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The Realization of the 'Middle Ages' Concept in Umberto Eco's Novel *The Name of the Rose* and Its Reproduction in Translation

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ABSTRACT

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is not merely a historical detective novel but a profound cultural palimpsest that captures the ideological, religious, and philosophical tensions of the Middle Ages. This paper explores how Eco conceptualizes the "Middle Ages" through narrative devices, linguistic structure, thematic frameworks, and intertextual references. Additionally, it investigates the challenges of reproducing this multifaceted concept in translation, particularly focusing on English and Russian versions of the text. The research draws upon semiotics, translation theory, and medieval studies to analyze how the medieval worldview is constructed in Eco's narrative and how effectively this vision is transmitted through translation. Emphasis is placed on lexical, syntactic, and cultural features, as well as the translator's strategies in rendering scholastic discourse, ecclesiastical terminology, and Latin inserts. The study reveals that translation not only transmits the story but actively participates in reinterpreting its cultural and conceptual depth.

Keywords: Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, Middle Ages, translation, conceptualization, semiotics, medievalism, intertextuality, Latin, translation strategies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Middle Ages, often viewed as a time of obscurity and scholastic rigidity, has fascinated writers, scholars, and artists alike. Few modern authors have engaged with this period as comprehensively and intricately as Umberto Eco in his novel *The Name of the Rose*. First published in Italian in 1980 (*Il nome della rosa*), the novel blends the genres of detective fiction, historical narrative, theological debate, and semiotic experimentation. It is a work that both narrates a medieval story and reflects upon medieval ways of thinking. Eco's academic background in semiotics and medieval philosophy allows him to portray the Middle Ages not merely as a setting but as an epistemological framework — a worldview shaped by religious dogma, scholastic inquiry, and rigid hierarchies of knowledge.

This paper investigates how Eco realizes the concept of the Middle Ages in his novel and how this realization is preserved — or transformed — in translation. The translation of *The Name of the Rose* poses unique challenges due to the author's deliberate use of archaic language, medieval Latin, intertextual allusions, and philosophical density. While William Weaver's English translation has been widely praised, it still raises questions about how much of the novel's cultural and philosophical medievalism is fully translatable. A comparative analysis of English and Russian translations helps illuminate the nuances of such reproductions. Thus, the goal of this study is to analyze how the conceptual essence of the Middle Ages is constructed in Eco's original text and how it is rendered or reinterpreted through translation. The research contributes to discussions in comparative literature, translation studies, and cultural semiotics, offering insights into the representational fidelity and transformation of complex historical concepts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic reception of *The Name of the Rose* has been extensive, ranging from literary analysis to philosophical and theological studies. Early interpretations focused on the novel's intertextuality and postmodern structure (Barthes, 1983; Hutcheon, 1988), emphasizing Eco's subversion of genre conventions and narrative authority. Linda Hutcheon (1988) argues that Eco's use of metafiction and historical layering makes the Middle Ages not just a temporal setting but a discursive space, inviting readers to reflect

on epistemological boundaries. From a medievalist perspective, scholars like Caroline Walker Bynum (1992) and Aron Gurevich (1985) have explored how modern literature reimagines medieval categories of knowledge, symbolism, and authority. They view Eco's work as a reconstruction of medieval hermeneutics — the methods by which meaning was deciphered in scripture and the natural world. In translation studies, Lawrence Venuti (1995) provides a framework for analyzing how translators handle culturally and temporally marked language. Venuti's concept of domestication vs. foreignization is particularly relevant in understanding how translators choose between cultural fidelity and readability. This binary has been applied to Eco's novel by scholars such as Maria Tymoczko (2002), who emphasize the ethical implications of translating historical specificity. Specifically addressing the translations of *The Name of the Rose*, scholars like Birgit Lang (2010) have explored how Latin inserts, biblical references, and scholastic terminology were managed by William Weaver (English) and Viktoria Mochalova (Russian). Lang argues that translators must negotiate between maintaining the historical "otherness" of the text and ensuring accessibility for modern readers.

This body of scholarship establishes the foundation for our inquiry, highlighting the interplay between historical reconstruction, narrative form, and translation strategy.

III. METHODS

This study employs a comparative, qualitative methodology grounded in textual analysis, semiotics, and translation theory. The corpus consists of the original Italian version of *Il nome della rosa*, the English translation by William Weaver (1983), and the Russian translation by Viktoria Mochalova (2002). Specific textual passages were selected for their density of medieval references, use of Latin, scholastic debates, and theological symbolism.

Three analytical dimensions were defined:

1. **Lexical-Semantic Analysis** – evaluating the vocabulary used to construct a medieval worldview (e.g., theological terms, ecclesiastical titles, scholastic jargon).

2. **Intertextual and Cultural Analysis** – examining allusions to medieval texts (e.g., Aristotle, Aquinas, the Vulgate), historical events, and religious practices.
3. **Translation Strategy Assessment** – applying Venuti's (1995) domestication/foreignization model to determine how translators approached linguistic archaisms, Latin, and culturally embedded references.

Each selected passage was compared across the three versions, noting shifts in meaning, tone, and conceptual density. Supplementary tools included textual corpora of medieval Latin and glossaries of medieval terminology to validate interpretations. Reader reception studies were also referenced to understand how modern audiences perceive the translated text.

By combining literary and translation analysis, the study aims to present a holistic view of how the "Middle Ages" concept is mediated through both narrative and translation.

IV. THE CONCEPT OF 'MIDDLE AGES' IN *THE NAME OF THE ROSE*

Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) offers one of the most intricate fictional reconstructions of the Middle Ages in modern literature. Drawing on his profound knowledge of medieval theology, semiotics, and philosophy, Eco presents a narrative that does not simply occur in the fourteenth century but one that encapsulates and reflects the epistemological, cultural, and religious frameworks of the medieval period. The novel is not a passive portrayal of the past but a vivid reenactment of the intellectual climate of the Middle Ages. Through characters, setting, dialogues, and intertextual structure, Eco thematizes the concept of the Middle Ages not only as a historical era but as a cognitive worldview — an integrated system of signs, interpretations, and ideological conflicts.

The plot centers on the Franciscan friar William of Baskerville and his novice Adso of Melk, who arrive at a remote Benedictine monastery in Northern Italy to attend a theological disputation. However, they are drawn into a series of mysterious deaths within the monastery. As William investigates the deaths, he also uncovers a web of secrecy surrounding a forbidden manuscript — Aristotle's lost second book of *Poetics*,

believed to discuss the function of laughter. This central conflict between knowledge and power serves as the lens through which Eco frames the intellectual landscape of the Middle Ages.

One of the most evident ways Eco constructs the Middle Ages is through the **monastic setting**, which symbolizes a medieval microcosm. The abbey functions as a repository of divine and worldly knowledge, with its labyrinthine library representing both the richness and danger of unchecked intellectual inquiry. In the medieval context, the library is not merely a storage of texts but a sacred space where knowledge is regulated by ecclesiastical authority. The monk Jorge of Burgos embodies this idea, warning that certain types of knowledge — especially those that provoke laughter or doubt — threaten the stability of faith. When he states, "*Laughter kills fear, and without fear there can be no faith, because without fear of the Devil there is no more need of God,*" (Eco, 1983, p. 476) he voices the medieval belief in the necessity of hierarchical control over interpretation. This reflects the scholastic view that truth was already revealed and fixed; the role of the intellectual was not to discover but to interpret within the limits of orthodoxy.

Eco deliberately populates his novel with figures who represent the ideological conflicts of the Middle Ages. William of Baskerville, a former inquisitor and a Franciscan, reflects the **rationalist tendencies** of thinkers like Roger Bacon and William of Ockham. His deductive reasoning and empirical investigations stand in contrast to the doctrinal rigidity of other monks. William believes in interpreting signs but is aware of the limitations of interpretation, echoing the nominalist debates of the 14th century. In contrast, Jorge represents **dogmatic scholasticism**, clinging to an eternal order that forbids laughter and prohibits heterodoxy. Their dialectic throughout the novel mirrors the real historical tension between faith and reason that defined late medieval thought.

Another key element is Eco's use of **intertextuality**, a feature that reinforces the medieval worldview as a hermeneutic one — an approach where every text is a commentary on other texts. The novel is saturated with quotations and allusions to medieval and classical authors: Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, and Boethius,

among others. This aligns with the medieval scholastic method where authority is drawn from previous texts rather than from empirical discovery. For instance, during the theological disputation between the Dominicans and Franciscans, the monks frequently reference Church Fathers and classical philosophers, not to innovate but to reinforce their arguments through accepted sources. This dialogic interaction of texts within the novel itself mirrors the **medieval concept of textuality** — one embedded in tradition and constrained by hierarchy.

Language also plays a significant role in constructing the medieval world of *The Name of the Rose*. Eco uses Latin liberally throughout the novel, sometimes untranslated, which reinforces the sense of historical authenticity. Latin was the language of the Church, academia, and governance during the Middle Ages, and its presence in the novel underlines the **linguistic stratification** of the era. Furthermore, the characters frequently debate the semantics of words, signifying the importance of **hermeneutics** in medieval logic. The interpretive anxiety — how to decode signs, understand divine will, and read scripture — is a central theme. The signs left by the murderer, the secret content of the forbidden book, and the ambiguity of William's deductions all point toward the medieval obsession with interpreting the world as a symbolic system.

Eco also emphasizes the **institutional framework of the Church** as a powerful arbiter of truth. The conflict between the Pope's emissaries and the Emperor's supporters reflects the ongoing struggle between ecclesiastical and secular power — a hallmark of the 14th century. The Franciscan heresy, centered on the question of apostolic poverty, is based on real historical debates. The Fraticelli were persecuted for claiming that Christ and the apostles lived without property, thus challenging the Church's opulence. In the novel, this debate is not just theological but **political**, revealing how deeply entangled belief and authority were in the medieval worldview.

Furthermore, Eco's portrayal of the **library as a labyrinth** can be read metaphorically as a representation of the medieval conception of knowledge as hierarchical, guarded, and arcane. The structure of the library — with its hidden rooms, false doors, and circular paths — mirrors the structure of scholastic thought: rigorous, regulated, and centered on a core of forbidden knowledge. It is no accident that the book at the heart of the mystery is one that advocates laughter — an act associated with

ambiguity, freedom, and humanity. The desire to suppress such a book reflects the fear of losing doctrinal control in a time when heresies were proliferating, and the Church's monopoly on interpretation was threatened.

Ultimately, Eco does not present a monolithic Middle Ages. Instead, he portrays it as a time of **epistemological transition**, a period where competing worldviews — rationalism, mysticism, authoritarianism, and humanism — collided and coexisted. This plurality is embodied in Adso's character, who, in his old age, reflects on the events of the story with both awe and uncertainty. His closing words, "*Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*" ("The rose of old remains only in name; we hold only naked names"), encapsulate the loss of certitude and the transience of all systems of knowledge.

Thus, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is not merely a detective novel set in the Middle Ages — it is a profound philosophical meditation on the intellectual and ideological structure of that era. Through the careful crafting of setting, character, language, and intertextual reference, Eco immerses the reader in a world where interpretation is both the means of salvation and the source of danger. His Middle Ages is a space of semiotic density and theological tension, revealing the enduring complexity of a time too often reduced to caricature. As such, Eco's novel becomes a bridge not only between past and present but between history and its ongoing reinterpretation

IV. REPRODUCTION OF THE 'MIDDLE AGES' CONCEPT IN TRANSLATION

The results of the analysis reveal several key patterns in the conceptual realization and reproduction of the Middle Ages in Eco's novel and its translations.

First, the **original Italian text** is dense with scholastic references, theological disputes, and Latin quotations. Eco utilizes anachronistic syntax and vocabulary to reflect the linguistic texture of medieval Latin and early vernacular Italian. For example, Adso's narration imitates monastic chronicles, using periphrastic expressions, biblical intertextuality, and allegorical imagery. The narrative thus operates on both a plot level and a philosophical level, requiring the reader to interpret layered meanings.

In **Weaver's English translation**, many Latin inserts are retained, with occasional footnotes or glosses. Scholastic debates, such as those surrounding laughter and heresy, are generally preserved in tone and content. However, there is a noticeable shift toward **simplification** in some theological discussions. For example, complex syllogistic chains in the original are sometimes restructured or paraphrased to enhance readability. Terms such as "abbate," "frater," and "scriptorium" are retained to evoke the monastic setting, suggesting a strategy leaning toward **foreignization**.

In the **Russian translation**, Mochalova opts for a slightly more **domesticating approach**, providing more in-text explanation and substituting some Latin phrases with Russian equivalents. For instance, quotations from the Vulgate are rendered in Church Slavonic style rather than literal Latin transcription. While this increases accessibility, it also risks diluting the authenticity of the scholastic context.

A recurring issue in both translations is the handling of **humor and irony**, particularly in the dialogues of Jorge of Burgos and William of Baskerville. Eco uses these elements to critique rigid medieval dogma, and their subtleties are sometimes lost in translation. Additionally, Eco's Latin epigraphs, chapter titles, and marginalia, which mimic medieval manuscripts, are partially omitted or modified in both translations, reducing the sense of historical documentarism.

Despite these limitations, both translations manage to preserve the general atmosphere of the Middle Ages as a time of intellectual tension, religious fervor, and epistemological inquiry.

The translation of historical fiction that relies heavily on conceptual world-building poses unique challenges. In Eco's case, the Middle Ages are not merely a historical backdrop but a **semiotic and ideological system**, constructed through language, structure, and intertextuality. As the results show, the translators faced a trade-off between **conceptual fidelity** and **reader accessibility**.

Weaver's translation, while praised for its elegance, subtly shifts the tone of the novel from scholastic parody to accessible narrative. His strategy involves preserving

Latin as a cultural marker, but simplifying theological discourse. In contrast, Mochalova's Russian translation exhibits a more explanatory tone, seeking cultural equivalents that may reduce ambiguity but also flatten the novel's philosophical complexity.

Both translators must contend with the **temporal distance** between the medieval mindset and the modern reader's horizon of expectations. The Middle Ages in Eco's novel is characterized by **hermeneutic anxiety** — the search for signs and meaning in a chaotic universe. This tension is mirrored in the language, which mixes theological abstraction with forensic detail. Translation thus becomes not only linguistic mediation but conceptual negotiation.

The findings support the argument that translators must not only be bilingual but **bicultural and bitemporal**, capable of navigating both the source and target cultures, as well as their historical layers. A translation faithful to Eco must therefore balance the novel's scholarly density with narrative flow.

This analysis also reveals the crucial role of **paratexts** — footnotes, glossaries, prefaces — in bridging the conceptual gap between the source and target audiences. Future translations might benefit from more extensive use of such devices to enhance understanding without oversimplifying.

VI. CONCLUSION

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* offers a profound conceptualization of the Middle Ages as a contested space of knowledge, power, and belief. Through complex narrative strategies, intertextual references, and linguistic authenticity, Eco constructs a world that demands interpretive effort. The translation of such a work is not merely a linguistic exercise but an act of cultural and historical reconstitution.

The comparative analysis of English and Russian translations reveals both the strengths and compromises inherent in the process. While both versions succeed in rendering the general atmosphere and plot, they differ in how they mediate the conceptual

and philosophical intricacies of the Middle Ages. This study underscores the importance of adopting translation strategies that honor the temporal and cultural specificity of historical fiction, particularly when it engages deeply with the semiotics of a past world.

Ultimately, translation is revealed as a form of **re-authorship**, one that shapes the reception and understanding of historical and philosophical narratives across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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