

FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM

by Umberto Eco, translated by William Weaver. (Secker & Warburg)

Gary Snyder once wrote that every apprentice poet, as part of his training, should master at least one magical system. Eco, at this stage not exactly an apprentice at anything he chooses to undertake, knows them all. I've checked.

And Auden asserted that among the hallmarks of the true poet was a passion for lists — a proposition with which for personal reasons I'd feel bound to agree, even were it not validated by (a list) Homer and Hesiod, skalds and bards, Pope and Swift, Pound and...well, et cetera.

Eco, whether in fact or fiction — ambiguity deliberate — has, quintessentially, this passion. And even though poetry, to the best of my knowledge, is, along with drama, the only literary mode he's never had a go at (what he *has* had a go at ranges from a book on Aquinas through studies of semiotics, children's books, to an essay on the World Cup and another on blue jeans) there's the wider sense in which he's very much a poet=*poietes*=maker=maker; and *Lament for the Makaris* reminds us that Dunbar, too, was very fond of lists. And prodigiously learned, and much given, when in the mood, to a vein of quirky humour.

Anyway, there are a couple of very interesting lists in the essay "Dreaming of the Middle Ages" in *Travels in Hyperreality* which bear directly upon the matter and manner of *Foucault's Pendulum*.

Thus:

The Middle Ages of so-called *Tradition*, or of occult philosophy (or *la pensée sapientielle*), an eternal and rather eclectic ramshackle structure, swarming with Knights Templars, Rosicrucians, alchemists, Masonic initiates, neo-Kabbalists, drunk on reactionary poisons sipped from the Grail, ready to hail every neo-fascist Will to Power...mixing up René Guénon and Conan the Barbarian, Avalon and the Kingdom of Prester John. Antiscientific by definition, these Middle Ages keep going under the banner of the mystical weddings of the micro- with the macrocosm, and as a result they convince their adepts that everything is the same as anything else and that the whole world is born to convey, in any of its aspects and events, the same Message. Fortunately, the message got lost...

And then, in interrogative mode — which strikes me, favourably, as being much more Eco's normal intellectual habit — there's this:

Are there any connections between the Heroic Fantasy of Frank Frazetta, the new satanism, Excalibur, the Avalon sagas, and Jacques Le Goff? If they met aboard some unidentified flying object near Montailou, would Darth Vader, Jacques Fournier, and Parsifal speak the same language? If so, would it be a galactic pidgin or the Latin of the Gospel according to St. Luke Skywalker?

These lists, and what's implicit in them, are in essence what *Foucault's Pendulum* is "all about" (the quotes indicate a point I'll get back to later) and help to place both its immense achievement and its considerable limitations.

The mere mention of lists in literature inevitably brings to mind Jorge Luis Borges (whom in this book Eco sometimes by open reference and sometimes in sly asides seems to acknowledge as *il miglior fabbro*). *Foucault's Pendulum* contains one open reference to Don Isidro Parodi, the hero of the practically unread collaborative Borges/Bioy Casares detective stories. Much more important are the echoes (Ecos?), meant, of course, to be heard, from two other Borges stories: "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", in which an imaginary and deliberately created world gradually encroaches upon and finally supersedes the real one; and "The Secret", in which, except for the fact that it's rather disgusting, we're never told what the secret is.

There is, however, a crucial distinction between what Borges was doing there and what Eco is doing here. In Borges there *is* a secret, and elsewhere he's said that it shouldn't be too hard for the intelligent reader to work out: this particular intelligent reader's guess has always been the obvious one: How Babies Are Made. In Eco, *au contraire*, to quote the author, "the secret is that there is no secret".

Which brings us, by a route circuitous enough to satisfy even the author of "The Garden of Forking Paths", back to the book in question.

There is an already large and steadily growing literature, of the railway- and airport-bookstall kind, purportedly having some basis in fact, on the Knights Templar, the Holy Grail, and related matters (though, as a matter of fact, I'm not aware of the slightest connection between the Templars and the Grail — in terms of the mythology, it doesn't fit: the Templars were founded in 1184, by which time, assuming Joseph of Arimathaea hadn't fallen asleep on the job, the Grail should have been safely esconced in Glastonbury, or under what was to become T.S. Eliot's flat).

A good deal of *Foucault's Pendulum* does in fact read rather like this meta- or sub- or counter-literature. But, of course, it's meant to. Eco

himself once wrote that, though one was entirely free to ignore high culture, one ignored pop culture at one's own peril. And he's always, apparently, been rather more of a devotee than most of us these days are of Marshall McLuhan.

One must admit that John Dee, Robert Fludd, Cornelius Agrippa, W.B. Yeats and even Madame Blavatsky don't precisely represent pop culture as currently understood. But they do represent minds of the first order gone wonky in the service of an idea, or ideal, which will make sense of a world which otherwise makes no sense at all. Yeats was far too intelligent a man to enter the Order of the Golden Dawn otherwise.

Aleister Crowley, "The Great Beast 666", is another matter; and it's more with his foetid world that *Foucault's Pendulum* is concerned.

It's very doubtful that Crowley could have sustained his own claim to be "the most evil man who ever lived" — for starters, I imagine Gilles de Rais, Elizabeth of Hungary and Vlad the Impaler could have given him a run for his money.

But evil in itself is no more the point of *Foucault's Pendulum* than it was of *The Name of the Rose* — although it's a major theme in both, and although terrible things happen in both that, if one is at all disposed to Manicheanism, can only be attributed to cosmic malignancy.

The really interesting thing that happens in this book is the way monstrous evil arises out of a joke. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* the jokes — which come in the middle of the play — limp so badly by comparison with the great passages that they're normally ascribed to a collaborator — perhaps Ford. And indeed Marlowe comes in for a passing reference here, as does almost everyone else I can think of from Homer to Hitler.

The main point — insofar as I grasp it — of the book as a whole is the triumphant cry at the end of Pound's translation of the *Trachiniae*: "Splendour! It all coheres!"

But the coherence, in Borges' phrase, is a discipline of chess players, not of angels. And chess players aren't angels.

The book is, it goes without saying, a metafiction. In it we find, for example, Bacon writing Shakespeare, and someone else writing both, not to mention Cervantes — another preoccupation of Borges's. The passages in which the narrator, Casaubon — what other name, in so intensely academic a novel? — reads the diary left by his vanished colleague Belbo in/on the computer Abulafia (named after a real thirteenth-century cabbalist) are, though mad, painfully moving.

What actually happened to the Templars in the early fourteenth century is pretty much too horrible to contemplate; so, in a different way, is what's in recent years been done to them in books of nonsense masquerading as fact. Why the Templars are so much more fascinating than their fellow-heretics — the Albigensians for instance — I have no idea. Yes, I do. The Templars were an order of warrior monks; they were also immensely rich. Just why did they capitulate to King Philip the Fair as easily as they did? And that's essentially the question with which Eco opens his novel. A great many of the Templars — including the Grand Master, Jacques du Molay — gave themselves up quietly when they had absolutely no reason to; particularly when they must have had a pretty fair idea of what they were in for in the way of white-hot irons and so on.

But it's Eco's thesis — let me correct that, Eco's theses — that on the one hand the historical record is perfectly true, on the other it's ridiculously false: what in fact the Templars were doing — trained as they were to withstand torture, in the Middle East — was quite deliberately sacrificing a fair few of their number (the number came, according to other sources I've seen, to 504) with a view to a few surviving Templars, through mystic arts, ruling the world.

And this is where the story really begins. Three editors at an Italian publishing house — Casaubon, Belbo and Diotallevi — decide to start an occult list — what they call “their Diabolicals”.

This, of course, is where we merge with Borges, whose secret society *Orbis Tertius*, including Bishop Berkeley, created Tlön.

But Borges, along with Cavafy the most economical writer of all time, would never have gone to such immense lengths to make a point.

I think — well, in fact, it's obvious — that the centrally important fact about *Foucault's Pendulum* is that absolutely everything in it is provisional. I think it's the first truly paranoid novel for some years — since, say, *The Crying of Lot 49*. It's a novel that incorporates almost the entire contents of John Sladek's *The New Apocrypha*, Martin Gardner's *Fads and Fallacies* and de Camp and Ley's *Of Lands Beyond*, plus acres of people like Frances Yates. It incorporates it, uses it absolutely brilliantly, and then leaves the reader thinking — Well, hang on, so what? It's very much shades of George Steiner's remark in *White Knights of Reykjavik* to the effect that it was odd and interesting that such immense mental powers as — for instance — Fischer's and Spassky's were being devoted to something so utterly pointless as chess.

That pretty much sums up my feelings on closing *Foucault's Pendulum*, I suspect for the last time — unlike *The Name of the Rose*. Crudely put, such genius, and for what? It isn't actually a novel at all in any ordinary sense: the prose, in Weaver's translation, is beautiful — all of the main characters sound alike, but they're meant to — but there is no real characterisation, no real plot — only relentless accumulation — and no emotional appeal other than that involved in being asked to solve a chess problem which states: White to play and mate in 641 moves.

Oh, and Eco has got Symmes's hollow earth theory mixed up with the Koreshan version. In the former, contrary to what he says, we live on the outside: in the latter, as he does say, on the inside — this having been the theory adopted by Hitler's High Command, with interesting results as regards the trajectories of V1s and V2s.

And that's really the case with *Foucault's Pendulum* — it's beautiful and made with the most extraordinary ingenuity and then shot off to nowhere in particular.

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