Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **6**, 1 (2014) 45–51

Translation and Transtextuality

Zsuzsa TAPODI
Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Miercurea Ciuc, Romania)
Department of Humanities
tapodizsuzsa@sapientia.siculorum.ro

Abstract. Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* as a postmodern literary work is extensively based on transtextuality. There are series of quotations from the Bible, Petrus Abelardus, St. Bernard, Petrarch, Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Jorge L. Borges, Nietzsche, and other classic authors interwoven into the novel's narrative. The text is a result of multiple translations, a truly intercultural adventure: Adso, a 14th-century German monk from the Melk monastery provides a Northern Italian travel experience in Latin language, this memoir is translated by the publishing narrator into the Italian language of the 20th century. The characters of the story come from different areas of Europe, as there are monks from England, Spain, Norway, Germany, and other countries. This paper sheds light on the problems that occurred during the novel's translation.

Keywords: postmodern literature, translation, transtextuality

Eco's first novel, *Il nome della rosa*, published in 1980, was a great national and international success. It was published in 6,500 copies in Italy, and translated into 47 languages.

The novel narrates a series of mysterious events occurring in the autumn of 1327 in a fictitious Northern Italian Benedictine abbey, presented as if it were real, and which could have really existed. The detailed depiction of the building of Europe's largest monastery, the everyday monastic life, the origins of the contemporary heretic movements (told by the learned William of Baskerville to his rather interested novice), the doctrinal clashes within the Church concerning Jesus's poverty, the vivid description of the process of inquisition, all reinforce the realistic atmosphere of the medieval world. The story is narrated by Adso, a Benedictine monk from the Austrian abbey of Melk (an allusion to the famous 10th-century Benedictine author of the 'Letter on the Antichrist'), who evokes his memories of early youth towards the end of his life. He remembers arriving at the abbey as a novice in the company of his master William of Baskerville, a Franciscan monk from England. The story blends the conventions of historical novels with

BDD-A7561 © 2014 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:20 UTC)

the best tradition of memoirs and also shows elements of a Bildungsroman, since the events experienced by Adso are evoked in the mirror of his later years with the impact they had on his entire life. The Franciscan brother has arrived to prepare a conciliatory meeting between the adepts of the Holy Roman Emperor and the Avignon Pope, but the abbot of the Benedictine monastery commissions William to solve the mystery of consecutive murders, whose victims are all friars, who used to work in the scriptorium of the monastery's library. But in the structure of the book the crime story is only the superficial stratum. Following the model of the medieval interpreters, Eco later completes his work with an explanatory glossary, entitled *Annotations to The Name of the Rose* (which in the Hungarian edition is already included in the volume). There he explains the game of the labyrinth dominating the novel, and concludes that "even a naïve reader realizes that he has to deal with such labyrinths, which do not have anything in common with special representation." The labyrinth does not only represent the scene of the plot (as the library was meant to be built originally as a maze, to be deciphered only with much difficulty), but the story is also an entangled labyrinthine web itself, with the threads of searching, lapsing and finding forming the loops and nods of the narration. The introduction already foreshadows the intricate structure of the novel with the manuscripts appearing and disappearing embarrassingly.

The distinctive features of a detective story may be observed in several different aspects: the text of the novel itself is like a riddle that must be solved by the reader, while the past appears as a body to be revived through interpretation, by the reconstruction of the events. The introduction, told by the modern intermediary narrator—the story of quest for a medieval manuscript, and the attempt to reconstruct it—is actually already an authentic tangle text. It is a miniature representation of the entire work's purpose: to reconstruct from its remnants and revive something that seems irremediably and irrevocably lost. Similarly, at the end of the novel the old Adso looks back once more to the great adventure of his youth, and he tries to reason out and reconstruct the contents of the half burnt codex shreds he had found among the ruins of the monastery. These symbolic acts, just as the title of the book itself, are metaphors of the past. Postmodern theorists consider that history cannot be grasped objectively; we can approach the past only through various narratives, products of our imagination, just like fictional literature. Our ideas relate to the events of reality as Adso's codex-fragments relate to the irrecoverably lost hundreds of volumes of the perished monastery library.

This postmodern literary work is based on transtextuality.[1] There are series of quotations from the Bible, Petrus Abelardus, St. Bernard, Petrarch, Conan

1 Gérard Genette defines **transtextuality** as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (1997 [1981], 1).

BDD-A7561 © 2014 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:20 UTC)

Doyle, Agatha Christie, Jorge L. Borges, Nietzsche, and other classic authors in it. Eco plays one of his favorite postmodern creative games by building fragments of other author's texts into his own works, without any quotation marks, as if written by himself. He also plays with the opposite procedure by imitating a medieval literary habit in the extensive use of quotations, however some of the quotations—put into his characters' mouths—are invented by himself.

> But I believe a historical novel should do this, too: not only identify in the past the causes of what came later, but also trace a process through which those causes began slowly to produce their effects.
> If a character of mine, comparing two medieval ideas, produces a third, more modern, idea, he is doing exactly what culture did; and if nobody has ever written what he says, someone, however confusedly, should surely have begun to think it (perhaps without saying it, blocked by countless fears and by shame). (Eco 1984, 534)

Several scholars led by investigative fervor have listed these "quotations," identifying and classifying their would-be authors in their effort to reconstruct Eco's extremely rich historical compendium of ideas. Eco plays a game with the reader through the hidden and false quotes: he translates into medieval German a philosophical item of Wittgenstein's which is told by one of the characters.

Translatability and untranslatability, the relationship between language and reality, the issue of understandability constitute the central themes of the novel. The two investigators in the memoir have to perform translation work. They find out that the mysterious murders are somehow related to a certain text read by the monks working in the *scriptorium*. On the fourth day of the week of the plot they try to decipher the note of the second victim, Venantius, who had been translating from Greek, but this proves to be undecipherable. Venantius had recorded for himself with a cryptography consisting of zodiac signs how one can enter into the library-labyrinth. Although William manages to decipher the code: "Secretum finis Africae manus supra idolum age primum et septimum de quatuor," still, the meaning of the text and of the Greek sentences put on paper in a hurry avoids their understanding. They could finally enter the labyrinth after they had deciphered its secret from the outside, and even the fragmentary Greek text unveiled its murderous intent only at the end of the novel. As if the parable would warn us about the difficulties of translation: the text always deceives its reader, who cannot understand it but through misunderstandings.

Comparing the Romanian and Hungarian translations of the novel several important cultural differences can be observed. The most obvious difference is how the names: *Guglielmo—William*, *Venantio—Venantius*, *Nicola—Miklós* are used. The English translator retains the "original" English name of the detective-

BDD-A7561 © 2014 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:20 UTC)

monk: *William*. The Hungarian translation follows the Latin and German language versions, whereas the Romanian follows the Italian Romanesque forms. The same is true for words related to the monastic life: *vesper, vesperás*. The Hungarian version thus stands closer to the medieval Latin than the original work.

Imre Barna, the Hungarian translator retains the Latin and German verse quotations, their Hungarian translations are given in the footnotes, to which there are added 30 pages of glossary by Gábor Klaniczay, a researcher of the era, for those readers who wish to understand the historical references. Each Hungarian edition contains the author's additional notes, which were published separately by Eco.

The Romanian editions do not include the glossary, neither the translations of the German and other texts; instead of these the translator, Florin Chirițescu provides some concept explanation guidance on the Middle Ages in the epilogue.

For the Romanian reader the maze-effect is stronger because, on the one hand, the unknown names, concepts, and theological debates are creating a semantically puzzling atmosphere, on the other hand, they constitute a veritable ideological labyrinth. The most important information can be seen in the text associated with the names, which for the Hungarian reader serve as Ariadne's thread, helping in interpreting the articles.

A specific performance is the translation of Salvatore's speech, because he uses a mixture of languages.

In the sexta period of the third day Adso evokes the adventures of Salvatore. The Romanian translator interprets the elements of the list in parentheses; the Hungarian translates them, or retains the better known Latin names.

> Şi după faptele pe care le povestesc, de-a lungul cursului Dunării am văzut şi încă mai văd mulți dintre aceşti şarlatani care-şi aveau numele şi împărşeala lor în legiuni, ca dracii: *accapponi* (castratori de cocoşi*), lotori* (înnoroiiți), *protomedici* (medici de curte), *pauperes verecundi* (săraci sfioşi), *morghigeri* ([aprox.] potoliții), *affamiglioli* (încîrduiții), *crociari* (cruciații), *alacerbati* (iuții), relicvari, înfăinați, *falpatori, iucchi* (lilieci), *spectini* (făloşi), *cochini* (muzicanți de tarantelă), *acconi* şi *admiracti* (demni de privit), *mutuatori* (care împrumută), *attermanti* (curinşi de tremurici), *cagnabaldi* (câini curajoşi), *falsibordoni* (falşi sprijinitori), *accadenti* (picați pe nepusă masă), *alacrimanti* (înlăcrimați) şi *affarfanti* (îndrăciți). (Eco 2004, 191, translated by Florin Chirițescu)

> Az elbeszélésemben történtek után a Duna völgyében később is sok efféle szélhámost láttam és látok mind a mai napig, nevük volt, osztályaik és légióik voltak, mint az ördögöknek: libabőrzők, sárdagasztók, protomedikusok, pauperes verecundi, béljósok, cruciariusok, alacerbatusok, ereklyeárusok, porhintők, nagyotmondók, jugulátusok, táltosok, kotyvasztók, ettőllopók és

BDD-A7561 © 2014 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:20 UTC)

> attólkoldulók, adconátusok és admiractusok, uzsorálók, orrolók, füllentők, szájalók, nyelvelők, kesztyűbe dudálók és fűzfánfütyülők. (Eco 2011, 221, translated by Imre Barna)

In this respect, it is worth looking at the English translation as well, where the translator chose to omit the whole enumeration: "Long after the events I am narrating, along the course of the Danube I saw many, and still see some, of these charlatans who had their names and their subdivisions in legions, like the devils." (Eco 1983, 402, translated by William Weaver)

The translation of the biblical paraphrases represents yet another special challenge, since these texts are also the result of multiple translations (from Hebrew or Aramaic, Greek-Latin). What (Bible) translation should the translator turn to? In the case of the Hungarian language, should the translator use the earlier—but Protestant—Bible translation of Gáspár Károli, closer to the medieval stage of language, or would it be more appropriate to use the later, more "modern" Catholic version? In the scene of Adso's sinning, when—in the central episode of the memoir, on the night of the third day of the plot—the young novice is making love with a peasant girl, he recites verses from the Song of Songs: "[…] ímé szép vagy, én mátkám, ímé szép vagy, a te szemeid olyanok mint a galambok […] megsebesítetted az én szívemet, én húgom, én jegyesem […]" (Eco 2011, 290, translated by Imre Barna).

Imre Barna quotes, or rather alludes to, the older Bible translation of Gáspár Károli published in 1490. The Romanian translator uses a more modern version, because the oldest Romanian translations are obsolete today.

The censors's hand can be traced in the Romanian edition published in the eighties: the sentence referring to the 1968 Soviet invasion of Prague was removed from the foreword.

The Romanian writer Mircea Cărtărescu mentioned on a meeting with his readers that Umberto Eco, while visiting Romania during the era of dictatorship, was perplexed when he was told that certain parts of his novel had been omitted due to reasons of censorship. Although the novel draws a highly plastic vision of totalitarian mentality and censorial logic in the figure of the multiple murderer Jorge—paying homage at the same time with postmodern irony to the postmodern master Jorge Luís Borges—the Italian author could hardly understand what had actually irritated the Romanian authorities in a novel built on a medieval topic and along semiotic problems. He received the humorous answer that in Romania even cookbooks were censored.

BDD-A7561 © 2014 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:20 UTC)

Conclusions

Gérard Genette revised the phenomenon called intertextuality by Julia Kristeva and Michael Riffaterre. In the case of translation the relationships between texts, defined by him as different cases of transtextuality (intertextuality, metatextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, and hypertextuality), indicate problems of not the same weight. In the case of *The Name of the Rose* architextuality, that is generic determinedness, does not play a significant role, as the novel evokes several narrative genres,[2] however, these no not appear literally in the text, this is why they do not constitute a translation problem either. The architext only influences the reader, who categorizes according to the generic patterns known by him/her when interpreting the text (Bildungsroman, parable, memoir, historical novel, detective novel). Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians* can be regarded as a hypotext as concerns the detective thread; the library as labyrinth evokes Jorge Luís Borges's short stories (e.g. *The Garden of Forking Paths*).

Eco applies the intertextual games, the inclusion of real or false quotations, text borrowings also in his later literary works, in *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004) and in *The Prague Cemetery* (2010). These quotations—as long as they have been translated into the target language—must be taken over from the already canonized translation. Thus the translator has to reproduce the detective work of searching for and reconstructing texts. The false quotations, such as the Wittgenstein fragment transposed into medieval German by Eco, requires a double effort on the part of the translator. The more simple procedure is if the translator leaves the "original" German version in the text, and—perhaps—adds the explanation in a footnote. It is more difficult to produce an own medievalized translation, in the spirit of the German.

From among the paratexts, the translation of the title can be carried out in every language, preserving the enigmatic character of the original. The Latin subtitles indicating the passage of time formally change depending on the culture of the target language (*nona*—*nóna*, *vesper*—*vesperás*). The illustration, the map of the abbey serving as the scene of the plot can be taken over without any problem in each translation.

There is a significant difference, however, in the case of metatexts. Eco's explanatory glossary did not appear in the volume at the first publication of the Romanian translation, in this way the readers did not receive any assistance on the part of the writer in the interpretation of the novel, contrary to the Hungarian readers, who, besides Umberto Eco's instructions, were also guided by the culture-historical explanations assembled by Gábor Klaniczay.

When translating a literary work, besides the source text, the cultural embeddedness of the translator and the receivers of the translated text is also

2 See Tapodi (2009).

BDD-A7561 © 2014 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:20 UTC)

determining. The characteristics of the open work [*opera aperta*], dealt with by Eco, also manifest in translation. Every translation is also interpretation, as many different languages belonging to different cultures a text is translated into, as many—different—variants the original text will have.

Works cited

Eco, Umberto. 1962. *Opera aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee*. Milano: Bompiani.

—. 1980. *Il nome della rosa* [*The Name of the Rose*]. Milano: Bompiani.

—. 1984. *The Name of the Rose.* Translated by William Weaver. New York: Harcourt.

—. 1984. *Postscript to The Name of the Rose.* Translated by William Weaver. New York: Harcourt.

—. 2004. *Numele trandafirului* [*The Name of the Rose*]. Translated into Romanian by Florin Chiriţescu. Iaşi: Polirom.

—. 2011. *A rózsa neve* [*The Name of the Rose*]. Translated into Hungarian by Imre Barna. Budapest: Európa.

—. 2004. *La misteriosa fiamma della regina Loana* [The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana]. Milano: Bompiani.

—. 2010. *Il Cimitero di Praga* [*The Prague Cemetery*]. Milano: Bompiani.

Genette, Gérard. 1996. Transztextualitás [Transtextuality]. Translated into Hungarian by Mónika Burján. *Helikon* 1-2.: 82–90.

—. 1997 [1981]. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree.* Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. University of Nebraska Press.

Kristeva, Julia. 1996. A szövegstrukturálás problémája. [Structuring the Text]. Translated into Hungarian by Tímea Kovács. *Helikon.*1-2.: 14–22.

Riffaterre, Michael. 1996. Az intertextus nyoma [The Trace of the Intertext]. Translated into Hungarian by Enikő Sepsi. *Helikon.* 1-2.: 67–81.

Tapodi Zsuzsa. 2009. New Mannerism? Mystery and Cultural Memory in Four Postmodern Novels. *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica* Vol. 1 No. 1.: 97–112.

BDD-A7561 © 2014 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:20 UTC)