

Narrativizing History: The Revival of Conspiracy Discourse in Umberto Eco's *The Prague Cemetery*

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Abstract

Fictionalizing the past is not always misleading and Umberto Eco's fiction dissociates them from the relativism where the reader seldom finds the truth. Eco offers the reader an exclusive panorama which demands a keen investigation to decipher the fact and fiction that may appear obscure to naked eyes. Eco's novel, *The Prague Cemetery* impels the reader to take a time travel to the nineteenth century where the twenty-first-century reader finds spies, occultists, abbots, doppelgangers, mysterious diaries and abductions. Eco's storytelling eventually becomes "seducing narrative machinery" subjected to critical convoy where the reader begins the probe, reaching his own interpretations. The article focuses on the primary requirements from the model reader of *The Prague Cemetery* - the capability to contextualize the cultural, philosophical and political setting of the nineteenth century along with the theosophical occult societies of the time, without succumbing to the relativism the novel can lead to. The article studies how the model reader is entrusted with the responsibility to detangle the fictional narrative intertwined with historical facts and interpret the hidden signs, left unsaid.

KEYWORDS: conspiracy, relativism, mythology, model reader, fictionalization.

Increasing popularity for topics like conspiracy theories and storytelling as they provide lucidity and coherence in perception that serves a relief to the desolation and despair confronted as a part of a chaotic social reality. Arendt remarks this thrive as a "thirst for action," where the reassurance comes at the price of a closed interpretive system substituting itself for reality. The developing new interest shows a revival and testimonies that factual literature has achieved a status of gratifying the "reality hunger" of the contemporary reader. Eco also partook in the revival of literature indulging on narratives resorting to storytelling techniques that distinguish conspiracies and challenging the readers to a spirited fictive investigation and thus unravelling a charade of the avant-garde.

Conspiracy theories act as a method used to explain "an unacceptable reality through a narrative relying on over-rationalization and biased causality and intentionality" (qtd. in Leleve 5). A cognitive deciphering and reading of historical and political events demand a skilfully woven intelligible and indisputable narrative. The characteristics of modern conspiracy theories rest in their "critic dimension." The unravelling of truth involves the cohesion of clues "within a causal effective narrative" (5) - the process of exploring every sign as an investigational stratagem. The determining, arranging and confronting of traces work as the basis in describing how a diegesis is heuristically established.

The Prague Cemetery has always been categorised a difficult read. An average reader with limited erudition could follow the events and political realm of nineteenth-century Europe gave birth to erratic debates post its release in 2010. The central character Simone Simonini's escapades in Italian unification, Franco-Prussian

war, the Paris commune and other historical events explained may appear atypical to a postmodern reader. *The Prague Cemetery* is not a novel that invites its reader to find a culprit rather the investigation finding its cynosure in categorizing and analysing facts and fiction, crossing the pitfalls of misleading motifs. The reader is supposed to renounce the pleasure of a closed denouement, as said “truth is forever out of reach” (Eco 300).

The Prague Cemetery is designed in such a way that the novel welcomes two types of reading, types Eco himself distinguishes as “ingenuous” and “critical.” The ingenuous reader skips through the quotations and descriptions jumbled all over the novel, with innumerable abrupt and discontinuing plots and schemes. Whereas the critical reader rejoices in resolving the puzzle that reflects mirror-plays, manifold citations and multiple allusions they confront whilst actualizing the plot. The novel stipulates discernible possibilities of double reading contributed by Eco’s inclinations in incorporating exotic factors moulding a multifarious postmodern literary furore.

Despite the varying explanations, conspiracy theory took a mythical turn with Eco interpreting the theory as “a mythological version of a causal explanation of chance” (qtd. in. Leleve 6). Eco practically illustrates it when Simonini forges the ill-famed Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Simonini plots whole new mythology with “a Manichean vision” of the world, revolving around the perennial dispute between the vice and the virtue represented by Jews and Christianity. Thus giving rise to an aetiological discourse to confront.

The reader is reminded of the night as May 6th, 1770, in the Mount Tonnerre besides river Rhine, where a Stranger gets caught by masked men, further leading him to a group of three hundred ghosts. They subject the Stranger to interrogation where he undergoes several terrifying trials like firing a pistol to attest his compliance. Later the Stranger reveals his identity as the head of the Universal Masonic congregation by Divine Right, who is aware of the Society’s secrets and agendas. Simonini reckons,

Forget the Mont Tonnerre, the left bank of the Rhine, the time – I thought. Let’s imagine conjurors from every part of the world, representing the tentacles of their sect extended in every country, let’s gather them in a clearing, in a cave, in a castle, in a cemetery, in a crypt, as long as it’s sufficiently dark, let’s have one of them deliver a speech that unveils their plots, and their will to conquer the world (Eco 95).

Simonini is a fictional spy, a forger, an operational part of many police organizations, a murderer, a swindler, a trafficker and author of various anti-semitic texts, whose pursuit in life is as obnoxious and bizarre as the person himself is. Despite his pervasive disposition, his psychological abnormality is Eco’s thoughtful strategy employed in the play of the novel.

The ending note of the novel says when Simonini expects “all the events and characters depicted are true, even the most implausible ones” (Eco 424). The modesty expressed in this last revelation actually is an intelligible invitation from Eco to re-interpret the whole novel under the new light of the information. Contrary to one’s own early reading, storylines start appearing historical and not fictional – the Boullan and Diana episodes and the satanic sexual rituals turn out to be real historical

situations. The reader is thrown to a cognitive challenge finding his interpretations false and beseeches the reader to re-interpret his own interpretations.

Statements and arguments were made claiming *The Prague Cemetery* reiterates anti-semitism, interwoven with protocols unknown to the populace whereas the counterclaim proposed by Eco affirms the ethos of Eco's Model Reader having the pre-requisites for a veritable understanding of the novels. According to Anthony Burgess, *Foucault's Pendulum* is an encyclopaedic detective story about a search for "... men who not merely seek power over the earth but the power of the earth itself" (Eco). As the conspiracies generally in novels provide one with a formidable amount of knowledge and information, *The Prague Cemetery* fits perfect to the array of *Foucault's Pendulum*. According to Moss, the novel is a gathering of complex artefacts of Eco's postmodern aesthetic at work in a traditional literary form featuring the forgery of "the Protocols of the Elders of Zion." The novel can be considered the terminal expression of eliding intertexts and exploring historical events probably unknown or unimagined by a 21st-century reader. The excerpt on the back cover of *The Prague Cemetery* says, "an inspired twisting of history and fiction" from where another fictional narrative unfolds about a character who gets eventually involved in the historical events of the time and thus making a heterogeneous yoking of reality and fiction.

In an era of the cognitive revolution, stories have become the chief sources of knowledge, formulating discourses reaching every nook of society Eco in his *The Role of the Reader* addresses, "frames" and familiar scripts as vehicles of knowledge. These condensed stories and virtual realities as Eco terms, are heuristic tools creating mental comparisons – the cognitive instrument in interpretation and analogical thinking. Eco's fictions are manifestations of dismissing rigid borders existing between facts and fiction and provide a reliable amount of history. Simonini, the forger of the Protocols is completely a fictional character who neither undermines the inception of the forgery nor examines its destructive power.

The usual strategies employed in asserting the fictionality of a text serves no help in determining the imaginary and historical factors. Neither plausibility nor enunciation avails the reader to divide fact and fiction pertaining an exigency in ascertaining the history for a just interpretation. The perusal hits the reader with a realization that the remarkable story he went through was in fact "the genesis of one of the most perilous forgeries of recent history" (Eco 415). It becomes the reader's prerogative to conjure facts contributed to shaping "the history of European anti-semitism. The reader is sent to a dilemma where he cannot easily establish the author-reader dogma. When the central character Simonini himself transpires to a delusional forger, the reader has to gather cues to form a convincing interpretation of the diegesis.

Eco's narrative strategies foster the reader's inquiry: to serve an aid for the reader wallowing through unfamiliar historical facts and digressions, Eco affixes a summary in the appendix to differentiate plot from the story, condensing the main events of the story under the title "Useless Learned Explanations." As an assist to help the reader in the interpretation process Eco adopts certain strategies as a relief, twisting plot and story. It is an impossible task to encompass the complicated nineteenth-century scenario in a linear gist of a clarified explanation. Generally, a narrative attains unity by focalization were in *The Prague Cemetery*, focalization is a

bit problematic as Simonini, the forger himself suffers from a split personality disorder. The real hero is always a hero by mistake; he dreams of being an honest coward like everybody else (Eco 212). To derive a univocal meaning will be a miserable attempt as the reader cannot construe a distinctive synopsis from *The Prague Cemetery*.

Conspiracies being his idiosyncratic forte when coming to the fictional front, he opines that conspiracies never attracted him but the paranoia authorizing them to prosper did. "There are many small conspiracies, and most of them are exposed. But the paranoia of universal conspiracy is more powerful because it is everlasting. You can never discover it because you don't know who is there. It is a psychological temptation of our species" (Eco). *The Prague Cemetery* is a literary sensation of its own kind, designed to play with the reader's connivance. Eco's fiction offers a new ethical dimension entrusting the reader with the responsibility to preserve truth evolved from a cognitive fictive inquiry. Eco's accomplished reader is proficient in negotiating the hall of mirrors built by the author and thus developing a consensual synthesis.

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