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**Birgit Eriksson**

## **A NOVEL LOOK AT THEORY**

### **About Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum***

#### **Semiotics and novels**

When Umberto Eco published his first novel, *The Name of the Rose*, in 1980, he was already a well-known intellectual and writer. In Italy he had played an important role in all sorts of academic and more popular aesthetic, cultural and political discussions for more than 20 years; he had published books on a wide range of different topics, and every week he wrote in the magazine *l'Espresso*.

Among academics he was also known internationally as a literary critic and semiotician. In literary criticism his early book *The Open Work* (1962) and *The Role of the Reader* (1979) were influential for their studies in the ambiguity of literary and other works of art, and for their invitation to readers to participate more actively in the interpretive and creative process. In the field of semiotics he was the author of important books such as *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984), and although he likes to claim that semiotics has existed the last 2000 years he is often regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern semiotics.

It was therefore not surprising that Eco's best-selling debut as a novelist received some attention, and for those familiar with his interests in James Bond, Sherlock Holmes and Thomas Aquinas nor should it have been too surprising that *The Name of the Rose* told the story of a complicated murder mystery set in a 14th-century Italian monastery. Clearly there was a connection

between the novel and his interests in both popular culture and medieval history and aesthetics. Nor was it difficult to see a connection to his semiotics, and the novel has often been read as 'really' being about something besides the dark monastery murders: for example as being just a fictionalised version of his theoretical work.

The point I wish to make in this paper is that Eco's novels are more than this. To read them as an expansion of his theoretical work is certainly interesting, but not because they are more or less the same – rather they exceed the theory and do it in a way that shows some of the limits of theory.

When looking at the differences between Eco's theoretical reflections and his fiction, a place to begin is his own statements. He deliberately draws attention to it, when he, paraphrasing Ludwig Wittgenstein on the dust jacket of the Italian version of *The Name of the Rose*, states that "what you can't theorize about, you'll have to tell about". This does not mean, however, that the material to be treated in the two genres is completely different. They do not deal with different parts of reality, and Eco does not regard one as more creative than the other. The important difference for him lies rather in the mode of writing: While the novel is characterized by a multiplicity of meanings by showing how any emotion or situation is full of contradictions, scientific or theoretical writings have the mathematical formula as their ideal and try to establish order, clarity and exactitude.

What unites many of Eco's theoretical writings is his interest in semiotics. He has contributed to the development of semiotics both as a general theory and as an analytical tool. According to himself one of his reasons for choosing semiotics was that it could grasp everything and make it possible for him to transgress some traditional boundaries: for instance, to analyse both high and popular culture, both literature and other discourses. What semiotics does is to regard all cultural expressions as messages in a communication process: as systems of signs that we use to describe the world and tell it to

one another. It was semiotics that actually made it possible for him to talk about different phenomena in a homogeneous way, and to make his different studies – of medieval aesthetics and popular culture, of modernist literature and television programmes – meet and enrich each other. We can see the method being practiced in his essays, where he always analyses reality as a communicative affair, no matter if the topic is the avant-garde of the 60s, the terrorism of the 70s, the occultism of the 80s or the ethics of the 90s. Semiotics is the method that enables him to talk about all of it at the same time: seeing it all as aspects of one and the same world of significations and interpretations.

That semiotics is a common denominator in Eco's writings does not mean that they are all highly theoretical. Right from the beginning of his intellectual career, and long before his debut as a novelist, Eco has not only written weighty books with systematic and general semiotic theories, but also very small and occasional texts, written for specific and local situations – like his mini-diary. Most of these everyday texts were originally published in papers and weeklys, and as a genre we can locate them somewhere in between theoretical and fictional discourse.

It is significant that Eco has continued writing these small, unpretentious texts after his worldwide success with the novels. Unlike so many other writings in literary history, they are obviously not written just to earn money and thus to enable the writer to concentrate on more important and prestigious forms of writing. On the contrary, it is possible to see the small essays and the novels alike as a sign of Eco's acknowledgement that it might be necessary to use one language for saying what you cannot say in another. And I think this acknowledgement became more important for him with the general recognition of what we now know as the post-modern condition.

We can see it in Eco's essay from *Faith in Fakes*, "Language, Power, Force" (1979), where he deals with the modern or post-modern sensation of living in a universe without a heart or a centre, only with margins. He ends this essay with the suggestion – following Foucault – that this

universe is better grasped by fiction than by theory. It might be because of this recognition that he began to write novels. And it might also be because of his sensation of a centreless world that from the time of *The Role of the Reader* he turned from the general models of communication to the more specific problems regarding the interpretation of literary texts. In any case it will be interesting to see whether he will continue writing novels now that he – with *Kant and the Platypus* (1997) – has turned his analytical and theoretical attention away from the interpretation of literature again and towards a more general cognitive theory about the meeting between reality and perception.

Eco's last novel, *The Island of the Day Before* (1994), is literally about the lack of a centre. It tells about the 17th century *after* the scientific discovery that the earth is not centre of the universe and *before* the modern invention, not least by the novel, of the human being as the centre of everything. In *The Island of the Day Before* there is no longer a centre in the universe and not yet a centre in man, whether in his individuality, reason or psychology. The novel's very last words state about its 17th-century people that "It was people without a soul", and for Eco this is obviously not a loss. By focussing on "people without a soul" it is possible for him to write a novel where he can play with rhetoric and metaphors and avoid anthropocentrism. More than anything else *The Island of the Day Before* is this: a light-footed experiment with the possibilities of the soulless or centreless novel.

In theoretical and scientific discourses it is harder to make these experiments. In post-modern and deconstructive theories it has been tried, but the result – if the author is not Jacques Derrida – is very often also criticised for its lack of coherence, not least by Eco, who has criticised many sorts of irrationalism, hermetism and deconstruction, not always being too cautious about the differences between the three. According to Eco, in serious arguments you do need a centre, a stable position from where to see and write, and he has insisted on reason and classical Aristotelian logic as fundamental to all serious arguments,

but not to all discourses. Poetry and fiction for instance grant other possibilities: Here you do not have to follow *reason* or agree on one type of logic. Here you can experiment with different types of logic and experiences and rhetoric, have different centres, change points of view and 'points of speech' – and by doing so you might get quite another result than what you get if you insist on Aristotle's law of identity ( $A = A$ ), on his law of contradiction (nothing can at the same time be A and not A), and on his law of excluded middle (A is either true or not true, *tertium non datur*). In fiction there is very often not identity and not an either-or; here we see other possibilities and might discover that third ways exist: *tertium datur*.

In the rest of my paper I shall examine how these possibilities are explored and what their consequences are, first in *The Name of the Rose* and then in *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988).<sup>1</sup> To begin with I shall look at the novels *as if* they were theories and then I shall show how the theoretical positions are transformed, because they are not, in fact, theories, but novels.

## **The Name of the Rose**

### The novel as theory

Taking a first glance at *The Name of the Rose* you might say that the world presented here has a very strong centre. At least it has a strict inner structure: The setting for the novel is a medieval monastery with a library, described meticulously in words and images; the story unfolds in the course of seven days, corresponding to seven murders, and the days and the text are divided into periods corresponding to the liturgical hours. We get the impression of a strong religious order, and the seven days of the composition reinforce the impression by alluding to Genesis and later to the Apocalypse of St. John.

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<sup>1</sup>In the following I quote from *The Name of the Rose*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., San Diego 1983, and *Foucault's Pendulum*, Secker and Warburg, London 1989, both translated from the Italian by William Weaver.

Also on the thematical level the composition is clear: In the detective story there is the conflict between William, the detective, and Jorge, the librarian; and in the historical narrative there is the conflict between the established church and the heresy, and thereby also between William and the inquisition. These conflicts are not at all as different as they seem, since the two main threads of the novel intertwine: The detective story is not only about murders, but also about the nature of laughter and forbidden knowledge. And the historical novel is not only about religious and political conflicts, but contains murders too; only here they are in the name of God. Both narrative threads therefore require that the protagonists and the reader make expeditions to the books of the library, and both are also a questioning of truth that involves a struggle between nominalism and realism, between totality and detail, and between empiricism and dogmatism. In this way they can be regarded as versions of the same fundamental conflict. But what are the positions?

First of all there is William, the hero of the novel. Politically and religiously he is the tolerant and open-minded Franciscan. Epistemologically he is the cautious observer of particularities and the sensible interpreter whose method is a combination of sensuous empiricism, fallibilism and the constructive skills of the mind. He is sceptical about universals and ideas, which are only signs, and tries to "discover things in their individual truth" (*The Name of the Rose*, p. 317), but we also learn that the narrator, Adso,

had the impression that William was not at all interested in the truth, which is nothing but the adjustment between the thing and the intellect. On the contrary, he amused himself by imagining how many possibilities were possible (*ibid.* p. 306).

On all levels – the political, the religious and the epistemological – William has two opponents: the inquisition and, more importantly, Jorge of Burgos. For different reasons, but with more or less the same result, they both try to defend the one and only

perfect, fundamentalist truth and metaphysical order – at all costs. And the enemy here is not only the modern scepticism of William, but also heresy and all other sorts of objects and activities that might destabilize the established church and order.

In short, we have a structure with one open, modern position (keywords: empiricism, humanism, fallibilism, nominalism, reason) and one authoritative traditional position (keywords: metaphysics, truth, dogmatism, intolerance, belief, philosophical realism). These are by far the most important positions in the structure of the novel and the development of its plot, and are almost as mutually exclusive as black and white.

But we also have a third position, which is neither traditional and authoritative nor modern and rational. Here we meet the laughter and the heretical movements, the sex and the dreams, the religious satires and the miniature paintings showing another universe in the margins of the Holy Scriptures' authoritative truth. These practices do not criticise rationally, but experiment with the invention of a world with everything turned upside down. If we should generalize these practices and their function in relation to dogmatic truth, they are not really modern, but rather post-modern destabilizing. If apart from William of Occam and Roger Bacon, William's position, with his love of signs and abductions, reminds us of Peirce, then this position could easily be taken from Bakhtin's book about Rabelais and carnivalism. But it could also be the position of deconstruction, and it is tempting to read it as a comment to both Bakhtin and Derrida when Jorge warns against taking the deconstruction of the hierarchies seriously as an alternative truth:

But if one day somebody, brandishing the words of the Philosopher and therefore speaking as a philosopher, were to raise the weapon of laughter to the condition of subtle weapon, if the rhetoric of conviction were replaced by the rhetoric of mockery, if the topics of the patient construction of the images of redemption were to be replaced by the topics of the impatient deconstruction and distor-

tion<sup>2</sup> of every holy and venerable image – oh, that day even you, William, and all your knowledge, would be swept away. (*ibid.* p. 476)

William denies this, of course – believing in his modern, experimental and sceptical knowledge – but the question is whether the novel also denies this. Exactly how much does the laughter sweep away?

To answer this, it is necessary to look at it not only as a synchronic structure with positions, but also as a diachronic narrative with lives. If we look at *The Name of the Rose* as a narrative rather than as a stable structure of oppositions, it is remarkable that Eco does not allow his hero, the clever semiotician, to be successful. This is not a Hollywood movie, William is not Sean Connery, and things are not as black and white as the opposition between his empiricism and interpretive openness and Jorge's always already perfect truth suggests. Like all theoretical minds, William is tempted by the truth, and when he cannot discover the first killings "in their individual truth" he chooses the wrong context – that is: the wrong book – to explain them. He sees the seven trumpets of the Apocalypse as the key to the murders, and like all hermeneutic circularism, the interpreted object does as is expected: Jorge finds out that William believes in the apocalyptic connection and adjusts to it. What we have, then, is not crime and detection as simple, isolated events, but a much more complex interactive process where William and Jorge, or reader and text, both adjust to and seduce each other.

In the end, of course, William solves the murders and finds out about the other context, Aristotle's dangerous book on the comedy, but the point is that it is too late: When the library burns down, and the inquisition continues its murderous trials, Jorge is the one to laugh, William the one to cry. At the end of

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<sup>2</sup>In the English version the Italian words "decostruzione" and "stravolgimento" (*Il nome della rosa*, Bompiani, Milano 1980, p. 479) are translated into "dismantling and upsetting", which I have replaced with "deconstruction and distortion", a more direct, but in view of "decostruzione" also a much more meaningful translation, since Eco would not be Eco if he used this word innocently.

the novel, there are not many possibilities left on the thematical level for making possible worlds, and to stress the lack of success the novel ironically follows the first and 'wrong' explanation when it lets "the forces of hell prevail" (*ibid.* p. 480) and the Western world's biggest collection of knowledge burn down like in the world conflagration of the Apocalypse.

With our historical knowledge we can of course claim that in the long run William's modernity will win and Jorge's truth lose. But this optimism finds no support in the novel, where with sustained irony the contemporary narrator claims to be

comforted and consoled in finding it immeasurably remote in time (now that the waking of reason has dispelled all the monsters that its sleep had generated), gloriously lacking in any relevance for our day, atemporally alien to our hopes and our certainties (*ibid.* p. 5).

The novel is thoroughly pessimistic regarding the moral as well as the intellectual quest for truth. What we have at the end is not a perfect world order and not even a reasonable one. Modern reason has not succeeded in sweeping traditional truth away, so what kind of detective story is this when possessing the truth does not help at all, and neither the criminal nor the detective wins? And can you do this at all – "discover things in their individual truth" and "imagine how many possibilities are possible" – instead of going for the same kind of truth as Jorge? Well, one thing you could do is to stop focussing on truths and theoretical positions and write a novel instead. This is what Eco has done, and in spite of its historical and epistemological pessimism, he has written a novel that in its own way is a perfectly happy one.

The novel as novel

Novels are, as Eco describes them in *The Role of the Reader*, machines for making possible worlds. And these worlds are not meant to be universal. In his famous treatise on the novel, *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt describes as one of the characteristics of the genre that it rejects universals and replaces

the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one – one which presents us, essentially, with a developing, but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places.<sup>3</sup>

In short, the novel seems to be the place to try out nominalism in practice, to imagine possibilities and "discover things in their individual truth". In the following I shall try to show how with *The Name of the Rose* Eco does exactly this – and try to answer the question, if this becomes a new truth or if this too is swept away by deconstructive irony.

Rather than being generally known, an individual truth has to be experienced and expressed by someone and from somewhere. If we look at *The Name of the Rose* as a narrative told from a particular place and in a particular way, we soon lose the apparent clarity of its thematical conflicts and well-ordered physical and historical world. Right from the beginning the story is placed in a frame that is a whole nest of Chinese boxes with a range of different narrators writing from different positions and different historical periods: The contemporary authorial narrator finds a manuscript that has travelled through a lot of hands and been translated, appended and changed from the 14th-century to the present day, when he "out of pure love of writing" decides to publish his "Italian version of an obscure, neo-Gothic French version of a seventeenth century Latin edition of a work written in the last or next-to-last decade of the fourteenth century" (*ibid.* p. 4).

This ironic nest of Chinese boxes could be rejected as just another example of postmodernist play. But beyond playing Eco also draws attention to the centreless universe of the novel, stressing that this lack of a stable centre is not merely a loss: not having one central position from which to speak also represents the possibility to create a more open world with room for diffe-

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<sup>3</sup>Ian Watt: *The Rise of the Novel*, The Hogarth Press, London 1987 (1957) p. 31.

rentiations and meetings between different points of view and different discourses.

This is obvious in the beginning, which is not one, but three beginnings: First the framework, which is "Naturally, a manuscript": "On August 16, 1968, I was handed a book written by a certain Abbé Vallet, *Le manuscrit de Dom Adson de Melk, traduit en français d'après l'édition de Dom J. Mabillon...*" (*ibid.* p. 1); then the prologue: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (*ibid.* p. 11), and finally the "First day": "It was a beautiful morning at the end of November" (*ibid.* p. 21).

With these three beginnings the novel not only introduces three different narrators, but also quotes three very different literary traditions: the literary cliché about the long lost but now found manuscript, the Genesis of the Gospel according to St John, and finally a literary universe very similar to the one we know from the famously unsuccessful beginnings of Charlie Brown's Snoopy.

All three are very well-known beginnings from the history of literature, but also beginnings from what we normally consider completely different realms of this history. We have here a mixture of, confrontation and play between traditions – the ones already mentioned but also the detective story and the historical novel, the gothic novel and the Bildungsroman, the religious satire and medieval chronicles, Christian mythology and many others.

What is important in this way of using literary traditions is not only how on an aesthetic and stylistic level Eco makes high and low, new and old vocabularies meet in the very polyphonic world that is the novel's own. The narrative technique – or techniques – are also interesting on an epistemological level, not because one is more or less true than the other, but precisely because it does not make any sense to ask about the truth-value of literary traditions. They are manifestations of different ways of seeing, organizing and telling the world, but they do not, as theories might, exclude each other. They do not aim to be universal, but can live together as individuals sometimes can:

Snoopy does not need to eliminate the Bible, and Eco can test the possibilities of his own possible world.

That it does not make sense to ask about truth-value does not mean that all readings and depictions of the world are equally good. What makes sense is to ask about the usefulness – or joy – of the different ways: what is good in which situation. The novel also points at the different possibilities by dividing Adso, the narrator's voice, into two discourses: The old Adso looks back at the experiences of his youth with a prudent, integrating and unifying glance, but this alternates with the fragmented, uncomprehending and naive voice of the young Adso, who narrates while he experiences.

Adso thus alternates between a vertical and a horizontal organization of the events, just as the reader is forced to alternate between the detective story and the historical novel. The historical descriptions interrupt every reading for the plot, and the detective story points at the fact that in spite of the reality effects this is still 'just a novel'. In this way they disturb each other's quests for truth: for the perfect explanation and for historical realism. They survive as narratives, as possible ways of organizing the world, but never as pure genres: The historical novel contains serious realism, but also play; the detective story is part of Western logocentrism, but also part of popular culture; and Adso's autobiographical discourse would like to be teleological, but is *also* biological, and *also* influenced by the fragments of arbitrary texts he finds in the ruin of the burnt-down library.

All in all, the linear narratives exist in a polyphonic composition where they are constantly played off against the novel's bric-a-brac of quotations from literary and philosophical traditions. Adso calls attention to this when he warns the reader that "nor do I promise you an accomplished design, but, rather, a tale of events..." (*ibid.* p. 18). By characterizing his writing in this way (in Italian as "un'elenco di fatti", a *list* of events) he returns to a narrative mode previous to the novel: to a simpler, but also more open way of narrating, where he can

list the facts one after the other without trying to link them to each other causally and without establishing a centre.

The result is that we have a novel that on the one hand is held together by medieval time and space and by Adso's memories of the events and on the other hand is divided into a mosaic of quotations, of *disjecta membra*. The tension between these uniting and dividing principles is absolutely central because they also function as two interpretive strategies: one that learns from the medieval way of reading the world as similarities and one that follows the modern way of reading through individual qualities.

In reading *The Name of the Rose* we are, just like Adso with his theocratic hierarchical reading of the world and the bric-a-brac of the literary fragments, placed between two possibilities: to search for the uniting principle between the many different elements and read it as *one* text or to read the apparent unity, the book, as a mosaic of fragments that directs us towards other texts.

The point is, first of all, that if we follow only *one* of these interpretive strategies, we end up doing what the novel warns against: searching for purity and truth, either by integrating all the details in an overall design or by digging up the sources of the quotations and seeing them as some kind of deeper truth than the novel's own polyphony.

Second, and just as important: We can and shall not totally avoid either of the two strategies. From a theoretical point of view we can choose to support either Jorge or William or deconstruction, but in reading the novel we have to learn from Adso who resembles both Jorge and William: not trying to see a narrative unity would be boring and probably impossible, and to be completely blind to the intertextual references would deprive the reading of some of the novel's additional meanings – not only its post-modern ironical play, but also how with his additive composition Eco approaches the often anonymous medieval texts that did not have to respond to the modern

requests of originality and authenticity.<sup>4</sup> The additive composition can be read as a strategy to avoid the central position of strong authorial subjectivity and to gain a complexity of references and echoes, which he probably could not have achieved without borrowing other voices. What Eco does, in respect to Ian Watt's remarks about the novel, is to tell how individual truths are not necessarily centered in individuals, but are also out there: in all the possible worlds of literature.

Reading *The Name of the Rose*, the reader experiences what William has yet to discover: that it is difficult to avoid a position that resembles Jorge's: Like Jorge we as well as William must admire the overall design of its possible world, and to enjoy it we must keep an eye on it and not let all the intertextual references destabilize the unity. But we must also do what the destabilizing third position does and William tries: sometimes forget the narrative unity and enjoy all the possibilities that the novel's use of literary traditions gives us for constructing our own possible worlds. Like Adso we must be able to do both – accept the hierarchies, but also take a close look at the fragments, with the risk or chance that they can turn everything upside down.

### **Foucault's Pendulum**

*Foucault's Pendulum* tells the story of three friends – Belbo, Casaubon and Diotallevi – and their idea about the Plan, which is their own reconstruction and reinterpretation of world history. We follow the three men from when they first meet at a bar in Milano in 1972 until the end in 1984, when the Plan has already caused the death of two of them, and Casaubon, the narrator, is waiting for his pursuers while looking back at what happened and trying to discover the reasons for and logic of how the Plan got out of control. The main thread of the narrative is thus the development of the Plan, which we follow from

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Umberto Eco's introduction in *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, New Haven/London, 1986 (Italian original, 1959).

the three men's first discussion of Casaubon's thesis about the Knights Templars, to their publishing of a series of occult books and their hereby inspired intellectual game in which they construct a new world history according to an occult master plan, and finally to the fatal consequences when the Plan is taken seriously. In the Plan world history is described as a fight between secret societies that have struggled over the centuries to reconstruct a lost message that would ensure them world hegemony, and the murderous consequences are that reality strikes back: that some secret and occult society takes the plan seriously and comes to get the lost message.

*Foucault's Pendulum* thus deals even more explicitly than *The Name of the Rose* with the interpretations and narratives we make of the world: with how to connect events and how to attribute meaning to them. But if we look at it 'as theory', which means as exposing a discussion between theoretical or interpretive positions, it is also quite different from *The Name of the Rose*, which at least pretended to have a clear opposition between the detective and the criminal. In a way *Foucault's Pendulum* starts where *The Name of the Rose* ends. Right from the beginning we know that Eco's second novel will not be about a fight between personified good and evil, or a "whodunit", but will be about a seduction: about how the Plan, which started as an innocent fiction, could seduce its creators so that they, in Casaubon's words, "were slowly losing that intellectual light that allows you always to tell the similar from the identical, the metaphorical from the real" (*Foucault's Pendulum* p. 468).

If there is an opposition it is this one, which is also familiar to readers of Eco from *The Limits of Interpretation* and *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*: the opposition between getting seduced by the similar and metaphorical on the one hand and insisting on the mind's possibility to separate them from the identical and real on the other. But it is a particularity of his novel that the second position is almost empty: Casaubon's wife enacts it, but she plays a very small role; part of

Belbo's biography can be read as representing it, but both do it in a biological and existential sense. If we look for "the intellectual light" of the above quotation, we find it only in Casaubon's narrative intentions. The light of reason is explicitly what he wants to shed over the development of the Plan. As stated in the beginning, he will "ask the help of Science" (*ibid.* p. 9) and "Stick to facts, causes, effects. I am here for this reason, and also for this reason, and this..." (*ibid.* p. 17-18).

In reality, however, scientific and reasonable discourses do not take up much room in the novel. The focus is rather on vocabularies that do not respect logics of causality or chronological order. The three friends each have their own logic and way of organizing the world, and these are also compositional principles in the formal structure of the novel:

First, the novel is divided into ten parts taken from the Sefirot tree of the Jewish kabala and hereby referring to a cosmic order and an overall metaphysical design. This is the principle of faith, tradition and wisdom represented by Diotallevi, the imaginary Jew. Second, it is also divided into 120 short chapters, all introduced by a quotation said to be found on Belbo's computer, and with no obvious logic other than a more or less arbitrary combination from the huge archive of intertextuality.

Finally, the novel is structured like the narration of Casaubon, who, while waiting for his presumed pursuers, tries to discover the chronological causality in their loss of control over the Plan. This is not an easy job, since the narrative includes the Templars' history since 1344, the occult or hermetic tradition of the last two thousand years, and some of Belbo's computer files with childhood memories and other personal writings. Moreover, the borderline between similarities and identities is not at all easy to define. Casaubon starts out having "a cultural investigation agency", being "a kind of private eye of learning" (*ibid.* p. 224), and he soon discovers that the cultural information he finds is connected not only in linear causalities, but also in networks. In the library he discovers that he can always find connections if he wants to, and as a true rhizoma-

tic encyclopaedist he is able to associate from sausage to Plato in five steps: "Let's see: sausage, pig bristle, paint brush, Mannerism, Idea, Plato. Easy." (*ibid.* p. 225).

The Plan is thus a mixture of these three different types of logic: Diotallevi's mystical insight is deprived of its religious content and combined with the computer's arbitrary combinations, which are seen as signs of a hidden metaphysical truth, and all is united in the encyclopaedic Plan:

wanting connections, we found connections – always, everywhere, and between everything. The world exploded in a whirling network of kinships, where everything pointed to everything else, everything explained everything else.... (*ibid.* pp. 463-4).

By ignoring traditional scientific virtues, first they find superficial analogies between historical facts, then they ironically interpret these analogies as secrets, and finally they attach some paranoid causal or symbolic value to them. In this way they are able to construct an esoteric, ironic and paranoid world history, guided only by the aesthetic fascination of their own intellectual game – and mistakenly believing that their possible world is isolated from the surrounding world, and that their aesthetic play is without consequences in the real world.

From Eco's theoretical writings we are familiar with his critique of this kind of practice, regardless of whether he finds it in historical hermetism, in deconstruction or in contemporary culture's fascination with irrationalism. The question is therefore how this critique presents itself in the novel. As far as I can see there are two significant ways in which *Foucault's Pendulum* differs from Eco's theoretical position. One has to do with the novel's aesthetic and stylistic strategy, the other with the plot development.

First, it is obvious that *Foucault's Pendulum* is not only critical towards, but also extremely fascinated by the Plan's ironic-aesthetic strategy, which it unfolds at such a length that the novel itself adopts some of the characteristic features of the

Plan. In presenting the Plan it indeed follows the superficial analogies and the paranoid interpretations very far in warning against them, and the critique is thus expressed in a vocabulary very similar to that which is criticised. There is, in short, a remarkable resemblance between what the novel criticises and its own aesthetic and stylistic practice, and this means that the novel warns against a fascination that seems to be necessary for the reader's enjoyment of it. To enjoy its immense compilation of historical information we do not only have to follow the analogies and interpretations of the Plan, but also to learn from it and construct our own connections.

Second, there is an interesting lack of consistency or at least an ambiguity in the plot development. The Plan is described as a construction of a possible world, with the only problem that it gets more and more real. The aesthetic construction has ethical and existential consequences when the occult somehow acts according to it: *as if* it were true. By letting this happen, the novel does two things: It presents the secret and dangerous societies, both as the Plan's paranoid construction and as a strong power in the world outside the Plan: in 'reality'. And it lets reality and fiction intertwine without giving any reasonable logical explanation. In this way the novel comes very close to constructing its own paranoid, symbolic connection.

Casaubon points at this when he asks: "was it possible for reality not only to catch up with fiction but actually to precede it, or, rather, to rush ahead of it and repair the damage that it would cause?" (*ibid.* p. 171). The point is that the novel apparently agrees when it *makes* this possible: When it constructs its own similarities and ignores a chronological causality in the plot development, it resembles the Plan, which is based on this ignorance and, in Diotallevi's words, regards "Space-time: the error of the West" (*ibid.* p. 469). And when it lets the Plan be both made-up and true, the consequence is necessarily that as readers of the novel we are no more able than the creators of the Plan to "tell the similar from the identical, the metaphorical from the real".

If *Foucault's Pendulum* had been a theory, this paradoxical lack of consistency between what the novel says and does would have been a serious problem. Fortunately, however, it is not a theory, and in the following I shall argue that the paradox gives the novel a special quality, and that it would have been much more problematic if the ambiguity had not been there.

The problem raised by *Foucault's Pendulum* deals with the relationship between reality and our fictions, readings and interpretations of it. Like *The Name of the Rose*, it relates that fictional or interpretive practice can change the world because they have a seductive power with unpredictable effects. Reality might adjust and make the fiction come true, not as mimesis, but in a much more unpredictable way. Fiction and reality, interpretation and history, are not identical, but they do meet, and this meeting raises aesthetic as well as epistemological and ethical problems.

But how do we read, then? How does the novel want us to read itself and the world when it apparently cannot make up its own mind: Just as it is both a grand fiction and warns against making one, it also criticises and parodies all the other ways of reading that it sketches, such as for example its own reading of the lives of the two protagonists, Casaubon and Belbo: Casaubon's biography is horizontal, a story without important conflicts, hidden depths or crucial moments; Belbo's is vertical, uncovering the motivations underneath and pointing at decisive events and absolute existential choices of an almost revelatory character. In the first biography everything is equally important, in the second there is a sharp distinction between the significant and the insignificant. The first monotonous pragmatic reading is not very interesting, the second radical existential one arouses our curiosity, but is also described with an ironical distance. Again, the novel will not choose, but lets both unfold, and all in all it seems to agree with Belbo, who divides people into idiots, fools, blockheads and lunatics, and sees no other solution than to mix these in reasonable quantities – just as it seems to agree with Casaubon, who cannot find the

right vocabulary to describe the Knights Templars and thus describes them as belonging to a range of different genres including the comedy, the John Ford movie, the tragedy and many others (*ibid.* p. 102).

But what do you do if you cannot choose one style or genre or way of reading? What Eco does with *Foucault's Pendulum* is apparently to include them all. The question of how to reorganise and deal with texts and knowledge is not only treated in the Plan's paranoid unity, but also in the fragments without unity of which the novel *also* consists. If we look at the formal structure of the text, it is rather a system of differences than one big synthesis. With all its explicit and implicit quotations and with all its different narrative modes, it confronts a whole range of particular rhetorical approaches to the world: the neo-realism in Belbo's childhood memories, the romantic longings, the modernist fragmentation and postmodernist eclecticism in his fictions, the critical satire in Casaubon's social realism, the irony, the earthbound simplicity and many more.

All of these, even the irony, are treated ironically or parodied. This can seem like an unbearable know-it-all attitude from the author, but I think it is important to notice that the critique and parodies do not change the fact that all the approaches are actually present in the novel. In spite of their unreliability and ridiculousness they are included in a pragmatic polyphony that is hard to read as a unity but rather seems like the loose network of an encyclopaedia, where some units connect more easily than others.

But what exactly is the difference between this encyclopaedia and the Plan? Actually, it is hard to define. The novel does not establish a fundamental difference; Eco's theoretical writings do: they insist on a clear distinction between reasonable and paranoid, hermetic interpretations. In the novel it is otherwise: here there is no external enemy<sup>5</sup> and no absolute distinction; the 'heroes' are also the 'criminals', and the problem is not presented as an either-or, but as slight differences of

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<sup>5</sup>This is also confirmed by the fact that Belbo's biography and Casaubon's method in many ways resemble Eco's own.

meaning. You might be seduced by similarities that are too superficial, or you might be too suspicious in your interpretations, but it is a question of degrees and excess, not of essential differences.

This lack of a clear distinction might, like the above-mentioned lack of consistency, be seen as a weakness of the novel, but I would prefer to see it as an opening that dissolves Eco's apparent know-it-all attitude. His encyclopaedia or fiction might be a non-method or a non-style, but it is also a text that in its all-embracing pretensions resembles the Plan, and in this way the irony or ambiguity also includes both the author and the reader, who compared to the heroes of the novel do not have any privileged position or method. If the impression, after reading *Foucault's Pendulum*, is one of a lack of control, then it is not only because of the overwhelming quantity of material, but also because of the novel's lack of centre when it does not act according to its own warning, and when it shows that the difference between creative combinations and paranoid interpretations cannot be defined in advance, but only along the way, when you see how the world reacts.

You can try to secure this experimentalism by avoiding hermetism, in the sense that rather than keeping your discourse secret and closed to the world, you let readers and other discourses confront and interfere with it. But this is, in short, not a question of essentials but of pragmatics – which Eco knows when he very often also ignores the 'time-space'-rules of causality in his theoretical writings. I am sure that many readers find it paranoid when he, for instance, compares medieval scholasticism with modern structuralism, or traditional hermetism with contemporary deconstruction. But he finds similarities when he suggests that the first two see the world as a stable and understandable system with synchronic and universal structures, and that the last two both stress the lack of referentiality in language, suspiciously look for things hidden under the literal meaning, and are opposed to the rationalistic principles of Aristotelian logic.

In the world we find similarities that are hard to explain as cause and reason, and sometimes they are very productive, also for our recognition of differences. *Foucault's Pendulum* is productive in this way because it is composed in such a way that it does not only, like the universal Plan, explode "in a whirling network of kinships, where everything pointed to everything else, everything explained everything else". It rather explodes, like a universal encyclopaedia, *in a whirling network of differences* that may point to, but certainly do not explain, each other, and where the myriad of textual elements seems much more important than the overall plot development.

### **Paradoxical novels, theoretical ambiguity**

In *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* there are some almost identical formulations of how reality can catch up with and overtake the plans and constructions made by humans, and how things may happen that do not belong to any plan. And in the narrative development of both novels the potential danger in this is shown.

What exactly is the solution that the novels suggest, if any? It is apparently not to quit making fictions and interpretations. Eco has continued writing novels in spite of the unpredictability and risks about which they tell. In so doing he has shown that the recognition of the possible fatal consequences of too much ethic or aesthetic purity or of the impossibility of pure reason does not mean that you cannot experiment with the possibilities of these. He warns against it and tries it out at the same time. And he also tells how important the experiments are: What happens in both novels is that at the end of their lives the narrators describe what they could not control. The problem that the novels deal with is that you cannot methodologically control in advance the readings of the world. You can – like Adso and Casaubon – try to do it at the end of your life, i.e. afterwards, but this is based on lives, on experiences. You cannot see the borderlines until you have

crossed them, and if you never try to cross borderlines you end up as closed and dogmatic as the Christian or hermetic library of truth. And again: the advantage of the novel is that with one hand you can do all you can to cross the borderline, while with the other hand you point at all the risks in doing so.

In Eco's novels this is enacted in different ways: In *The Name of the Rose* laughter, irony and ambiguity stand out as very positive because of their subversive, deconstructive and liberating potentials. In *Foucault's Pendulum* they have the same potentials but are also shown to be problematic. But these 'theoretical truths' are turned upside down in the writing of the novels: as a rhetorical strategy irony is employed far more frequently in the second novel, which thematically presents it as problematic, than in the first.

Regarding reason we have the same paradox, just the other way around: in *The Name of the Rose* the carnivalistic movements are liberating when they turn order and reason upside down, but reason still has its place in the protagonist William and in the very reasonable and logical criminal plot. In *Foucault's Pendulum* the constantly expanding analogies are criticised for their lack of logical coherence, but this critique is itself put forward in a narrative that often forgets causality and follows expanding analogies. In spite of its critique of order and reason, *The Name of the Rose* is much more organised and reasonable than *Foucault's Pendulum*. And in spite of its critique of irony and deconstruction, *Foucault's Pendulum* is much more ironic and deconstructive than *The Name of the Rose*. Thus, the thematical and the formal aspects 'complement' and contradict each other in such a way that you cannot translate them into theoretical positions and choose between them.

This ambiguity between the enunciate and the enunciation opens up the fictions and gives them a special complexity. In a theoretical discourse it is different; here the ambiguity can be rather annoying, at least to Eco, who in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* criticises Richard Rorty for the lack of consistency between what he says and does. In Eco's own fictions, however, there is this lack: he does not do what he says

and he does not say what he does. And if you had to be that consistent – always do what you said and say what you did – it would probably be the end of all experiments and really be authoritative. Fortunately, Eco is not that consistent. He continues constructing possible worlds and making them ambiguous so that his readers can do the same – even if he knows that they might all of a sudden become more real than ever intended or wanted.

Rather than insisting on consistency, Eco insists on openness: that it is necessary to confront your possible world with other worlds and other vocabularies. What is described as dangerous in Jorge's library and in the Plan is most of all the isolation, the defensive focus on the internal correspondences in their own one and only – mimetic or symbolic – vocabulary, which turns out to be an exclusion of all confrontations, differences and dialogues. If the discourses here are dangerous, it is because they wish to be closed and universal at the same time.

In the version of the first novel – the library's dogmatic realism – the texts are conceived as repetitions of another and truer God-given reality, and as destructive to the possible worlds of the imagination because texts and readers are condemned if they do not do as the authoritative original prescribes.

In the version of the second novel – the Plan's aesthetic self-referentiality – the texts are taken as having nothing to do with another prosaic reality; this also destroys the possible world because in its isolation the Plan becomes too pretentious, because at one and the same time it wishes to include everything and in reality excludes all communication in striving for its own perfection.

In this way Eco's first two novels give us two images of how bad it can get, both if you take fiction to be identical with truth and reality and if you take it to have nothing to do with truth and reality. One is too much and the other too little, and the same can be said of the relationship between Eco's fictional novels and his theoretical truths: the novels and the theory are not identical, but they are certainly related.

