



MAPS, METHOD AND MEANING:  
THE PROBLEMATICS OF INTERPRETATION  
IN *THE NAME OF THE ROSE* AND  
*FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM*.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	
<b>Declarations</b>	
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	
<b>A Note on Quotations</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	i
<b>Part One: “The Text and the Detective”</b>	
Chapter 1 — “By way of introduction (1) ...”	1
Chapter 2 — “William of Baskerville: Semiotic Detective”	13
Chapter 3 — “‘Medieval’ Counterpoint: Absolute Interpretation”	31
Chapter 4 — “Burning the Accused: Method and Prejudice”	44
Chapter 5 — “By way of summation (1) ...”	52
<b>Part Two: “The Disease of Drift”</b>	
Chapter 6 — “By way of introduction (2) ...”	57
Chapter 7 — “Hermetic Drift: A Portrait of Overinterpretation”	61
Chapter 8 — “Case History: Jacopo Belbo, Editor”	78
Chapter 9 — “Back to the Text: Lia to the Rescue”	96
Chapter 10 — “By way of summation (2) ...”	105
<b>Conclusion</b>	109
<b>Bibliography</b>	115



## Abstract

This thesis offers a reading of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* which focuses on the interpretive themes presented by the novels. It sets out to argue that not only do the novels raise questions about the validity of our interpretive strategies (relating to the world, as epistemology, to texts, as hermeneutics, and to signs, as semiotics), but that they can be read as developing a certain critical position regarding the possibility of valid interpretation.

In *The Name of the Rose* William's method of semiotic ratiocination is challenged by the fact that, as a detective, he fails, whereas Bernard Gui, who seems the character most removed from William because of his blatant prejudice, succeeds. I suggest that this failure undermines William's positivism by underlining the unavoidability of prejudice. However, rather than providing the definitive post-modern solution to the question of interpretive validity (by declaring that there can be none), I argue that *The Name of the Rose* simply calls into question a belief in absolutism without committing itself to freeplay.

*Foucault's Pendulum* takes up the question posed at the end of *The Name of the Rose*: if there is no absolute interpretive validity, can there be any criteria for interpretation at all? The novel traces the seduction of its three central characters by the hermetic philosophy of similarities and correspondences. Arguing that Belbo's adoption of hermetic interpretation stems not from a rational commitment to freeplay but from a personal crisis of belief, which drives him to "use" hermeticism as a form of escape, I suggest that *Foucault's Pendulum* can be read as opposing radical theories of freeplay.

Both *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* can thus be read as sketching an interpretive middle ground between the extremes of positivist hermeneutics and radically relativist hermeneutics.



## **Declarations**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Mark John Badger  
31 January 1995

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### A Note On Quotations

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in Part One are from *The Name of the Rose*, whilst all those in Part Two are from *Foucault's Pendulum*. Quotations are referenced in brackets following the text, with the name of the author (unless already specified), and, in the first instance and where confusion between two publications by the same author is possible, the year of publication.

## Introduction

I prepare to leave on this parchment my testimony as to the wondrous and terrible events that I happened to observe in my youth, now repeating verbatim all I saw and heard, without venturing to seek a design, as if to leave to those who will come after (if the Antichrist does not come first) signs of signs, so that the prayer of deciphering may be exercised on them. (*The Name of the Rose*, 11)

### 0.1.

It is customary to commence a study of Umberto Eco's novels by declaring one's helplessness in the face of such vast, erudite and ironic texts. Such gestures are hardly surprising given both Eco's reputation and his achievements in *The Name of the Rose* (1983) and *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989). When a scholar who has devoted his career to the study of aesthetics and poetics turns his hand to fiction, critics are warranted a sense of apprehension. When that scholar produces eminently readable novels densely packed with philosophical reflections about the nature of texts and their unravelling, such apprehensions are realised. The difficulty in Eco's novels lies not so much in the vast amount of information presented (although that is truly formidable) nor even in the interweaving of philosophical and narrative strands throughout the novels. Rather, what seems most disturbing in *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* is the pervasive sense of irony, an irony that causes critics to question whether or not the novels' interpretive reflexivity might not serve to undermine their own position as privileged readers.

*The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* are, I wish to argue, intensely textual novels, both structurally, in their use of frame narratives, intense quotation and intertextual reference, and thematically. *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* are novels about the difficulties involved in interpretation. That both novels incorporate interpretive references and themes is an observation of little ingenuity, and most critics have taken issue with the semiotic and hermeneutic implications they present. It is tempting to deal with these interpretive elements within the novels by simply appealing to Eco's "other" body of work, his academic writings, especially those of his works that develop his semiotic theory. There are certainly rich pickings to be had

in this regard, for both *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* contain many "echoes" of ideas expounded in more academic terms in Eco's theoretical writings, from Brother William's exposition and practice of the process of "abduction" to Belbo's fascination with the unlimited chain of associations that constitutes the universe of significance.

The temptation (although it is also something more responsible than temptation) to look to Eco's other writings when explicating his fiction is one to which I have succumbed. However, in drawing on Eco's semiotics many critics have concentrated on particular technical aspects, especially the concept of "unlimited semiosis," in order to suggest how the novels serve to "narrativise" ideas that already exist as "theory." Rocco Capozzi has argued that

this approach of tracing *The Rose* to Eco's own works, or to any other author, would reduce Eco's application of unlimited intertextuality to a mere question of identifying sources, or quotations ... A search for sources would also overlook Eco's intentions of demonstrating how in the act of writing an author undertakes what Maria Corti appropriately calls a 'literary journey' ... through the encyclopedia of literature. (1989, 413,414)

In this thesis I wish both to recognise the ramifications of many aspects of *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* in terms of Eco's theory, and also to suggest that they present an argument about interpretation that goes beyond Eco's theoretical writings, although both theory and fiction move in the same direction.

From his early work on the poetics of modernist art to his most recent work on the "limits of interpretation," Eco has been involved in the debate over the nature and role of interpretation. Having explored the concept of the "open" work as a way of explaining the experience of modernist art, Eco sought to map out the relationship between reader and text in semiotic terms, a project which produced such works as *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), *The Role of the Reader* (1979), and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984). From this work in particular, Eco came to be associated with a "reader-response" approach to interpretation, an approach which centred around the concept, borrowed from Peirce, of "unlimited semiosis." Eco stressed the potentially endless nature of signification, each sign requiring interpretation in terms of another sign,

and the necessity for the reader to bring to the text the interpretive effort required to “actualise” the potential significations contained therein.

In his most recent work, as represented in *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990) and *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992), Eco has engaged more specifically in the debate over interpretive validity. Eco’s work has, ever since *Opera aperta* (1962)<sup>1</sup>, had implications for the basic hermeneutic question of “how are we to understand correctly.” As David Robey says of Eco’s argument in *Opera aperta*, where he introduced his conception of the “open” work: “the interpretation of the modern open work is far from entirely free; a formative intention is manifest in every work, and this intention must be a determining factor in the interpretive process” (Eco 1989, xii). However, the stress on unlimited semiosis and the role of the reader seemed to imply the opposite of such interpretive restrictions: unfettered by univocal signification, the reader could bring any experience to a text, making the concept of “valid” interpretation redundant.

In *The Limits of Interpretation* Eco sought to counter such relativist implications in his semiotics, reinforcing his often overshadowed commitment to Peirce’s demand that interpretation be “grounded.”

To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object and that it ‘riverruns’ for the mere sake of itself. To say that a text potentially has no end does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy ending. ... If there is something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something which must be found somewhere, and in some way respected.  
(6,7)

If interpretation must “respect” its “object,” and if it is constrained also by the “intention” of the text itself, as constructed by the encyclopedic competence of a historical and political community, then some interpretations can and should be accepted as preferable to others. We may not be able to say what a text means definitively—Eco’s semiotics, unlike much structuralist thought, has always respected the contingency of historical conditions—but we can still develop criteria for a kind of interpretive validity. “If it is very difficult,” Eco writes, “to decide whether a given interpretation is a good

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<sup>1</sup> translated into English as “The Open Work” (1989).

one, it is, however, always possible to decide whether it is a bad one" (1990, 42).

Arguing that some reviews of *The Name of the Rose* had been too narrow in tying the novel's events to the ideas expressed in *A Theory of Semiotics* and *The Role of the Reader*, Rocco Capozzi asserts that such critics had not paid "sufficient attention" to the fact that Eco was already developing these ideas further in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Capozzi 1989, 413). Likewise, I feel that many reviews of both *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* have suffered from not taking into account *The Limits of Interpretation*. Many critics seem to have found in Eco's novels support for precisely the interpretive free-play Eco has recently been at pains to disassociate himself from, being unable or unwilling to distinguish, as Eco does, between the "unlimited semiosis" of Peirce and the interpretive "drift" of *Foucault's Pendulum*. Reading either novel as an illustration of the values of interpretive freedom proves, to some degree at least, problematic—although it most certainly can be done, and done well. Eco himself refuses to proscribe such readings of his novels; far be it for me to suggest that they are untenable. My aim in this thesis is to argue that reading the novels as *opposing* interpretive freedom along the lines of *The Limits of Interpretation* is also a fruitful approach, even if it shares the same problematics as the argument of *The Limits of Interpretation*.

In order to develop such a reading, I wish to outline the way in which both novels present the problematics of interpretation as a theme, and to argue that these themes can be read as placing certain attitudes towards interpretation in a pejorative light. In so doing I will refer to various issues raised by Eco elsewhere, both semiotic and hermeneutic, to illustrate my argument. I do not wish, however, to present an exhaustive account of semiosis in *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*. Others are better equipped, and it is a task beyond the bounds of this thesis.

## 0.2.

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (11). So begins Adso’s introduction to his narrative in *The Name of the Rose*, echoing the famous opening verse of the Gospel of John. The origin of the Word in the Godhead is, Adso contends, the one event “whose incontrovertible truth can be asserted” (11) in a world of change and decay. The Absolute Truth to which the text gives witness is, however, veiled to a fallen and depraved humanity who, in consequence, must struggle to “spell out its faithful signals even when they seem obscure to us” (11). Moving from the general to the particular, Adso is able to claim his own poor text as a symptom of this overwhelming mortal frailty, declaring his ignorance in the face of the events he lived through and has now come to narrate.

I prepare to leave on this parchment my testimony as to the wondrous and terrible events that I happened to observe in my youth, now repeating verbatim all I saw and heard, without venturing to seek a design, as if to leave to those who will come after (if the Antichrist has not come first) signs of signs, so that the prayer of deciphering may be exercised on them. (11).

In opening with a quotation about the divinity of the Word, and arguing for the frailty of our efforts at interpretation and understanding, especially in relation to his own narrative, Adso effectively places the problematics of textuality and interpretation before the reader.

The hermeneutic doubt of Adso’s introduction follows from yet another introduction, that of the frame narrator, the discoverer and translator of Adso’s text, who is equally at pains to stress his doubts regarding the text he presents. The impression that builds is thus one of extended divorce from the events at the heart of the story. We, the readers, are told that what we have before us is a translation of a French translation of an eighteenth-century Latin edition of a now lost medieval manuscript, whose author opens by declaring his uncertainty about the meaning of his own narrative. And all this is unverifiable, for not only are the bibliographical details in the French edition misleading, but the only copy of that edition is itself missing. The possibility of grasping the “meaning” of Ado’s narrative thus seems even more remote than the original text itself, for even if we possessed the original, it would still presumably “exercise on the reader”

the task of making meaning. Indeed, at the end of his own introduction the frame narrator declares, that the text has no meaning, no deeper truth than its own enjoyment. Adso's story is, he declares, "immeasurably remote in time ... gloriously lacking in any relevance for our day, atemporally alien to our hopes and our certainties" (5).

The structure of the narrative frames of *The Name of the Rose* thus poses a challenge regarding the nature of meaning and interpretation, placing the meaning of the text in contention. What Adso's narrative may "really" be is repeatedly denied to the reader. This strategy of rendering reading problematic is continued into the actual narrative of *The Name of the Rose* itself, continuing to deny the reader any safe ground upon which to build an interpretation. Essentially, Adso's narrative takes the form of a detective story. From Adso's description of William of Baskerville, so similar to Watson's description of Holmes, through William's initial act of ratiocination in locating Brunellus to the series of murders, William's attempts to locate the murderer and his conflict with the "evil genius," in Jorge of Burgos, Adso's narrative bears all the tell tale signs of the detective genre. However, *The Name of the Rose* holds a twist: it is a detective story where the detective loses. Brother William discovers the murderer, Jorge, but he does so by accident, following a false chain of reasoning, and he discovers Jorge too late to save the lives of the monks, and too late to save his "grail," Aristotle's lost book on comedy.

*The Name of the Rose* is not a "typical" detective story, where the detective is triumphant and the villain vanquished. Instead Adso closes his reminiscences with Brother William denouncing the hubris of human reason and asserting the futility of seeking an order in the universe. I wish to argue that William's defeat, and the conclusions that he draws from it, are central to a reading of *The Name of the Rose* that sees it as a self-reflexively textual novel. Far from being isolated sentiments expressed only in the disappointment of a failed quest, William's questioning of the possibility of ratiocination, and of reading texts and signs in general, is the culmination of a thread running through the entire novel. From the beginning of Adso's narrative, where William explains to Adso his method in discovering the whereabouts of the lost

Brunellus, the way we read signs and the knowledge we can draw from them features prominently in Adso's recollections. Nor is William's despair at the narrative's conclusion an about face from a previously uncontested positivism, for one of Adso's most enduring memories would seem to be of William's struggle to reconcile the positivism of Roger Bacon with the perceived relativism of William of Ockham, a struggle never fully resolved in spite of William's apparent championing of empiricism.

What can appear at the outset, then, as a "safe" detective story, in the same positivist form as the stories of Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, rigidly tied to space and time within a narrative which imposes the strict order of the canonical hours, ends up turning on the reader's expectations. Instead of championing the skill of the detective, which may to some extent negate the unease of the frame narratives, it compounds that unease, refusing the reader the conventional platitudes and making problematic the usually unchallenged ability of the detective to interpret the universe correctly. This refusal of conventional expectations<sup>2</sup> is carried over into Eco's second novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, providing a certain continuity of themes between the two. Both novels permit a reading that sees the transgression of convention in a narrative dealing with interpretation as making a statement about the nature of interpretation itself.

As with *The Name of the Rose*, *Foucault's Pendulum* provides both a narrative and a narrator that raise doubts about interpretive certainty. Casaubon, like Adso, narrates his tale from a position of doubt: *The Name of the Rose* centres on a narrative spun by Adso looking back on an event long past but still confused in his mind, and *Foucault's Pendulum* is Casaubon's attempt to construct a narrative to account for his experiences, a narrative constructed over a period of two days and shifting according to Casaubon's moods. The conclusion of *Foucault's Pendulum*, being Casaubon's final reflections as he awaits his death, constitutes not the completion of what has gone before (635 pages of "before," no less), but a revision, a rewriting. Having come to an

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Robey's account of Eco's association of ambiguity, art and convention in the introduction to *The Open Work*: xi, xxiv.

understanding by producing a narrative, Casaubon enacts the hermeneutic circle by returning to the parts with a view of the whole and providing a new interpretation of them.

The story that he weaves is itself consciously interpretive, for it is a story of a creative rewriting, a fiction that appears to trespass into the realm of reality. *Foucault's Pendulum* takes the form of a thriller rather than a detective story, revolving around a lighthearted "reconstruction" of a secret "plot," with a twist as the plot seems to become real, trapping its ostensible creators. Casaubon's narrative tells of how three editors, fascinated with the apparent meaninglessness of the world in which they live, begin to play with a philosophy that asserts the necessity of interpretive free play. The hermetic adepts the trio encounter all insist that meaning lies beyond the apparent, that it is to be sought in hidden associations, in occult correspondences. Because the Ultimate Truth, the only Reality, lies beyond, outside of the realm of comprehension, the meanings we traditionally assign to the elements of our experience are invalid, and we are free to dismember those experiences and recombine them in any way we desire, in search of connections that hint at the Truth.

Whilst our trio set out to parody what they see as the illogical nature of hermetic philosophy, they are gradually seduced by its possibilities, fascinated by the ease at which they are able to discover perverse and bizarre correspondences. History becomes a text that reveals hidden truths, malleable and compliant, accepting the wildest of interpretations without complaint. Thus, like Adso's narrative in *The Name of the Rose*, the story of the Plan in *Foucault's Pendulum* calls into question the possibility of universalising interpretations; given the right assumptions and enough skill, any interpretation is possible. But the trio begin to believe in their own narrative, which starts to occupy a twilight world of the boundary between what is accepted as fiction and what is accepted as history. Whilst they may not believe that it is true, they find themselves *wanting* to believe that it is. In this condition, their world comes falling down upon them: Diotallevi dies of a cancer he equates with their own interpretive metastasis, Belbo is blackmailed by the Diabolicals to reveal what the Diabolicals now think is a real

Plan, and Casaubon is not only drawn into Belbo's fate, but seems to lose control of his own sanity.

Casaubon's conclusion thus turns away from the philosophy that would appear to have destroyed their world. Rethinking his experiences, he concludes that meaning can be found in our lives, and the denial of meaning is, as Diotallevi had claimed, to blaspheme against the Word. We may not, he decides, be able to know truly, but that does not mean that we should give up contesting the world in which we live altogether. In concluding on this note, *Foucault's Pendulum* seems to imply the opposite of the conclusion of *The Name of the Rose*, raising the possibility that its own questioning of the stability of meaning is itself an interpretive excess, an extreme that cannot be warranted. In this way, *Foucault's Pendulum* could be seen to answer Adso's final question of William in *The Name of the Rose*: "Do you mean," Adso asks, "that there would be no possible and communicable learning any more if the very criterion of truth were lacking ...?" (*The Name of the Rose* 493). Truth may be beyond us, but as "fragile as our existence may be, however ineffectual our interrogation of the world, there is nevertheless something that has more meaning than the rest" (*Foucault's Pendulum* 623).

### 0.3.

Inevitably, when dealing with texts in translation, the question of interpretive adequacy acquires a new dimension. No translation, not even the most inspired, can claim to flawlessly reproduce the original into another language: there is always a degree of difference, always something "lost" in transition. This is something attested to by William Weaver's "Pendulum Diary," an anecdotal account of Weaver's translation of *Foucault's Pendulum*. "Pendulum Diary" frequently functions as an admission of the gap between Italian and English, and the inability of seamlessly closing it, especially when the language in question is so artfully and cunningly employed. From the very opening words—"Fu allora che vidi il pendolo"—Weaver explains that the task of translating the Italian novel was one of approximation and compromise; not so much a

translation of a message from one medium to another as an interpretation of a text into the terms of another language.

There seems to be little argument that translation is always a matter of interpretation in this manner and that Weaver is not alone in his dilemma. Even, then, given that Weaver's translation is a remarkably good one (and at least one critic has refused to allow this point), it seems too much to ask that it provide the English speaking reader with access to a text that is somehow essentially Eco's. The novel *Il nome della rosa*, Eco's "original" text, remains always something different from the text which is *The Name of the Rose*. This difference can pose a problem for the traditional philological enterprise, in that the aim of a study of Eco's novels should be, under such terms, to provide knowledge *about* the novels, and anything that is interposed between the essence of the novels<sup>3</sup> and the reader should be considered an impediment, and an attempt made to overcome it.

Given Eco's frequent assertion that in interpretation it is paramount that the text be respected, it may seem especially brash to attempt a study of his own novels in translation. However, I wish to suggest that it is this very injunction to respect the text that dispels any doubts about dealing with the novels in translation. What is present to the reader, in the terms of Eco's poetics, is always a "linear text manifestation" (Eco 1979, 13-15) which must be approached, if not on its own terms, at least in a manner which respects the cultural milieu that engendered it. What the reader of *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* is faced with is not an Italian text, requiring respect for the nuances of late twentieth-century Italian experience (although that can certainly be brought to the text), but an English text, requiring respect for late twentieth-century Anglophone experience. *The Name of the Rose* is a different text to *Il nome della rosa*, its status as a translation should not function as an impediment to a "correct" reading, but instead set it apart from its "original" as a literary event in its own right, requiring its own commentary. Certainly, for many critical purposes, the two novels (*Il nome della*

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<sup>3</sup> in whatever terms "essence" should be conceived; authorial intention, textual intention, historical intention, the language of the text, etc.

*rosa* and *The Name of the Rose*) are similar enough for there to be little point in distinguishing them (does Guglielmo/William discover the murderer in *Il nome della rosa/The Name of the Rose?*), but we should not assume that a reading sufficient to one is necessarily sufficient to the other.

It could certainly be argued that given my assertion of the differences between the “original” and the “translation,” *The Name of the Rose* ceases to function as Eco’s text. At best we should see it as a hybrid text, attributable to both Weaver and Eco, or perhaps we should attribute it to Weaver alone, as his commentary on *Il nome della rosa*. This thesis should then be renamed a study of *Weaver’s* texts, not of Eco’s, to which it does not really refer. Otherwise I may give the false impression that I am saying something about texts that are essentially Eco’s. Such an objection has some force; however I would like to counter it by challenging its assumption about the role of the author. Eco himself would surely, although perhaps not as radically, assent to Barthes’ dismissal of the role of the “empirical” author from the function of the text. The text is, after all, a “machine for generating interpretations” (Eco 1992 (b), 820) and not a tool for revealing the hearts and minds of writers. Given this, the appearance of the name “Umberto Eco” on the cover and title page of the novels functions as an element of the text itself, providing the opportunity for intertextual allusion, rather than serving to anchor the text to some extra-semiotic event or intent. Thus *The Name of the Rose* remains bound to Eco, no matter how distancing the translation may be from the words he scripted (as does even the movie called *The Name of the Rose*). Likewise, any translation of *Il nome della rosa*—and even *Il nome della rosa* itself—is always removed from the empirical figure who likewise bears the name that is emblazoned on its cover. Thus I will continue, in this thesis, to explore the question of interpretive validity as it is raised in Eco’s two novels, *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault’s Pendulum*.

