

UMBERTO ECO AND THE GRAND DESIGN: REASON AND UNREASON IN *FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM*

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Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* begins during the political ferment of late 1960s Italy. It is in this atmosphere that the narrator first develops his interest in the occult. This interest continues - indeed is fostered by - his sojourn in the rich cultural and mystical admixture of Brazil. He then returns to Italy, and the publishing company he now works for decides to use his mystical fascination (and those of his colleagues Belbo and Diotavelli) by publishing a series of "New Age" books. The manuscripts submitted by potential authors for this series are a strange mixture of ritual magic and fantastical theories on the nature of the world.

The narrator and his sophisticated colleagues, scornful of such bizarre ideas, seek to parody them, by concocting - as an intellectual game - an occult conspiracy theory explaining the entire history of the world. Unbeknownst to them, however, in the making of their conspiracy theory they have drawn not only on knowledge of historical and fictional secret societies but also unintentionally on the secrets of a very real group. For this secret society, the ideas of the conspiracy are anything but an intellectual game. Convinced that the three have discovered a mystical secret which they desire, the initiates start to hunt down the three colleagues. Diotavelli by this time is dying of cancer, but Belbo is captured and killed by the occultists when he refuses to reveal his (non-existent) secret knowledge. The book ends with the narrator waiting for the moment when he too is tracked down and destroyed.

THE POWERS OF UNREASON

Eco's novel presents a vision of the world divided between reason and unreason, the rational and the irrational.

In the human being the magma of the irrational is concealed beneath the thin and vulnerable crust of human reason.

The narrator of the story appears as a sceptic. He stands at a distance from the carnival-like revolutionary farce of late 1960s student politics and he reacts with horror when as an

expatriate in Brazil he hears that former students have taken to terrorism. His reaction to the mystical manuscripts submitted to him is one of critical disbelief. But the greater his involvement with these ideas become the more the boundary between belief and disbelief begins to fade. He begins to find the harmony of the plan he has concocted "beautiful" and "poetic". He falls into a state of spiritual seduction by powers of unreason of his own devising.

The struggle between these twin forces arises once again in the figure of Amparo, the narrator's Brazilian girlfriend. Amparo has consciously forsaken her heterogeneous cultural roots for the apparent "modernity" of Marxism and cultural materialism. The author, however, senses that this rejection is only skin deep:

Amparo had made up her mind: religion was always the opiate of the people and pseudo-tribal cults were even worse. But when I held her by the waist in the Escolas de Samba, joining in the snaking lines to the unbearable rhythm of the drums, I realised she clung to that world with the muscles of her belly, her heart, her head, her nostrils.

The fundamental clash between the two elements of Amparo's psyche comes when, while witnessing a voodoo ceremony, she succumbs to the ritual trance. Ironically at the same ceremony a German psychologist takes part, trying but failing to be affected by the voodoo trance. She is perhaps too strongly rooted in the modernity of her science.

LIA

If Eco presents his characters as in conflict between the rational individual and collective mysticism then the one character for whom the rational holds the field of battle is Lia, the narrator's Italian girlfriend.

Lia offers the author a counterweight to his attraction to the seductive nature of his occult speculations. She offers him the choice of living in a world concerned with reality rather than collectivist fantasy. She reminds him: "Archetypes do not exist. The body exists."

When the narrator explains his carefully constructed conspiracy to her she demolishes it with rational arguments culled from as mundane a source as a tourist guide book. She shows that the document which has started the three friends on their conspiracy "game" is not a secret guide to hidden knowledge but merely a medieval merchant's "laundry list".

Despite Lia's demonstration of the dangerous qualities of his conspiracy game the author does not abandon it. He clings to it because it allows him to reconstruct and therefore control society and world history in his own terms. He thinks

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that he has power over the plan. In reality, of course, the plan has power over him.

In the last scenes of the book he realises that it is Lia and their baby son who represent the real quality of living.

But by then, with the occultists closing in, it is too late.

SYMBOLS OF SUBVERSION

For Eco's narrator it is not just human beings who are divided between mystic and rational selves. He sees all apparently rational objects as having irrational "shadow" meanings. The more the narrator becomes enthralled by the cleverness of his plan the more his vision becomes thick with these "shadows".

The title "Foucault's Pendulum" expresses this connection of opposites. Scientifically the pendulum, which takes its name from its inventor, marks a point of non-movement in the rotating earth. In terms of its irrational counter-meaning, however, the pendulum marks a wellspring of occult power - the mystic centre of the world.

The significance of these shadows is that they subvert the true meaning of an object. How valid is a system of numbers as the building blocks of mathematics if it is also the basis of numerological magic? What can be made of the scientific basis of a computer if it stores the secrets of the occult? The final irony is that when the occultists reveal themselves they choose a museum of science and technology as their meeting place.

The unreason of collectivism can only triumph in a world where truth and rationality have ceased to be legal tender.

The Russian Revolution triumphed in 1917 because for the previous half century Russian intellectuals devoted themselves to the justification of violence. The Nazis triumphed because they were fish who swam in an intellectual sea of racial collectivism and the irrationality of "blut und boden".

SYNARCHY

Synarchy is the mystical doctrine which inspires the secret society which pursues the narrator and his colleagues. The nature of synarchy is first explained to the narrator by the occultist Agliè:

A political formula which would lead to a harmonious society. Synarchy as opposed to anarchy ... An enlightened oligarchy that would eliminate class conflicts.

The synarchists have also come to the notice of D'Angelis, a secret policeman, who is investigating their activities. He is puzzled by the fact that both communist and fascist groups seem to have dabbled in synarchy. He laments that:

There was a time when we went looking for the Red Brigades in squats and the Black Brigades in martial arts clubs; nowadays the opposite could be true.

Lia unravels the complex skein of left/right connections with a characteristically simple judgement:

Synarchy is God.

Here again this character cuts to the heart of the matter. Marxism and fascism are secular faiths devised in the years after which Nietzsche had declared that "God is dead". They both have a higher goal which can be worked for and which justifies their crimes.

Like all entities in Eco's book these ideologies have a "shadow" existence. They are mirror images of each other. The

world is a conspiracy against them controlled by a powerful core group of individuals so they organise on conspiratorial lines controlled by an inner circle.

Fascism and communism were twentieth century secular faiths but they never abandoned their mystical millenarian roots. Such mysticism united and divided them as they fed off each other in ghastly symbiosis.

THE CONSPIRACY

The secret society's head, Agliè, says:

Isn't it said that history is just a blood stained and senseless riddle? No, impossible; there must be a design. There must be a mind.

He espouses synarchy because he abhors the anarchy he sees in history.

But Agliè does not simply want to know that there is a higher plan. He wants to control it. His is the essence of the "vanguard doctrine". He hates anarchy because it is uncontrolled. It is the negation of distilled power.

The mystical collectivists despise the anarchy of society's individual interactions because it has an open complexity. The collectivists desire a simple solution known only to themselves. They desire to be the "elect", the "initiates", the "herrenvolk".

For mystical collectivists the simpler is the all-explaining formula of history the better. For Marxists the answer to the conspiracy of history question can be summed up in one word. It is: the capitalists. For fascists, it is: the Jews.

For Eco's occultists it is: synarchy - an answer to all questions because unreason is infinitely pliable.

PARADISE AND THE ABYSS

At the end of *Foucault's Pendulum* evil triumphs. The narrator has witnessed the savage death at the hands of the occultists of his friend Belbo. The narrator himself is left keeping lonely vigil on a hillside waiting for the time when he himself will perish at the hands of his enemies.

In his desperate predicament the narrator embraces the truth of Lia's rational arguments. His fate is sealed already but he thinks of his son:

Maybe even now he is experiencing his opportunity. He's found a ball, a blade of grass, an ant and in it he sees paradise and the abyss.

The narrator failed in his choice and succumbed to the siren cries of collectivist mysticism.

But his son too will have choice, and the possibility of victory rather than defeat.

The narrator realises that belief should be in the individual, not the collective.

The mystical collectivists despise the individual and worship the plan - though there is no plan.

But try telling them. They of little faith.

Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*.

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