

*Auctor in Fabula: Umberto Eco and the Intentio of Foucault's Pendulum*

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## Abstract

Umberto Eco's 1988 novel *Foucault's Pendulum* weaves together a wide range of philosophical and literary threads. Many of these threads find their other ends in Eco's nonfiction works, which focus primarily on the question of interpretation and the source of meaning. The novel, which follows three distinctly overinterpretive characters as they descend into ruin, has been read by some as a retraction or parody of Eco's own position. However, if *Foucault's Pendulum* is indeed polemical, it must be taken as an argument against the mindset which Eco has termed the "hermetic". Through an examination of his larger theoretical body, it will be seen that Eco preserves his philosophical consistency across his fictive and non-fictive work.

*Auctor in Fabula: Umberto Eco and the Intentio of Foucault's Pendulum***Introduction**

To define Umberto Eco seems, on first glance, an impossible task. Over a career spanning nearly six decades, he has not carved a niche for himself as much as he has extended his formidable shadow over Western semiotics and academia. Declared by Jonathan Culler of Cornell University to be the world's "most distinguished representative" of the semiotic discipline (Culler 116), Eco has written extensively for both technical and lay audiences. His expertise extends to aesthetics, popular culture, literary criticism, comic books, philology, and medieval philosophy, establishing him as one of contemporary Europe's indisputable polymaths.

Together with his essays and lectures, Eco has achieved widespread notoriety through his fiction. His 1980 debut, *The Name of the Rose*, became an international bestseller, and was eventually adapted for the screen in a production starring Sean Connery. His later novels—including *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), *The Island of the Day Before* (1994), and *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004)—did not receive quite the same reception, but Eco has built a large cult following nonetheless. His novels are as distinctive as his nonfiction, filled with characters who struggle with contemporary philosophical problems, employing a veritable encyclopedia of historical and literary references, and driven by that "taste for whimsicality" which marks his personality (Eco, *Search for Perfect Language* 4).

Whether writing for academics or for a lay audience, whether composing fictional narratives or analytical essays, Eco returns to several topics in particular. Foremost among these is the question of interpretation. The nature of texts, how they mean, and

how much they can mean has been a concern of Eco's since his 1962 book *Opera aperta* (translated into English in 1989 as *The Open Work*). Since then, he has expounded his nuanced brand of structuralism in academic works such as *The Role of the Reader* (1979), *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984), and *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990). In recognition of his work in this field, Eco was invited to deliver the 1990 Tanner Lectures at Cambridge (Collini 1). Additionally, Eco has had a keen interest in the history of semiotic philosophy, particularly in the thought of the classical and medieval scholars. In 1979, before the International Association for Semiotic Studies, he proposed several avenues for historiographic approaches to the topic. A large volume of his own essays on the subject published in 2014 (*From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*) bears witness to his long devotion.

While universally respected, Eco is not always understood, particularly when it comes to his fiction. During the previously-mentioned Tanner Lectures, the late Richard Rorty (then of UVa) confessed to having conducted a particularly mistaken reading of *Foucault's Pendulum*. Acknowledging in the same breath that he had later changed his mind regarding Eco's purpose, Rorty described his first impression:

I decided that Eco must be satirizing the way in which scientists, scholars, critics, and philosophers think of themselves as cracking codes, peeling away accidents to reveal essence, stripping away veils of appearance to reveal reality. I read the novel as anti-essentialist polemic, as a spoof of the metaphor of depth[.] More specifically, I interpreted the novel as a send-up of structuralism—of the very idea of structures which stand to texts or cultures as skeletons to bodies, programs to computers, or keys to

locks[.] I decided that Eco had managed to shrug off the diagrams and taxonomies of his earlier work[;] he is willing at last to abandon his long search for the Plan, for the code of codes. (“Progress” 89-91)

Such a reading could not survive the torrent of work which followed *Foucault’s Pendulum*, which indisputably proved that Eco had not retracted anything; in his talk, Rorty freely admitted the untenable nature of his interpretation (though, as a philosophical pragmatist, would not admit to any *mistake*).

Though such an interpretation may be universally discarded (declared “incorrect” by some, declared “not useful” by others), it would be well worth discovering what makes this interpretation so appealing, even for a highly-educated philosopher and literary theorist such as Rorty. Is the novel truly “polemic,” is Eco merely playing a 500-page prank on his readers, or is something else going on? And if the novel makes an argument, what argument does it make? An exploration of the novel in the context of Eco’s other writings can settle this question beyond any reasonable doubt. *Foucault’s Pendulum* is indeed an argumentative book, but one that argues against a philosophy which Eco, far from espousing, has rather attacked throughout his career: overinterpretation and the hermetic mindset. Establishing this thesis requires an overview of Eco’s hermetic targets, a description of both Eco’s and Rorty’s philosophical positions, and, finally, a careful reading of the novel itself.

### **Eco’s History of Interpretive Drift**

As close to a manifesto as Eco has ever written, his 1990 lecture series (to which Rorty’s talk was a response) laid out his core conception of the attitude towards the physical and textual world which he has labeled “hermetic” (Eco, “Unlimited Semiosis”

28). This attitude is characterized on the one hand by a sort of flippancy toward interpretation and the meaning of a text (for the text or symbol can represent *anything*) and on the other hand by a dead seriousness with regard to the idea that truth that may be found in deep layers of signification (for it also must represent *something*). Paradoxical, yes, but Eco's definition of the hermetic clearly marks it as contrary to normal logic (Eco, "Interpretation and History" 29). A believer in what Eco terms "interpretive drift" (Eco, "Unlimited Semiosis" 26), that is, the continual deferral of meaning via symbolic processes, the hermetic thinker operates under a hermeneutic of suspicion, clinging to the non-falsifiable belief that ultimate truth is just outside his grasp.

Eco's historical research traces elements of this mindset as far back as the Grecian scholars, whose concern with the bounds of reason was paired with other aspects of their culture which were "fascinated by infinity" (Eco, "Interpretation and History" 29). According to Eco, the same civilization which produced Aristotelian logic was simultaneously absorbed with the possibility of a deep and secret γνῶσις<sup>1</sup> beyond the reach of methodical reason, which could unlock the world's hidden meanings. Even as science and rationality made great strides, the mystery cults of Isis and Mithras flourished across the Hellenic and Roman worlds (Magness 162), enticing followers with the promise of secrets.

This search for secret knowledge, Eco says, was spurred by a desire to uncover the hidden correspondences underlying apparent contradictions, and was enabled by a readiness to understand texts as inherently symbolic, carrying deeper signification than what is visible on the surface. In these circles, the importance of rational thought as an

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<sup>1</sup> "Knowledge"; the root of English "gnostic" and "gnosticism"

avenue to truth was downplayed, with revelatory visions and epiphanies elevated in its place: “truth becomes identified with what is not said [and] must be understood beyond or beneath the surface of a text” (Eco, “Interpretation and History” 30). The interpretive faculties become vitally important in these philosophical religions, as it is only through hypothesizing deep structures connecting phenomena that something closer to true meaning may be found.

These ancient philosophies of the anti-rational reached their apogee in the second century A.D., in a relatively peaceful, tolerant society, where Roman mixed with Greek, and Cretan with Phrygian, and where even deities could become fluid—for example, Ceres could also be identified as Demeter, or Rhea, or Cybele, all harvest goddesses who were once separated by religion and race. Enough was known concerning both the world of cultures and the physical world for syncretism to limitlessly combine and conflate anywhere that similarities were found. In the mystical collection *Corpus Hermeticum* of the second and third centuries (from which the label “hermetic” is derived), the gnostic creed, “that which is below is like that which is above” (Newton 3), made its first appearance, codifying the idea that perceived correspondences in sense, quality, or likeness—particularly between lower, earthly things and higher, heavenly things—were indicative of the cosmic structure. Initiates desired, along with narrator Hermes Trismegistus, to “learn the things that are, and comprehend their nature” (“Poemandres”). Much of the appeal of grasping this deep structure was the promise of power to those who knew the mysterious means by which the stars influenced the events of earth.

Although many original texts were lost during the collapse of the Roman Empire, medieval Neo-Platonists carried the torch of hermeticism through the majority of the

Middle Ages, as writers such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and other apophatic theologians argued that the One “is so distant from us that [. . .] he must be spoken of through metaphors and allusions, [and] contrasting expressions” (Eco, “Absolute and Relative” 27). John Scotus Eriugena (whose *De divisione naturae* was itself an influential piece of mystic-philosophical synthesis) made the assertion in the ninth century that “there is, I believe, no visible or corporal thing that does not signify something” (Eco, “On Symbolism” 145). For all of these Christian writers, the concept of a world whose elements did not interrelate and mutually signify was the height of absurdity. Thomas Aquinas himself quoted Pseudo-Dionysius as an authoritative source in his *Summa Theologica* in defense of deep symbolic readings of Scripture, saying: “*impossibile est nobis aliter lucere divinum radium nisi varietate sacrorum velaminum circumvelatum*”<sup>2</sup> (*Summa* I Q. 1 Art. 9). The world was, to these scholars, “*liber scriptus digito dei*”<sup>3</sup> (Hugh of St. Victor, quoted in Eco, “On Symbolism” 145), which required strenuous interpretation to understand.

The rediscovery of many classical texts at the time of the Renaissance infused new life into hermetically-minded scholarship, spurring what James Heiser has called the Hermetic Reformation (Heiser). Pico della Mirandola, Marcilio Ficino, and others regained access to Plato’s full corpus, as well as the reunited *Hermeticum*, allowing them to re-introduce the unadulterated forms of Greek and Gnostic thought into mainstream dialogues. The result was a culture which fostered a mindset “based on the principles of analogy and sympathy, according to which every item of the furniture of the world is

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<sup>2</sup> “It is impossible that the divine ray should shine on us, unless enveloped in various sacred veils.” (Note: all translations are the author’s.)

<sup>3</sup> “A book written by the finger of God.”

linked to every other element” (Eco, “Unlimited Semiosis” 24). Along with philosophical innovation, Europe also saw the birth of a wide interest in alchemical studies. The *Hermeticum* continued to promise (in symbolic form) the secrets of the world, but now the nature of these secrets were commonly interpreted through a more scientific lens.

As Enlightenment philosophy began to hold a new sway over accepted scholarship and dialogue, European mysticism declined, but other methods of deep interpretation came into vogue. Secret societies such as the Freemasons became extremely popular—as did the pastime of speculating about their doings and connections to historical figures. One of Eco’s key examples of historically-oriented text-mining is that of Gabriele Rossetti, trying in the 1830s to prove the heretical origins of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* by searching for Masonic and Rosicrucian symbols in the text (Eco, “Overinterpreting Texts” 55-9). Dante, evidently, was considered a valuable authority (perhaps due in part to his own multifaceted theory of interpretation); there were attempts throughout the Reformation and Enlightenment to claim him for Protestants or for Roman Catholicism—one theory even that argued he prophesied the advent of Luther in *Purgatorio* (Friederich 49). Yet, by this period the impulse to seek out the secret correspondences of the earth had almost completely disappeared. Greater scientific knowledge, combined with the rise of nominalist philosophy, had largely discouraged any attempts at finding truth in hypothesized structures of the external cosmos.

This progression away from interpretation of the world and more exclusively into interpretation of texts was finally cemented with the rise of phenomenology in the beginning of the twentieth century. Once Husserl, Heidegger, and their fellows finally divorced meaning from the external world and located it within the linguistic structures

of the mind, literary theory and philosophy of language found a new significance in Western thought. Suddenly, unspooling the structure of language was central to saying anything about people or the world: “it is not as though we have meanings, or experiences, which we then proceed to cloak with words; we can only have the meanings and experiences in the first place because we have a language to have them in” (Eagleton 52). Since then, it has become passé to speak confidently of a shared reality to which thoughts correspond (as in Aquinas’ definition of truth [*Summa* I Q. 21 Art. 2]); rather, communities have shared linguistic constructions through which individuals organize their perceptions.

As a result, Western literary theory developed a new focus on how much a text can be thought to say—or whether a text could “say” at all. Structuralists generated meta-theories of narratology and semiology, New Critics declared the key to decoding texts was idiosyncratic to each, and later Deconstruction would seek to expose holes in proposed structures. Eco argues that, despite their theoretical differences, scholars from each discipline are capable of deep interpretive enterprises using “the same technique” of selective coherence as the mystics (Eco, “Unlimited Semiosis” 28). Eco cites Yale Deconstructionist Geoffrey Hartman’s reading of Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” to illustrate this phenomenon: Hartman analyzes the poem under the assumption that it must be saying more than is on the surface (Eco, “Overinterpreting Texts” 60-2). Eco has little problem with this hypothesis, but disagrees with Hartman’s method, which eschews any rule of selecting which poetic elements are significant and which are not (61). Hartman judges his reading as valid purely on the grounds of its

apparent coherence, without first arriving at a rule to govern which data are significant and which are not.

This reliance on selective coherence is, in fact, the uniting factor among all these disparate thinkers. Whether speculating on the hierarchies of the Kabbalistic Sephirot or on the unvoiced words of a text, whether comfortable with interpretive drift because of a firm belief in an Absolute or because of a firm belief in the absence of an Absolute, all of these thinkers operate under a certain amount of confirmation bias, accepting only those data which support their extra-textual hypotheses and declining to acknowledge when little or no support is found. For example, when Rossetti proposes the three mirrors of *Paradiso*, Canto II, to be an allusion to the triangularly-oriented lights of Masonic ritual, he renders the other references to light in the canto incomprehensible, whereas if they are considered through the lens of medieval optic science, all parts of the text become mutually supportive (Eco, "Overinterpreting Texts" 59). Likewise, when it was shown that elements of Platonic thought appear in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the automatic response of the Renaissance Hermetic was to believe that the *Hermeticum* (which must be presupposed as ancient) influenced Plato, despite any historical or philological evidence of the reverse (Eco, "Two Models of Interpretation" 19). All of this uneconomical "use" of texts (Eco, "*Intentio Lectoris*" 57), this "beating" them into a useful tool (Rorty, "Consequences" 151), and particularly this readiness to assume and seek out a deeper, hidden truth behind the veil of the surface meaning is a readerly habit which Eco has written extensively against throughout his career, which he has labeled with the blanket term "hermeticism," and which is the primary focus of *Foucault's Pendulum*.

### Unlimited Semiosis vs. Infinite Semiosis: The Peircean Factor

As Rorty discovered, however, to recognize Eco's targets is not in itself sufficient to understand *Foucault's Pendulum*. Grasping the complete cause of Rorty's misreading requires a fuller understanding of where Eco and Rorty both stand in relation to other contemporary literary theorists, as both scholars have carefully-constructed philosophical positions which influence how they categorize themselves and each other.

Any attempt at placing Eco or Rorty on a philosophical map must take into account the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. Despite having taken Peirce's ideas in very different directions, both Eco and Rorty have been vocal about their shared intellectual heritage: Eco has cited Peirce consistently and extensively since his 1976 *A Theory of Semiotics* (15), while one of Rorty's most famous monographs was *The Consequences of Pragmatism*. Peirce, the originator of American Pragmatism (Dewey 709), was the first to codify the idea that the meaning of a hypothesis and the consequences of a hypothesis were inseparably related. In Peirce's calculus, "it reflects badly on the content of a hypothesis if no consequences can be derived from it" (Misak 3). Only the consequences, or uses, of an idea can define its meaning.

Peirce, a widely-recognized scientist and logician, used this fundamental theorem of pragmatic philosophy to construct an epistemology centered on a progressive approach to truth. On one hand, he was adamant about the necessity of fallibilism (the readiness to rethink any belief in the face of new evidence or experience); on the other hand, he believed that truth is approachable "through the continual correction [of] knowledge" (Eco, "Absolute and Relative" 34). For Peirce, to understand a proposition is to grasp the consequences of it being true or untrue. However, as consequences can only be

hypothesized, nothing can be truly known in its fullness. Through the slow, communal process of abducing propositions to fit human experiences (and later discarding them when better hypothesis occur), the human community as a whole advances towards truth.

As pragmatism continued being articulated through John Dewey, William James, and others of Peirce's successors, the idea that this hypothetic process grows closer to truth was abandoned as unnecessary baggage. By the time James published his volume *Pragmatism* in 1907, he was of the opinion that "you can say of [a true statement] either that 'it is useful because it is true' or that 'it is true because it is useful.' Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing" (James, *Pragmatism* 98). This is evidence of a progression even in James' thought: in his 1885 lecture "The Function of Cognition," he had not yet fully developed his idea of truth as equivalent with usefulness, though his divorce between metaphysical speculation and the analysis of mental "percepts" was already clearly articulated (James, "Function of Cognition" 31-2). As Pragmatist theory developed parallel to modern psychology and phenomenology, the metaphysical category of truth came to be considered entirely superfluous, subsumed into a truncated epistemology. If man can speak only of the events which occur within his own mind, it appears useless to create non-falsifiable theories concerning things beyond.

Richard Rorty, as an avowed heir to the Pragmatist tradition, follows more in the path of James than of Peirce. While claiming Peirce as an early influence (Rorty, "Progress" 93), Rorty rejects truth as a metaphysical entity, and with it Peirce's conception of the aim of investigation: "For all his genius [. . .] Peirce himself remained the most Kantian of thinkers—the most convinced that philosophy gave us an all-embracing ahistorical context" (Rorty, *Consequences* 161). For Rorty, philosophical

investigation can speak only within human contexts and vocabularies, and cannot brook hypostatization (or, as James himself put it, “vicious abstractionism” [“Abstractionism and ‘Relativismus’” 135]) of such things as “‘truth’, ‘knowledge’, ‘language’, [or] ‘morality’” (Rorty, *Consequences* 162). The only things worth attempting to discuss are the consequences and uses of ideas or actions. As this is the case, all theoretical attempts (such as Eco’s) to talk about interpretive enterprises in terms of better or worse are futile, and ultimately wastes of intellectual energy.

Eco, conversely, seized on the semiotic facet of Peircean philosophy as his starting point. Though Peirce is often paired with Saussure as a joint father of the semiotic discipline, Peirce’s concept of signification was unique. He argued that representation was fundamentally triadic, composed of three parts: the sign, the object, and what he named the interpretant (Misak 16). The sign is the phenomenon which stands in place of; the object is that which is replaced by the sign; and the interpretant is a concept or rule which allows the sign to stand in for the object and renders the sign intelligible by the recipient. This interpretant, “the idea to which [the sign] gives rise” (Peirce 171), is the key distinctive of Peirce’s semiotic theories. According to Peirce, the interpretant, as an idea, should itself be taken as a sign (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 166), but this operation opens up an extraordinary sequence of signification. The interpretant-as-sign must also have its own interpretant, but that interpretant is itself a sign and also requires an interpretant; in proposing this recursive sequence, Peirce allows for the possibility of infinite depth and nuance in each sign.

The “infinite chain of interpretation” (Misak 19) precipitated from the Peircean interpretant has been adopted by several schools of thought. Derrida, for example, used it

as part of his justification for removing the idea of the “transcendental signified” from his philosophy (Derrida 20). If, as Peirce has it, there is an infinite regression of signification, then “from the moment there is meaning, there are nothing but signs” (50). Without a central transcendental signified, a *primum signatum* for all signs to eventually refer back to, Derrida can replace it with his concept of “play,” in which all language becomes ultimately inconsistent and self-defeating by default.

Like Derrida, Eco uses the concept of the Peircean interpretant, but, unlike him, Eco does not jettison the functionality of language—or its capability to bring its users closer to truth. In his view, the successive signification will always be governed by culturally-instituted codes, which connect disparate “cultural units” (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 66). These cultural units, when imported into a semiotic theory, can be equated to sememes (Schneider 18). They function like quanta of meaning, embodying concepts with which individuals may or may not have empirical experience, based on the shared cultural knowledge they have access to. Eco cites Schneider’s definition of cultural units to demonstrate the flexibility of the term: “a unit [. . .] is simply anything that is culturally defined and distinguished as an entity” (Schneider 2). These entities may be as disparate as “Empedocles” and “Seychelles,” or as narrowly separated as “U.S. President” and “Barack Obama.” These units will also be subject to history and geography, as different cultures will have different definitions for units: the components of unit “Barack Obama” will differ widely depending on whether the language user is a member of American, French, or Iraqi culture—and some cultures (e.g., the Huaorani) may not have this unit at all.

The cultural units are arranged according to shared cultural codes—the unspoken habits by which individuals can automatically associate the unit “Disney” with the unit “mouse” and the unit “castle,” and can allow each to symbolize another. These codes determine which directions are easiest for the process of signification to operate in: they establish the grain of the semiotic universe. For example, a language-user can hypothetically use “dust” as a metonym for “currency,” but unless there is already an established connection between the two units, “dust” will make far more sense to a Western reader as a symbol, metaphor, or metonym for “body,” “impurity,” or “age.” For Eco, the sign-as-interpretant process may proceed into a potential infinity, but it is an anisotropic infinity: an infinity of nuance rather than an infinity of possibility. To illustrate this distinction, Eco has adopted the terms “infinite semiosis” to describe the free, undirected semiotic activity of Derrida et al., and “unlimited semiosis” to describe his own more tame, directed concept (“Unlimited Semiosis” 28).

This semiotic stance turns into an interpretive one with the addition of one more Peircean idea: that “a sememe is in itself an inchoate text, whereas a text is an expanded sememe” (Eco, “Peirce and the Semiotic Foundations of Openness” 175). Although Eco also cites Tzvetan Todorov, Teun van Dijk, and Algirdas Greimas as supports in the introduction to *The Role of the Reader*, this concept is easiest understood as a simple extension of Barthes’ dictum that “*le récit est une grande phrase*”<sup>4</sup> (4). Writing in reference to structural analysis of narratives, Barthes’ argument was that a large text embodies all the levels and relations of a simpler sentence. Both he and Eco stand together on this point: that, whether in narratology or in semiotics, the largest unit of the

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<sup>4</sup> “The narrative is a large sentence.”

system bears all the characteristics, contains all the depth, and retains all the possibilities of the smaller units—and vice versa. Larger narratives have lost nothing by becoming more complex than shorter ones (“[L]’*art ne connaît pas le bruit* [. . .] *il n’y a jamais unité perdue*”<sup>5</sup> [Barthes 7]), and larger signs likewise lose nothing in their complexity. Texts are signs, and signs are texts.

Bearing in mind that texts and signs should not be considered in opposition to each other, it becomes clear that the prime difference between larger texts and more nucleic signs is at the same time a similarity: both are governed by systems of coding which dictate the best methods of interpretation. The difference is that while all texts and signs should be read according to human cultural codes and habits, the internal complexity of a larger text gives rise to the possibility of connecting internal patterns and references. Under these circumstances, the text becomes its own governor, as a self-contained, miniature Saussurian *parole*. Levels of intertextual context suddenly become evident; units within the text begin to reflect one another and become symbols; the text (to a large degree) becomes self-defining, self-interpreting, and self-sufficient.

Here, in this point of textual self-actualization, lie Eco’s own contributions to textual theory. Needing a way to describe how the text becomes its own interpreter by setting up its own linear context, Eco introduces the idea of *intentio operis*, the intent of the work. Referencing classic concepts of the *intentio auctoris* and *intentio lectoris*, the intent of the work is, essentially, a simple way to denote the ability of the text to define itself. Paired with it is Eco’s concept of the Model Reader: the reader which a text intends to create over the course of a reading. As he put it in “Joyce, Semiosis, and Semiotics”:

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<sup>5</sup> “Art does not know noise [. . .] Unity is never lost.”

Independent of any alleged intention of the author is the intention of the text. But a text exists only as a physical object, as a Linear Text Manifestation. It is possible to speak of text intentions only as the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text intention. A text is a device conceived in order to produce its Model Reader. (148)

For Eco, interpretations of texts are generated by readers—but these readers will have interacted with the text during their reading. The text, thus, is acting on its readers to cause them to generate interpretations. It can do so by playing with their cultural expectations, by drawing internal connections, or by referencing other texts.

Rejecting both authorial and readerly intent can confuse critics, but Eco's focus is always on the text as real object: "the text [. . .] is a linguistic strategy which is supposed to trigger an interpretation" ("Small Worlds" 66). A discussion of authorial intent must limit itself to examining the relationship between the conceptualized work in the author's mind and the "Linear Text Manifestation" that is preserved on the page, while a discussion of the reader's intent should be primarily concerned with the knowledge and training he or she brings to the reading. Good interpretation should have nothing to do with either the author's or reader's intent; rather, it should focus on the ways and means by which the text provokes the mind of the reader to generate meaning.

Retaining the potential infinities of the Peircean interpretant, while still holding to a system of semiotic and interpretive governance, Eco stands in a rather unique position among literary theorists. On one hand, he is open-minded regarding the possibilities of the text; on the other, he has a fairly solid structural framework for critiquing the quality

of interpretations. The essentialism he holds to is both nuanced and historicist, subject to shifting cultural definitions, but it remains indisputably a form of essentialism.

To sum up, then: despite a shared philosophical heritage, from the perspective of Richard Rorty's radical Pragmatism, Eco's structural theories look functionally identical to those of the mystics or hermetics. Having cut himself off from any vestiges of essentialism, Rorty lumps together all attempts to find the "truth" of a text (or even to set criteria for better interpretations) as naïve: "the thought that a commentator has discovered what a text is really doing—[. . .] rather than merely being capable of being used for these purposes—is, for us pragmatists, just more occultism" (Rorty, "Progress" 103). Confronted with Eco's various structural theories of signification and interpretation, combined with the adoption of unlimited semiosis, Rorty fails to distinguish between Eco and deconstruction, or Eco and hermeticism. From Eco's perspective, however, there is a very key distinction between theorists that claim texts can support any interpretation, and those (like himself) who argue for interpretations that respect the structure and intentions of the text. From such a standpoint, he is capable of attacking hermetic drift in *Foucault's Pendulum* without contradicting or betraying his own stance.

### **The Hermetics and the Pendulum**

Having established Eco's thoughts on the nonfictional hermetic mindset and his theory on what constitutes good interpretation, what remains is to examine *Foucault's Pendulum* itself, to see how well the hypothesis regarding its *intentio* fits the data. Recall that the hypothesis is this: *Foucault's Pendulum* provokes the well-read reader to use his or her knowledge of the historical debates on interpretation to inform the rest of the novel. Should the hypothesis be correct, a reading of the novel should discover a distinct

and sustained conflict between Eco's categories of the hermetic and the realistic. The remainder of this paper will argue that this conflict is not only found in *Foucault's Pendulum*, but actually defines the novel's intent.

With all due respect to Ted Gioia, who labeled it "one of the most grand and complicated plots in modern fiction," *Foucault's Pendulum* requires only some small amount of reconstruction to analyze. Despite the *media res* opening and flashback-heavy narrative, it is relatively straightforward overall. Whether it has more than one protagonist is debatable. Casaubon serves as narrator, though Eco labeled Jacopo Belbo the protagonist in the first of his 1993 Norton Lectures ("Six Walks" 9), but the story limits itself for the most part to a single narrative strand. That strand follows Belbo, Casaubon, and Diotavelli, three Milanese editors whose knowledge of occult theories and secret societies draw them into the anti-rational fantasies that they once ridiculed. Casaubon, as mentioned, is narrator: the events are related and organized from his perspective. The majority of his observations center on his own experiences with the occult and hermetic worlds, and are augmented by the diary entries Belbo records on his computer, Abulafia. Casaubon's narration swings back and forth from past to present and back again, as he spends a night hiding in Paris' Musée des Arts et Métiers reminiscing about the events which led him to this climactic evening. By sustaining this dual timeline, the novel allows him to comment on those events from the later, wiser point of view. It is largely through this commentary that the philosophical progression is revealed.

The plot traces the path that the three editors walk from naïveté into experience, from wholesomeness into unwholesomeness, from realism into a vertiginous labyrinth of signification. If *Foucault's Pendulum* can be read *as* anything, it should be read as a case

study in the seductiveness of the hermetic mindset. The novel exhibits three primary evidences supporting this reading: an explicit and consistent slide into illogical and unsupported interpretation; specific manifestations of the hermetic practice, which engross and fascinate the characters; and, lastly, clear contrasts between overly-ambitious interpretive acts and economical interpretive acts.

The book's *fabula* begins early in Casaubon's life, during his years studying philology and Templar history at the University of Milan (*Pendulum* 45). Through his social circle, he falls in with Belbo and Diotavelli, editors at Garamond Publishers. Casaubon begins working with them, using his research training to help them sort the useless manuscripts from the publishable. At this point in their careers, the characters, while aware of the conspiratorial way of thought, look on it with a certain amount of *hauteur*. When Casaubon, during his thesis research, first discovers the wide body of work attempting to trace the occult and mystical history of the Templars, the "visionary excess offended [his] incredulity, and [he] resolved to waste no more time on these hunters of secrets" (46). In 1972, at Belbo's request, he makes his first visit to Garamond to look over a manuscript on the Templars. The book proves to be by one of the "hunters of secrets," and the three men share an extended conversation on the history of the Templar trials—and the fanciful beliefs some hold regarding the events. Belbo concludes the conversation with a comment on the credulity of the masses: "The whole thing is a twisted syllogism. Act like a lunatic and you will be inscrutable forever. [. . .] Whenever a poet or preacher, chief or wizard spouts gibberish, the human race spends centuries deciphering the message" (90). Though conscious of and in contact with the world of conspiracies and radical occultism, the main characters have distanced themselves from

it. Their work is to reject the illogical and fanciful as unfit for publication or consumption.

All this changes, however, when Casaubon is hired and initiated into the workings of Manutius Press, Garamond's lesser-known sister. Manutius, originally for the purpose of fleecing self-published authors, is in the process of being transformed by Signor Garamond (owner of both presses) into an avenue for making money on the multitudes of conspiracy theorists. By publishing an extended series of books purporting to constitute an authoritative encyclopedia of occult mysteries, Garamond muses, the company can draw a consistent profit from the gullible: "It's a gold mine, all right. I realized that these people will gobble up anything that's hermetic, as you put it, anything that says the opposite of what they read in their books at school" (*Pendulum* 219). Dubbed "Project Hermes," this enterprise will occupy Belbo, Casaubon, and Diotavelli for most of the remainder of the novel, as they work to research all the disparate and esoteric branches of occult theories, and field manuscripts from the "Diabolicals" (their term for the writers of such works) who come to know about the project.

All goes well with the project up to the point at which the editors decide to have a little fun at the expense of their clients. After some time of immersion in the world of the Diabolicals, Casaubon is jaded enough to jest, "There exists a secret society with branches throughout the world, and its plot is to spread the rumor that a universal plot exists" (*Pendulum* 265). At the same time, however, a research visit to observe some mystical rites raises as many questions as it answers. Alone, Casaubon muses: "It was becoming harder for me to keep apart the world of magic and what today we call the world of facts. [. . .] I began to question everything[,] asking them to tell [me] another,

deeper story, which surely they were hiding” (300). It is in this frame of mind that he and the other two editors begin disposing with even the loosest concept of intellectual integrity by inventing their own pseudo-conspiracy.

Spurred by a joke about dropped folders re-enacting the practice of Kabbalah, Casaubon is suddenly struck with an idea—a golden opportunity to generate further books for the Manutius clientele. He eagerly explains to his compatriots:

What if you fed [the computer] a few dozen notions taken from the works of the Diabolicals—for example, the Templars fled to Scotland, or the *Corpus Hermeticum* arrived in Florence in 1460—and threw in a few connective phrases like “It’s obvious that” and “This proves that”? We might end up with something revelatory. Then we fill in the gaps, call the repetitions prophecies, and—voilà—a hitherto unpublished chapter of the history of magic. (311)

The three immediately set about combining various propositions: first randomly, on Belbo’s workplace computer, Abulafia, and then intentionally, as they begin fitting larger pieces together. After so long dealing with mediocre writers and the drudge of repeated theories, they find a certain thrill in creation. Diotavelli remarks, “We are reconstructing the history of the world. [. . .] We are rewriting the Book. I like it” (336-7). Before long, the new conspirators have a rapidly-growing theory that involves Templars, Rosicrucians, Nazis, telluric currents, Gnosticism, Hollow Earth Theory, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the lost city of Agartha, and—of course—the Pendulum of Léon Foucault.

The game begins to collapse once Belbo, naively expecting no consequences, reveals the basics of the falsified Plan to one of the Diabolicals. Suddenly, he receives

mysterious threats from unknown sources, is framed in a terrorist scare, and finally is kidnapped. Casaubon travels to Paris in search of his associate, terrified by the implication that the pseudo-Plan, or aspects of it, may in fact be true. When he arrives in Paris, the swinging narrative stills its motion as he concludes his long night of reminiscing. His vigil inside the Musée eventually sees a great gathering of occult followers from multiple secret societies. This convocation and séance climaxes with the ritual murder of Belbo at his refusal to give the Diabolicals the key to the Plan, which they have assumed to be true. After a deranged encounter with the Eiffel Tower (“foul metal spider” [*Pendulum* 502]), Casaubon escapes the city, clearly out of his wits, and travels into the Piedmont countryside to await the bloodthirsty plotters.

The progression from logic to irrationality, from well-substantiated belief to gullible derangement, is clearly evident—even in the words the editors use to talk about their endeavors. Even when the Game is still very much for fun, Casaubon recognizes that he must start thinking like a Diabolical to put together a Plan: “If you move in the refined time of revelation, do not follow the fussy, philistine chains of logic. [. . .] Having no grid [to act as structure], I had to assume the existence of one. I had to read with mistrust” (*Pendulum* 328). As the project continues, the joke becomes more and more real, and the pranksters find themselves drawn deeper and deeper into the mire. Even while Casaubon and Belbo joke about “strict scholarship, above all” (433), a deeper “sickness” is taking hold of their reason (433), causing them to question their deepest principles. Belbo’s diary entries during this time reveal a growing religious and philosophical crisis:

If belief is absolutely necessary, let it be [. . .] a religion out of joint, fuming, subterranean, without an end. [. . .] But if there is no cosmic Plan? What a mockery, to live in exile when no one sent you there. [. . .] When religion fails, art provides. You invent the Plan, metaphor for the Unknowable One. [. . .] To create an immense hope that can never be uprooted, because it has no root. [. . .] Why write novels? Rewrite history. The history that then comes true. (434)

Belbo, the agnostic, finds the comfort of belief to be an intense temptation. In a world where possible structures continually present themselves, might it not be better to live as though they were true? The meaning-seeking and meaning-imposing that Eco has written about elsewhere is weighed by Belbo as a path to solace—rather than the endless hunger that it becomes. By the night of the Parisian showdown, hermetic methods have deeply poisoned the thinking of each of the main characters.

Two clear phenomena that draw solid connections between the interpretive habits spoken of in Eco's nonfiction and the characters of *Foucault's Pendulum* are the Kabbalah and the power of fakes. Eco has written at some length on each of these topics: in *The Search for the Perfect Language*, as well as in other essays, he has talked about the nature and possibilities of Kabbalistic philosophy and techniques; in the essays of *Travels in Hyperreality* and elsewhere, he has discussed the mysterious power of the falsehood—as well as a theory of fakes, copies, and counterfeits. Both of these subjects are central themes of *Foucault's Pendulum*—to the point that much of the book will be incomprehensible without at least a basic understanding.

Kabbalah, as a practical discipline and a philosophy of language, grew up in the Middle Ages and maintained a distinct presence in the small but persistent community of Jewish scholars. Drawing first from the idea that the words of God created the world, and second from the idea that Hebrew was undoubtedly the language which God used, they developed a system of thought that looked for truth and power in the structures of Hebrew itself. While Christian theory of the time broke down meanings into several ways of reading a text, Kabbalistic readers actually changed the expression of the text in the search for the hidden truth (Eco, *Search* 27). Kabbalah treats language as “a universe unto itself” (Eco, “On Llull” 399), and attempts to discover truth encoded within the Torah using acrostics, numerology, and endless anagrams.

Besides having its chapters metatextually structured around the ten emanations of the Kabbalistic Sefhirot, the story of *Foucault’s Pendulum* is explicitly laced with further references to Kabbalah—primarily in the persons of Diotavelli and the computer Abulafia. The first time Casaubon meets Diotavelli, Belbo emphasizes that (whether true or not) Diotavelli thinks of himself as a practicing Jew, and, additionally is a practicing Kabbalist (*Pendulum* 66). Diotavelli speaks often of the mythology of the Sefhirot and the Breaking of the Vessels, which grew out of late Kabbalistic mysticism (185). His approval of playing with the Plan stems from his beliefs: “The rationality of history is the result of a good recombining of the Torah. And that’s what we’re doing” (362). Paradoxically, the character with the greatest philosophical interest is also the one who first realizes its dangers. When, near the novel’s end, Diotavelli is stricken with cancer and dying, he attributes it to the irresponsible nature of the Game. In a statement reminiscent of the *Corpus Hermeticum’s* creed that “as above, so below,” Diotavelli

gasps to Belbo: “[A]s the Torah, so a man’s body. [. . .] Rearranging the letters of the book means rearranging the world. [. . .] And we anagrammatized all the books of history, and we did it without praying” (466). Convinced that his cells have succumbed to the wanton rewriting of the world, Diotavelli dies as the first intellectual casualty of the Plan.

While a less-dramatic element, Abulafia is equally vital to the plot. Belbo’s somewhat-primitive word processor, with capabilities probably quite similar to Wordstar 2000, in which *Foucault’s Pendulum* was composed (Eco, “How I Write” 332), Abulafia is named after Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia, the thirteenth-century scholar whose works on the names of God and the Prophetic Kabbalah were major landmarks of the tradition (Edel 456), and, in Eco’s words, “took the art of combination to its utmost limit” (“On Llull” 399). As a computer, Abulafia serves primarily as a means for the human characters to reveal their inner thoughts. This happens both explicitly, as in Belbo’s diary entries, and implicitly, as when Casaubon has to resort to psychoanalysis to guess Belbo’s password. Casaubon says that Belbo used the computer with a “combinatory passion” (*Pendulum* 21), medicating his own lack of creative faculty with an endless, electronic play of other authors’ stories and characters. In the privacy of his digital documents, Belbo can experiment and express without judgment or consequences.

Abulafia also facilitates the first germ of the Plan. When Belbo, Casaubon, and Diotavelli first joke about throwing together a pastiche of conspiracies, they turn to the computer to generate some random series of connections, using pre-loaded sets of propositions and connective phrases. Belbo had already been experimenting with combinatory poetry, so to play with the sequence of the world was merely a small step

further: “All that’s needed is the data and the desire” (*Pendulum* 311). Though in itself merely a combinatorial device—and thus more akin to the *Ars Magna* of Ramon Llull (Eco, “On Llull” 397)—Abulafia is undeniably another textual connection to Kabbalah and the hermetic.

Additionally, Eco has always been fascinated by the way that falsehood, the discrepancy between thought and outside reality, can affect history and society. His concept of culture as a shared ecosystem of propositions and societally-supported facts—the cultural “Encyclopedia” (Eco, “Power” 274)—provides a framework for studying the effects and interactions of true or false cultural units on the history of that culture. History, as John Lukacs put it, becomes “a certain kind of memory” (Lukacs 246), and, in keeping with Peircean methodology, the culture slowly verifies or disproves various units of its collective memory, working toward a better and better Encyclopedia (Eco, “Power” 299). These fakes range from the benign, such as the American penchant for wax museums (Eco, “Travels” 12-21), to the ecclesiastical, such as the spurious eighth-century Donation of Constantine (Eco, “Power” 282), to the malicious, such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Eco, *Six Walks* 133-9). In every case, the assumption of a falsehood as though it were true in the technical sense has repercussions similar to a “real” proposition, until the culture can rewrite its Encyclopedia to reflect new findings.

In *Foucault’s Pendulum*, Eco explores the power of the fake specifically in reference to the hermetic mind, and the way that a need for confirmation can sweep aside any evidence for disbelief. The primary falsehood of the novel is, of course, the counterfeit Plan of the Templars. Through rewriting history, the editors are playing with both primary subjects of the overinterpretive mind: the world and human language.

However, history cannot be empirically verified, and thus using history opens the editors to the possibility of serious repercussions at the hands of those who take the lies seriously. When Nesta Webster, “that inexhaustible source of anti-Semitic arguments” (Eco, “Power” 292), wrote in the 1920s on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, she concluded that it managed to tell the truth about a global Jewish conspiracy *despite* acknowledging its fictitious provenance (Eco, *Six Walks* 138). When Isaac Casaubon, the sixteenth-century Protestant philologist, and the fictional Casaubon’s namesake (Eco, “Intertextual Irony” 229), decisively concluded through linguistic science that the *Corpus Hermeticum* could not be older than the Scriptures, Isaac Vossius and others of the “lunatic fringe” stubbornly maintained that it was a mystic prophecy of Christ’s coming (Grafton 89). Likewise, the Diabolicals of *Foucault’s Pendulum* will not accept fakery as an excuse. As Lia, Casaubon’s less-credulous lover, puts it:

People believe those who sell lotions that make lost hair grow back. They sense instinctively that the salesman is putting together truths that don’t go together, that he’s not being logical, that he’s not speaking in good faith. But they’ve been told that God is mysterious, unfathomable, so to them incoherence is the closest thing to God. (*Pendulum* 444)

In the end, Belbo finally realizes that there is no way out of the falsehood. Telling the truth will not convince those who were waiting for the lie: “They wouldn’t believe him. His words were too undramatic, too simple. It was a revelation they wanted, on pain of death” (468). The three editors may have treated history as rewritable, but their own actions prove absolutely irrevocable.

While it is clear at this point that *Foucault's Pendulum* has direct, explicit connections to historical hermeticism, to stop here would be to go no further than Richard Rorty did, leading to a similar faulty reading. The next step in defending the hypothesis regarding the novel's intent is to establish a clear contrast between hermeticism and more economical interpretation in the novel. Of such contrasts there are three primary manifestations: the various treatments of the Message of Provins, the theories regarding the significance of resemblances, and the perspectives on the concept of the Absolute.

While the Message of Provins may appear a minor plot point, its various interpretations help drive the larger story in key ways. First brought to the editors' attention by recurring Diabolical Colonel Ardeni, the Message constitutes little more than a half-legible, coded note, supposedly found in a crypt in the French city of Provins. The note, apparently a simple list of objects, is interpreted by Ardeni to be allegorically detailing a master plan of the disbanded Templars: "If you know the history of the order, it's less obscure than it seems" (*Pendulum* 115). According to Ardeni, the list is a series of steps which were to be completed by the various groups of undercover Templars, moving toward the recovery of the Holy Grail (119). Being at the start of their long journey, Casaubon, Belbo, and Diotavelli find all of this ridiculous, and send Ardeni on his way.

Later, however, in the midst of the feverish Plan-concocting, Casaubon is reminded by chance of Ardeni's document. Having spent time studying all the labyrinthine histories and theories of the Diabolicals, he begins to visualize ways that the mysterious text could fit in to the grander scheme: "No longer was I laughing at the message Ardeni had shown us" (*Pendulum* 319). Suddenly Casaubon and the other

editors find that, using a modified form of Ardeni's symbolic reading, they can structure the whole of their Plan around the Provins message, involving "all the centers of Europe" (321) and most of medieval and modern history in the scheme.

In direct opposition to this use of the Provins document stands Lia's interpretation. Not long before the Diabolicals hear about it, Casaubon tells Lia, his lover and mother of his infant son, Giulio, about the grand project that he and his coworkers have been assembling. To his surprise, she is more disappointed than impressed, concerned that he and the others are toying with others' beliefs when they should not. Asking for a copy of the Message of Provins, Lia swiftly comes up with a counter-interpretation in only a couple days of research. Her theory is radically different: "It's a laundry list" (*Pendulum* 438). Using a Provins guidebook and some other resources, she convincingly argues that the list of instructions is nothing more than a guide for a day's purchases and deliveries, and that the hay cart, roses, and stone have no deeper symbolic meaning. Her reconstruction, guided by actual historical research about the location and likely authors, presents a solution far more economical than either Ardeni's or the editors' guesses. Casaubon is floored, but falls back on the game-like nature of the project to defend his pride: "All right, we started out with a laundry list. Yet we were clever enough, inventive enough, to turn a laundry list into poetry" (444). The level-headed Lia remains unconvinced.

Another preeminent way that Eco contrasts the hermetic and economical is by juxtaposing his characters' stances on numerological similarities. When Colonel Ardeni, ever the Diabolical poster child, is explaining his interpretation of the Provins document, he spouts an endless series of numeric relationships, drawing connections between thirty-

six, one hundred twenty, six hundred sixty-six, eighteen, nine, and other numbers of “profound significance” (*Pendulum* 115). Diotavelli, out of the editors the most keen on arithmetical symbolism, immediately responds in a tone half-encouraging, half-mocking:

Excuse me for butting in, but [ . . . ] thirty-six knights for each of the six places makes two hundred and sixteen, the digits of which add up to nine. And since there are six centuries, we can multiply two hundred and sixteen by six, which give us one thousand two hundred and ninety six, whose digits add up to eighteen, or three times six, or 666. (117)

Ardenti’s response is ecstatic: “It’s a revelation!” (118). For him, the infinite relationships between mathematical entities become the most fruitful of all grounds for overinterpretation. The world of numbers allows for a multi-dimensional labyrinth of connections between objects, dates, and the numeric entities themselves, and the sheer number of potential mathematical operations makes any connection possible. Tellingly, Ardenti treats the metonymic potential of numerological connections as ends in themselves. Nine is significant because it is the sum of the digits of thirty-six—but thirty-six is significant because its digits add to nine. There is no direction to this recursive symbolism, merely the shadow of some great meaning that imbues each connection with deferred significance. All things become signs, none are referents, and the more connections that can be found, the more Ardenti is certain that his idea must be true.

Conversely, the ever-sensible Lia presents an opposing view. At a point when Casaubon is struggling “to keep apart the world of magic and what today we call the world of facts” (*Pendulum* 300), Lia gives him an alternate view. Her view on archetypes and numerical significance is rooted solidly in the real world, and specifically in the

body. She counts various attributes that correspond to the numbers one to ten: one for the person, two for the eyes, ears, nostrils, three for the family, four limbs, five fingers, and so on: “Just sticking with the body, you can get all the numbers you want” (303). For Lia, the number nine is not significant because it is the sum of the digits of thirty-six, but rather because it can signify the number of bodily orifices. Her view does not permit Ardeni’s endless chains of signification, because she always returns to the real world of her experience and roots the symbolic operations there. Another way of understanding this is that Lia does not separate her experience from the thing-in-itself, focused as she is on the intense reality of the world; reality and experience are one in her mind, and are their own Absolutes, capable of being symbolized, but never of being symbols themselves. She rejects the Nietzschean creed that there are no facts, “only interpretations” (Nietzsche 139), in favor of the Peircean stance that signs are the means to knowing facts.

The treatment of the Absolute, the *primum signatum*, the ultimate and final truth, is the last primary way that Eco contrasts the life of symbols with a life of the real. Several of his characters reference a need for something solid at the end of all the signs, some Archimedean point from which all the lesser *mobiles* swing. Right at the book’s opening but late in its *fabula*, as Casaubon is ensconcing himself in the Musée, he ponders the nature of the titular pendulum, which is swinging before him:

The Pendulum told me that, as everything moved—earth, solar system, nebulae and black holes, all the children of the great cosmic expansion—one single point stood still: a pivot, bolt or hook around which the

universe could move. [. . .] The only stable place in the cosmos, the only refuge from the damnation of the *panta rei*.<sup>6</sup> (*Pendulum* 5)

The idea of the pendulum, the swinging weight hung from one fixed and immovable point, enraptures Casaubon. Similarly, Belbo too feels “a desperate thirst for the Absolute” (48), looking for some point from which to value his own cowardly and melancholy self, some master scheme to blame for his own failures (513). His computer’s password prompt is “Do you have the password?” to which the necessary answer is “No” (37). At one point, Casaubon and Belbo discuss Foucault’s device—and Belbo viciously attacks the illusion of stability: “If you detach it from the ceiling of the Conservatoire and hang it in a brothel, it works just the same. [. . .] It promises the infinite, but where to put the infinite is left to me” (201). Belbo hits here on the key difference between the novel’s hermetics and its sensible people. For the overinterpretive and overeager, it matters little where the Absolute is—in fact, the Absolute is nothing more than an afterthought, a necessary link posited as a result of the great scheme of connections which can be moved or changed at will. If the Plan can’t work with Jerusalem, then it must be centered on Paris. If the Templars’ goal is not the Grail, then, by all means, substitute telluric currents. The universe is “an infinite onion, which has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere” (514), subject to unpeeling at any location. There are no consequences or mistakes, merely endless series of empty secrets.

In response to the infinite abstractions and symbolic worlds of the Diabolical imagination, Eco presents, again, a staunchly realist and humanist perspective. Though they do not realize until too late, Casaubon and Belbo encounter specific objects and

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<sup>6</sup> A tenet of Heraclitus’ philosophy: “everything flows.”

moments of self-actualization and pure *realitas* that provide what the Pendulum refuses to deliver. For Casaubon the counterpart to the seductive pseudo-structures of the Plan is his infant son, Giulio. While the Plan is a *magnum opus* of the abstract, the hyperbolic, and the contentless, Giulio is one of the concrete, a “grail” of flesh (*Pendulum* 365) knitted via the anatomic alchemy of Lia’s womb. When he is born, Giulio is a touchstone of real life, much like Lia; when Casaubon is awaiting death on the hillside, Giulio becomes a hope for redemption, a proof that existence is not “so empty and fragile that it can be endured only by the illusion of a search for its secret” (516). The baby is a product, like the Plan, but is as far from the sterile abstraction of the Plan as can be imagined. He embodies the infinite, the mysterious, the ineffable—without sacrificing the truth of his being.

On the other hand, Belbo’s personal story is bookended by two encounters with the Absolute—both rooted solidly in the world. Towards the close of the novel, Casaubon recalls one of Belbo’s diary entries, recounting a childhood episode during the Second World War. An instrumentalist as a young boy, Belbo was requested to perform bugle calls at a burial. At the final moment of his melody, when all around have stilled and he alone acts, he is enveloped in a sort of mystical experience:

He felt he was playing out a string that kept the sun in place. The planet had been arrested in its course, had become fixed in a noon that could last an eternity. And it all depended on Jacopo, because if he broke that contact, dropped that string, the sun would fly off like a balloon, and with it this day and the event of this day, this action without transition, this

sequence without before and after, which was unfolding, motionless, only because it was in his power to will it thus. (*Pendulum* 524)

This moment of intense being, when all things are tremendously and irrevocably important, becomes a sort of Grail to Belbo throughout the rest of his life. Melancholy, cynical, and self-deprecatory, unlucky both in love and business, Belbo embarks on the Plan largely as an avenue to create something undeniably his own.

When the power of his falsehood inevitably proves too much to handle, Belbo is brought to the brink of death—but the brink of death brings him to his second, long-sought encounter. Captive in the Musée, bound and noosed, surrounded by throngs of conspirators, occultists, and mystics demanding the final secret of the Plan, Belbo has only to invent some further lie in order for his gullible captors to be convinced. Instead, he refuses. Presented with a moment of utter invincibility (*Pendulum* 493), when all of fate apparently hangs on his next action, Belbo chooses to refuse rather than capitulate. In the scuffle that ensues, his prop is knocked away, and Belbo is hung by the Pendulum's own wire. At this, the moment is complete: Casaubon sees the double pendulum formed by Belbo's head and the metal plumb—the classic example of a chaotic system—resolve itself, and for a single, eternal moment Belbo is “the point of suspension, the Fixed Pin, the place from which the vault of the world is hung. [. . .] A single fearless act had reconciled him with the Absolute” (495). Both moments, both in the cemetery and in the Musée, were meaningful because they did not mean anything. In these two instants of action, there was “no symbol, no sign, symptom, allusion, metaphor, or enigma” (525). They were themselves, and only themselves. For the characters of *Foucault's Pendulum*, personal experience and the immanence of the real are the only things which can be

invested with any ultimate significance. Meaning is in life itself: in the “fingers and toes” of a newborn (371), in the moment a coward says no in the face of death, and in the way that the velvet of a peach “makes shudders run from your tongue to your groin” (532). The arcane promise of the Pendulum will ever be merely a distraction and a counterfeit.

### Conclusion

It would be easy to personally fault Rorty for producing a bad interpretation of *Foucault's Pendulum*. But all that can really be said is that he was unable to become the Model Reader, thanks to those philosophical presuppositions that he brought with him to the reading. A reader ready to notice allusions and make more open-minded judgements should close the cover with a sure sense of Eco's philosophical consistency. While he may indeed “emend [his] thinking constantly” (Eco, “On Symbolism” 140), the conflict between good and bad interpretation has never left his writing. Though it is perhaps too much to argue, as others have, that Lia, ever the voice of caution and wisdom, speaks with Eco's own voice (Eco, “Reading” 825), a contrast is indisputably presented between her views and those of the editors and Diabolicals. The divide between her realism and their “vicious abstractionism,” between the truth of experience and the falsehood of the hermetic, is too deep, too all-encompassing, to be taken otherwise.

The presentation of such a humanist and realist perspective is fitting in the novel of a man who loves life and human pleasures the way that Eco himself does. Drinker, smoker, humorist, a man who enjoys actual sex more than the writing thereof (Zanganeh “Art”), a critic who can be enamored of Nerval's *Sylvie* after a hundred readings (Eco, “Mists” 29), Eco seems to adhere to Alyosha Karamazov's desire to “love life more than the meaning of it” (Dostoevsky 242). Though an intensely abstract thinker, Eco's

concerns always return to the real, the consequential, the human: the question of how life should be lived always trumps the need for absolute certainty regarding what life *is*. In the face of a postmodern world, he proposes what he calls a “Negative Realism” as a starting point for philosophy: the conviction that the universe does exist, has discoverable limits, guidelines, and boundaries, and that, while ideas may be infinite, “there are some things that would be crazy to say” (Eco, “Some Remarks”). *Foucault’s Pendulum* springs directly from, and masterfully reflects, that conviction.

In a paper presented at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, Eco confessed to having wanted to rewrite *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Flaubert’s extravagant satire on spurious academics (Eco, “Borges” 125). By painting a picture of interpretation gone wildly, even horribly, awry, Eco has indeed succeeded in satirizing the methods of looking at the world and language against which he has argued for decades. In place of hermeticism he offers realism; in place of postmodern excesses he values economy; in place of chaos he points out the evidence of order.

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