Epistemology in Eco’s *Il nome della rosa*

*Il nome della rosa* has been widely acclaimed as a consummate compendium of Umberto Eco’s linguistic theories, which are articulated in previous publications such as *Opera aperta*, *La struttura assente* and *Lector in fabula*.¹ Technical notions such as those of Model Reader, inter-textuality, extra-textuality, openness, closure, meta-language and meta-literature assume tangible, three-dimensional form in the novel. Still, rather than merely illustrate or clarify aspects of semiological methodology, Eco’s narrative appears to construct, or at least suggest, a comprehensive theory of knowledge that is rooted firmly in linguistic premises and has meaningful implications for philosophic and literary inquiry in general. Stated in another fashion, in addition to reflecting on the structures and strategies inherent in the process of narration, Eco delves into the very nature of cognition itself,² fusing medieval and contemporary values into a unified system that may give the impression of being desultory or contradictory. This kind of effect is produced by the fact that Eco clothes his epistemology in a series of paradoxes that eventually resolve themselves into a coherent discourse. It is, therefore, possible to identify a dominant paradox that contains Eco’s prime conclusions on the nature of knowledge. In turn, subordinate or tangential paradoxes buttress the central thesis, producing a polyvalent metaphor that is as compelling as the library-labyrinth situated in the very nucleus of *Il nome della rosa*.

The fundamental contradiction, pertaining to the pursuit of truth and knowledge, results from the juxtaposition of apparent progression toward a perceived truth, or set of truths, and the evanescence of the same. It will be shown that Eco’s epistemology floats precariously between Pirandellian quasi-nihilism and Platonic idealism. Interestingly enough, one of the sub-paradoxes
involves those who are on the leading edge of man’s quest for absolute answers to the riddle of human existence: the intellectual community. Eco seems to paint an ambiguous but broadly unflattering portrait of this élite group, which epitomizes the compulsive drive to attain unequivocal knowledge, on the one hand, and the grotesque disfigurements that the same impulse can engender, on the other.

Considering first what may be labelled the "positivist"\textsuperscript{3} strains in the epistemology that emerges from the novel, we must take into account the many references to the manifest stability of the cosmos, created in accordance with meticulously geometric principles. At one point Adso exclaims, "Fui mosso allora da spirituale dolcezza verso il creatore e la regola di questo mondo, e ammirai con gioiosa venerazione la grandezza e la stabilità del creato."\textsuperscript{4} Orderly motion in the universe is frequently stressed by characters who cite, "i modi e i numeri e gli ordini delle cose, così decorosamente stabiliti per tutto l’universo" (p. 285). Presumably echoing the author’s own sentiments, the narrator at one point extols the virtues of architecture and, at the same time, those of the entire universe, which is constructed on the basis of identical criteria: "Perché l’architettura è tra tutte le arti quella che più arditamente cerca di riprodurre nel suo ritmo l’ordine dell’universo, che gli antichi chiamavano kosmos." (p. 34) Finally, that a transcendent, intelligible Truth exists and bathes palpable reality with its luminous materiality is an uncontested fact in the minds of certain thinkers — the faithful, if you will: "la verità è indivisa, brilla della sua perspicuità e non consente di essere dimidiata dai nostri interessi e dalle nostre vergogne." (p. 246) These are Adso’s words and they seem to synopsize, rather forcefully, belief in the cognitive powers of the mind, as well as in the accessibility of reality, gained through materialist, phenomenological or even idealist modes of dialectic.\textsuperscript{5}

It follows that logical man, deposited into such a reassuring context, cannot help inferring that the universe was formed by a deliberate act on the part of a compassionate Prime Mover who, in the act of creation, originated the phenomenon of communication.\textsuperscript{6} It is no mere coincidence that the opening lines of the novel are "In principio era il Verbo e il Verbo era presso Dio, e il Verbo era Dio" (p. 19). In biblical as well as modern terms, man was brought into being explicitly to decipher that "verbo" or primordial word, which is synonymous with the universe itself. Emphasizing just such a conceptualization are the frequent allusions to the "book of nature" — an archaic metaphor that is
infused with modernist connotations by virtue of the writer's pervasive linguistic culture. Nature's most unique book, then, contains the essence of the physical laws of the universe; it methodically surrenders these truths to the inquisitive mind: "ci parla come un grande libro." (p. 31) By extension of this optimism, the universe may even become "loquace" (p. 31). That a divine intelligence bent on divulging its own quintessential nature exists and subtly orchestrates the unfolding universe is scarcely questioned by personae who exemplify the pursuit of attainable knowledge. Representative is a reference to the symbols of the world: "con cui Dio, attraverso le sue creature, ci parla della vita eterna" (p. 3). Although liturgical in denotation, such an assertion is clearly secular in connotation. To summarize, on the affirmative side of the epistemological equation we may place a series of observations expressing the belief that an omnipotent will communicates reliably and consistently with man through a vast code, thereby enabling man to comprehend his environment, which, of course, includes the code itself. As a result, what we might call "Newtonian man" imagines himself in a privileged position, inside a predictable cosmos where absolute time, space and motion exist above the realm of faulty sensibility.

A disturbing paradox is produced by a preponderance of contrasting modernist or quantum reality in which man no longer enjoys an aristocratic position by virtue of his superior faculties. Rather, he observes from a severely restricted perspective, seeing his universe from but a single vantage point: his own. Contemplative man, therefore, comes to the inescapable conclusion that his perceptions are necessarily inadequate and distorted. Such a modernist diagnosis is strongly suggested by a variety of references to the mysterious, arcane cosmos in which comprehensive or indestructible Truth remains hopelessly blurred. According to this alternative view, the "book of nature" is still operative, but it is not at all alluring. Instead, it is sealed; it is a "libro misterioso" (p. 288). To proceed too audaciously through its pages, "si infrange un sigillo celeste e . . . molti mali potrebbero seguirne" (p. 96). By dint of a dramatic shift in interpretation, nature is suddenly obstructionist, evasive and hermetic. Its synchronous elegance now becomes a mocking delusion: "Mi sono comportato da ostinato, inseguendo una parvenza di ordine," laments Guglielmo, "quando dovevo saper bene che non vi è un ordine nell' universo" (p. 495). The reassuring Garden of Eden is transfigured into an impregnable fortress; hence, the image of the "imprendibilità della Città di Dio" (p. 29). Signs
that elsewhere serve to disclose the sinuousness of reality suddenly are abstruse, unintelligible, "Segni di segni" (p. 19) — necessities far removed from the symbols that mirror them. Decoding, then, is no longer the application of intelligence and logic for the purpose of discerning empirical entities but rather an almost desperate act of faith, a "preghiera di decifrazione" (p. 19). Ultimately, the benevolent anthropomorphic Being that sustains anemic man in the context of what we might call the "medieval scheme" now seems almost demented, camouflaged behind and within a chaotic jumble of twisted signifiers: "così che dobbiamo compitarne i fedeli segnacoli, anche là dove ci appaiono oscuri e quasi intessuti di una volontà del tutto intesa al male" (p. 19).

Man's role within this particular construct is problematical at best, if we follow the argument that emerges from Eco's arrangement of quoted and paraphrased philosophical statements. Though it allows him to perceive the harmony of creation, man's consciousness also induces him to realize that only minute fragments of that symmetry are available to him: "di questo silllogismo [the universe] coglie solo proposizioni isolate e sovente sconnesse," confesses Adso, "donde la nostra facilità a cadere vittima delle illusioni del maligno" (p. 282). The unabridged syllogism will always elude man's eager grasp. That being the case, our disconnected premises lack final corroboration or validation. Eco's protagonists, therefore, find themselves mired in a disorienting galaxy of images that stand for other images, which in turn stand for still other images: "segni dell'idea di cavallo" (p. 36), for instance. Other signs, meanwhile, are self-contained contradictions in terms, utterly devoid of meaning; Guglielmo cautions the reader, "Ma non dimentichiamo che ci sono anche segni che sembrano tali e invece sono privi di senso, come blitiri o bu-ba-baff" (p. 114).

The paradox of knowledge attained and knowledge repudiated assumes a haunting, lyrical expression in the form of the library — the focus of Guglielmo's investigation into the crimes committed in the abbey, as well as of his and Eco's philosophical speculation. It can scarcely be denied that the author intends to suggest that the library is a microcosm of society, both medieval and contemporary. Passages such as the following lead us to the very brink of such a conclusion: "quanto è avvenuto tra queste mura altro non adomba che la vicenda stessa del secolo in cui viviamo, teso nella parola come nelle opere, nelle città come nei castelli, nelle superbe università e nelle chiese catted-
rali" (p. 403). With these words the blind Jorge characterizes the fourteenth century; however, by virtue of the modernist resonances felt throughout the novel, the library can be seen as an allegory of Eco's own society. Additionally, the library is a micro-cosm of the universe, reflecting as it does the intricateness and congruence of reality. In this, Eco's labyrinth resembles Borges's "Library of Babel," though there is a difference that will be identified later. To imply the library-universe parallel, Eco writes that "La biblioteca è costruita secondo un'armonia celeste a cui si possono attribuire vari e mirifici significati..." (p. 220) and that "il tracciato della biblioteca riproduce la mappa dell'universo mondo" (p. 316). But, as if to ensure the evocative power of the edifice, Eco instructs us that the building's date of construction is unverifiable, thus projecting its origins into some nebulous, prehistoric epoch. We are also told of the labyrinth's mythic initial phases when "i giganti vi posero mano" (p. 30). The author also establishes a bond between the human and the divine planes of existence, which the library seems to unify: "Era questa una costruzione ottagonale che a distanza appariva come un tetragono (figura perfetissima che esprime la saldezza e l'imprendibilità della Città di Dio)" (p. 29).

Having already described the cosmos as an unparalleled book whose infinite pages entice man to absorb more and more of its precious contents, Eco now turns his narrative attention to the library, stocked with countless volumes that attest to man's endeavours to interpret the cosmic tome. The subjects covered by these texts span the entire horizon of human speculation — from the philosophic to the scientific and pseudo-scientific.

The library functions as a paradox that sits inside the greater paradox of knowledge, reiterating it. This is because, like those of the limitless universe, the library's total contents remain outside the reach of individual researchers; hence, the many allusions to the obscurity and confusion that the library promotes. Its defiant complexity is stated in these terms: "La biblioteca si difende da sola, insondabile come la verità che ospita, ingannevole come la menzogna che custodisce. Labirinto spirituale, e labirinto terreno" (p. 46). Rather than illuminate man's path to progress, the library-labyrinth seems to conceal deliberately and guard fiercely its shrouded data: "Luogo di misteri celati, di illeciti tentativi di svelarli" (p. 110) and "luogo dove i segreti rimangono coperti" (p. 105). In the final analysis, the monks' ventures within the tangled corridors of the structure duplicate man's existential meanderings through the mazes of his mind.
and its context: "La biblioteca è un gran labirinto, segno del labirinto del mondo. Entro e non sai se uscirai. Non bisogna violare le colonne d’Ercole" (p. 163). This is a striking medieval analogy that, like so many other elements in Eco’s richly textured novel, has twentieth-century reverberations. Indeed, contemporary science appears to be virtually at the pillars of Hercules, on a macrocosmic level by probing the extreme limits of the expanding universe, and on a microcosmic level by probing the minutest components of DNA molecules. Crossing that threshold could be man’s damnation, in the sense that he could conceivably discover that his ageless search for an absolute solution to the labyrinth of existence has been a monumentally frivolous deception.21

This last consideration leads us to a discussion of the role of laughter, since the homocides investigated by Guglielmo and Adso appear to be committed in the course of a frantic search for a presumed Aristotelian manuscript that deals with the concept of laughter. Strangely, even this topic becomes the basis for yet another paradox, directly related to the primary one of knowledge. On the one hand, Eco’s personae argue that the ability to laugh is a distinctive trait of man, which elevates him above other species: "il riso è proprio dell’uomo, è segno della sua razionalità," (p. 138) states Guglielmo. Furthermore, it is perceived to be a gift, an instrument meant for man to employ in his struggle to decode the stimuli that bombard his senses: "Aristotele aveva parlato del riso come cosa buona e strumento di verità" (p. 120). One character even goes so far as to establish a cause and effect relationship between laughter and the act of creation — reinventing the Genesis account: "Attribuisce la creazione del mondo al riso divino" (p. 471).

Nevertheless, the motif has a reverse, sinister side embodied in Jorge, the blind monk who murders, then commits suicide in order to prevent the restoration of Aristotle’s script.22 Jorge is convinced that disclosure of the manuscript’s contents would undermine the bases of understanding the universe, as set down by theologians. By extension, such a revelation, he fears, might invalidate orthodox or historical explanations of Truth: "I padri avevano detto ciò che occorreva sapere sulla potenza del Verbo," (p. 476) insists Jorge. Divulging laughter’s potential would be tantamount to defying the pillars of Hercules: "Se questo libro ... fosse diventato materia di aperta interpretazione, avremmo varcato l’ultimo limite" (p. 477). It could be argued that Eco, through the convictions articulated by Jorge, considers laughter to be man’s reaction to the realization that his general mode of
perception is biased and distorted because it can never be meaningfully corroborated. Accordingly, all phenomena are reduced to the level of sheer fantasy: spontaneous fabrications of the mind. Having comprehended this, man could respond by deducing that nothing that he feels or thinks is real. Laughing in the face of apparent reality and refusing to accept any of it as permanent or truly knowable represents a potentially perilous development. However, since man is, for all intents and purposes, prevented even from reaching this definitive conclusion as regards his place in the cosmos, he is also destined not to recover Aristotle's controversial treatise. Appropriately, then, Eco has Jorge devour the poisoned pages of the manuscript (an exquisitely convenient metaphor in the context of the preceding remarks), destroying them forever: "Ora sigillo ciò che non doveva essere detto, nella tomba che divento" (p. 483). These are Jorge's dying words. Pirandello's "riso folle" is recalled — by which man reacts hysterically to his own maddening existential plight.

At the foundation of Eco's seemingly contradictory epistemology is his Saussurian-linguistic heritage. That is to say, Eco posits the existence of two basic types of signs, natural and artificial, by which man understands the world. Tracks created by the hooves of a horse constitute an example of the former, while any word that by social convention is selected to represent a given object illustrates the latter. In both cases, the mind must contend with "abstract realities" in the sense that the perceptions are qualitatively removed from the objects they symbolize and belong to a different order of reality. The discrepancy between these two orders prompts the mind to question the authenticity of both types of signs as well as its own capacity to express a reliable judgment. A confused Adso, therefore, poses the following rhetorical question: "Ma allora posso sempre e solo parlare di qualcosa che mi parla di qualcosa d'altro e via di seguito, ma il qualcosa finale, quello vero, non c'è mai?" (p. 320). With this and the many similar queries interspersed throughout the novel, Eco appears to probe the molecular structure of the communication phenomenon — an artificially contrived system designed to convey information. By means of an unarticulated accord, societies have evolved elaborate networks or complex codes. Only rarely do the users of this apparatus consider whether or not the code itself constitutes a firm reality and not merely a tangle of roadways that have no significance in and of themselves. At one point, the dialectic between Guglielmo and Adso (together and
alternately, the conveyors of the author’s personal views) wryly proposes that the entire communicative code is meta-linguistic in nature: “Sino ad allora avevo pensato che ogni libro parlasse delle cose, umane o divine, che stanno fuori dai libri” (p. 289). The speaker, Adso, is stunned by the thought that books, symbols of human knowledge, speak only of other books and that the spoken word refers only to mental images: “Ora mi avvedo che non di rado i libri parlano di libri, ovvero è come se parlassero fra loro. Alla luce di questa riflessione, la biblioteca mi parve ancora piú inquietante” (p. 289).

As a consequence of these postulates, all perceived phenomena are relegated to the realm of dreams: “Un sogno è una scrittura e molte scritture non sono altro che sogni” (p. 441). By simple extrapolation, all of man’s knowledge, documented in texts of all descriptions, assumes a disturbing ambiguity that numbs the same inquisitive mind that dares to assume it can grasp the ultimate forces of the universe:26 “come interpretare i segni multiformi che il mondo pone sotto i nostri occhi di peccatori, come non incappare negli equivoci in cui ci attrae il demonio?” (p. 451). In these metaphors, Eco revives the “original sin” analogue and endows it with a twentieth-century pessimism by equating man’s incomplete capacity to decipher the coded messages of the universe and man’s inherent concupiscence.

Perhaps the most stimulating passage that sheds light on this obscure dilemma is the one containing the following observation: “L’ordine che la nostra mente immagina è come una rete, o una scala, che si costruisce per raggiungere qualcosa. Ma dopo si deve gettare la scala, perché si scopre che, se pure serviva, era priva di senso” (p. 495). Paraphrasing Wittgenstein,27 Guglielmo proposes the order-ladder analogy to epitomize the delirium man must confront: the discernible rationality of the universe could be a property of the human mind, rather than of the universe proper. This is because man can observe the phenomena of reality only from within that matrix, as part of it, and never from an external, unconditioned perspective. It is precisely for this reason that Eco has his principal debaters differentiate between the imperfect human and the comprehensive divine modes of perception: “Cosí Dio conosce il mondo perché lo ha concepito nella sua mente, come dall’esterno prima che fosse creato, mentre noi ne conosciamo la regola, perché vi viviamo dentro trovandolo già fatto” (p. 222).28

What conclusions can we draw from the seemingly antagonistic, irreconcilable philosophies that are directly cited, para-
phrased, alluded to or otherwise filtered through the critical
consciences of Guglielmo and Adso? On the one hand, the reader
finds himself showered with fragments of Pirandellian quasi-
nihilism and incompatible world views, whereby an irrational,
infinite universe cannot be adequately known by rational, finite
man. Yet this pessimism is tempered by the certainty of man’s
experience, if not the certainty of the purpose of that experience:
“Non ho mai dubitato della verità dei segni, Adso, sono la sola
cosa di cui l’uomo dispone per orientarsi nel mondo,” proclaims
Guglielmo, adding, “Ciò che non ho capito è stato la relazione
tra i segni” (p. 495). On the other hand, one discovers a tend-
ency to assert the Platonic postulation of the existence of prime,
or incorruptible, Ideas that transcend the unstable forms per-
ceived by the senses. And yet, this same optimism is counter-
balanced by the expressions of scepticism already cited in this
paper, by which it is implied that perhaps even these icons of
reality are no more than figments of the mind or patterns on the
retina of the imagination. Does Eco’s novel reconcile these incompat-
tible views or does it merely record a wide variety of notions
that have materialized over the centuries? It is my opinion that
the author strives to synthesize rather than simply record diver-
gent interpretations.

By taking into account the eventual destiny of the library, we
may be able to propose a plausible rationalization. In the con-
cluding pages of Il nome della rosa, the library is accidentally set
ablaze and is burned to the ground. Some time later, Adso
returns to the site of his experiences to survey the remains. He
notices among the ruins, swallowed up by weeds, remnants
of the gutted edifice: sections of wall, fragments of books and a
surrealistic spiral staircase that once led to the scriptorium. Adso’s
mind begins to associate images and memories stimulated by this
collapsed Tower of Babel; he also begins to sense that the debris
still exerts a compelling influence: “come se da quelle disiecta
membra della biblioteca dovesse pervenirmi un messaggio” (p.
502). The more Adso contemplates, the more he senses the
presence of a mystical force intent on restoring the interrupted
process of communication: “come se il fato mi avesse lasciato
quel legato, come se l’averne individuato la copia distrutta fosse
stato un segno chiaro del cielo che diceva tolle et lege” (p. 502).

I suggest that in Eco’s view the universe continues to signify
to man, even though its code is obscure and protean. The
persistence and irresistible of these transmissions persuade man
that some sort of comprehensive meaning, even in human terms,
must exist somewhere. Yet every discovery that man achieves reveals to him that the reality he seeks to comprehend is infinitely more elaborate than he had ever imagined. At this point, man is in danger of despairing of ever decoding the complete message. Still, on the brink of desperation, he responds to the inexplicable call to collect the shattered pieces of his puzzle and resume his uncertain but obligatory quest, much like Leopardi’s "Vecchierel bianco, infermo mezzo vestito e scalzo."  

By way of confirmation of such a predicament, Guglielmo summarizes: "Nessuno ci impone di saper, Adso. Si deve, ecco tutto, anche a costo di capire male" (p. 454).

As stated in the introduction of this paper, Eco’s epistemology is expressed through and reflected in the academic community, which also becomes the subject of a disquieting paradox. On the one hand, the community of scholars spearheads the universal quest for knowledge of the natural world. Scientists, philosophers, psychologists and linguists are the vanguard of this collective thrust, directing and shaping the process of decodification and classification of the universe’s vast data. On the other hand, this same forward-looking posture can and does become an all-consuming force that tends to obstruct the decodification process, thereby making man’s task of orienting himself in an already difficult environment even more thorny.

Let us for a moment consider the affirmative side of the paradoxical ledger. There is little doubt that the Franciscan and Benedictine monks in the novel are presented as paragons of intellectual life in the fourteenth century; by implication, they personify modern learning as well. Their role as custodians of the Word of God is frequently stated, as in this instance: "E finché queste mura resisteranno, noi saremo i custodi della Parola divina" (p. 45). By extension, they are the repositories of knowledge itself, since the Word is, in fact, synonymous with the created cosmos. This aspect of the monk’s role is also identified in plain terms: "Se ora Dio ha affidato al nostro ordine una missione, essa è quella di opporsi a questa corsa verso l’abisso, conservando, ripetendo e difendendo il tesoro di saggezza che i nostri padri ci hanno affidato" (p. 44). As the abbot informs us, he and his colleagues derive great satisfaction and pride from the exercise of their sacred responsibility: "il nostro ordine ... fa luce per tutto il mondo conosciuto" (p. 44). By collecting, copying, cataloguing and fiercely protecting the trove of books that represents, as stated, virtually the whole spectrum of learning, scholars in Eco’s novel enjoy immense prestige and privilege.
In this sense, the author presents the monks and, on a larger scale, all intellectuals dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge, in rather complimentary terms. They are unique individuals blessed with keen vision and a profound love for their vocation.

However, as was the case in the paradoxes cited previously, this image is contrasted with a considerably less flattering model, because these same devoted scholars are guilty of arrogance, presumptuousness and — dare I say it? — blindness. It is no mere coincidence that Jorge, the Benedictine who ingests the much-sought-after manuscript, is blind. It seems to suggest that scholars permit themselves to become contaminated by their elitism. References to the vanity and ambition thriving within the walls of the monastery abound. For example, Jorge preaches that “In questa comunità . . . serpeggia da gran tempo l’aspide dell’orgoglio” (p. 401). He then specifies the object of this excessive pride: “lo studio, e la custodia del sapere” (p. 402). At the root of such fanaticism, ironically enough, is that very same passion for learning. Inverted, it can be an intoxicating, even dehumanizing force. As Jorge points out, “L’Anticristo può nascere dalla stessa pietà, dall’eccessivo amor di Dio o della verità” (p. 494). Too often, Eco appears to suggest in veiled fashion, modest intellectual accomplishments, when observed from a strictly personal perspective, seduce the mind into thinking that its own deductions are exclusive or preeminent. It is for this reason that reference is made to the “seduzione della conoscenza” (p. 186). By analogy, scholars may lose sight of the limited scope of their particular areas of research — their modest series of books in an infinite library, if you will — and may think of themselves as giants standing on the shoulders of dwarves when, in reality, the reverse is true, as Guglielmo explains: “E spesso i sapienti dei tempi nuovi sono solo nani sulle spalle di nani” (p. 97).

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NOTES

Although it can be argued, with considerable justification, that the author's personal observations are indistinguishable amid the chorus of narrative voices in the text, I am inclined to agree with De Lauretis who, in op. cit. p. 81, calls the novel: "Vera e propria somma di una certa visione epistemologica, di una precisa cognizione del mondo e del processo conoscitivo e creativo."

There is also an indirect justification of the thesis proposed in this paper in Eco's own Postscript to the Name of the Rose (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 7, where one finds the following concession: "The text is there and produces its own effects. Whether I wanted it this way or not, we are faced with a question of an ambiguous provocation." Also, Carmine Di Biase in Linea surreale in scrittori d'oggi (Napoli: S.E.I., 1981), p. 115, offers a similar reading of the novel as epistemological allegory: "La realtà, per lo scrittore, è sempre bivalente: di qui, l'ambiguità dell'arte e della parola, come l'ambiguità del giudizio della storia, che resta inafferrabile, perché le stesse cose possono essere viste da più parti."

The term is placed in quotation marks to indicate that it does not relate strictly to formal Positivism, but rather to many systems that, in approximate terms, propound the reliability of reason or of the senses as means for understanding the physical world.

U. Eco, Il nome della rosa (Milano: Bompiani, XIII ed., 1984), p. 287. Subsequent references to this edition will be made in the body of the article.

It is rather difficult to identify specific quotations from philosophers expounding these views since, as Eco himself admits in his Postscript to the Name of the Rose, cit. p. 48, "I had dozens and dozens of file cards with all sorts of texts and sometimes pages of books, photocopies — countless, far more than I used. . . . So, as I was writing, I had at my elbow all the texts, flung in no order; and my eye would fall first on this one, then on that, as I copied out a passage immediately linking it to another."

Michelangelo's "Creation of Man" fresco in the Sistine Chapel vividly conveys such a notion, since the artist depicts man not only in the likeness of his Creator but also in a receptive posture, waiting for his potential for dialogue with the divine to be actualized.

It is generally conceded by scholars that modern linguistics is a derivation of Saussurian theories set down in Cours de linguistique générale. It is in this text that the relationship between the signifier and the signified, that is, between the word and the reality outside that word, is explored in modern terms, although Eco, in his Postscript, cit., p. 26, acknowledges an even more remote point of origin for such speculation: "furthermore, we find a developed theory of figures only with the Occamites. . . . It is only between Bacon and Occam that signs are used to acquire knowledge of individuals."

Of course, symbolist poets, as enunciated in Baudelaire's "Correspondances," is largely founded on a similar perception. To cite a few key verses from the poem, which appears in Les fleurs du mal (Paris: Garnier, 1961), p. 13, "La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers / Laisset parfois sortir de confuses paroles / L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles / Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers."

See also the following comments from Eco, Il nome della rosa, cit., p. 282: "Era . . . come se tutto l'universo mondo, che chiaramente è quasi un libro scritto dal dito di Dio, in cui ogni cosa ci parla dell'immensa bontà del suo creatore." On the same page, we read "il mondo intero mi parlava della fanciulla che . . . era pur sempre un capitolo del gran libro del creato, un versetto del grande salmo cantato dal cosmo."

Modern physics has demonstrated that perception of time, space and matter is relative and variable. At the quantum level of physical reality, the behaviour of matter is even said to be unpredictable, as the following remark from P. Davies, God and the New Physics (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1983) p. 102,
demonstrates: "you can't know where an atom, or electron, or whatever, is located and know how it is moving, at one and the same time." The philosophical implications of the quantum theory are also indicated by the same author in cit., p. 111, where he writes, "The quantum theory demolishes some cherished commonsense concepts about the nature of reality. By blurring the distinction between subject and object, cause and effect, it introduces a strong holistic element into our world view."

11 Di Biase, in op. cit., p. 114, voices a similar opinion: "vuole [Guglielmo] appunto con la ragione, svelare i misteri dell'abazia, che poi simboleggia il sortilegio e l'intrico della realtà."

12 Once again citing the Di Biase article, op. cit., p. 114: "Decifrare il mistero della parola, cioè del re en della storia, attraverso i lacerti e le vestigia di verità sparse nei secoli depositate in manoscritti inviolabili, diventa 'preghiera' da opporre alla realtà distorta della società dell'epoca."

13 Additional illustrations may be found in Eco, Il nome della rosa, cit., pp. 19, 37, 38, 95, 283.

14 Cf. n. 5, above.

15 It is interesting to note that Jorge Luis Borges in "The Library of Babel," Ficciones, trans. by Emecé Editores (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 86, argues the opposite: "No one can articulate a syllable which is not full of tenderness and fear, and which is not, in one of those languages, the powerful name of some god. To speak is to fall into tautologies."

16 In his Postscript to the Name of the Rose, cit., p. 59, Eco writes: "The reader should learn something either about the world or about language: this difference distinguishes various narrative poetics, but the point remains the same." The modernity that I attribute to the monastery is justified also on the basis of a rather transparent analogy between Eco's library and that of Borges, with the latter being more easily recognized as a contemporary analogue.

17 These resonances can be felt throughout the narrative, to a large extent, because of the connotations of the name of Guglielmo de Baskerville, clearly reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes, as De Lauretis suggests in op. cit., p. 83.

18 Cf. Borges, op. cit., p. 79: "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps an infinite, number of hexagonal galleries."

19 Di Biase clarifies this notion, op. cit., p. 116: "Nella Biblioteca sono non solo i libri della verità, ma anche quelli dell'errore; esistono per disegno divino, anche i testi dei maghi, le kabbale dei giudei, le favole e menzogne dei pagani, perché tutto riflette l'immagine della verità, anche se è distorta."

20 A similar statement can be found in Borges, op. cit., p. 80: "Like all men of the Library, I have travelled in my youth. I have journeyed in search of a book, perhaps of the catalogue of catalogues; now that my eyes can scarcely decipher what I write, I am preparing to die a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born." The distance traversed does not seem at all significant in the context of an infinity of hexagons.

21 Other representative references may be found in Eco, Il nome della rosa, cit., pp. 41, 45, 136, 179, 468, 492.

22 Several critics have provided useful interpretations of this character. De Lauretis, op. cit., p. 84, offers this comment: "Jorge de Burgos . . . rappresentante del despotismo più nero e di quell'eccessivo zelo e amor di verità che sempre fu cagione di distruzione e morte." Capozzi, op. cit., p. 226, provides the following observation: "Jorge da Burgos incarna il simbolo di intolleranza e fanatismo delle autorità . . . sempre pronte a vedere eresia dappertutto." Eco himself, in Postscript, cit., pp. 27-28, virtually admits the association between this persona and Jorge Luis Borges: "Everyone asks me why my Jorge, with his name, suggests Borges and why Borges is so wicked. But I cannot say. I wanted a blind man who guarded a library . . . and library plus blind man
can only equal Borges. Also because debts must be paid.”

23 De Lauretis, in op. cit., p. 81, proposes a slightly different approach to the motif of laughter in the novel: “la soluzione di Rabelais, del comico, dell’epoche ironica, che finge di accettare l’Ordine per farlo esplodere dal di dentro, Eco la tenterà nel suo romanzo.”

24 In Eco, Il nome della rosa, cit., p. 478, we read the following dire prediction: “protrebbe nascere la nuova e distruttiva aspirazione a distruggere la morte attraverso l’affrancamento della paura.” These may appear to be the hysterical rantings of the fanatical abbot, Jorge da Burgos; however, I suspect that the author sympathizes with the quoted prognostication. Implied therein is the suspicion that loss of the capacity to fear (by permitting laughter to displace all other sentiments in his character) could render man immune to death, in the sense that the phenomenon would cease to have a very emotional or intellectual significance for him.

25 The allusion here is to C.S. Peirce’s notion of “semiosi illimitata,” as cited in De Lauretis, op. cit., p. 41.

26 Additionally, in Il nome della rosa, cit., p. 291, Eco has his narrator muse, “Tale è la magia delle umane favelle, che per umano accordo significano spesso, con suoni eguali, cose diverse.” Similar remarks clearly underscore the arbitrary nature of man’s principal means of communication and, indeed, perception.

27 De Lauretis, in op. cit., p. 85, reiterates this connection between Eco and Wittgenstein, saying about the sentence, “si deve gettar via la scala su cui si è saliti,” that “La frase, manco a dirlo, è di Wittgenstein.”

28 De Lauretis, in op. cit., p. 85, seems to concur, writing “Se ... Guglielmo insegue le tracce della verità nel gran libro della natura, ciò che alla fine egli scopre è che l’opera è aperta, che non vi è un ordine nell’universo, e quello che noi (lettori) vi troviamo, ponendo certe relazioni tra i segni e certi rapporti tra essi e le cose, è sempre un ordine finalizzato a un nostro scopo, con un fine storico, quindi, non metafisico, umano e non divino.”

29 This point is essentially what distinguishes Eco’s library from Borges’. In other words, Eco assumes the validity of his perception of signs, and therefore accepts the possibility of attaining meaningful insight into phenomenological reality, whereas Borges, by virtue of his infinite hexagons and principle of duplication, seems to reject the reality even of the signs.

30 Eco’s assertion of the eternal nature of this process corresponds quite well with Borges’ contention that the Library is indestructible. In Borges, op. cit., p. 80, we read: “The Library exists ab aeterno. No reasonable man can doubt this truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world.”