

Esotericism, Irony and Paranoia in Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*

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Introduction

This paper examines Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989) as an example of the ironic employment of Western esoteric motifs. Connections are drawn between the interpretative methods of the Western esoteric tradition and medieval Christian exegesis and contemporary semiotics, both of which Eco is deeply engaged with. Eco, though fascinated and attracted by esotericism, and concerned by its growing popularity in the contemporary West, finally rejects it in favour of a renewed commitment to rationality and a scientific worldview.*

Identifying Esotericism

The past decade has seen a vast proliferation of publications on 'esotericism' and 'esoteric traditions' within the field of Studies in Religion.¹ These studies span all religions and cultures, but the most influential have been of esoteric traditions in the West. The place of Christianity, once established as the monolithic Western religion, has been reassessed. Secular humanism, the offspring of Christianity, which has traditionally been viewed as the nurturing philosophy of the

* This paper was greatly facilitated by discussions with Don Barrett, who also commented on sections and edited the final product.

¹ For example, Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994; Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (eds), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, Crossroad, New York, 1995; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998; and a host of other publications.

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academic study of the Humanities, has similarly been sidelined.¹ Indeed, it has been suggested that when the origins of Studies in Religion as a discipline are examined, it is clear that the idea of the

comparative study of religions is in a sense rooted in western esoteric traditions... Like the early esoteric traditions of Renaissance Hermeticism and Christian Kabbalah... the history of religions was born out of the search for some transcendent unity of religions, an attempt to find common patterns and archetypes to unite the diversity of religions, and the ideal of a universal primordial tradition or *philosophia perennis*.²

The rise of academic and popular interest in esotericism has been linked to the decline of Christianity as a source of meaning and spiritual authority for Western society, the growth of New Age religion, and the gradual 'mainstreaming' of previously 'cultic' ideas, including reincarnation, mysticism, and polytheism.³

Even a superficial examination of Western esotericism will reveal numerous methodological problems for both the esotericist and the scholar. These include: what precisely is 'esotericism' or 'the esoteric'; what can be said about any subject that by definition is hidden or secret; and what is the relationship between initiatory and secretive esotericism and the popular and consumerist New Age movement?⁴ Antoine Faivre, a founding figure in the scholarly investigation of esotericism, distilled the following typology of esoteric thought. Faivre suggested that, rather

¹ Carlo Ginzburg, 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm', in Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1989, pp. 96-125.

² Hugh B. Urban, 'Syndrome of the Secret: "Esocentricism" and the Work of Steven M. Wasserstrom', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 69, No. 2, June 2001, p. 439. Urban is reviewing Steven M. Wasserstrom's *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, Princeton University Press, 1999. See also Antoine Faivre and Karen-Claire Voss, 'Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions', *Numen*, Vol. 42, 1995, pp. 48-77.

³ Colin Campbell, 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization', *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, Vol. 5, 1972, p. 131 and *passim*.

⁴ Adam Possamai, 'Secrecy and Consumer Culture: An Exploration of Esotericism in Contemporary Society using the work of Simmel and Baudrillard', *Australian Religion Studies Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2002, pp. 44-56.

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than concentrating on the secret or initiatory aspect of esoteric doctrines, certain characteristics found in such teachings could be extracted to illuminate areas of occultism, gnosticism, and hermeticism. He argued that these characteristics were the existence of symbolic and real correspondences, the idea of living nature, the use of imagination and mediation, the process of transmutation, the practice of concordance, and the emphasis on the means of transmission of an esoteric teaching from master to disciple.¹

Correspondences refer to the interconnections that may be detected between the macrocosm and the microcosm, the seen and the unseen, and indeed all that is. The existence of these correspondences gives rise to a method of interpretation, and of constructing meaning:

The entire universe is a huge theatre of mirrors, an ensemble of hieroglyphs to be decoded. Everything is a sign; everything conceals and exudes mystery; every object hides a secret. The principles of noncontradiction and excluded middle of linear causality are replaced here by those of the included middle and synchronicity.²

Living nature, the second characteristic, offers an example of a 'book' to be read through this method, and the 'idea of correspondence presumes already a form of imagination inclined to reveal and use mediations of all kinds'.³ The final characteristic, that of concordance, fits logically here, as it is the ultimate aim of this interpretive method. According to Faivre, concordance:

manifests the will not only to eliminate some differences or to uncover harmonies among diverse religious traditions, but to acquire above all a *gnosis* embracing diverse traditions and melding them into a single crucible.⁴

¹ Faivre, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

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The remaining two characteristics, transmutation and transmission, are relevant to the spiritual journey of the individual esotericist. 'Transmutation' is a stronger term than 'transformation', and has an alchemical lineage. The esoteric acolyte undergoes ritual and spiritual initiations that are aimed at complete metamorphosis. Transmission is the key to the preservation of the teachings; and it is the insistence on the initiation from master to disciple, 'following a preestablished channel, respecting a previously marked path'¹ which creates the second problem referred to above: what can be said about any subject that by definition is hidden or secret?

Secrecy, Seriousness and Esotericism

The problem of secrecy manifests itself in several fascinating ways. In isolation, it may be formulated as a classic double bind. Edward Conze, discussing Tantric Buddhism, forcefully argued that when esoteric knowledge is being taught to an 'indiscriminate multitude' there are only two possible interpretations of the status of the purveyor. The first is that s/he is not an initiate and the knowledge is therefore not knowledge. The second is that:

he has been initiated. Then if he were to divulge the secrets... he has broken the trust placed in him and is so morally depraved he is not worth listening to.²

This problem has become acute over the previous century. One particularly difficult issue concerns the cultural appropriation of tribal lore of traditional cultures. The conflicting claims of Western universalism and tribal localism often saw Western initiates into primal cultures (usually anthropologists or archaeologists) revealing what they had learned, believing that this will 'preserve' knowledge for posterity, and make it available for study.³ From this beginning, the mass

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

² Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India: Three Phases of Buddhist Philosophy*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1967, pp. 271-3.

³ See Paul C. Johnson, 'Shamanism from Ecuador to Chicago: A Case Study in New Age Ritual Appropriation', *Religion*, Vol. 25, 1995, pp. 163-178; also the

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appropriation of indigenous traditions by 'New Age' groups has flourished. The other logical outcome of secrecy and initiated tradition is the inverse of the unscrupulous initiate revealing secrets. This is the paranoia resulting from the initiation for those who believe that the preciousness of the secret will ensure that the uninitiated will seek to acquire it through unscrupulous means, including the torture and murder of initiates.

However, central to the argument of this paper is the status of the secret teachings *per se*. Faivre noted that the etymology of 'esoteric' 'is slight. ("Eso" means "inside" and "ter" implies an opposition.)'¹ In an important article, Hugh Urban therefore argues that it is most profitable to accept that the secret teachings are 'simply a hidden content', and that more constructive approaches focus on 'how.... [is] a given body of information endowed with the mystery, awe, and prized value of a secret?'² He suggests that there are four strategies that are crucial to the transformation of 'secret knowledge into a kind of capital'.³ These are the advertisement of the secret; the establishment of a 'graded hierarchy of levels of "truth"' and then to restrict access to these truths by means of initiation';⁴ the use of ambiguous language to produce mystification; and the 'power of semantic shock',⁵ which is the effect produced on hearers through the use of radical linguistic juxtapositions.

From this it can be concluded that to become an initiate of esoteric teachings is a serious matter, and that reprisals might well occur if an initiate revealed secret material. Yet it is unavoidable that different attitudes to such secret material will exist. In Western culture the dominant religion, Christianity, officially rejected the existence of

discussion of pioneer participant archaeologist Frank Cushing's residence among the Zuni in David Hurst Thomas, *Skull Wars: Kennewick Man, Archaeology, and the Battle for Native American Identity*, Basic Books, 2000, pp. 71-76.

¹ Faivre, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

² Hugh Urban, 'The Torment of Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions', *History of Religions*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1998, p. 219.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

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esoteric teachings;¹ and the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment promoted the criterion of rationality, which encoded all knowledge as a public commodity.² Esoteric ideas, however, continue to exist and to attract adherents. From the last quarter of the nineteenth century, reason and truth, conceived as absolutes, have been under attack. The idea of multiple meanings and symbolic pluralities, so long a part of the Western cultic milieu, has achieved widespread acceptance under the banner of 'postmodernism'.³

It is in the context of this philosophical shift that the recent popularity of esotericism within Studies in Religion is best viewed. However, many aspects of Western intellectual and cultural life have similarly been affected, including the visual arts, and literary forms such as the novel. To date, scholars of esotericism have only paid attention to artworks or novels utilising esoteric teachings if written by esotericists.⁴ Wouter Hanegraaff paved the way for a more comprehensive assessment of this material in his recent study of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. He notes that the novel 'is full of motifs derived from alchemy, freemasonry, spiritualism and Grail mythology',⁵ and suggests that:

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- ¹ During the first two centuries of Christianity Gnostic churches flourished, and a variety of 'secret' teachings have survived. However, the orthodoxy established rejected such spiritual elitism and condemned the content of Gnostic texts. See Marvin W. Meyer (trans.), *The Secret Teachings of Jesus*, Random House, New York, 1984; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Random House, New York, 1979; and James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1981.
 - ² See Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey*, Mandarin, London, 1996 [1994].
 - ³ There are many varieties of postmodernism, but they all feature one or more of the following philosophical positions: scepticism, linguistic determinism, anti-realism, nihilism, and relativism. Johannes C. Wolfart, 'Postmodernism', in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds), *Guide to the Study of Religion*, Cassell, London: New York, 2000, p. 387.
 - ⁴ For example, the fictional output of the followers of G. I. Gurdjieff (c.1866-1949), founder of the Fourth Way. Most notable of these is P. D. Ouspensky's novel *The Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*, perennially popular and most recently reprinted by Lindisfarne Books in 2002.
 - ⁵ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'Ironic Esotericism: Alchemy and Grail Mythology in Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg*', in Richard Caron, Joscelyn Godwin, Wouter J.

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the stance of ironic distance typical of Mann's usage of esoteric motives merits quite as much attention from students of western esotericism as a usage for promoting an esoteric worldview.¹

Mann's novel is beautiful and wholly serious, a reverent evocation of the spiritual quest, employing esoteric motifs to signal the protagonist Hans Castorp's gradual initiation. Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* is a novel similarly riddled with esoteric motifs. However, it is irreverent, comic, and undisciplined; described savagely by Salman Rushdie as 'a fiction about the creation of a piece of junk fiction that then turns knowingly into that piece of junk fiction'.² Yet it too is wholly serious in its message about the nature of esoteric teachings, a message that is less sanguine than Mann's.

Foucault's Pendulum and Esotericism

Umberto Eco was born in Alessandria, Piedmont in 1932, and made his academic reputation as a medievalist.³ His early interest in Thomism, medieval philosophy and textual interpretation led him to semiotics, particularly the theories of the American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce. He wrote magazine and newspaper columns in which politics and popular culture were analysed with equal mastery.⁴ His debut as a

Hanegraaff and Jean-Louis Viellard-Baron (eds), *Esoterisme, Gnosés & Imaginaire Symbolique, Gnostica*, Vol. 3, Peeters, Leuven, 2001, p. 577.

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² Review cited in Maya Jaggi, 'Captain Marvel's Kingdom', *Spectrum*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Weekend Edition, October 26-27, 2002, p. 4.

³ His doctoral dissertation was published as *Sviluppo dell'estetica medievale* in 1959. The English translation is Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin, Yale University Press, New Haven: London, 1986.

⁴ Eco's interest in popular culture is evident from his more academic published work also. See Oreste del Buono and Umberto Eco (eds), *The Bond Affair*, trans. R. A. Downie, Macdonald, London, 1966, an examination of the James Bond phenomenon; Richard Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers*, New York University Press, New York, 1995, in which Eco discusses politics and terrorism; Umberto Eco, Stephen Jay Gould, Jean-Claude Carrière, and Jean Delumeau, *Conversations about the End of Time*, ed. Catherine David, Frédéric Lenoir, and Jean-Philippe de Tonnac, trans. Ian Maclean and Roger

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novelist in the 1980s with the publication of the phenomenally successful medieval detective story *The Name of the Rose* was a triumph. Moreover, this novel popularised two significant preoccupations that are constant in Eco's work: 'the conflict between intellectual freedom and repression, and the urge toward intellectual system and order'.¹ The novel also served to showcase his extensive knowledge of the Middle Ages. His second novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, was published in 1989, having been eight years in the writing. Its reception, both by critics and readers, was muted; this is understandable in that the attractive and fashionable medieval setting of *The Name of the Rose* has been abandoned in favour of a contemporary mystery,² and the consoling detective-figure who reveals all to the reader is similarly absent.³

However, *Foucault's Pendulum* is in many senses a deeper fictional exploration than *The Name of the Rose*, and its preoccupations are closer to Eco's scholarly and personal interests. The novel concerns three Italian men: the two Piedmontese Jacopo Belbo and Diotallevi; and the younger Milanese Casaubon. They meet in 1972 when Casaubon is a postgraduate student writing a doctorate on the Templars.

Pearson, Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, London, 1999, in which the meaning of the millennium and apocalypticism are traversed; and Umberto Eco, V. V. Ivanov and Monica Rector, *Carnival!*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok (assisted by Marcia E. Erickson), Mouton Publishers, Berlin, New York, Amsterdam, 1984, in which Eco ranges across medieval carnival, theatre, and contemporary television programmes.

- ¹ David Robey, 'Umberto Eco', in Michael Caesar and Peter Hainsworth (eds), *Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1984, p. 84.
- ² Eco has written extensively on the appeal of the medieval for modern audiences. See Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes*, trans. William Weaver, Secker & Warburg, London, 1986. See also Kim Selling, *Medievalism and Modern Fantasy: The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy Fiction*, unpublished Honours thesis, 1997, University of Sydney, *passim*.
- ³ That detective fiction is, by and large, a consoling genre has been long recognized. See Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1980: 'Social function has been a recurrent theme in recent discussion of cultural products. A crucial notion has been that stories, myth, books, rituals are not so much an answer about the world, but a set of questions shaped to provide a consoling result for the anxieties of those who share in the cultural activity – the audience. Cultural productions appear to deal with real problems but are in fact both conceived and resolvable', p. 2.

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Central to the plot are two publishing houses; the academically respectable Garamond and the fringe Manutius, which publishes self-funded or 'vanity' projects. All three men read manuscripts for Manutius, and christen the authors of these books, which are chiefly of an esoteric nature, 'Diabolicals'. In the 1970s they meet Colonel Ardeni, who has written a book about the remnant of the Templars hiding a treasure in Provins, Champagne. He has a document that he believes reveals the location of this treasure:

THE (NIGHT OF) SAINT JOHN
36 (YEARS) P(OST) HAY WAIN
6 (MESSAGES) INTACT WITH SEAL
F(OR THE KNIGHTS WITH) THE WHITE CLOAKS
[TEMPLARS]
R(ELAP)S(I) OF PROVINS FOR (VAIN)JANCE [REVENGE]
6 TIMES IN 6 PLACES
EACH TIME 20 Y(EARS MAKES) 120 Y(EARS)
THIS IS THE PLAN
THE FIRST GO TO THE CASTLE
IT(ERUM) [AGAIN AFTER 120 YEARS] THE SECOND JOIN
THOSE
(OF THE) BREAD
AGAIN TO THE REFUGE
AGAIN TO THE LADY BEYOND THE RIVER
AGAIN TO THE HOSTEL OF THE POPELICANS
AGAIN TO THE STONE
3 TIMES 6 [666] BEFORE THE FEAST (OF THE) GREAT
WHORE.¹

The novel's structure is labyrinthine, moving back and forth between time periods, its sections named for the ten Kabbalistic *sefirot*. After this early encounter with Ardeni, Casaubon and his girlfriend Amparo move to Brazil. He returns alone to Italy aged thirty and falls in love with Lia. He meets Diotallevi and Belbo again and resumes reading manuscripts at Manutius. While sceptical of the thought processes of

¹ Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*, trans. William Weaver, Secker & Warburg, London, 1989, pp. 135-6.

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the Diabolicals, they decide in Chapter 65 to concoct an occult document, which reveals that they are being drawn into esoteric interpretative strategies. This is noted by Casaubon, the novel's narrator:

When you assume an attitude of suspicion, you overlook no clue. After our fantasy on the power train and the Tree of the Sefirot, I was prepared to see symbols in every object I came upon.¹

From this point on, the esoteric alternative reality is referred to as 'the Plan' by the three friends.

They have complex discussions with several of the Diabolicals, including Signor Aglie (who implies he is immortal, and possibly the Comte de Saint-Germain) and Monsieur Salon. Salon introduces the nineteenth century anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* into the already explosive mix, with dramatic results. As the plot thickens Diotallevi notes, in classic esoteric style, "Not bad, not bad at all... To arrive at the truth through the painstaking reconstruction of a false text."² Shortly after, Belbo decides that the *Protocols* is a disguised version of the 'Ordonation of Provins', Aglie's Templar document; Casaubon and Lia have a son, Guilio; and Diotallevi develops cancer. In Chapter 101 Casaubon, burdened by his esoteric knowledge, is moved to explain to Lia what he and his friends have pieced together. She deflates the esoteric reasoning process comprehensively:

Lia said: 'Pow, I don't like your story.'

'Isn't it beautiful?'

'The sirens were beautiful, too. Listen, what do you know about your unconscious?'

'Nothing. I'm not even sure I have one.'³

Lia is an unconvincing character, the novel's Virgin Mary, foil to Lorenza Pellegrini's whore. However, when shown Aglie's document

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

² *Ibid.*, p. 459.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 532.

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she, correctly it is implied, interprets it as a laundry list. Eco is here possibly indicating the tendency for games about power and control to be attractive chiefly to men, and for women to be more grounded in the reality of everyday life.

The reader must accept that Lia's analysis of the Aglie document is correct. However, Eco is concerned to demonstrate that the reality of the esoteric is not so easily dealt with. People believe that there is a secret and that Belbo, Casaubon and Diotallevi are in possession of it. Secrets do not exist in a vacuum, but have political and social ramifications. Belbo leaves for Paris to meet with the esotericists, to tell them there is no secret. He is captured, so Casaubon follows him. In Chapter 111 Casaubon witnesses a ceremony in the Conservatoire des Artes et Metiers, where the Foucault's pendulum of the title is exhibited. Many of the assembly are known to Casaubon: he sees the death of Belbo, hanged by the motion of the pendulum; and of Lorenza Pellegrini, the novel's *femme fatale*.

When Casaubon returns to Italy Diotallevi is dead, and he has realised that Lia's interpretation of the Provins list is correct. Amid an atmosphere of rising paranoia, he also realises that to assert that there is no secret will not save him:

I have understood. And the certainty that there is nothing to understand should be my peace, my triumph. But I am here, and They are looking for me, thinking I possess the revelation They sordidly desire. It isn't enough to have understood, if others refuse and continue to interrogate. They are looking for me, They must have picked up my trail in Paris, They know I am here now, They still want the Map. And when I tell Them there is no Map, They will want it all the more. Belbo was right. Fuck you, fool! You want to kill me? Kill me, then, but I won't tell you there's no Map. If you can't figure it out for yourself, tough shit.¹

The novel closes with Casaubon sitting on a hillside in Piedmont near Belbo's childhood home, waiting for his fate.

From this brief summary it is not apparent how funny *Foucault's Pendulum* is, nor how permeated by esoteric and occult allusions it is.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 641.

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The seductive Lorenza Pellegrini calls the occultist Signor Aglie 'Simon' and he calls her 'Sophia';¹ the histories of the Templars and the Rosicrucians are retold in detail;² there are references to *gematria*, the names of God, the Comte de Saint-Germain, and the Holy Grail. Many of the plot devices are esoteric: Casaubon and his Brazilian girlfriend Amparo separate after she has a brief and shocking experience of trance possession; in Chapter 6 Casaubon breaks into Belbo's computer, Abulafia, by answering the question 'Do you have the password?' by typing 'No'.³ The lukewarm critical response to *Foucault's Pendulum* could be due to this labyrinthine tapestry of allusions; to the fact that the novel asks so much of its reader in terms of attention to the plot and assumed knowledge of obscure historical material. *Foucault's Pendulum* falls into the category of metafiction, 'a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject'.⁴ Many works of this nature are written by scholars and critics, and few receive a genuinely popular reception.

Eco, Semiotics and Rationality

Eco is an author who has spent much of his working life pondering the mysteries of writing and reading. He notes that there is tension in the

¹ Ioan Petru Culianu, 'Gnosticism: Gnosticism from its Origins to the Middle Ages', in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, New York, Macmillan, 1987, Vol. 5, pp. 566-573.

² See Peter Partner, *The Murdered Magicians: The Templars and their Myth*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982; Malcolm Barber, *The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple*, Cambridge: New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994; Christopher McIntosh, *The rose cross and the age of reason: eighteenth-century Rosicrucianism in Central Europe and its relationship to the Enlightenment*, E. J. Brill, Leiden: New York, 1995; Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London: Boston, 1972; and Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, revised edition, Arrow, London, 1996.

³ Eco, 1989, *op. cit.*, p.42.

⁴ Mark Currie, 'Introduction', in Mark Currie (ed.), *Metafiction*, Longman Group Ltd, Harlow, 1995, p. 2.

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history of storytelling between the notion of authorial intention and the freedom of the reader to find other meanings in the text:

All along the course of history we are confronted with two ideas of interpretation. On one side, it is assumed that to interpret a text means to find out the meaning intended by its original author or – in any case – its objective nature or essence, an essence which, as such, is independent of our interpretation. On the other, it is assumed that texts can be interpreted in infinite ways.¹

Eco recognises that the second position resembles the esoteric process of interpretation, which he terms ‘Hermetic drift’, in which ‘from similarity to similarity everything can be connected’.²

This position is close to the postmodern philosophical stance that argues for the equal value of all interpretations. Because of his delight in literary gamesmanship, Eco has sometimes been called a postmodernist and a philosophical relativist. That he perceives the attraction of ‘story’ over reliable, soberly compiled ‘fact’ is clearly apparent: the pseudo-history of the Rosicrucian movement is one of his constant examples, referred to in many of his writings.³ An examination

¹ Umberto Eco, ‘Unlimited Semeiosis and Drift: Pragmatism vs. “Pragmatism”’, in Kenneth Lane Ketner (ed.), *Peirce and Contemporary Thought: Philosophical Inquiries*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1995, p. 205; see also Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1979, p. 57.

² Eco, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

³ This point is cleverly made by Jonathan Culler, one of the respondents to Umberto Eco’s 1990 Tanner Lectures. His piece, ‘In defence of overinterpretation’, contains the comment: ‘Let me add here that, whatever Umberto Eco may say, what he does in these three lectures, as well as what he has written in his novels and his works of semiotic theory, convinces me that deep down, in his hermetical soul which draws him to those whom he calls “followers of the veil”, he too believes that overinterpretation is more interesting and intellectually valuable than “sound,” moderate interpretation. No one who was not deeply attracted to “overinterpretation” could create the characters and interpretative obsessions that animate his novels. He spends no time in the lectures here telling us what a sound, proper, moderate interpretation of Dante would say but a good deal of time reviving, breathing life into an outrageous nineteenth-century Rosicrucian interpretation of Dante – an interpretation which, as he said, had had no impact on literary criticism and had been completely ignored until Eco uncovered it and set

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of this narrative reveals much about the nature of the Western esoteric tradition, and why Eco has seen fit, through the medium of a humorous novel, to criticise it.

The Rosicrucian movement, or the confraternity of the Rosy Cross, made its historical debut in 1614 when an anonymous German manifesto, *Fama Fraternitatis R.C.* was published. It concerned the Oriental travels of one Christian Rosencreutz, a pseudo-historical fifteenth century Christian who learned secrets from Arab and Jewish scholars. In 1615 a second manifesto, in Latin, followed; *Confessio Fraternitatis Roseae Crucis, Ad eruditos Europae.* The secret confraternity purportedly behind these manifestos was never found, which is logical given the constraints of secrecy discussed earlier in this paper. Eco comments that:

the habitual behaviour of the Rosicrucian writers is to affirm not only that they are not Rosicrucians but that they have never encountered a single member of the confraternity. Johann Valentin Andreae and all his Tübingen circle of friends, who were immediately suspected of being the author of the manifestos, spent their lives either denying the fact or playing it down, passing it off as a literary game, a youthful error. For that matter, not only are there no historical proofs of the existence of the Rosicrucians, but by definition none can exist.¹

It is difficult not to conclude that Eco appreciates the absurdity of the Rosicrucian position acutely: it is also clear that he is too intelligent not to see the problems arising from the acceptance of such a history as 'true'. However, it is important to realise that the Diabolicals of *Foucault's Pendulum*, while the occasion of much of the novel's humour, are ruthless killers. Esotericism and secrecy, as Urban argued,

his students to work on this interesting semiotic practice', in Umberto Eco et al, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefano Collini, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 110-111. Eco's fascination with esoteric interpretations is not disputed, although I would strongly contest Culler's assertion that Eco finds such 'overinterpretation' preferable to rational interpretation.

¹ Umberto Eco, *Serendipities*, trans. William Weaver, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 11.

have 'real social and political contexts' in which they 'emerge and with which they are inextricably intertwined'.¹

Murder and mayhem interest Eco too, and more will be said about his lifelong fascination with detective and crime fiction.² However, it is important to note that there is no ambiguity about Eco's attitude to the crimes committed by the esoteric cabal in *Foucault's Pendulum*. They are crimes, and they reflect the diseased thought processes of the perpetrators. This recalls the dying Diotallevi's last conversation with Casaubon, where he lays the blame for his cancer on the Plan:

You can't understand. You're the prisoner of what you created. But your story in the outside world is still unfolding. I don't know how, but you can still escape it. For me it's different. I am experiencing in my body everything we did, as a joke, in the Plan.³

Here paranoia displaces modern scientific and medical diagnoses; is the paranoia justified? It is impossible to say, but Diotallevi does die, and (contrary to Diotallevi's expectations) Casaubon does not escape. In *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* Eco engages in his most thorough analysis of the pseudo-history of the Rosicrucians, and draws a tortuous, but painstakingly researched and carefully supported, genealogy from the seventeenth century manifestos to the aforementioned *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The message is clear: some interpretations are not merely foolish, but dangerous and even criminal.⁴

Verification and the Community

In its traditional form, the detective story is a rational exercise in which disorder is combated and order restored through the process of

¹ Urban, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

² There is a discussion of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.: London, 1994, pp. 27-28; later he discusses Sherlock Holmes and the fictional world of Conan Doyle, pp. 104-105.

³ Eco, 1989, *op. cit.*, p. 566.

⁴ Eco, 1994, *op. cit.*, pp. 132ff.

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detection, which is a form of interpretation.¹ Eco's fondness for detective novels is thus entirely congruent with his interest in medieval sign theory,² semiotics,³ books and the technology of publishing,⁴ and esoteric histories. Indeed, Eco claims a high lineage for the detective story: it 'asks the same question[s] as... philosophy and religion'.⁵ *The Name of the Rose* is a classic detective story, in that the mystery is commented on as it unfolds by the Franciscan monk Brother William of Baskerville, the detective figure, who ultimately solves the crimes. *Foucault's Pendulum* presents the reader with the elements of the plot (which initially constitute a puzzle but not a crime), and gradually exposes the menace behind the foolish-seeming and irrational Diabolicals. When the reader closes the book, s/he realizes that the plot inevitably culminates in the murders of Belbo and Lorenza, the death

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- ¹ A fascinating analysis of the parallels between rational interpretation, occult interpretation, and the genesis of modern detective methods is provided in Ginzburg, *op. cit.* He sees the medical paradigm as the model for detective work: 'Thus, we have returned to semiotics. We find it included in a constellation of disciplines (although the term is obviously anachronistic) which have a common feature. It might be tempting to juxtapose two pseudosciences, divination and physiognomics, with sciences such as law and medicine, ascribing the disparity in such a comparison to the spatial and temporal distance of the societies under discussion. But this would be a superficial conclusion. Something did indeed link these different methods of seeking knowledge in ancient Mesopotamia (if we exclude divination by inspiration, which was based on experiences of an ecstatic type): it was an attitude oriented towards the analysis of specific cases which could be reconstructed only through traces, symptoms, and clues. Mesopotamian legal texts themselves did not consist of collections of laws or ordinances but of discussions of concrete examples. Consequently, we can speak of a presumptive or divinatory paradigm, directed, depending on the forms of knowledge, towards the past, the present, and the future, there was medical semiotics in its twofold aspect, diagnostic and prognostic; for the past, there was jurisprudence. But behind this presumptive or divinatory paradigm we perceive what may be the oldest act in the intellectual history of the human race: the hunter squatting on the ground, studying the tracks of his quarry', pp. 104-5.
 - ² Umberto Eco and Constantino Marmo (eds), *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam: Philadelphia, 1989b.
 - ³ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990.
 - ⁴ Umberto Eco, 'Afterword', in Geoffrey Nunberg (ed.), *The Future of the Book*, University of California Press, Berkeley: Los Angeles, 1996, pp. 295-306.
 - ⁵ Eco, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

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by cancer of Diotallevi, and the expected but not yet executed murder of Casaubon.

The novel is frightening in a way that *The Name of the Rose* cannot be: the guiding figure of the detective is absent, and the reader flounders in the puzzle along with the characters, whose often-faulty perceptions are all that are apparent. Advocates of postmodernism would claim that this is an accurate depiction of the human condition. Eco creates a nightmare vision of this state, but his final word is that this may be how it appears, but it does not have to be how it is. The American neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty was a respondent to Eco's 1990 Tanner Lectures. Rorty stated that his close reading of the passage near the end of *Foucault's Pendulum* where Casaubon 'lets go' affected him thus:

I read this passage as describing a moment like that when Prospero breaks his staff, or when Faust listens to Ariel and abandons the quest of Part I for the ironies of Part II. It reminded me of the moment when Wittgenstein realized that the important thing is to be able to stop doing philosophy when one wants to, and of the moment when Heidegger concluded that he must overcome all overcoming and leave metaphysics to itself. By reading the passage in terms of these parallels, I was able to call up a vision of the great magus of Bologna renouncing structuralism and abjuring taxonomy.... He is willing at last to abandon his long search for the Plan, for the code of codes.¹

Eco's impatience with postmodern epistemological scepticism is apparent in his response to this. Rorty, he claims, has just got it wrong. He did not present a proliferation of interpretations for the purpose of asserting that there is no truth: on the contrary, it is possible to determine what is the correct interpretation, or at least dispose of the least likely. He playfully adapts George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "OK, all interpreters are equal, but some of them are more equal than others."²

¹ Richard Rorty, 'The Pragmatist's Progress', in Eco, 1992, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91.

² Umberto Eco, 'Reply', in Eco, 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

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How, then, does one distinguish between interpretations? And what are the consequences for the study of esotericism within Studies in Religion and elsewhere? Eco urges the community to verify what they know and to resist the attractions of false tales, which are 'like myths, always persuasive'.¹ This recalls Lia's allusion to the sirens of Classical mythology. The sirens were beautiful and their song entrancing: they lured unsuspecting sailors to their deaths. Eco is alert to the danger posed by the proliferation of false tales, and argues that it must not be concluded:

that a criterion of truth does not exist and that tales now called false and tales that today we believe true are equivalent because they because both belong to the genre of narrative fiction. There exists a process of verification that is based on slow, collective, public performance by what Charles Sanders Peirce called 'the Community.' It is thanks to human faith in the work of this community that we can say, with some serenity, that the Donation of Constantine was false, that the earth turns around the sun, and that Saint Thomas at least knew the planet is round.²

In contemporary society, improved communications technology, compulsory education, and the cheap mass production of books are a mixed blessing, in that error may spread as quickly as truth.³ In that

¹ Eco, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 19-10. The same point is made forcefully in Ketner, *op. cit.*, p. 220; and in Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (eds), *Conversations on Art and Performance*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1999, in which Eco is interviewed. Robin Ridless' study of twentieth century mass culture, *Ideology and Art: Theories of Mass Culture from Walter Benjamin to Umberto Eco*, Peter Lang, New York: Berne: Frankfurt on the Main: Nancy, 1984, notes Eco's wariness toward idiolects, defined as 'privately held linguistic practices or bodies of practices', p. 154.

³ 'The wisest men foresaw as well that the superabundance of books would lead to the promulgation of uncomfortably divergent opinions. The famous chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson, had already complained of overabundance and the seeds of error in 1439, and voices were heard as early as 1485 in Nurnburg lamenting that it was not only the wide distribution of error in but the uniformity and consistency of error in print that made it powerful. All the copies of a printed book are alike, and *therefore* it is impossible to compare and correct copies one with another. An error inserted in one is in all, and there is no control as there was

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sense, *Foucault's Pendulum* is a cautionary tale, though not for children.

The process of distinguishing truth from error, working toward the building of the communally-negotiated and publicly evaluated truth, is a moral duty. Solipsistic indulgence in private worlds, cut off from this public evaluation, can only end in irrelevance and isolation, the solipsist labouring under the burden of paranoia that inevitably accompanies the perceived possession of 'secret knowledge'. Moreover, the widespread dissemination of the esoteric or Hermetic interpretive paradigm through the twin promotions of popular New Age spirituality and chain-store postmodernism is a real cause for alarm. In his Tanner Lectures Eco took care to uncover the history of postmodern ideas, and to note that they were not in any sense new. He then identified these ideas as 'disquieting', and drew a lengthy table of parallels between ancient Gnosticism and Hermeticism and contemporary deconstruction which is worth reproducing in full:

A text is an open-ended universe where the interpreter can discover infinite connections.

Language is unable to grasp a unique and pre-existing meaning: on the contrary, language's duty is to show that what we can speak of is only the coincidence of the opposites.

Language mirrors the inadequacy of thought: our being-in-the-world is nothing else than being incapable of finding any transcendental meaning.

Any text, pretending to assert something univocal, is a miscarried universe, that is, the work of a muddle-headed Demiurge (who tried to say 'that's that' and on the contrary elicited an uninterrupted chain of infinite deferrals where 'that' is not 'that').

Contemporary textual Gnosticism is very generous, however: everybody, provided one is eager to impose the intention of the reader upon the unattainable intention of the author, can become the *Urbmensch* who really realizes the truth, namely, that the author

in collating individually prepared manuscripts', James J. O'Donnell, 'The Pragmatics of the New: Trithemus, McLuhan, Cassiodorus', in Nunberg, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

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did not know what he or she was really saying, because language spoke in his or her place.

To salvage the text – that is, to transform it from an illusion of meaning to the awareness that meaning is infinite - the reader must suspect that every line of it conceals another secret meaning; words, instead of saying, hide the untold; the glory of the reader is to discover that texts can say everything, except what their author wanted them to mean; as soon as a pretended meaning is allegedly discovered, we are sure that it is not the real one; the real one is the further one and so on and so forth; the *hylics* – the losers – are those who end the process by saying ‘I understood’.

The Real Reader is the one who understands that the secret of a text is its emptiness.¹

For the student of Studies in Religion there is an added significance to this magnificent matching of interpretive techniques. Throughout the twentieth century it has been argued that religion has declined in significance in the West, and that Christian theology is no longer meaningful in a post-Enlightenment world where science provides answers to the ultimate questions, including the nature of humanity, its past and future.² However, in the second half of the twentieth century the revival of Hermetic and esoteric discourses revealed the dissatisfaction which modern Western people were experiencing: science failed to satisfy the human craving for mystery and awe. Consequently, scholars in Studies in Religion now feel that the secularisation thesis has run its course, and the world is in a process of re-enchantment.³ The type of fashionable literary criticism which Eco has analysed rose in popularity as theological discourse declined. It is clear from his analysis that postmodern, deconstructive literary criticism is secularised theology: the promotion of its profoundly anti-

¹ Eco, 1992, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-40.

² See Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, London, Faber and Faber, 1967; also Karel Dobbelaere, ‘Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization’, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 1999, pp. 229-48.

³ Yves Lambert, ‘Secularization or New Religious Paradigms?’ *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 1999, pp. 303-333; also Rodney Stark, ‘Secularization, R.I.P.’, *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 1999, pp. 249-74.

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realist stance (which rejects science and truth, probability and the reality of the world outside the text) is Western esotericism's 'non-spiritual' form. Its spiritual counterpart is Western esotericism in its religious form, found both in the revival of traditional esoteric groups and in the wider, demotic New Age movement.

Coda: Philosophy, Religion and Science

Eco has written on religion only rarely, and is clearly not a Christian believer.¹ However, he is disturbed that the loss of Christianity has resulted in a revival of esotericism. He champions rationality in the face of irrationality:

I am frightened by the new upheaval of irrationalism. Recently in Italy as well as in France there were many debates about the crisis of reason. And at this point we have to teach people that reason, rationality is not an absolute value, it is a technique, a conjectural activity. In Italy some of my friends have launched a new slogan of the 'weak thought' against the 'strong thought' of the old rationalism, a weak conjectural thought able to correct itself. That is a notion of reasonability, if I can coin this term, that has to be taught.²

It would be easy to misread this statement as indicating that Eco believes that the relativists were right. This is incorrect: it is just that he knows that 'rationality' may produce dogmatism and falsehood (not for nothing is he an expert on Thomas Aquinas). What he is arguing for is the patient, continually self-correcting, rationality of Max Weber's concept of *verstehen*, for so long a methodological axiom in Studies in

¹ Umberto Eco and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, *Belief or Nonbelief? A Confrontation*, trans. Minna Proctor, 'Introduction' by Harvey Cox, Arcade Publishing, New York, 1997.

² Bill Bourne, Udi Eichler, and David Herman (eds), *Voices: Writers and Politics*, Spokesman, Nottingham, 1987, pp.17-18.

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Religion.¹ This method is in essence the same as the inductive probabilism of contemporary philosophy.

Scepticism has a long history in Western philosophy. In ancient Greece Pyrrho of Elis formulated the thesis that it was not possible to use experience as the predictor of future events, and that empirical evidence was evidence only of one's perceptions. This thesis was further developed by David Hume in the eighteenth century, but it has been argued that most who invoke Hume nowadays misread his intentions: he did not intend to argue against induction, but merely to note that inductive arguments were not formally valid.² The gradual building up of events through experience, testing each one and accumulating evidence, is philosophically compatible with the existence of truth and epistemological realism. Thus Hume and Eco find themselves co-opted by postmodernism, when in fact they argue against it.

Faced with the deconstructionist 'Diabolicals' and the New Age irrationalists, Eco offers rationality and science as a source of meaning. In *Foucault's Pendulum* the question of the ultimate ground of being for humans is touched on only lightly, but it is no accident that the object that inspires Jacopo Belbo is a scientific instrument. Speaking of the Foucault's pendulum in the Conservatoire des Artes et Metiers in Paris, Belbo says:

It may be the atmosphere – that it's in a church – but, believe me, you feel a very strong sensation. The idea that everything else is in motion and up above is the only fixed point in the universe... For those who have no faith, it's a way of finding God again, and without challenging their unbelief, because it is a null pole. It can be very comforting for people of my generation, who ate disappointment for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.³

1 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, London, Duckworth, 1975, pp. 176-178.

2 David Stove, *Popper and After: Four Modern Irrationalists*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1982, pp. 50 and 55.

3 Eco, 1989, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-6.

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The pendulum is ultimately the instrument of Belbo's death, but the scientific reality of it, its beauty as well as its truth, sustains him throughout his final ordeal. Lured and tempted by the fantasies of the Diabolicals, Belbo, Casaubon and Diotallevi lose their lives but realise the ultimate value of truth.