

# The Name of the Rose

Zacharias P. Thundy

Although Eco recognizes several possible sources for the title *The Name of the Rose*, he tantalizingly invites readers to explore for themselves the significance and signification of the book's title. Interwoven with the title and the text are the subtexts of Eliot's "Little Gidding," Yeats' Rose-poems, and Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. Perhaps the book is also an onomastic tribute to the nameless peasant girl of the novel.

---

After all that has been said and written about the arcane name of Umberto Eco's much celebrated *The Name of the Rose* — over three hundred articles and serious reviews have been written on the book in English alone, according to the studies of Inge and Coletti — one may wonder whether anything new can be said about the mysterious title of the book. I would like to do two things here: one, recall briefly the reflections of the author and of the critics on the name of the rose, and, two, make my own observations on the book's title.

As for the first part, Eco himself has done most of it for us in his *Postscript*. Eco writes:

The idea of calling my book *The Name of the Rose* came to me virtually by chance, and I liked it because the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it hardly has any meaning left: Dante's mystic rose, and go lovely rose, the Wars of the Roses, rose thou art sick, too many rings around Rosie, a rose by any other name, a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, the Rosicrucians. The title rightly disoriented the reader, who was unable to choose one interpretation.... A title must muddle the reader's ideas, not regiment them. (3)

## 80 Names 42.2 (June 1994)

After Eco had written these words, Robert Fleissner wrote his own rather exhaustive study of the rose-metaphor in literature. After recognizing the relevance of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," he suggests that "As in Faulkner, Eco's primary symbolism behind the rose is probably love, as also with Dante's 'Mystic Rose' and thereby Christ and Mary as medieval roses" (132). Fleissner agrees that Eco's rose symbolism is consonant with his semiotic interests (Ferruci 1-20), that Gertrude Stein's familiar rose line was in Eco's mind (134), and that Jacques Derrida's use of rose symbolism vis-à-vis deconstructionism may also have something to do with Eco's work (134).

In general, with regard to all these critical suggestions and interpretations, Eco's attitude is reluctance to evaluate what scholars say about him.<sup>1</sup> Eco says emphatically: "The author should die once he has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text" (*Postscript* 7).

I am more interested here in what Eco does not say about the rose than in what he says about the title. What fascinates me is the profound silence of the author rather than his reluctant eloquence. In other words, the text alone is my guide in this examination of the name of the rose. In this connection, I like to repeat what Eco himself says about his quasi-discovery of the idea of St. Thomas' explanation of the experience of beauty which does not take place in the first operation of the mind (**simple apprehensio**) but in the second operation of the mind, which is judgment (**compositio et divisio**) in the work of P. Vallet. Twenty years after this discovery Eco went back to his source. Eco writes:

The Abbe Vallet had never said what I was convinced he had said.... On this page...Vallet was saying something else, something absolutely irrelevant. It was only then that I understood I had extrapolated *my* idea while reading him, probably because some of his words had triggered in my mind a sudden association, had provided the starting point for an inference, obliging me to move my thoughts in a given direction. Who holds the rights for that idea? P. Vallet? Myself? Vallet's book?... I think the third answer is the most likely. The book served as a machine for producing interpretations. I insist that Vallet's book *contained* that idea because (and I checked afterward) nothing in the preceding or following pages disproves it. The book did not spell out that idea but

strategically provided the possibility of extrapolating it. Naturally,...he did not know what his book could do. But it did it. ("Prelude" xv)

In his *Postscript* Eco repeats the same view of the potency of the text in generating new interpretations as long as the author is silent: "Nothing is of greater consolation to the author of a novel than the discovery of readings he had not conceived but which are then prompted by his readers.... [But] he must remain silent, allow others to challenge it, text in hand" (3).

My interpretation of the title of the novel implies that there is a correspondence between **res et nomen**, between form and matter, between substance and shadow, between the content of the book and its title. As Eco himself admits in his *Postscript*, "A title...is in itself a key to interpretation" (2), and that "the rose is a symbolic figure...rich in meanings" (3). In the novel William states that there is at least some sort of relationship between names and things:

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

In a similar vein Adso reflects on the coincidence of opposites in metaphors in a passage which occurs during Adso's ecstatic union with the peasant girl:

Is it possible that things so equivocal [Michael's ecstatic martyrdom and Adso's sexual ecstasy] can be said in such a univocal way? And this, it seems, is the teaching left us by Saint Thomas, the greatest of all doctors: the more openly it remains a figure of speech, the more it is a

## 82 Names 42.2 (June 1994)

dissimilar similitude and not literal, the more a metaphor reveals its truth. But if love of the flame and of the abyss are the metaphor for the love of God, can they be the metaphor for love of death and love of sin? Yes, as the lion and the serpent stand both for Christ and the Devil. (248)

With these prolegomena, let me suggest three subtexts that are embedded in the text and in the title of Eco's novel. As far as I know, no critic has pointed these out. I don't expect Eco to come out and admit that these passages underly his choice of the novel's theme and title. Eco confessed in an interview:

All literature has always been a borrowing. It starts with Homer. What do you think Ariosto was doing, or Cervantes? I would say that this continued intertextuality is the principal characteristic of literature. The difference is that now the game has become intentional, has been discovered, whereas before it was covered over. ("Talk" 96)

In the game of intertextuality that Eco plays with us, sometimes he covers over his tracks as the murderer does in the book, and sometimes he leaves the tracks in fresh snow as the abbot's horse Brunellus does. Eco seems to cover up the first two sources fairly well; the third he dares flaunt in our face.

The first subtext is T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding." There are several points where Eliot and Eco meet—I shall not discuss where they part, which will be the grist for another study in itself.

The most important point of their convergence is the conjunction of the metaphors of fire, ashes, and rose. In Eco these metaphors merge in the end of the book where the monastery goes up in flames, leaving behind ashes and ruins. There is life after death for the individuals, if not for the whole building, even in this world; some of the relics of the building, of course, were saved:

The abbey burned for three days and three nights, and the last efforts were of no avail.... The survivors were fully aware that no building could be saved, when the finest constructions showed only their ruined outer walls, and the church, as if drawing into itself, swallowed its tower.... By the time the fire reached the far side of the various workshops, the servants had long since saved as many objects as they could, and had

chosen to beat the countryside to recapture at least some of the livestock, which had fled beyond the walls in the confusion of the night.... On the third day...the monks and all the others collected their belongings and abandoned the still-smoking abbey, as a place accursed. They scattered, I do not know whereto. William and I left those parts on two horses. (497-498)

Adso not only survived but thrived; he returned to Melk, where he became a professed monk and ordained priest, wrote the record of his unforgettable adventures, and then made a pilgrimage back to the site of his adventures.

Eliot had earlier anticipated these basic motifs and metaphors, especially Adso's return to the ruins, in "Little Gidding:"

Ash on an old man's sleeve  
Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.  
Dust in the air suspended  
Marks the place where a story ended.

...

We are born with the dead:  
See they return, and bring us with them.  
The moment of the rose and the moment of yew-tree  
Are of equal duration. A people without history  
Is not redeemed from time.

Of course, the element of optimism adumbrated by Eliot in his reference to the rose and the yew-tree and by Eco in his reference to the third day is clear in the passages cited above. Eliot concludes:

Quick now, here, now always —  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and rose are one.

## 84 Names 42.2 (June 1994)

Again in these lines Eliot brings together the metaphors of fire and rose with as much hope as Eco does at the end of his novel. Further, Eco's attempt to bring the end of an era/millennium and the beginning of a new one is clearly embodied in the following lines of "Little Gidding:"

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

In this context I like to think that Eco's decision to place the metaphor of the rose at the end of his work and then at the beginning as the book's title is probably due to the influence of "Little Gidding" on Eco's thinking.

The second uncited source for the rose-metaphor is W. B. Yeats, who has three rose-poems which seem to throw some light on the meaning of the rose as Eco conceives it.

The novelist recognizes that the final Latin hexameter "Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus" is from the twelfth-century *De contemptu mundi* of Bernard of Morlay,

whose poem is a variation on the *ubi sunt* theme.... But to the usual topos... Bernard adds that all these departed things leave (only, or at least) pure names behind them. I remember that Abelard used the example of the sentence *Nulla rosa est* to demonstrate how language can speak of both the non-existent and the destroyed. And having said this, I leave the reader to arrive at his own conclusions. (*Postscript 1*)

In the style and tone in which Eco speaks here, let me add: I too remember Yeats using the metaphor of rose in the context of the destruction of Troy by fire and in the passing away of beauty with the **ubi sunt** motif in mind. Yeats' poem is called "The Rose of the World:"

Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?  
For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,  
Mournful that no new wonder may betide,

Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,  
And Usna's children died.

Eco himself has said that the Wars of the Roses were not far from the content of the rose. If that is the case, we have in Yeats an excellent reference to wars, roses, and defeat. In "The Rose of Battle" Yeats exclaims:

Rose of all Roses, Rose of all the world!  
The tall thought-woven sails, that flap unfurled  
Above the tide of hours trouble the air,  
...  
And when at last, defeated in His wars,  
They have gone under the same white stars.

In *The Name of the Rose* finally there is peace. Eco writes:

All I can do now is be silent. O quam salubre, quam iucundum et suave est sedere in solitudine et tacere et loqui cum Deo! [O how healthy, how pleasant, and how sweet it is to sit in solitude, to be silent and to talk with God!] Soon I shall be joined with my beginning, and I no longer believe that it is the God of glory of whom the abbots of my order spoke to me.... Gott ist ein lauter Nichts, ihn ruhrt kein Nun noch Hier [God is pure nothingness, touched by neither Now nor Here].... I shall soon enter this broad desert, perfectly level and boundless, where the truly pious heart succumbs in bliss. I shall sink into the divine shadow, in a dumb silence and in ineffable union, and in this sinking all equality and all inequality shall be lost, and in that abyss my spirit will lose itself, and will not know the equal or the unequal, or anything else: and all differences will be forgotten.... I shall fall into the silent and uninhabited divinity where there is no work and image. (501)

How similar are Yeats' thoughts in the rose-poem, where the "Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days" is also the rose of peace:

Brooding no more upon God's wars  
In his divine homestead,  
He would go weave out of the stars

## 86 Names 42.2 (June 1994)

A chaplet for your head.

...

And God would bid his warfare cease,

Saying all things were well;

And softly make a rosy peace,

A peace of Heaven with Hell. (36-38)

The third subtext that is the real inspiration of Eco for the use of the rose-metaphor for the purpose of signaling the transformation of the young novice Adso into a mature adult, into a monk and priest, is Apuleius' *Metmorphoses*.

Apuleius of Madaura's *Metamorphoses* is also known as *The Tale of Lucius* and as *The Golden Ass* (where "golden" is merely an adjective of praise). Lucius of Thessaly goes to stay in the city of Hypata where he has an affair with the kitchen maid Fotis. His hostess, Byrrhaena, is a witch, and Lucius, overcome by curiosity, observes Byrrhaena turn herself into a bird. With the help of Fotis, who gives him the wrong unguent, Lucius transforms himself with the magic ointment and is metamorphosed into an ass. He is led away by thieves before he can get hold of the antidote, a rose. As an ass he goes through many comical, satirical, amorous, and dangerous adventures. After doing penance for the follies of his youth, with the help of Venus/Isis, he succeeds in eating a wreath of roses and becomes human again with the benediction of the priest Mithras. Goddess Isis in repeated visions urges Lucius to be initiated in her rites. Finally, under the direction of the priest Mithras, Lucius is initiated into Isis' mysteries and is consecrated as one of the high priests (Pastophori) of Osiris in Rome.

Since the scope of this study is very limited, it is unnecessary to trace the numerous parallels between Apuleius and Eco. It is sufficient to point out that one of the central themes of both novels is the physical, psychological, and spiritual development of the protagonists. Rose plays the pivotal role in the case of Lucius; so does the vision of the rose, the symbol of hope, for Adso. Therefore, if *The Name of the Rose* can be viewed as a **Bildungsroman**, then Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* with its central topos of the rose is one of the conscious models used by Eco. Then there is the important episode of the sexual encounter — of Fotis and Lucius and of Adso



and the peasant girl — which eventually leads to their loss of innocence and to their growing up. Another interesting parallel is that both the peasant girl in the *Rose* and Fotis in *The Golden Ass* dabble in magic. Penance and initiation also play major roles in both novels. Interestingly, Eco, when asked why the first hundred pages of the *Rose* are so demanding, explains that they are intended as “a penance or an initiation, and if someone does not like them, so much the worse for him. He can stay at the foot of the hill” (*Postscript* 41). Also, both novels begin alike *in medias res*. Lucius is riding on horseback when he encounters another traveler from whom he receives instruction just as Adso, riding on muleback, is tutored by his mentor Brother William. Though the ass is nameless except in the mind of the ass which is Lucius himself, in the twelfth century the ass assumed the name of Brunellus at the hands of Nigellus Wireker in his *Speculum Stultorum* or *The Mirror of Fools*. Eco introduces Brunellus as the abbot's horse in the *Rose*, thereby indicating his acquaintance with Apuleius' and Wireker's novels.

All these striking parallels from Eliot, Yeats, and Apuleius demonstrate that Eco plays with the rose-metaphor used by these three writers (as well as by others). Naturally, as Adso puts it to Brother William, “I could go on listing all the true things you discovered with the help of your learning....” But, in spite of all this taxonomy or *Listenwissenschaft*, there is no consistent order or pattern in Eco's use of his subtexts vis-à-vis the symbol of the rose. William states:

I have never doubted the truth of signs, Adso; they are the only things man has with which to orient himself in the world. What I did not understand was the relation among signs... There was no plan [connecting the deaths, but only] a sequence of causes and concauses, and of causes contradicting one another, which proceeded on their own, creating relations that did not stem from any plan. Where was all my wisdom, then? I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe. (492)

It is a redoubtable challenge to speculate on why and how Eco came to call his novel *The Name of the Rose*. Eco the semiotician could have called it “The Sign of the Rose” in order to give his

book a modern look. That title would be inappropriate since the events described in the novel take place in the Middle Ages. Being a medievalist, he could have called his work "The Romance of the Rose;" that would be duplicating a classical title. Indeed, in keeping with the nominalist tendencies of the fourteenth century, I suspect, Eco decided to call his novel "The Name of the Rose."

But there is more to the title. Eco borrowed much of the rich meaning of the symbol mostly from modern works. However, to lend some credence to the medievalness of the title and to disorient the readers, he decided to add as an afterthought at the end of the novel the verse from Bernard of Morlay: "Stat rosa pristina nomine; nomina nuda tenemus." Paradoxically, here the **nudum nomen** of the pristine rose has become the sign as well as the **res ipsa**, the thing itself, empty outside but rich inside.

Finally, it is not only in the beginning and the end of the novel that the rose appears; the rose is also the heart of the matter. The central theme of the novel is the growing up of the protagonist with its objective correlative in an incident in which a person with the association of rose, as in the case of Lucius, is involved. The central episode, which is placed exactly in the middle of the book, is Adso's sexual encounter with the peasant girl. It is useful to remember here that in the *Romance of the Rose*, rose symbolizes not only the lady (Guillaume de Lorris) but also the sexual union with the lady (Jean de Meun). In fact, Eco uses the word "rose" in its adjectival form in that episode ("a rosy perfume breathed from her lips"); further, throughout the description of the girl, Adso uses consistently metaphors borrowed from the Song of Songs, where the bride is called the "Rose of Sharon." If, then, the girl has a name in the imagination of Adso, quite possibly it is Rose, the **pristinum nomen** of the object of Adso's desires and the subject which Adso held once naked in his arms. He lost the girl to the inquisitors who probably executed her for the practice of witchcraft. Consequently, in the end of the novel Adso was holding not a subject with a name but an empty name without its bearer.<sup>2</sup> In one sense, then, the book is a tribute to the memory of the nameless peasant girl who loved Adso and whom Adso lost.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> "I would like to name each of them, but if I quote somebody I cannot do it without expressing or suggesting agreement or disagreement, and if I do so I shall indirectly or directly support one or another interpretation, thus contradicting my theoretical assumptions." "Prelude" xv, n.1.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Grace Alvarez-Altman for her suggestion that there could be a person behind the word **Rose**. I think she is right.

Works Cited

- A Talk With Eco. *Newsweek*, 13 November 1989, p. 96.
- Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*. Trans. Jack Lindsay. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1962.
- Coletti, Theresa. *Naming the Rose. Eco, Medieval Signs, and Modern Theory*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988.
- Eco, Umberto. *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*. Trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Name of the Rose*. Trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Prelude to a Palimpsest," in Inge.
- Eliot, T. S. *Collected Poems, 1909-1963*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963.
- Fleissner, Robert. *A Rose by Another Name: A Survey of Literary Flora from Shakespeare to Eco*. West Cornwall: Locust Hill P, 1989.
- Inge, M. Thomas, ed. *Naming the Rose: Essays on Eco's The Name of the Rose*. Jackson and London: UP of Mississippi, 1988.
- The Book of Daun Burnel the Ass*. Trans. Graydon Regenos. Austin: U of Texas P, 1959.
- The Romance of the Rose by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun*. Trans. Harry W. Robbins. New York: Dutton, 1962.
- Yeats, W. B. *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan, 1951.