Umberto Eco and the Meaning of the Middle Ages

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-The library is unlimited and cyclical. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope.

-Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel."
The narrative frame around Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, which intricately removes the story itself from its ultimate reader by insinuating long journeys, lost manuscripts, and various narrative intermediaries between text and recipient, also establishes a chain of connection between the late medieval murder mystery itself and its modern retelling, thus bringing the Middle Ages into present-day reality and vice versa. "Umberto Eco," the author's narrative *Doppelpënger*, who dates his introduction January 5, 1980, alleges that the novel itself is no more than a painstaking reconstruction of a manuscript that fell into his hands in Prague in August of 1968, shortly before "Soviet troops invaded that unhappy city," precipitating his flight from Czechoslovakia, the loss of the manuscript,
and a decade-long philological odyssey through old bookstores, libraries and manuscripts in order to recover or reconstruct what had been lost. The fictional "Eco" finally succeeds in his reconstruction of the disappeared copy of an "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;" but in the meantime many years have gone by. 1968 in Czechoslovakia is a long way from 1980 in Italy. The fictitious "Eco" then states:

I can transcribe my text with no concern for timeliness. In the years when I discovered the Abbé Vallet volume, there was a widespread conviction that one should write only out of commitment to the present, in order to change the world. Now, after ten years or more, the man of letters (restored to his loftiest dignity) can happily write out of pure love of writing. And so now I feel free to tell, for sheer narrative pleasure, the story of Adso of Melk, and I am comforted and consoled in finding it immeasurably remote in time (now that the waking of reason has dispelled all the monsters that its sleep had generated), gloriously lacking in any relevance for our day, atemporally alien to our hopes and our certainties.

This is far too heavy-handed to be even remotely believable; the reader is positively beaten over the head with the suggestion that "Eco" protests too much. As a skilled rhetorician, "Eco" surely knows that his insistence on the immeasurable remoteness and irrelevance of his story for our times in fact leads to the almost immediate conviction that the story will be anything but irrelevant and remote;
that it will be "a distant mirror,"\textsuperscript{3} perhaps even a roman-à-clef in which, under the guise of a medieval murder mystery, the real Eco writes allegorically of our own times and its horrors and joys. But this second reading is almost as suspiciously simple as the first, naive reading suggested by "Eco"'s insistence on irrelevance, and it too tends to consume itself, as even "Eco" surely knows it will. On the one hand \textit{l'art pour l'art} and the intellectual pristinely isolated from any actual worldliness, on the other hand an allegory. Connotation and denotation here wholly negate each other, and the reader is left in a state of tense suspicion and expectation, wondering what the truly true truth truly is.

But the reader never finds out. At the end of the novel he is as confused as he was at the beginning, for the entire narrative apparatus is the construction of a labyrinth in which the reader, like the narrator and the characters, is invited to chase after logical patterns, hypotheses, and signs, using the methods of human reason only to find at the end that they all dissolve into nothingness. The reader has been chasing after will-o-the-wisps, and even the patterns he thought he had discovered were merely his own creations, not the expression of reality or the hand of God. The narrative is thus a trap into which the reader strays unawares, finding out only after it is too late that there
is no getting out again and that he is, willingly or unwillingly, lost. The novel begins with the triumphant assurance of St. John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," in which there is no distinction between the signifier and the signified, but rather perfect unity and certainty. Meaning is inherent here in the Word itself; it does not need to be sought or created, for it is. Here there is no place for interpretation and no space or ambiguity in which the interpreter can move. As in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, "the simple truth is, that he who knows names knows also the things which are expressed by them." But this is only the beginning, for "we see now through a glass darkly, and the truth, before it is revealed to all, face to face, we see in fragments (alas, how illegible) in the error of the world, so we must spell out its faithful signals even when they seem obscure to us and as if amalgamated with a will wholly bent on evil." 

Evil has come into the world, and the evil is associated with a growing distance between signifier and signified, between the Word and God, so that now the original pristine state of certainty has been replaced with doubt, light with darkness, and the one longing of the devout is to return to the former unity, to go from the "signs of signs" to the Word itself, which is God, and thus to perform "the prayer of deciphering." At the beginning of the novel the narrator, though troubled by doubts and premonitions of
evil, still believes the task of interpretation to be a
good and devout one. But at the end even this fragile
hope is destroyed, as his efforts at deciphering lead only
to confusion and to further demonstrations of the vanity
of any hope for understanding, so that now all he can do
is be silent and surrender to the nothingness which he
now recognizes as the one principle of the universe: "Gott
ist ein lauter Nichts, ihn rührt kein Nun noch Hier."7
Silence is the greatest good. The narrator has discovered
that he is unable even to say or to think what he most
desires, and he has reached the Wittgensteinian conclusion:
"Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen."8
At the end of the story the narrator Adso, who comes from
Wittgenstein's own country, is worse off than he was at
the beginning. The exercise in narration has destroyed the
last vestiges of his faith, and he realizes that the entire
project of his book has become pointless.9 Now he is left
with nothingness: "stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda
tenemus."10 Here the signifier and the signified are not
merely separated by several layers of intermediate semio-
logical effluvium; they are completely sundered, and the
narrator is left with only names and lists that have no
reference to anything beyond themselves: language as a
closed magic circle. The optimistic world of Plato has
been destroyed. Knowledge of names brings one no closer
to knowledge of what is expressed by them. The prayer of
deciphering can not be performed. At the end there is the word, and the word only, and the word is not with God, who, if He exists at all, is completely separated from the word and from the self-referential language which is the only logical space to which human beings have access. If He is not Nothingness, then perhaps He is that "will wholly bent on evil" whose existence the narrator intimates at the beginning. By the end of the story "the Danube is crowded with ships loaded with fools going toward a dark place," and the narrator is a silent monk back at his Danubian monastery, the very place where the fictional "Eco" tries in vain to rediscover the manuscript after his own adventurous escape from Czechoslovakia and his cruise up the Danube from Vienna. The beginning and the end thus close in on each other like a snake circling into its own tail, again reestablishing the connection between those long dead days of the late Middle Ages, when the first stirrings of humanistic reason began to shake the foundation of certainty upon which Europe had rested for a thousand years, and the present day, when the circle is again closed, and reason itself begins to recognize with horror its own inadequacy and self-contradiction, and to yearn for a return to the days of certainty and totality; to give up its task and lie quietly contemplating the ineluctable, unspeakable and unapproachable, the essence which must forever lie hidden behind a dark veil. If it is an allegory,
then, the novel shows the seemingly circular path of reason from the old days to the new ones, from the end of the old Middle Ages to the beginning of the new. It becomes the drama of the doomed search for truth, and of the star-crossed effort of rationality to evade its own shadow. The question for the interpreter of the allegory, then, is what the Middle Ages mean for Eco, then and now, and how the emergence from the Middle Ages is doomed to failure.

Since the supertextual Eco carefully organizes the novel so that it will begin in Prague at the very moment when, in response to the growth of humanistic, non-dogmatic socialism—of "socialism with a human face," as it was called at the time—Soviet troops are about to invade, it would be tempting to interpret the novel as in some way an allegory or comment upon the development of Communism in the Twentieth Century. And such an interpretation would surely not be completely off the mark, not only because Eco, himself a European leftist, is passionately concerned with the subject or because as a careful and knowing storyteller he would not introduce the Prague Spring into his narrative without a purpose, but also because such depictions of the rise of Communism in Europe are not without a history of their own. The history of Marxism has by now become so rife with the designations "dogmatic," "schism," "Byzantine," "orthodox," "reformation" and "counterreformation" that it has become quite common to use
these words with reference to Communism in a naive way, forgetting that originally they had a very specific use: to compare modern Soviet Communism to medieval Roman Catholicism, with all the various implications, both good and bad, that such a comparison entails. Thus when Georg Lukács, in the first part of *History and Class Consciousness*, asks "What is orthdox Marxism?" he means the question seriously and uncritically: for him the term "orthodox" is positive, for it refers to the true dogma of the Communist Party and of its founders.\(^{11}\) For others the term takes on negative connotations, implying medieval discipline, intolerance and dogmatism. Thomas Mann's Jesuit mystic Naphta, himself based at least partly on Lukács, exemplifies the best-developed literary depiction of the comparison, along with its very real intellectual roots. Naphta, the aesthetic counterpart to the liberal secular rationalist Settembrini in *The Magic Mountain*, insists on the importance of discipline and dogma, and on the vision of a humanity freed from the burden of its many contradictions. As a Jesuit, he would seem to be the most bitter enemy of Communism, which is after all a doctrine which teaches that religion is no more than the opiate of the masses, but in fact he turns out to be the bitter enemy of capitalism and a Communist himself:
The Christian Middle Ages clearly recognized the inherent capitalism of the secular State: "Money will be emperor" is a prophecy made in the eleventh century. Would you deny that it has now literally come to pass, and with it the utter bedevilment of life in general?12

Naphta's Catholic hatred of capitalism goes even further:

The Fathers of the Church called mine and thine pernicious words, and private property usurpation and robbery. They repudiated the idea of personal possessions, because, according to divine and natural law, the earth is common to all men, and brings forth her fruits for the common good. They taught that avarice, a consequence of the Fall, represents the rights of property and is the source of private ownership. They were humane enough, anti-commercial enough, to feel that all commercial activity was a danger to the soul of man and its salvation. They hated money and finance, and called the empire of capital fuel for the fires of hell.13

Finally Naphta goes on to announce to the astonished Hans Castorp the arrival of a modern chiliology, a new dogma that perfectly fulfills the dreams of the old, carrying out the will of God and achieving the earthly paradise at the same time that it swept away all materialist secular modern culture:

Now, then: after centuries of disfavour these principles and standards are being resurrected by the modern movement of communism. The similarity is complete, even to the claim for world-domination made by international labour as against international industry and finance; the world-proletariat, which us to-day asserting the ideas of the Civitas Dei in opposition to the discredited and decadent standards of the capitalistic bourgeoisie. The dictatorship of the proletariat, the politico-economic means of salvation demanded by our age, does not mean domination for its own sake and
in perpetuity; but rather in the sense of a temporary spirit and force; in the sense of overcoming the world by mastering it; in a transcendental, a transitional sense, in the sense of the Kingdom. The proletariat has taken up the task of Gregory the Great, his religious zeal burns within it, and as little as he may it withhold its hand from the shedding of blood. Its task is to strike terror into the world for the healing of the world, that man may finally achieve salvation and deliverance, and win back at length to freedom from law and from distinction of classes, to his original status as child of God. \[14\]

For Thomas Mann's character, the spirit of the church fathers is perfectly embodied in the doctrines of Marx and Engels. Instead of secular materialism and individualism, Communism emphasizes discipline, devotion and service to a higher goal and to the vision of an earthly paradise. It replaces the random wanderings of a confused modern philosophy with the certainty of the revealed truth. It does not question its own ability to make statements about the world, and it does not lose itself in self-conscious criticism; rather, it turns outward with confidence, asserting self-evident and proclaimed truths. Devotion to the new religion gives peoples' lives meaning in a time troubled with the loss of meaning.

As Naphta sees it, all this is positive. But with the development of Communism in the Soviet Union, and particularly with the advent of Stalinism, it becomes increasingly negative. Now Communism in the Soviet Union comes increasingly to seem like a terrible historical mistake, the descent of the Middle Ages over a vast section of the world,
where a now perfect feudalism insists that the state owns everything, even its own citizens, who become slaves to the development of the dogmatic ideal. Moscow becomes the new Rome; the security police become the inquisition, complete with show trials and burnings; heretics are mercilessly hunted down and eliminated; the party chief in Moscow is infallible, and it is a crime to question him; pure organization and discipline take on paramount importance; the marshalling of power for power's sake, as the dogmatic apparatus becomes increasingly paranoid about its ability to maintain its own power. Gradually an entire people slips back into a horrible vision of the Middle Ages--only these Middle Ages are even worse than the original, for the instruments of torture and obedience are by now as modern and smooth as the dogma is medieval; and there is no hope of a pleasant afterlife as a reward for earthly troubles. By the time of the Spanish Civil War, Gerald Brenan writes that the originally liberating and refreshing movement towards Communist renewal had become ossified, and that the Communists were incapable of rational discussion. From every pore they exuded a rigid totalitarian spirit. Their appetite for power was insatiable and they were completely unscrupulous. To them winning the war meant winning it for the Communist party...But perhaps more serious...was their lack of moral or political integrity. Their opportunism extended to everything. They seemed to have no program that could not be reversed, if its reversal promised them any advantage, and they were just as ready to use the middle classes
against the proletariat as the proletariat against
the middle classes. No doubt the historical
method of Marxism lends itself to a good deal of
stretching: even so their going back on so many
of their past tenets recalled the feats of those
Jesuit missionaries of the seventeenth century
who, the better to convert the Chinese, suppressed
the story of the Crucifixion. It is a comparison
worth insisting on. By their devotion to an
institution rather than to an idea, to a foreign
Pope rather than to a national community, they
were following the road laid down by Loyola.
And their impact on Spain was very similar. Just
as the Jesuits from the time of Latinez had turned
their backs on the great ascetic and mystical
movements of their age and had worked to reduce
everything to a dead level of obedience and
devotion, so the Communists showed that the great
release of feeling that accompanies a revolution
was distasteful to them. They frowned on all
its impulses, both its cruel and its creative
ones, and applied a severely practical spirit to
its various manifestations.15

This comparison is more to the counterreformation and
the Baroque than to the Middle Ages proper. It refers to
the disintegration and paranoid defense of an original
hegemony. In view of the perceived ossification of revolu-
tionary dogma, in which the rigidified institutional
form of Communism seems to betray Communism's intellectual
and spiritual roots, it is not surprising that, just as new
charismatic reform movements sprang up during the Middle
Ages as a challenge to the institutional church, so too
various heretical and nonheretical sects began to spring
up within the body of world Communism, and that schisms
occurred. The division between East and West separates
authoritarian Moscow-oriented Communism from its humanistic
European counterpart, and thus Moscow is associated not
merely with Rome but with Byzantium. Splits between the followers of Mao, Trotsky, Hoxa, Ceaucescu, Stalin, Kruschev and even Gorbachev further rend the body of Communism. Most reform movements are rigorously eradicated and ostracized, and thus they take place outside the official doctrine of Communism, which remains that of Moscow; but some, like Alexander Dubcek's Prague Spring or Gorbachev's current reforms, grow up within the spiritual and corporal body of Communism itself. They become movements for reform rather than for revolution, pointing out the rigidity of institutional structures and urging greater flexibility and closeness to pristine ideals for the good of the movement itself.

Thus Dubcek's reform movement insisted on the separation of church and state--of the Communist Party apparatus from the machinery of government--, seeking to avoid the double bureaucracy that had resulted from the failures to articulate differences between Party and state. It called for pluralism and respect for minority opinions. It called for freedom of the press and insisted on the validity of separate paths to Communism--i.e. paths not identical to the one taken by Moscow. It called for a limited free market. All this amounted to the call for a kind of Renaissance, a fifteenth century in the history of world Communism, and caused tremendous excitement around the world, as leftists looked to Prague as the last great hope for Communism in the world.16
Then, duplicitously, the forces of orthodoxy, spearheaded by the enemies of reform in Moscow, East Berlin and Warsaw, put an end to the ferment as the armies of the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia, causing mass nonviolent resistance for several months but nevertheless gradually reinstating a rigid and orthodox rule under Dubek’s successor, Gustav Husak. Czechoslovakia went from the Renaissance of the Prague Spring to the Middle Ages of authoritarian neo-Stalinist dictatorship—-and "Umberto Eco" somehow managed to escape with the manuscript of a fourteenth century narrative that told the story of the resistance to change and new ideas in an Italian monastery where the Byzantine struggles for power between church and state, town and country, lords and royalty, monasteries and city clergy, feudal lords and a growing bourgeoisie, were as confusing as the various intrigues in and around Czechoslovakia in August of 1968; and where the struggle for rational thought, incarnate in a search through a labyrinth filled with books, is finally defeated through the utter destruction of the labyrinth/library and the burning of the books within it.

Since Eco's novel revolves around the discovery and burning of one particular book, the lost discourse of Aristotle on comedy and laughter, it would be tempting to draw the parallel further into the realm not only of politics but of aesthetics; to examine the course of Communist aesthetics through the Twentieth Century, comparing Jorge of Borges, the blind keeper of the library and of the ultimate truth,
to Zhdanov and Lukacs and the cultural commissars who bitterly opposed the advent of cultural modernism, insisting on the tried and true methods of heroic socialist realism—among them none other than East Germany’s cultural boss Kurt Hager, whose attacks on the Prague reforms had helped bring about the Soviet invasion in 1968. What Jorge hates most of all is laughter and comedy, for it puts the old verities in doubt, calling into question the seriousness of God's creation and of the natural order. Likewise the enemies of modernism within the Communist Party insisted on a heroic and unproblematic realism that directly embodied the dogma of the party: for them art was not a means to its own end; rather, it was a tool for the further clarification of a text that in its essence needed no interpretation. They thus rejected the marginal and the offbeat as distractions, insisting that both comedy and tragedy were the products of an inferior, presocialist order. In August of 1968, then, they sought to crush in Czechoslovakia a reform movement that had blossomed largely out of the efforts of writers and intellectuals to create a new and vital kind of culture in opposition to the ruling doctrines.

All this would be tempting; and since Eco’s book is rife with discussions of the connections between heresy and poverty, richness and orthodoxy, revolution and the Word of God, it would not be particularly out of place. Since Eco himself has written that Mann’s *Magic Mountain* was one
of the models he used in constructing his text, nothing would seem more self-evident than to make Jorge a medieval Naphta and William of Baskerville, the monkish detective hero of The Name of the Rose, a Settembrini, with the bewildered narrator, Adso of Melk, an unfortunate Hans Castorp experiencing the passage of time in the sub-Alpine monastery just as Castorp himself experiences the mysteries of time and the end of the European era in his Alpine sanatorium. All of this would be justified by the book itself.\textsuperscript{17}

And yet since this text is so devious, insisting constantly on the futility of interpretation and deciphering, even this rather complex allegory would seem almost too simple. While the idea of The Name of the Rose as "an immense acrostic\textsuperscript{18} on the European tragedy and the advent of a new Middle Ages in one-third of the world would be of great interest to Eastern European dissidents and those interested in the development of Communism, it would become rather remote for unpolitical or unconcerned Westerners. This does not necessarily mean that such an interpretation would be wrong; it merely means that it leaves one dissatisfied, wondering if the allegorical interpretation is not merely one part of a much larger truth that the reader, like William of Baskerville with his Anglo-Saxon logic, has failed to grasp. What is the meaning of the Middle Ages?

Since Eco the writer of the novel goes out of his way to insert into that very novel "Eco" the finder of a manuscript,
and since he has written an entire postscript explaining in highly abstract terms the origins and writing of his novel, it seems permissible to draw other texts by Eco into the struggle with the literary text, which is thus connected with the entire body of Eco's work—provided one constantly keep in mind the dangers and pitfalls of such a procedure. *The Name of the Rose* is not the only work in which Eco tries to come to terms with the Middle Ages. A great deal of Eco's writing has been specifically devoted to the problem of the Middle Ages and their relationship to the present time; and it becomes clear in these texts that Eco does not view the Middle Ages as merely a positive or negative allegory for this or that political structure; rather they are a constant condition, the state of being from which Western man is always departing and to which he is always returning. Thus the Middle Ages, for Eco, are not a particular period; rather, they are a general reference, a spiritual context: "Modern ages have revisited the Middle Ages from the moment when, according to historical handbooks, they came to an end," writes Eco in one essay significantly entitled "The Return of the Middle Ages."¹⁹ The implication is clear: While the historical handbooks mistakenly believe the Middle Ages to have come to an end around 1498, in fact they never ended. They are still with us, and we are still living in them. Thus it would be specious to single out one particular political system and assert that it is a reversion to the Middle Ages, since all of Western spiritual and intellectual
life is precisely that. Eco may write elsewhere that "the attacks that Franciscans and Dominicans made on each other are not very different from those of Trotskyites and Stalinists,"\textsuperscript{20} and this assertion may serve to shore up the Communist interpretation of \textit{The Name of the Rose}, suggesting that Eco's Franciscans are Trotskyites and his Dominicans Stalinists; but in the same essay Eco writes that Charles Manson is simply a monk who has gone too far, like his ancestors, in satanic rites."\textsuperscript{21} Clearly more is going on here than a one-on-one comparison. Eco writes, "all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages: Modern languages, merchant cities, capitalist economy... the struggle between the poor and the rich, the concept of heresy or ideological deviation, even our contemporary notion of love as a devastating unhappy happiness."\textsuperscript{22} For Eco, "The Middle Ages are the root of all our contemporary 'hot' problems, and it is not surprising that we go back to that period every time we ask ourselves about our origin."\textsuperscript{23} Thus, "Our return to the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots."\textsuperscript{24} Eco sums the process up thus: "If it is true—and it is—that the Middle Ages turned us into Western animals, it is equally true that people started dreaming of the Middle Ages from the very beginning of the modern era."\textsuperscript{25}

Since \textit{The Name of the Rose} captures the moment when the Middle Ages began to depart from itself and to transform
itself into the modern era, it is not far-fetched to imagine the novel as precisely such a dream, a returning to one's roots. It is an intricate reworking of the complicated, contradictory process by which man is always setting out from and returning to himself, using and misusing reason and the search for truth in a process that is both linear and circular, for while it tries to proceed in a straight line, it always winds up back where it began: the Middle Ages, Western man's spiritual origin.

The condition known as the Middle Ages is none other than the state of absolute certainty and clarity that exists when there is no separation between signs and what they represent: between our way of talking about things and things in themselves. Since there is no separation, the order of the universe and man's place in it is self-evident. The task of the philosopher is merely to repeat and explicate what is already known. He can not push back the borders of knowledge, for everything that can be known is already known. If, as in one of the novel's frequent metaphors, "the world speaks to us like a great book," then the reading of that book is unproblematic, for all creation says only one thing: God. If interpretation is needed, that interpretation is supplied not by the inquisitive inductive method of the empiricist intellect; it is derived by authority from first principles. The task of the human intellect is to obey authority and glorify God. It gives up the subjective feeling of random freedom for the objective knowledge of perfect freedom, which is the service of God.
The exit from the Middle Ages, then, might be described as the gradual recognition that the picture it paints of the world and of man's place in it is somehow inadequate. If the world is still a book, its interpretation has become problematic, for between signs and the things they represent are now other signs, and signs of signs, all pointing in different directions, sometimes seemingly at random, at other times in a sort of pattern, but always confusing and uncertain. Into the space opened up by the separation between sign and essence steps the rational intellect, the spirit of the Enlightenment, which Kant described as man's departure from his self-imposed immaturity, which in turn is no more than man's fear of freedom, his desire to submit himself to the dictates of established intellectual and religious authority. Enlightenment is thus the experience of freedom from given truths; man can search through the book of the world, interpreting signs according to the inductive functioning of his reason, not according to the deductive commands of authority. Thus man is thrown back on himself; he becomes a sort of intellectual detective, like William of Baskerville, seeking a way through the labyrinth of signs that is the outside world. His relationship to that world is dynamic but unstable, for it is constantly shifting as he moves through the labyrinth. But the tragedy or beauty of the search is that rational man can never be sure that he
has found what he is looking for; at the end of the labyrinth
he is back where he began, and there is still the gap between
sign and symbol, between the seeker through the labyrinth
and that which he seeks. He begins to suspect that there
can be no true knowledge which is not self-knowledge. In
return for his freedom rational man must pay a high price;
insecurity and uncertainty become his constant companions
as he continues his search through the labyrinth. He may
come to believe that even if the truth itself, that point
where signs and their meanings become unified again, is
infinitely far away, the search for the truth is itself
a part of the truth, perhaps the only part to which men
have access. But this belief and the pleasure of the search
require a strong sense of self-confidence and more than a
little modesty and humor, the ability to look critically at
the search and the seeker. Philosophy here is a process,
not a finished product. Not all times or all people can be
satisfied with such abstract rewards. They want the truth,
and they want it now. They do not want the insecure freedom
of movement and search; they want the security of stasis and
having found what they are looking for. Thus, the path of
the intellect through the labyrinth is always accompanied by
the desire to destroy the labyrinth itself and go back
immediately and via the quickest path to the original state
of certainty, where the identity between signs and things was
not so much discovered as given. The path of reason is always
dialectical and contradictory: as it goes forward, it also goes backwards, for it is always running up against its own limitations. William tells Adso,

The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless. Er muoz gelichesame die leiter abwerfen, so er an ir ufgestigen...  

he adds, quoting the Middle High German words of what he refers to as "a mystic from your land." This is an only slightly disguised medievalized version of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous parenthetical remark at the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

"(Er muss sozusagen die Leiter wegwerfen, nachdem er auf ihr hinaufgestiegen ist.)"  

Philosophers must throw away the philosophical ladder which they have used to climb to the realization that philosophy is a strictly limited enterprise, a hall of mirrors in which one can achieve no metaphysical truths—that traditional philosophical discourse is deeply contradictory, and in fact nonsensical. The philosopher's true task, then, is to analyze *signs* of things, or language, because he has no access to a world beyond the world that is *his* because he can speak of it. Kant's *Ding an sich* is infinitely distant here. "Alle Philosophie ist 'Sprachkritik,'" says Wittgenstein: all of philosophy is no more than the criticism of language, because thought
itself is limited by language: "The thought is the significant sentence," and "Language is the totality of sentences," while "The sentence shows the logical form of reality." 29

Another modern German-speaking philosopher takes the Kantian problem as his starting point in order to reach a conclusion that, while different from Wittgenstein's, nevertheless is in agreement with the rejection of traditional philosophical discourse. Friedrich Nietzsche goes so far as to reject the Socratic intellect in favor of a Dyonisian passion:

The calamity waiting to be borne from within the womb of theoretical culture gradually begins to fill modern man with fear, and he nervously tries to avert the danger by reaching for palliatives from the treasure house of his experiences, though he himself does not really believe in these palliatives. At the same time that he begins to suspect his own consequences in this way, natures of a great and generalized breadth, with unbelievable acuity, have used the tools of science itself in order to show the limitations and conditionality of perception as a whole. They have thus decisively refuted science's claim to universal validity and universal goals. In proving this, they have for the first time laid bare the insane illusion that arrogates to itself the ability to delve to the innermost depths of existence itself by means of causality. 30

Nietzsche goes on to name Kant and Schopenhauer as his intellectual forebears; and his critique in turn becomes the starting point of the massive self-criticism of modern man, who begins to recognize that his faith in science is just that: faith—and thus not to be separated from the faith of the Middle Ages. Suspecting the limits of his own reason, modern Western man flees from them and tries to
hide. But Nietzsche goes on, in words that make it clear why he has become the favorite philosopher of the postmodernists. He asserts that such hiding is vain and pitiful:

After all, the character of that "break" to which people are accustomed to referring as the original agony of modern culture is this: that the theoretical human being is terrified by the consequences of his own thought. Unsatisfied, he no longer dares to surrender himself to the terrible icy stream of existence. Instead, he runs fearfully up and down the bank. He no longer wants to have anything in its entirety—complete even with all the natural cruelty of nature. The optimistic way of looking at things has made him too soft for this. But at the same time he feels that a culture based on the principles of science must face destruction if it begins to become illogical—i.e., if it begins to run away from its own conclusions. Our art reveals precisely this generalized distress. It is in vain that people turn imitatively to all great productive periods and natures; in vain that people pile up all of "world literature" around modern man in an attempt to console him, placing him in the middle of the styles and artists of every era, so that he will give them a name, as Adam gave names to the animals. In spite of all this, modern man remains eternally hungry. He is a "critic" without real desire and power. He is the Alexandrian man. In the end he is nothing more than a librarian and a proofreader. Surrounded by dusty books and printing errors, he goes blind in misery.}

Nietzsche's description fits not only the monastery library and the librarians in The Name of the Rose; it also fits the modern or postmodern insistence on stylistic syncretism and anachronism in art.

But Wittgenstein's path and William of Baskerville's
is different: a sort of makeshift compromise between the desire to search freely for the truth by rational means and the necessity of never quite being able to find it by using these means. For Brother William, "The only truths that are useful are instruments to be thrown away" in order to continue the search: a cold practicality. But in time even William's confidence is shaken: "Where is 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." And at the end he complains, "It's hard to accept the idea that there cannot be an order in the universe because it would offend the free will of God and His omnipotence. So the freedom of God is our condemnation, or at least the condemnation of our pride."  

To which William's young companion Adso replies,

But how can a necessary being exist totally polluted with the possible? What difference is there, then, between God and primogenial chaos? Isn't offering God's absolute omnipotence and His absolute freedom with respect to His own choices tantamount to demonstrating that God does not exist?

The response of the medieval spirit is to negate not the question itself but the asking of it: to hide the uncertainty of essences behind a labyrinth of authority and deviousness. But the labyrinth here is on several levels. At the highest level, the nature of things
itself is labyrinthine, and God himself is the creator of the labyrinth. The labyrinth is a library somewhat like the one which Jorge Luise Borges describes when he says that "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings."\textsuperscript{35} The library is an enigma to man but not to God:

The Library exists \textit{ab aeterno}. This truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world, cannot be placed in doubt by any reasonable mind. Man, the imperfect librarian, may be the product of chance or of malevolent demiurgi; the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatical volumes, of inexhaustible stairways for the traveler and latrines for the seated librarian, can only be the work of a god. To perceive the distance between the divine and the human, it is enough to compare these crude wavering symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book, with the organic letters inside: punctual, delicate, perfectly black, inimitably symmetrical.\textsuperscript{36}

For spirits like William the labyrinth is an invitation to explanation and interpretation. At a lower level the labyrinth arises out of the dictates of human authority, the medieval spirit trying not to uncover but to conceal the truth, which in this case is its own fear of nihilism; for the insistence on Baroque and Byzantine decoration, on arabesques and secrets, is merely the counterpart to emptiness and uncertainty. At the lowest level the labyrinth is an actual physical structure through which Brother
William and Adso are trying to find their way. The labyrinth exists at the level of God, at the level of man, and at the level of nature. What is specifically medieval is not the fact of the labyrinth—for the labyrinth is a philosophical given—but rather man's attitude towards it. He can view the labyrinth as the forbidding protector of primal secrets, meant to keep man at a distance through the order of blind obedience, or he can view the labyrinth as an invitation to an elaborate game, a puzzle to be solved. Thus William's mentors are the great Roger Bacon and William of Ockham, who combine religion with reason. But William's nemesis, Jorge of Borgos, despises Bacon and all the other forerunners of a modern, non-medieval thought, because they are not sufficiently obedient. For Jorge, wisdom is not the pleasure of searching for the new, relying on one's own common sense and reason; it is the veneration of and obedience to authority. Jorge sermonizes that the work of the wise man is study, and the preservation of knowledge. Preservation of, I say, not search for, because the property of knowledge, as a divinity, is that it is complete and has been defined since the beginning, in the perfection of the Word, which expresses itself to itself...There is no progress, no revolution of ages, in the library of knowledge, but at most a continuous and sublime recapitulation.

And Jorge goes on to specify what the content of that knowledge is:
I am He who is, said the God of the Jews. I am the way, the truth, and the life, said our Lord. There you have it: Knowledge is nothing but the awed comment on these two truths... beyond that there is nothing further to say. There is only to continue meditation, to gloss, preserve.38

Given this task, it is clear for Jorge what the greatest sin of a scholar must be:

Now, my brothers, what is the sin of pride that can tempt a scholar-monk? That of considering as his task not preserving but seeking some information not yet vouchsafed mankind, as if the last word had not already resounded in the words of the last angel who speaks in the book of Scripture...39

The ultimate intellectual sin, then, is philosophy, love of knowledge for its own sake. Sin is the pride which believes itself capable of better or more adequately interpreting that which requires no interpretation: the Word of God and its earthly manifestation in the physical world.

Eco's novel depicts the moment in history when the new spirit of inquiry is about to destroy the old certainties, while simultaneously leading to a countermovement in favor of the old certainty. Subordinated to this movement and implicit in it are the rise of capitalism, liberalism and modern science; the development of the bourgeoisie and the new trading cities; struggles within the church; the switch from Latin to vulgar national tongues; a growing
individualism, the rise of heretical sects and protestantism; the uprooting of ancient traditions and the search for new ones. All these developments have more or less historical specificity, but they are merely outward manifestations of the central problem, which is a philosophical and an epistemological one. It is this central medieval dilemma that characterizes modern man, for medieval man was not really faced with the dilemma, living as he did in a state of blissful unself-consciousness.

The insecurity of freedom leads to the decline of the sacred, of that which demands and receives absolute obedience and worship. But in his new secular glory, his literate Gutenbergenian rationality, man feels that something is lacking, and he begins looking again for the sacred, for something to which he can give up the burden of thought, which in its essence is no more than the burden of existing as Kant's fully adult human being. In the midst of a terrible freedom, man seeks for the soothing feeling of a domination to which he can surrender.

Hence the development of modernity is accompanied by the constant critique of modernity, the development of secularism by the constant search for the sacred. Eco states in an essay entitled "The Sacred is Not Just a Fashion" that all over the Western world there is a marked "return to religious thought" that is manifested in the growth of cults, gurus, fundamentalism, religious politics, millenarianism, theocratic revolts, and a whole host of
atheistic or polytheistic religions from astrology and vegetarianism all the way to numerology and the worship of humanist culture or rationalist science as a fetish. Eco writes,

the mass media indicate the symptoms of a crisis in the optimistic ideologies of progress: both the positivistic-technological, which wanted a better world with the help of science, and the materialist-historical, which wanted to build a perfect society through revolution.\textsuperscript{40}

Eco goes on to note that the most interesting development in the new religiousness is

a certain atheist sacrality not presented as the answer of traditional religious thought (to the disappointment of the left), but rather as the autonomous product of a crisis in secular thinking...The interesting thing is that it follows, in atheistic forms, the modes that typified religious thought.\textsuperscript{41}

The God of this new atheist theology is not the Bible's "he who is:" rather, he is "he who is not." One cannot talk about him, because he is completely separate from words, infinitely removed from the signs that human beings use to communicate with each other and with themselves:

He hides himself, is ineffable, can be drawn upon only through negative theology, is the sum of what cannot be said of him; in speaking of him we celebrate our ignorance and he is named at most as vortex, abyss, desert, solitude, silence, absence.\textsuperscript{42}

This is the implacable, unknowable God that Adso addresses
at the end of the narrative: a God of nothingness who both fascinates and repels, relentless and indestructible testimony to the fact that there are some things man will never be able to reach with his paltry reason. This is the great beyond about which one cannot speak, the theological counterpart to Wittgenstein's demand for silence: "Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische." This God is the absolute negation of "the nineteenth-century ideology of progress," as Eco calls it:

This secularized and infinitely absent God has accompanied contemporary thought under various names, and burst forth in the renascence of psychoanalysis, in the rediscovery of Nietzsche and Heidegger, in the new anti-metaphysics of Absence and Difference. During the period of political optimism a sharp break was created between these ways of conceiving the sacred, that is to say the unknowable, and the ideologies of political omnipotence. With the crisis both of Marxist optimism and that of liberal optimism this religiosity of the void in which we are steeped has invaded even the thought of the so-called Left.

Eco concludes that in the wake of these phenomena it is quite possible that "a new Middle Ages is to take shape, a time of secular mystics, more inclined to monastic withdrawal than to civic participation." Enter "Eco" in Prague, the discovery of a manuscript, and the reconstruction of the Middle Ages by a secular mystic now "restored to his loftiest dignity" by the disintegration of the leftist optimism of the decade which began coming to an end with the Prague Spring.
For the new secular mystics, history, if it ever existed, has come to an end, and there is no more development, but rather continual being: existence in a kind of post-history where man stands lonely at the end of the long path of Western history looking back over the catastrophes and successes of what has gone before, picking and choosing at will like Adso in the ruins of the monastery from the rubble and bric-a-brac; fitting the pieces together in what he knows very well is no more than a game. He cannot commit himself to anything any more, for he knows that the immanent meaning required for commitment is infinitely far away from him. His job is merely to try to fill the emptiness around him with patterns and semblances of order. Walking in melancholy up and down the banks of the terrible icy stream of modernity, he is like Wallace Stevens’ singer creating order:

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.46
This is posthistory: what comes after the modern has died away and become no more than a style itself, like any other style: when the present itself has become passé. It is the era of syncretism and anachronism, a new Middle Ages living in the ruins of classical culture. Among the mystics are monks trying to preserve the modern heritage, monks trying to destroy it, and a great mass of people who have now reversed the process begun by Gutenberg at the end of the Middle Ages: while Gutenberg's technological invention had brought literacy to the masses, weaning them away from images and drawing them to the word, to ratio, the new technology draws them back into the image, the medieval icon and away from ratio. Surrounded by a plethora of images and pictures, by the illusion of knowledge, they gradually sink back into the spiritual equivalent of illiteracy, leaving the few, the new secular monks, to preserve the word in all its rigor. For some, like Brother William, post-modernism becomes a challenging game, a test of strength; the challenge for them is to continue on the modern path of ratio in spite of the fact that they know they will never find exactly what they long for. The development of modernist forms has come to an end for them; and they are left to sift through what is left of the developments, concentrating on the content of the forms. Their job is to construct and deconstruct models of what might be, of an ultimate text hidden somewhere in the
library:

On some shelf in some hexagon (men reasoned) there must exist a book which is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest: some librarian has gone through it and he is analagous to a god.47

But it is only God who gets to view the book itself. Human seekers can only hope to come closer to it through deciphering of the less sublime texts at their disposal. They are the quintessential happy scholars, practising what Nietzsche called the "fröhliche Wissenschaft."

Others demand more—or less. They reject the nonchalant gallantry of the challenge to treat the labyrinth as a game. Unable to sit back at a distance and observe and calculate, they want the authentic, the immediate. They reject secular religion and demand religion itself. Rather than an archaeology of the modern, they want the realization of the truly medieval. They therefore demand sweeping reform and a return to essences, to God. They are the new sects which call for a fundamental revolution in the church, in the state, and in society. They are the Franciscans, the Albigensians, the Fraticelli of their day. Some of them are holy, some evil, for as Brother William says, the line between the saint and the devil is a hard one to draw, and what motivates them both may be a similar force.

In 20 or 30 years all peoples of the world will turn back to God. This is not related only to Egypt. The systems which govern the world today
are going to be discredited. People must find another system. Religion is the alternative, says Isaam al-Irian, an Egyptian fundamentalist now fighting against the secularism of his country. His words are echoed all around the world by fundamentalists who claim that the advance of modernity has emptied human life of meaning, creating a trivial façade to cover the emptiness underneath. From Protestant fundamentalists and Catholic liberation theologians to Islamic radicals and resurgent Jewish orthodoxy, and from upstarts within established religions to the founders of new religions and new sects, the movement is the same: away from a secular emptiness and towards a world filled with imminence, even if only by decree. This is no longer the post-modern world of the "fröhliche Wissenschaft;" it is the world of authority and austerity, of transcendence and faith. It is a world inimical to ratio. Some of the new fundamentalists combine their religious activism with social and political insight into the needs of the great masses of the world's impoverished; others serve the elite of established wealth and power. But both appeal to the same religious need.

Even if these new holy men create their religions as an intricate Byzantine maze to conceal their own doubts—for they too are inescapably modern, and that is their tragedy--, the result is the same. They claim to have recognized what the happy scholars of the postmodern world do not see: that ordinary people need faith and authority
in order to bear their own existence, and thus that they learn to love the very authoritarian domination that seems at first to be harming them. They see that people are happier in a state of blind faith than in a state of secular and sophisticated doubt, and so they oblige by giving the world what it wants and needs. Like Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor, they are much kinder than the prophet of freedom, Jesus Christ:

'Didst Thou not often say then, "I will make you free?" But now Thou hast seen these "free" men,' the old man adds suddenly, with a pensive smile. 'Yes, we've paid dearly for it,' he goes on, looking sternly at Him, 'but at last we have completed that work in Thy name. For fifteen centuries we have been wrestling with Thy freedom, but now it is ended and over for good.'

Insisting on men's need for miracle, mystery and authority, the Grand Inquisitor continues,

I tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born. But only one who can appease their conscience can take over their freedom. In bread there was offered Thee an invincible banner; give bread, and man will worship Thee, for nothing is more certain than bread. But if someone else gains possession of his conscience—oh! then he will cast away Thy bread and follow after him who has ensnared his conscience. In that Thou wast right. For the secret of man's being is not only to live but to have something to live for. Without a stable conception of the object of life, man would not consent to go on living, and would rather destroy himself than remain on earth, though he had bread in abundance. That is true.
But what happened? Instead of taking men's freedom from then, Thou didst make it greater than ever! Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering. And behold, instead of giving a firm foundation for setting the conscience of man at rest for ever, Thou didst choose all that is exceptional, vague and enigmatic; Thou didst choose what was utterly beyond the strength of men, acting as though Thou didst not love them at all—Thou who didst come to give Thy life for them! 50

The emptiness of the secular mystic and the emptiness of the Inquisitor here come together, and both are opposed to the living religion of freedom with which Christ had blessed—or cursed—mankind. If Christianity is the spirit of the resurgent Middle Ages embodied in the Inquisitor, then it is not the original Christianity of Christ and his free disciples but Christianity as the dogmatic orthodoxy of an authority that no longer desires the living spirit but prefers the dead word; a Christianity without Christ. This is the spirit that Eco's Jorge and Mann's Naphta embody: the recognition that people want to be dominated, that they cannot stand uncertainty, enigmas, labyrinths—the state of freedom that comes when domination suddenly takes away its caring hand. As Naphta says,

All educational organizations worthy of the name have always recognized what must be the ultimate and significant principle of pedagogy: namely the absolute mandate, the iron bond, discipline,
sacrifice, the renunciation of the ego, the curbing of the personality. And lastly, it is an unloving miscomprehension of youth to believe that it finds its pleasure in freedom; its deepest pleasure lies in obedience. 51

It is the same spirit which speaks out of the mouth of Jorge when he condemns laughter because it puts man at a distance from fear and obedience, creating space for the entry of individuality and thought—of freedom. In the world of austerity and authority there is no space for the laughter of Nietzsche's "fröhliche Wissenschaft," and so all laughter must be condemned and Aristotle's book on comedy destroyed. This is a world implacably opposed to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who celebrates laughter, games and puzzles:

This crown, the crown of the laughing one, this crown of roses: I myself put it on my head, I myself pronounced my laughter holy. I found no one else today who was strong enough for this.

Zarathustra the dancer, Zarathustra the weightless one waving his wings, the one who prepares for flight, waving for all the birds, ready and complete, a holy and carefree being:

Zarathustra the truth-sayer, Zarathustra the truth-laugher, not impatient, not one for absolutes—one who makes leaps and sideways bounds: I myself put this crown upon my head!

This crown of the laughing one, this crown of roses: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown! I pronounced laughter to be holy; you higher beings, learn from me—laughter! 51

The Middle Ages of Eco's novel are thus not merely an allegory for Communism or for capitalism, for faith or for unbelief; rather, they describe a place in the spirit which is fundamentally our own; and they define a problem
which we must confront, inasmuch as we think about the conditions of our existence. Caught between Brother William and Jorge, Adso falls into a despairing nihilism; and the reader ends the book with no answers, but with many questions. For both William's "fröhliche Wissenschaft" and Jorge's asceticism are somehow unsatisfactory alternatives: the one means individualism, freedom and the intellect, but it also means a nonchalant emptiness and lack of commitment; while the other means faith and commitment but also surrender and loss of freedom. If Jorge is the villain of this tale and Brother William the hero, then Jorge, for all his faults, is a strangely comprehensible villain and Brother William a somewhat uninspiring hero. Both are part of the Middle Ages and the exit from them: the one an authoritarian dogmatist and the other an almost secular detective-monk. The reader wants neither, or he wants them both. For both are as modern as they are medieval, and both are a fundamental part of the soul's journey. With Faust, modern man can cry out, "Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust". The question is whether Adso or the reader might, with both as guides to lead him through the infernal and paradisiac labyrinth of earthly and divine mysteries, somehow be able to balance very carefully somewhere between the two, a tightrope walker using each to correct the excesses of the other as he makes his way through the modern maze. It is a question as worthy of asking as it is of being answered.
Notes

2. Rose, p.5.
3. The name of a book by Barbara Tuchman about which Eco speaks in connection with the rediscovery of the Middle Ages. Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror (New York: Knopf, 1978). In her introduction, Tuchman writes: "After the experiences of the terrible 20th century, we have greater fellow-feeling for a distraught age whose rules were breaking down under the pressure of adverse and violent events;" and she quotes Voltaire as saying, "History never repeats itself; man always does," p.xiv. Umberto Eco, Travels in Hyperreality (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p.62.
5. Rose, p.11.
6. Rose, p.11.
9. In the same way, at the end of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus Wittgenstein comes to the realization that the project of the book he has written is itself meaningless: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless...," p.189.

17. In his Postscript to The Name of the Rose (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p.30, Eco cites Mann's Magic Mountain as one of his models and sketches in highly personal terms the origins of his one novel. Eco also notes that his model for Adso's narration is Soren Zeitblom in Mann's Doktor Faustus, p.33.

20. Travels, p.81.
22. Travels, p.64.
27. "(He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)" Wittgenstein, pp.188-9.
29. Wittgenstein, p.60 (sentences 4 and 4.001) and pp.78-9 (sentence 4.121).
32. Rose, p.492.
33. Rose, p.493.
34. Rose, p.493.
37. Rose, p.399.
38. Rose, p.399.
40. Travels, p.91.
43. **Travels**, pp.186-7. "There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical," Wittgenstein, pp.186-7.


45. **Travels**, p.94.


47. Borges, p.56. The original text contains a minor typographical error: "gone though it" instead of "gone through it."


51. Mann, p.400.

52. Nietzsche, p.41. Nietzsche is quoting himself here.


for Adam Bżoch