HOW TO DO THINGS WITH INTERTEXT:
ON UMBERTO ECO’S THE NAME OF THE ROSE

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There has long been a debate about how much of the meaning of a text is in the
text itself, and how much is in the mind of the reader. An empirical approach to
this question is to study the relation between an individual text and its intertext.

The concept of intertextuality has been widely used in literary and cultural studies,
where it has changed how we see the relation between author, text and reader. It
plays down the role of the author in the meaning of what they write, since texts
depend on other texts and on what the reader recognizes, rather than on what the
author may have intended. Important theorists include Bakhtin, Barthes, Eco,
Foucault, Genette, Kristeva (who proposed the term in the 1960s) and Riffaterre.

The basic idea seems simple. A pattern in one text repeats a pattern in an earlier
text. That is, only part of the meaning is in the text itself. In order to retrieve the
full meaning, the reader must recognize that a reference is being made to another
text, and must also understand why it is being made. But from this it follows that
the concept is unavoidably subjective. A word-for-word quotation is objectively
definable and can be found by software. But a decision as to whether two plots
represent a meaningful parallel or only a coincidental similarity is likely to depend
on a subjective interpretation. This limits the possibilities of replicable textual
analysis.

The neglect of the concept of intertextuality within linguistics is part and parcel of
the neglect of textual study (including the analysis of literary texts) which has
plagued linguistics since the 1960s, but is nevertheless odd. First, literary theorists
regularly acknowledge the origins of the concept in Saussure’s demonstration that
all meaning is relational. Second, corpora (especially concordance data) have
shown that it is intertextuality which tells us what words and texts mean.

This article has two main aims:

- to test the concept of intertextuality against a novel which was explicitly
designed to contain a very large number of intertextual references: Umberto
Eco’s The Name of the Rose
• to assess whether this novel can itself contribute to a theory of intertextuality: that is, whether narrative fiction can express ideas in a way which is difficult or even impossible in conventional academic prose.

*The Name of the Rose*, originally written in Italian, has been translated into over twenty languages. These translations are paraphrases (that is, intertextual variants) of each other. I will mainly discuss the 1983 English version by William Weaver (Eco 1983). Many points are independent of the language of the text, but some meanings are generated by the English-language translation, and may be absent or less evident in translations into other languages. As Eco (1992: 74) himself says: “The text is there, and it produces its own effects”.

[Translated from the Italian by William Weaver.]