is super nos! Pray the Santo Pater come to leberar nos a malo and all our sin! Ja ja, you like this negromanzia de Domini Nostri Jesu Christi! Et anco jois m’es dols e plazer m’es dolors...” and more of the same (58). With his convoluted mixture of tongues he is like a medieval minion, though less cuddly. Veesper says that Salvatore is Bakhtin’s multi-voicedness (112), which brings in the idea of carnival and also indicates a connection between the idea of the comic and the ideas of intertextuality in the novel.

The prominent role of the woman that Adso loves also adds to the comic elements of *The Name of the Rose*. She is not at all comic in the sense that she is funny. If anything, her role in

the story is almost completely tragic. But her poverty and her femininity in a world of men puts her into the same category of reversals of expectations that defines the comic. The character's actual stage time is fairly short, but her influence over Adso continues as he wanders about the abbey dreaming, a caricature of the star-struck lover. Her influence also precipitates Adso's dream, which is both grotesque and humorous at the same time. Again, as with the marginalia and with Salvatore, the category of comedy which permeates the novel here overlaps with that of intertextuality, presenting similar ideas of subversion and reversal from two different angles.

The Suppression of the Comic

Despite the predominance of the comic motif, and although the sympathetic characters in the novel fight for the value of comedy, as often as they appear, laughter and comedy are always suppressed by the people in power, particularly by Jorge and Bernard Gui. The length that the authorities must go to in order to squelch the surging impulses of laughter in a way reveals how powerful it is. At the same time, even though the authorities will never completely wipe out the comic, they do completely destroy every comic impulse introduced in the novel. Murthy notes, agreeing with multiple other readings of the book, that "[t]he discussions on laughter emerging from the three debates indicate that comedy becomes a counter-discourse that questions the Church's discourse of power" (117). But even though comedy is presented as this bountiful discourse that could break open the oppressive confines of authoritarianism, this power is never fully manifested in the novel. It is there in seed form—it begins to bubble up in the laughter of the monks, in Adso's confused passion of love, in William's wry sarcasm—but still, monks continue to die, the woman and Salvatore are condemned to death, and the library burns, taking with it Aristotle and all of Adelmo's drawings.

Jorge hates and fears laughter more all else, and does the most to suppress it, but his hatred of Aristotle's book gives it an added air of mystery and desirability. Ironically the path that he takes to keep people from reading the book—poisoning the page—makes the book literally deadly, where it had only been metaphorically dangerous before. His actions accomplish the direct opposite of the vindication of truth that he at least claims to want. Sabry Hafez says that this inversion of upholding and suppressing truth began when the monk's love of knowledge became lust for authority (47). The excessive and misdirected desire for sure knowledge carried with it from the beginning the spark that would destroy all knowledge. Because laughter is a real force that plays an integral part in understanding the world, eliminating laughter from a system of knowledge, even in the name of understanding, will always weaken that system to the point where it crumbles or goes up in flames. Because he was closing off an important aspect of human understanding, Jorge was poisoning himself when he laced Aristotle's pages long before he ripped the book apart and devoured it.

Aside from the rather low trick of poisoning his opponents, another alley that Jorge pursues to suppress laughter is arguing that Jesus never laughed. In the time and place where the action of *The Name of the Rose* occurs, philosophical and political questions were often discussed in theological terms. Helen Rittlemeyer says that "stretching roughly from the Crucifixion to the Middle Ages, the language of theology so dominated learned debate that all complaints were expressed in religious terms, even when the problem at issue was economic or political (33). For example, the debate about Papal power that comprises the political backdrop of the novel is discussed in terms of whether or not Christ owned property. As was too often the case with that historical debate, Jorge's biblical exegesis is shaped by his own view about what he would like the text to say in order to support his argument. Again, Jorge's attention to this

subject suppresses laughter in one sense, but also makes it a topic of thought and conversation so that he inadvertently brings to light the very truths he is trying to suppress.

The most tragic example of the suppression of the comic in *The Name of the Rose* is the false trial and condemnation of Salvatore and the peasant woman. Jorge has little to do with their trial, which shows that the same desire to eliminate laughter and the marginal people that it represents is a widespread canker of fear in places of authority. Bernard Gui, the inquisitor who condemns the peasant woman as a witch and Salvatore and the cellarer Remigio as heretics, is apparently motivated by the same complex of drives as Jorge. Both stand for truth in their official capacities as inquisitor and confessor/mentor. But both really stand for themselves, and for their desire to force their own framework of understanding on all those around them. The woman and Salvatore represent a challenge to this framework and the structured, rational, male dominated order of the abbey, especially if they are shown to be innocent and their accusers to be mistaken. Catania says of Gui that he comes to the trial with a pre-conceived idea of what the outcome will be, and then uses the name of truth to speed the process along in the most efficient and orderly way towards his desired end (160). The evil of imposing an individual's framework or that of a powerful group in such a way is apparent. Exposing its evil shows some hope for change, for identifying a wrong is one step towards righting it. Still, this wrong is not righted within the pages of *The Name of the Rose*.

The Novel's Tragic Vision

The Name of the Rose certainly shows the power of laughter and of comic figures, even when they are banished and condemned by the fear and ignorance of those in power. However, *The Name of The Rose* shows with equal certainty that laughter and comic figures are *always* suppressed by the fear and ignorance of those in power. Despite bursting on the surface with

images and ideas of comedy, the novel still embraces a tragic vision. This tragic vision is manifested in the plot, and also in implications about language. In the first place, even though the plot's overturning of detective fiction expectations conforms to the comic mode of reversal, as a result of that reversal the structure of the novel's plot ends up conforming more to the pattern of a classic tragedy than to that of a comedy. The plot lacks some of the tightness of a traditional tragedy because of its many tangents and rabbit-trails, but many of the other elements are there. The unities of time and place that Aristotle recommended for tragedy are employed in a modified form to fit a novel rather than a stage play. The plot is brought to a destructive conclusion through hamartia, though admittedly it is the hubris of the antagonist and not a tragic hero. Apart from technical classical definitions of tragic plot, the story is simply sad. It is sad to see good characters lose life and hope, and it is disheartening to watch a library filled with centuries of art and knowledge burn to the ground.

Another way in which *The Name of the Rose* embraces more of a tragic vision than a comic one is in its view of signification in language. Comedy requires some level of concrete signification, and a theory of language and ideas that denies the concrete undermines the possibility of comedy just as much as a totalitarian approach to life like Jorge's and Gui's that allows for no play at all. Classical tragedy does not necessarily imply or necessitate an open view of signification, so the attitude of openness is not tragic in that sense. Rather, the openness of language is tragic in the sense that it is not sufficient to sustain comedy. Laurel Braswell clarifies the view of signification in the novel by comparing William and Jorge's views, saying that William holds to a symbolic view of language where words and ideas can have many fluid meanings, whereas Jorge believes in an "indexical" one for one interpretation (7). It is easy to see how Jorge's view of language cannot sustain comedy. Where a word or a sentence or even an

image has only one possible interpretation there is no room for plays on words, double entendre, or any other “ridiculousness of speech,” as Eco has Aristotle put it (520). However, the opposite also is true, that too much play in language does not provide the stability of expectation needed to create humor and incite laughter. The synchronic conventions of a certain locale might supply enough common ground for humor, but deep laughter that abides through time is impossible without a standard that abides through time. William’s symbolic view of language does not go so far as to eliminate the possibility of sarcasm and witticisms, but the farther he advances towards doubt about any certain meaning over the course of the novel, the farther he drifts from a deep sense of joyful laughter.

In the end, *The Name of the Rose* is tragic because nothing is definite but death and power hungry authorities at least. The best that the postmodern outlook embodied in the novel can offer is surface level humor and an idea of play in the text. Many readers of the novel acknowledge the pleasure of the play of meaning in a very Deridean sense. Helen Bennett says that this pleasure is the only meaning of the novel (126). Capozzi says that the adventure of the intertextuality is the book’s most important lesson (421). Veeseer says that “*The Name of the Rose* exchanges the joys of closure and finally fixed guilt for the pleasures of open form and endless play” (114). The openness and ambiguity of unlimited semiosis and endless intertextuality may seem free and joyful, especially with so many references to comedy and such stark examples of the opposite error, but it is a freedom that can never rest, and an ironic sort of joy that knows nothing of belly laughs.

Comedy in the Christian Understanding

In contrast to the worldview presented in this analysis of *The Name of the Rose*, Christianity supplies an essentially comic worldview and validates a comic understanding of

minor story arcs and situations. Christianity is comic in its view of history according to a classical conception of comedy because the human race begins well in the Garden of Eden, declines miserably with the fall of man, and with the unexpected good fortune of Jesus' work ends exponentially better than it began in eternal and incorruptible glory. This overarching comic story arc validates, though does not necessitate, true comedy in smaller story arcs. If the framework of history were ultimately tragic, then a comedy in its midst would be the deepest of tragic ironies. Every happy ending would be a false offer of hope, only making the reality of sorrow worse. Though a tragic worldview invalidates comedy, a comic worldview does not invalidate tragedy. An understanding of what could be, or even should be, makes the sorrow of any aberration from that good much more poignant. The Christian comic view of history provides the norm necessary for both comedy and tragedy to be built on.

This comic vision is played out throughout Scripture in ways comparable to the examples in *The Name of the Rose*. The stories in the Bible are also filled with reversals, and show the weak, the overlooked, and the marginalized members of society being blessed and glorified. The younger brother inherits over the older brother. The despised wife becomes the mother of the chosen son. The foreign harlot is the beginning of the royal lineage. The boy defeats the giant. The last is first. The blind see better than the powerful. The poor woman is the mother of God. Death means life. Reversal constitutes much of the fabric out of which the Bible is woven, as is the case with *The Name of the Rose*. What the reversals in the Bible have that is not apparent in the novel is a reason why. In the world of *The Name of the Rose*, reversals seem to happen because that is the way it is. Clearly totalizing power structures are destructive, so there must be something about the weak that is necessary to stabilize the strong. In the Bible, on the other hand, the triumph of the weak serves to bring glory to God.

Contrary to Jorge's argument that Jesus never laughed, the Bible is brimming with both laughter and with the deep joy that makes laughter genuine. In a way the laughter in all of the Bible is the laughter of Jesus because it is a recording of his word. Jesus may not laugh out loud in the stories given, but he does make a number of jokes that probably had his followers rolling. In "Ironies of Laughter," Doug Jones says that "[m]uch of Christ's ministry focused on poking fun at those who thought the world ran by power; He kept inverting things, using foolish things, just as the Godhead did with Abraham" (5). As in *The Name of the Rose*, humor is used to topple power discourses, but instead of simply deconstructing, the humor serves to replace those strictures to build up a new structure that operates by different rules—the kingdom of God. Philosophical conversations about laughter like the ones that happen at key points in *The Name of the Rose* do not happen in the Bible, but the ring of laughter itself does appear in key places. Laughter was the first response to God's plan of salvation that he told to Abraham: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gen 17:17). The response of God's people to his grace is laughter: "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy" (Psalm 26:1-2). Also, despite Jorge's protestations that he frowned upon it, Jesus promises laughter to his followers in the middle of the most well know list of reversals in the Bible: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:20). Jorge was doubly wrong in this case, first in his position on laughter, and then in falsely attributing his position to Jesus, the very foundation for any true laughter.

Under the surface of the Bible's presentation of a comic worldview is the assumption that language can communicate truth without infinite slippage. The Bible's use of quotation and

allusion shows a belief in the stability and discernibility of meaning, as does Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:18 that his work would accomplish every iota of the law, implying that meaning lies in the very words and letters of Scripture. Beyond just assuming stable meaning, the teaching of Scripture provides an answer for the best arguments that postmodern thinkers can make against meaning in the arguments of Jacques Derrida. Derrida presents what is perhaps the quintessential postmodern argument in his deconstruction of Western metaphysics, specifically the teachings of Plato. Leithart points out that according to Derrida's reading of Plato any move away from the origin is a negative move towards what is lesser, or worse: "Any supplement is necessarily a violent supplement, attempting to overthrow and violate the origin" (73-74). Derrida questions Plato's prioritization of the origin over the supplement, of speech over writing, and argues that all such binaries are an artificial ordering of what is really a very unstable linguistic situation. Leithart responds to him by arguing that Derrida critiques Plato's description of supplementarity while accepting his most basic metaphysical premise: "Derrida turns out to be nothing but a Platonist with a bad conscience, a Platonist who wishes there could be a world of forms, talks about reality as if there were a world of forms, but knows that the forms are always already tarnished by their shadows" (84). The problem with Plato and Derrida that shapes their view of the way language works lies in the fact that they believe in an ideal origin. Derrida may deny the origin, but because it is the only reality that he recognizes he must also deny any possibility of stable meaning.

In contrast to this despair at the loss of the ideal, Leithart argues that the supplementarity at work within the Trinity shows that removal from the origin does not have to be violent or some form of deterioration. In the Trinity, the Son is begotten of the Father, and thus is a form of supplement. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and thus is a form of supplement.

Yet all the persons of the Trinity are “equal in power and glory” in the phrasing of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Leithart summarizes his argument, saying, “a ‘supplement’ contaminates only if Derrida is still using the pure Platonic origin as a standard of comparison” (84). Apart from the Trinity, this same view of positive supplementarity is seen throughout the Bible, as early as the creation of woman from out of man: “Adam, the ‘original man,’ was incomplete without his supplement, but the supplement was not a degenerate form of the origin; rather ‘the woman is the glory of the man’ (1 Corinthians 11:7)” (Leithart 89-90). This positive view of supplementarity enables a view of language where even though the word goes out from the speaker, it still has meaning. Even though that spoken word may be written on a page and further removed from its origin, it still has meaning. The argument also makes even more sense of the goodness of the reversals throughout Scripture. The younger brother, the outcast, the poor, the blind, do not have to overturn power structures in a violent way, but in a way that brings full glory and goodness to all.

Reading *The Name of the Rose* with a Christian Comic Understanding

If *The Name of the Rose* is read with the biblical understanding of language and comedy in mind, the contrast highlights the novel’s essentially tragic vision, but at the same time validates its central theme. *The Name of the Rose* essentially poses a problem – human understanding, and posits a solution – comedy. However, despite the plausibility of this solution, the novel almost sheepishly discards comedy as a way of understanding and interacting with the complexities of the tangible world and with the vicissitudes of intertextuality. It is perhaps held back by too many assumptions about the unstable nature of language and of understanding. Instead, the novel undermines its own hopeful message and tragically self-deconstructs. The novel successfully critiques failed attempts at pure, humorless rationality, but neither William

nor Adso are able to rest in a rationality modified by humor, and the rest of the novel gives the indication that they are not mistaken in this unsettled view.

A biblical reading can affirm the novel's critique without buying into its despair. The undoing of Jorge represents the undoing of his falsely structured system of humorless rationality. Jorge claims to believe in the authority of the Church, in the teaching of the Bible, and in reason, but really what Jorge believes in is what he himself can understand and control—reason without humanity, without unexpected reversals, without humor. His very first words when he first appears on the novel's stage are “*Verba vana aut risui apta non loqui*” (94), vain words or laughter are not suitable to be spoken. This opening statement, spoken in Latin, the language of ecclesiastical authority, sets the stage for Jorge's character through the book. He remakes God into his own image as someone who never laughs and who expects everyone to cower in his presence.

In the eyes of people like Jorge, comedy is dangerous because it subverts both God and reason (or so they say). But in fact, comedy actually serves to restore rational order and a proper relationship between man and God. So far from destroying reason, comedy and humor are completely dependent upon it, because if there were no rational expected outcome there could be no reversal of expectations. If there were no standard scenario, there could be no unexpected departure from it. Comedy reveals the rule, the optimal scenario, by presenting an inversion thereof. Through this inversion, comedy performs the function of exposing error. Probably this corrective function is not first in mind for comedians and jokesters who simply are looking for a good laugh from the crowd, or for those who enjoy their jokes. Still, even when correction is not the purpose of comedy, since a standard is a precondition for humor, humor reveals that standard whether it intends to or not. Reason that cannot withstand a barrage of laughter is no reason at

all. Those who condemn all laughter deny themselves a valuable form of correction. Whether they mean well or ill to begin with—an ambiguous motive in the case of Jorge—they end up being puffed up with false pride without the balance that laughter offers.

Though it has the power of age and authority behind it, Jorge's stifling system is blown over by the fresh breeze of laughter. It is torn apart by William's and Venantius's arguments, by Aristotle's book, and ultimately by Jorge himself, who cannot wholly separate himself from his human impulse to laugh. The most extended and definitive debate about laughter is the final confrontation between William and Jorge in the *Finis Africae*. Jorge gives his best argument for the suppression of laughter, and William replies as a man only could in the face of such folly: "They lied to you. The Devil is not the Prince of Matter; the Devil is the arrogance of the spirit, faith without smile, truth that is never seized by doubt. The Devil is grim because he knows where he is going, and, in moving, he always returns whence he came. You are the Devil, and like the Devil you live in darkness (533). All the arguments of logic, authority, and humanity are on William's side, but Jorge remains unconvinced because his own understanding is the highest authority that he recognizes. Jorge was his own god, and the way he is destroyed by the revenge of suppressed comedy reveals this sorry fact.

One would think that the death of the villain would mean the victory of the protagonist and the ideals that they stand for. In *The Name of the Rose*, though, the villain brings with him into his fiery grave everything that his survivors value. Both William and Adso accept the despair that Jorge tries to force on them. William, surveying the wreckage of the burning aedificium, says of the doubly lost book of Aristotle that "it perhaps really did teach how to distort the face of every truth, so that we would not become slaves of our ghosts. 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 insane passion for the truth” (549). Even though William here does not at all share Jorge’s mission to hold together the structure of apparent rationality, he comes to accept Jorge’s premise that any rational structure only comes through the power of authority. In the moment Adso wants to hold out hope, and encourages William that he did in fact discover the secret of the abbey, but by the end of his life Adso too has surrendered to hopelessness with his admission, “I leave this manuscript, I do not know for whom; I no longer now what it is about” (560). Thus the final victory in *The Name of the Rose* goes to Jorge not because he vindicates the truth of his position, but because he wins his opponents over to his tragic worldview. A reading of the novel like with a grounded perspective on true comedy shows that *The Name of the Rose*’s answer to the error of hyper-rationalism is in many ways like Derrida’s answer to Plato’s metaphysics. Both identify a real problem, but are unable to rest in the solution that they propose because they adopt the tragic premises of their opponents’ thinking.

In addition to clarifying the tragic worldview of the novel, the biblical perspective also enables a clearer reading of *The Name of the Rose* is in differentiating between different kinds of laughter. Biblically speaking, not all laughter is good. This view is implied in the novel, but the difference between good and bad laughter is not thoroughly explained. In the end, Jorge too laughs, but it clearly is not the laughter of joy but the laughter of a madman. He is not convinced of the truth about laughter, but is overcome by a harsh, insane inversion of the comedy he never came to accept. Towards the end of the final debate with William about laughter in the *Finis Africae*, Jorge begins to rip out pages of Aristotle’s book and stuff the poisoned paper into his mouth. Adso records the bizarre spectacle, saying, “He laughed, he, Jorge. For the first time I heard him laugh....He laughed with his throat, though his lips did not assume the shape of

gaiety, and he seemed almost to be weeping” (536-37). When William tries to stop him, Jorge continues to devour the book and snuffs out the one lamp in the room: “The old man laughed again, louder this time...and for the last time we heard the laughter of Jorge, who said, ‘Find me now! Now I am the one who sees best!’” (537). Jorge suppresses laughter in the name of rational order to such an extent that he loses any rationality he may have had, and devolves into maniacal laughter with no joy in it at all. Remigio the cellarer also laughs tragically. After Bernard Gui condemns him for heresy, William and Adso see Remigio being led away by the guards. Adso describes the scene, saying, “He gave the onlookers a sly glance, laughing. But by now it was the laughter of a madman” (435). His laughter undermines reason, but not in a constructive way that leads back to reason. Jones points out that different laughing responses are natural in a fallen world. Quoting Proverbs 8:36, “Those who hate me love death,” Jones says that some peoples’ laughter is driven by a misplaced love: “within a Christian universe there can be no uniform explanation of what laughter points to...There are those who love the Trinitarian gift of life and those who hate it; laughter can signify different things for each—the laughter signaling joy vs. the laughter signaling resentment” (6). *The Name of the Rose* delineates the laughter of madness from the laughter caused by humorous stories or drawings, but the difference is more one of degree than of kind. All instances of laughter are an inversion of reason. The biblical perspective shows the difference between the laughter of joy and the laughter of bitterness, which lies in the person’s orientation towards the truth, and ultimately towards God.

A Christian understanding of comedy also completes the picture that *The Name of the Rose* begins to draw in regards to the weak and the marginal. *The Name of the Rose* does not really offer a solution to the problem posed by the marginal status of the woman and of Salvatore, only showing that such figures cannot exist happily in a totalizing system; biblical

teaching, on the other hand, shows the importance of the weak and the marginalized by inverting expected power structures and establishing the oppressed in a place of blessing. According to the worldview embodied in the novel, the marginalized cannot be restored without destroying its identity and creating a new margin. William illustrates this fact when he explains to Adso the ministry of St. Francis. He says, “Francis wanted to call the outcast, ready to revolt, to be part of the people of God...Francis didn’t succeed... To recover the outcasts he had to act within the church, to act within the church he had to obtain the recognition of his rule, from which an order would emerge, and this order, as it emerged, would recompose the image of a circle, at whose margin the outcasts remain” (Eco 229). William’s explanation assumes the same kind of tragic vision that makes it impossible for Derrida to imagine a non-violent supplementarity. In contrast, work of Christ means that the comic margin can enrich the logo-centric establishment in a way that brings joy and laughter. A good model of what a society ought to look like is necessary to critique aberrations from that model, just like a norm is necessary for something that breaks that norm to be funny. The Christian view of comedy offers a solution to the problem of marginalization that underscores the tragedy of the fate of Salvatore and the woman by showing what their position could be.

The purpose of comedy is not morality, but laughter. Jones says that “[t]o force all humor into the closet of genuine moralistic superiority misses the spirit of most comedy” (5). Morality is a presupposition of comedy, and at times comedy can restore a morality that has been hidden or lost. To read about the comedy in *The Name of the Rose* with the sole purpose of uncovering meaning without enjoying the process would be to miss the point, which is perhaps part of William’s error. But to read *The Name of the Rose* with no moral or epistemological standard is

also missing the point, because then the comedy would be no laughing matter at all, but rather madness.

Conclusion

Even though *The Name of the Rose* does not explicitly argue for a Christian understanding of the world and of literature, the novel's presentation of history, intertextuality, and comedy can help to inform a Christian literary criticism. The novel shows that in some ways all of history is a construct of words. Christianity teaches that history is a construct of the Word. The novel illustrates and comments on the complexity of relationships between texts, a phenomenon which Scripture also illustrates and speaks of in a way that affirms the proliferation of meaning. The novel hints that comedy may be the answer, or at least part of the answer, to hermeneutical confusion. Scripture affirms this answer in several ways, partly in that it celebrates joy and goodness, partly because a right relationship to God and men provides the necessary conditions for comedy, and ultimately because the Christian story is itself a comedy in the classical sense. A Christian interpretation of *The Name of the Rose* brings additional insight and needed closure to many of the theoretical questions that the novel raises, so a biblical approach enables a more complete reading of the novel.

In turn, *The Name of the Rose* offers the Christian reader more than just an entertaining and delightful read. It encourages the development of biblical literary criticism because it foregrounds interpretive and social problems that the Christian worldview is poised to address and provides a specific context in which to examine the ways that Scripture addresses these theoretical questions that carry so much weight in the critical field today. By connecting the comic, the semiotic, and the marginalized, the novel pushes readers to associate a comic

understanding of the world with questions of the suppressed and marginalized in other areas, both literary and in life.

Even aside from helping to clarify a specific literary theory, the novel also encourages justice in regards to the marginalized because of the bleak picture it paints of their suppression. At the heart of the gospel is story of people who were cast out being brought back into the fold. That it is all too easy for those on the inside to forget their marginalized origin is only to clear from the accuracy of the historical context of *The Name of the Rose*. The corruptions and abuses going on in the abbey in the novel are typical of what happens when men who call themselves God's begin to confuse Gods' infinite understanding with their own. The lesson of Jorge, of Bernard Gui, even of William, is a call to humility.

The view of knowledge presented in Ecclesiastes encapsulates the necessary response to the search for knowledge in *The Name of the Rose*. In Ecclesiastes, the preacher seeks out many of the same means of knowledge that are presented in the novel: scholarship, women, folly, power, but none of them satisfy. *The Name of the Rose* stops here, with none of these means of knowing fully able to satisfy the desire for understanding. Ecclesiastes does not stop here though. It recognizes human inability to comprehend this vapor of existence, but rests in the knowledge that God does know, and that obedience to him is enough. The book ends with a bleak picture of the limits of human knowledge, "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh," but then concludes, "all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecc. 12-14). *The Name of the Rose* exhibits the vanity of endless making of books in the confusion of the library and intertextual relationships,

but through its treatment of comedy, it points readers in a direction of being able to rest with limited human knowledge, but faith in a God who knows and keeps the order of the world.

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