

## **Fiction Imitating History, or History Imitating Fiction?**

### **Umberto Eco's *Il Cimitero di Praga***

John Cameron

Despite his acclaimed work in the field of semiotics, Umberto Eco is probably best known as a writer of historical fiction. His first novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) not only catapulted Eco into the international spotlight, but also revitalized the genre. This revitalization inspired writers of historical fiction to use the genre to explore 'the systems of knowing' (Groot 2009, 126) that we rely on to understand both the past and the present. Linda Hutcheon famously coined the term 'historiographic metafiction' to describe the way that these postmodern writers of historical fiction force readers to question not only the reliability of their fictional constructions of history, but of all such constructions. This may help to explain Eco's persistent fascination not only with forgeries and hoaxes but with the very important roles that they have played in shaping history. In *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988) the three editors Belbo, Diotallevi and Casaubon create 'The Plan' in a spirit of diversion, only to find out to their amazement and horror that this fiction has been accepted by some as reality.

As a writer of historical fiction, Eco is well aware of this problem, for writers in this genre are often expected to make their fiction as historically accurate as possible. Eco's works are clearly well researched, but Eco nevertheless insists that a writer of fiction's duty is to fiction first, and history second. Perhaps he would agree with Vladimir Nabokov, who insisted that 'fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth' (Nabokov 1982, 5). Besides, in his 'Postscript' to *The Name of the Rose* Eco wryly notes that readers were most often misinformed when they tried to level the dreaded charge of inaccuracy against him:

there is one matter that has amused me greatly: every now and then a critic or a reader writes to say that some character of mine declares things that are too modern, and in every one of these instances, and only in these instances, I was actually quoting fourteenth-century texts. And there are other pages in which readers appreciated the exquisite medieval quality whereas I felt those pages are illegitimately modern. The fact is that everyone has his own idea, usually corrupt, of the Middle Ages (Eco 1994a: 534-35).<sup>1</sup>

It is the corruption of such ideas that fascinates Eco, and many of his novels deal with the role that fiction has had in the shaping not only our idea of history but history itself. This idea is taken up again in *Baudolino* (2000) as the title character and his friends produce several historically important forgeries while also setting off in search of the mysterious Prester John. They do this despite having had a hand—literally—in the creation of the 1165 ‘Letter of Prester John,’ a forgery Eco believes helped to serve ‘as an alibi for the expansion of the Christian world toward Africa and Asia’ (Eco 2004c: 284). Just as the study of the many ways that historical context affects and shapes literature is important, so too should attention be paid to the opposite process. The writer’s gaze may be fashioned by his or her historical circumstances, but the historian’s gaze is equally subject to the same fashioning.

Eco in particular is clearly captivated by the influence that fiction has had on both historical events and our understanding of those events. He is not alone, for such a concern appears again and again in the works of Hayden White and other historians concerned with the influence of ‘narrative discourse’ on ‘historical representation.’ This influence can be clearly seen in Eco’s latest novel *Il Cimitero di Praga* (2010), a novel that explores the circumstances surrounding the creation of *The Protocols of Zion*, a forgery that was and unfortunately still is taken for genuine by many conspiracy theorists throughout the world. Eco discusses this forgery in a number of his earlier works. For example, in *Foucault’s Pendulum* Eco closely outlines the way that the conspiracy theory began to be accepted by reality, a theme he picked up again in 1993 during his Charles Eliot Norton lectures as he tries to ‘understand the mechanisms by which fiction can shape life’ (Eco 2004a: 139). Despite clearly showing the numerous ways that *The Protocols* was itself shaped by the fictions of Eugène Sue, Alexandre Dumas, Maurice

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<sup>1</sup> In fact Eco, as is his wont, has even devised a humorous list of such ideas (Frayling 1996: 179-80).

Joly, and others, 'the story' was 'so convincing in narrative terms that it was taken seriously. The rest of this story is History' (Eco 2004c: 292). By looking at how Eco has explored *The Protocols* in previous works in relation to *Il Cimitero di Praga*, one can gain a better understanding and appreciation of the ways that history is influenced by fiction and vice versa.

Eco has always been interested in the fine line between fact and fiction, a line that always seems ready to dissolve. His first novel, *The Name of the Rose*, purports to be a history written by Adso of Melk, a history supposedly written during the fourteenth century. I use the word 'supposedly' because the narrator and editor of Adso's manuscript notes that the manuscript that he received in 1968 was not Adso's original document but a nineteenth-century book that 'claimed to reproduce faithfully a fourteenth-century manuscript that, in its turn, had been found in the monastery of Melk by the great eighteenth-century man of learning' (Eco 1994b: 1). Eco notes that he constructed the novel in this way to set his 'narrative on a fourth level of encasement, inside three other narratives: I am saying what Vallet said that Mabillon said that Adso said' (Eco 1994a: 512). However, this encasement has much wider implications, for it suggests that this history, and perhaps history in general, is ultimately based on a forgery. Certainly the narrator begins to think so: 'this case went beyond all reasonable pessimism. I began to think I had encountered a forgery' (Eco 1994b: 3). The narrator's qualms are calmed by the discovery of another manuscript in Buenos Aires, which is curious, for the origins of this manuscript seem to be just as spurious as the other's. The reference to Buenos Aires, and the assertion that the Argentinean manuscript's 'description of the labyrinth in particular left no room' to doubt Adso's manuscript any longer (Eco 1994b: 3), point quite explicitly to a very important source of inspiration for Eco: Jorge Luis Borges. Although widely known for his interest in labyrinths,<sup>2</sup> many of Borges' most famous *ficciones* also explore the line between story and history, a line that becomes

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<sup>2</sup> This interest in labyrinths is clearly shared by Eco, whose novel provides many intricate and fascinating descriptions of the monastery's scriptorium. In the 'Postscript' to *The Name of the Rose*, Eco reveals that his indebtedness to Borges also influenced the creation of the scriptorium's guardian:

Everyone asks me why Jorge, with his name, suggests Borges, and why Borges is so wicked. But I cannot say. I wanted a blind man who guarded a library (it seemed a good narrative idea to me), and library plus blind man can only equal Borges, also because debts must be paid. (Eco 1994a: 515)

more and more non-existent as the reader progresses.<sup>3</sup> It is worthy of note that the very manuscript that convinces the narrator of the other manuscript's authenticity should have such origins. Even the initial enthusiasm of the narrator begins to subside 'on sober reflection' (Eco 1994b: 4), but he nevertheless decides to 'pluck up [his] courage and present, as if it were authentic, the manuscript of Adso of Melk' (Eco 1994b: 5). As if to underscore even further the degree to which fact and fiction often co-mingle and influence each other in turn, the narrator's motivation for publishing the manuscript sounds like the one that might be provided by a poet: 'Let us say it is an act of love. Or, if you like, a way of ridding myself of numerous, persistent obsessions' (Eco 1994b: 5). The desire for truth promoted by Cicero in *De Oratore* (55 BC) as the first law of history in this instance appears nowhere to be seen. Despite the desire that such laws be held, it must be noted that even Cicero wished in *De Natura Deorum* (45 BC) that could discover the truth as easily as he could expose falsehood.

This trend can be seen even more clearly in *Baudolino*. At one point in the novel, the historian Bishop Otto tells Baudolino that lying is linked with history: 'If you want to become a man of letters and perhaps write some Histories one day, you must also lie and invent tales, otherwise your History would become monotonous' (Eco 2002: 43). Baudolino heeds the bishop's advice, for he sees that the bishop lies in his own historical works, particularly in regards to Frederick I Barbarossa. Lies affect a whole host of historical events in the novel. Even the founding of Baudolino's city Alessandria in 1168 comes about as a result of a lie (Eco 2002: 40), a lie that quickly found its way into the

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<sup>3</sup> Of particular interest in this regard is Borges' 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,' in which a study of the false history of Uqbar begins to reveal what seems to be a very real conspiracy to create the world of Tlön. Of course both are entirely fictitious, but Borges suggests that history is often shaped by such fictions. This influence inevitably forces one to consider whether or not any history can ever really be true:

already the teaching of Tlön's harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has obliterated the history that governed my own childhood; already a fictitious past has supplanted in men's memories that other past, of which we now know nothing certain—not even that it is false. (Borges 2008: 81)

Eco would explore this idea in *Foucault's Pendulum*, in which an imaginary 'Plan' begins to be seen as horrifyingly real. In many ways it is seen as real precisely because of the attractiveness of the 'moving episodes' described by Borges, episodes that make the story far more accessible to readers. The echoes between this and *The Protocols* are made explicit at several points throughout the novel and in Eco's 'The Power of Falsehood,' in which he argues that the fictional nature of *The Protocols* is actually the very thing that made it so believable as history (Eco 2004c: 292). These echoes and their horrifying consequences are explored even more explicitly in *Il Cimitero di Praga*.

city's chronicles.<sup>4</sup> Following this the lies become much more complicated and wide-ranging, for Baudolino and his friends are ultimately responsible for forging the letter of Prestor John (c. 1165), rewriting Bishop Otto's *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus* (c. 1143-1145), and essentially creating the Grail legends. All of these events had a huge impact on history, and yet all of them were founded, like the city of Alessandria, on a lie. Eco points out that he had wanted for years to write a novel 'about a group of characters who made forgeries,' a novel that was inspired by his academic work on 'the semiotics of the fake' as well as the lectures he gave on the topic at the University of Bologna in 1994 (Eco 2004b: 319). The lies do not end there. Baudolino and his friends also accidentally drown Frederick I when they think that he has died in his room and attempt to make his death appear natural, a lie that essentially brings the Third Crusade (1189-1192) to a close. The story of Baudolino the great liar is actually framed by Baudolino telling his story to the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates, who understandably is never completely sure if Baudolino is telling him the truth. Baudolino insists that while he is a liar he has been truthful to Niketas, but Niketas is quick to dismiss this as merely an example of the Epimenides paradox that all Cretans are liars. This, Niketas argues, offers no foundation of truth for a history to rest on:

You [...] are like the liar of Crete: you tell me you're a confirmed liar and insist I believe you. You want me to believe you've told lies to everybody but me. In all my years at the court of these emperors I have learned to extricate myself from the traps of masters of deceit far more sly than you [...] By your own confession, you no longer know who you are, perhaps because you have told too many lies, even to yourself. And you're asking me to construct the story that eludes you. (Eco 2002: 39-40)

And yet, by having Niketas link Baudolino's lies back to the lies at the Byzantine court that he has supposedly managed to extricate himself from, Eco shows time and time again that history often does rest on such lies, lies that often go on have a very real impact on later events. Interestingly, Baudolino's lies do not find their way into Niketas' history, for he is advised by Paphnutius—who appears to be the same Saint Paphnutius

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<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, it is worth noting that Alessandria is Eco's hometown. It is also worth noting that Eco had previously written about the founding of Alessandria in 'The Miracle of San Baudolino,' in which he speaks of how 'the legend' of Alessandria's founding became recorded history (Eco 1995b: 236).

who was a recluse in Kiev Caves Monastery—to strike it from his work on the sack of Constantinople in 1204. Interestingly, Paphnutius also argues that Niketas should remove any reference to the Genoese who helped him flee the burning city, for then he would ‘have to tell about the relics they fabricated, and [his] readers would lose faith in the most sacred things’ (Eco 2002: 520). It may be a lie, but it is a lie in the service of the truth, for ‘in a great history little truths can be altered so that the greater truth emerges’ (Eco 2002: 521). This point is incredibly important, for Niketas Choniates is generally considered to be the most important source for our knowledge about the 1204 sack of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade. In this sense history becomes its own kind of fiction, for it shapes the facts for its own particular ends. In reference to his own work of historical fiction, Eco has Paphnutius comfort Niketas with the knowledge that Baudolino’s tale will eventually be told by someone: ‘You surely don’t believe you’re the only writer of stories in this world. Sooner or later, someone—a greater liar than Baudolino—will tell it’ (Eco 2002: 521). Eco may be a greater liar than Baudolino, but here he suggests that history itself may be the greatest lie of all.

While historians would probably not concur wholeheartedly with such an idea, it is nevertheless a generally accepted concept that fiction has its role to play when it comes to constructing or reconstructing the past. For example, Ronald Syme once argued that ‘narrative is the essence of history’ (Syme 1958: 193), while E. H. Carr argued that an historian needs an ‘imaginative understanding for the minds of the people with whom he is dealing, for the thought behind their acts’ (Carr 1964: 24). This imaginative understanding, which Giambattista Vico once called *fantasia*, may be overlooked as a guiding force in historical writing, but such oversight does not in any way decrease its influence. As Hayden White contends:

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by ‘finding,’ ‘identifying,’ or ‘uncovering’ the ‘stories’ that lie buried in chronicles; and that the differences between ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ resides in the fact that the historian ‘finds’ his stories, whereas the fiction writer ‘invents’ his. This conception of the historian’s task, however, obscures the extent to which ‘invention’ also plays a part in the historian’s operations. (White 1973: 6/7)

As Isaiah Berlin put it in one of his many essays on Vico: ‘Clio, as the English historian G. M. Trevelyan pointed out long ago, is, after all, a muse’ (Berlin 1991: 65). If this is the case, is it something to be applauded, decried, amended, or accepted as inevitable? Would it be possible to achieve a combination of all four? Peter Bondanella notes that Eco often sees fictional structuring and restructuring of history in a positive light:

fiction allows us limitlessly to employ our faculties for perceiving the world and for reconstructing the past, and it is through the pleasurable activity of fiction that adults structure our past and present experience. (Bondanella 1997: 165)

An awareness of this process should prompt us to be skeptical at the very least, to be willing to, as Eco puts it, ‘rewrite the encyclopedia every day’ (Eco 2004c: 301). Likewise, in *The Island of the Day Before*, Saint-Savin argues that ‘the philosopher must have the courage to criticize all the false teachings that have been inculcated in us’ (Eco 1995a: 82) and be prepared to come up with his or her own. To Eco such critical expertise is essential, perhaps now more than ever, to interpreting the many leading and misleading symbols that surround us.

In ‘Fake and Forgeries,’ Eco points out that the task of pinning down what is fake and what is real is becoming increasingly problematic because of ‘the difficulty in defining the very notion of “original”’ (Eco 1990a: 174) and because ‘such concepts as Truth and Falsity, Authentic and Fake, Identity and Difference circularly define each other’ (Eco 1990a: 200-01). Such ideas are not confined to semioticians like Eco, for distinct echoes of this can be found in the works of historians such as White:

the very distinction between real and imaginary events that is basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction presupposes a notion of reality in which ‘the true’ is identified with ‘the real’ only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity. (White 1990: 6)

This ‘character of narrativity’ is the essential point, for it makes such histories much more persuasive than the banal facts and figures of recorded history. However, such persuasiveness has its downside, for it can mislead just as much as it can enliven and entertain. Whatever the validity of such claims, the question one is confronted with is whether such skeptical criticism leads to a rejection of false knowledge or, paradoxically

enough, an increased susceptibility to it. While it may be good to rewrite the encyclopedia every day, it has often been the case that such rewriting has not made one any more intellectually rigorous when it comes to exposing genuine falsehood. Not only that, but if the encyclopedias are being rewritten every day, who exactly is doing the rewriting?

Therein lies the problem, a problem that Eco freely admits to in several of his writings. As Cristina Farranato puts it in *Eco's Chaosmos*: 'how is it possible that so much of our history has been controlled by false ideas' (Farranato 2004: 138)? While it may be the case that fictional structuring and restructuring of the past can be positive, it is just as likely that the opposite can be true. It may often prove that our histories are inevitably and perhaps unconsciously guided by fictional elements, but what happens when this is done deliberately? In *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, Eco describes several humorous situations where fakes have not only been mistaken for being genuine, but are actually being used to establish one's own history: 'the fake is recognized as "historical," and is thus garbed in authenticity' (Eco 1986: 30). In a similar but much more sinister way, this is what has happened with *The Protocols*, for the text's very history, despite the many times that historians have shown it to be lies piled upon lies piled upon lies, lends it a terrible authenticity in the eyes of those who believe it to be genuine (Bronner 2003: 78).<sup>5</sup> To one harboring such delusions, the fact that the text has a history is enough to make it history. This is similar to Hannah Arendt's point that, unfortunately, because *The Protocols* has been:

believed by so many people [. . .] it can become the text of a whole political movement, the task of the historian is no longer to discover a forgery. Certainly it is not to invent explanations which

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Bronner believes that some of the blame for this phenomenon lies with what he describes—in words that seem to deliberately reference Eco's essay quoted above—postmodern skepticism surrounding terms like 'true' and 'fake':

The pamphlet was a forgery and a pack of lies; there was nothing authentic about it. For many living in our 'postmodern condition,' however, this is essentially irrelevant: their relativism leads them to question the very notion of evidence in judging truth claims. One interpretative position is as good, or bad, as any other and there exist an infinite number of ways to interpret any given text. Paranoia can, in this vein, become a legitimate response to the 'hyper-real' quality of modern life and its fragmentary character. (Bronner 2003: 130, my emphasis)

While I may not share Bronner's blanket dismissal of relativism or the genuine need for skeptical inquiry—not dismissal, but inquiry—of any given truth claim, he makes an excellent point about the ways that an irrational paranoia can make one prey to a whole host of conspiratorial claims, claims that are—as Eco shows in both *Foucault's Pendulum* and *Il Cimitero di Praga*—much more tantalizing because of their fictional structure and elements.



dismiss the chief political and historical fact of the matter: that the forgery is being believed. This fact is more important than the (historically speaking, secondary) circumstance that it is a forgery. (qtd. in Bronner 2003: 122)

Such forgeries survive because people believe them to be true. And while skeptical analyses of truth claims have many positive effects, there are certain dangers involved that one must always take into account. The building rebuilt in the toppled one's place is likely to be faulty in its construction, but the apparatuses for showing this to be the case are themselves being called into question, a skepticism that leads not to a more rigorous desire for the truth but to the emergence of the conspiracy theory. As Berlin puts it, skepticism is often healthy, but when taken to an extreme it is ultimately self-defeating: 'scepticism, driven to extremes, defeats itself by becoming self-refuting' (Berlin 2008: 45). Once one's healthy skepticism begins to develop such an illness, there is often no way out of it, for even an explanation or rebuttal by an expert is immediately placed under suspicion because, paradoxically, it comes from such an established source.

To the conspiracy theorist, to provide proof that the conspiracy theory does not exist is in fact to provide the greatest evidence of its existence. There is no need to cite the numerous modern conspiracy theories that one can find all over the Internet today. However, despite the claims sometimes made by critics of the medium, the history of un-skeptical skepticism has a history the very much predates the World Wide Web. One can see this quite clearly from the example of the Rosicrucians, an example that Eco deals with quite heavily in *Foucault's Pendulum*, 'The Power of Falsehood,' and 'The Force of Falsity.' It is also worth keeping in mind that this is also the sect that—in an event that seems right out of the pages of 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' and *Foucault's Pendulum*—inspired Pierre Plantard's creation of the Priory of Sion, a fake group that inspired a very real conspiracy theory that helped to inspire a novel that has been compared by a number of rather insipid critics to *Foucault's Pendulum*: Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). This book in turn has produced a whole slew of conspiracy theories, online and elsewhere, which are all just as insidious and ridiculous as 'The Plan' conceived by Casaubon and his friends. In an odd twist, the tremendous success of Brown's novel meant that *Foucault's Pendulum* actually began to be advertised in relation to it as a 'thinking-person's *Da Vinci Code*,' even though Eco's novel is perhaps the greatest critique of the

conspiracy theory in modern literature. Irony would not be truly ironic without a comic twist.

Mark Twain once wrote that ‘a truth is not hard to kill,’ but ‘a lie told well is immortal’ (qtd. in Canducci 2009: 7). The seeming immortality of well-told lies is of great interest to Eco, particularly in *Foucault's Pendulum*, a novel that is in many ways ‘linked to the clamorous historical hoax of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*’ (Farronato 2004: 86). ‘The Plan’ created by Casaubon and his friends begins to be believed in by fanatics and conspiracy theorists in much the same way as *The Protocols* has managed to maintain a core of believers despite all of the overwhelming evidence that it is a hoax. Part of the reason for its pernicious resiliency is, as Eco and others have noted, its obvious fictional underpinnings. The very elements that make people believe in its reality are actually its most fictitious. And so, while fiction can often allow us to tap into our dreams, it also has the power to create nightmares:

This historical phenomenon transformed fiction into a nightmare, and Eco invites us to think of the effects of fiction on life: sometimes the results can be innocent and pleasant, but at other times interpretation can dangerously change reality. (Farronato 2004: 86)

It may be a nightmare, but, as the history of *The Protocols* and its horrifying influence has show, it is a nightmare that one can never wake up from. Perhaps this is why Eco chose to end *Foucault's Pendulum* with Agliè and other believers in ‘The Plan’ still having no idea that it ‘was all a hoax’ (Francesse: 107). Unfortunately, the end of the novel does not mean the end of the hoax any more than the numerous exposures of *The Protocols* has meant the end of what Bronner calls ‘the canonical text in the history of conspiracy theory’ (Bronner 2003: 130).

Again, part of what makes the conspiracy theory so appealing to people is that it contains fictional elements that make it easy to grasp and understand. It explains the complexities of the world as something simple and it also explains why our place in it is not what we thought it would be. At the same time, like any good fiction, it does so in a way that many clearly find to be emotionally appealing. Karl Popper argues that:

the conspiracy theory of society [...] is akin to Homer's theory of society. Homer conceived the power of the gods in such a way that whatever happened in the plain before Troy was only a reflection of the various conspiracies on Olympus. The conspiracy theory of society [...] comes from abandoning God and then asking: 'Who is in his place?' His place is then filled by various powerful men and groups—sinister pressure groups, who are to be blamed for having planned the great depression and all the evils from which we suffer (Popper 1976: 123).<sup>6</sup>

And so even stories of the world that cast people as victims are appealing for, as Eco argues, they 'explain the failure of our actions, or the fact that events have taken a different turn from the one we wanted' ('The Power of Falsehood' 298). At the same time, 'false stories are above all stories, and stories, like myths, are always persuasive' ('The Power of Falsehood' 298). *The Protocols* were strongly influenced by other fictional writings, so it was able to grab the attention of readers susceptible to its ideas in a way that a more factual but bland story never could. As Isaiah Berlin argues in relation to the ideas of the philosopher and conceptual pragmatist C. I. Lewis: 'there is no a priori reason for supporting that the truth, when it is discovered, will prove interesting' (Berlin 2008: 20).<sup>7</sup> For example, in *Foucault's Pendulum* Casaubon points out that *The Protocols* was largely inspired by a scene from a novel by Dumas, a scene that has also inspired Eco's latest novel:

We were particularly attracted by the episode in the Prague cemetery. This was the story of a certain Hermann Goedsche [...] under the name Sir John Retcliffe, he began writings sensational novels, including *Biarritz*, 1868. In it he described an occultist scene in the Prague cemetery, very similar to the meeting of the Illuminati described by Dumas at the beginning of *Giuseppe Balsamo*, where Cagliostro, chief of the Unknown Superiors, among them Swedenbourg, arranges the Affair of the Diamond Necklace. In the Prague cemetery the representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel gather, to expound their plans for the conquest of the world. (Eco 1990b: 403)

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<sup>6</sup> Like Eco, Popper seeks to undermine our often tenacious reliance on foundationalism. Along with his exposure of the flaws in such monistic approaches in other fields, his exposure of it the field of historicism has been especially important. For more on this, see *The Poverty of Historicism*. However, as Brian Boyd notes, Popper, 'unlike a Derrida or a Rorty [...] removes foundations without removing the search for truth' (7). Again, while skepticism is always healthy, un-skeptical skepticism is often self-refuting.

<sup>7</sup> In an odd twist that seems wholly in keeping with this discussion, Berlin's editor Henry Hardy notes that—despite Berlin's frequent allusions to this quote in other essays—he has 'not been able to find this remark in Lewis's published writings' (Berlin 2008: 20).

Despite such obvious fictional elements—or perhaps because of them—Goedsche's story was soon being quoted as fact:

In 1876 a Russian pamphlet reprints the scene from *Biarritz*, but as if it were fact, not fiction. And in 1881, in France, *Le Contemporain* does the same thing, claiming that the news comes from an unimpeachable source: the English diplomat Sir John Readcliff. In 1896 one Bournand publishes a book, *Les Juifs, non contemporains*, and repeats the scene of the Prague cemetery; he says that the subversive speech is made by the great rabbi John Readclif. A later version, however, reports that the real Readclif was taken to the fatal cemetery by Ferdinand Lassalle. (Eco 1990b: 403)

These works in turn ultimately lead to the publication of *The Protocols* in 1903, but by this time the lie had attracted so many other lies to it that it became more and more difficult to disprove to those who were susceptible to its message. As Casaubon points out: 'It was, again, the Plan of the Jesuits and, before that, of the Ordonation of the Templars. Few variations, few changes: the Protocols were self-generating; a blue-print that migrated from one conspiracy to another' (Eco 1990b: 403). No doubt this is why the Agliè and other believers in 'The Plan' are fervently Anti-Semitic despite there being no Anti-Semitic elements to 'The Plan' as originally conceived by Casaubon and his friends. As noted above, this might also be why the novel ends without 'The Plan' being exposed, for it, like *The Protocols*, is too grounded in fiction to ever be exposed by reality.

As Casaubon notes, it 'sounds like a folktale, and folktales are part of the collective imagination' (Eco 1990b: 406). Casaubon can see through such things, and perhaps it is no accident that his name was inspired by Early Modern scholar Isaac Casaubon, 'who demonstrated that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was a forgery' (Eco 1992: 81). Unlike his namesake however, the novel does not end with any indication that Casaubon will be able to expose any forgeries, not even the one he has created. In fact the novel—again clearly echoing the history of *The Protocols*—ends with Casaubon awaiting his murder at the hands of those who believe so strongly in 'The Plan' that they are willing to kill for it. In another clear acknowledgement of the insidious influence that *The Protocols* has had on our history, Casaubon realizes that it is too late to refute 'The Plan,' for such a refutation would only serve as proof to those who are so insistent on believing in it:

if They were to read it, They would only derive another dark theory and spend another eternity trying to decipher it the secret message hidden behind my words. It's impossible, They would say; he can't only have been making fun of us. No. Perhaps, without his realizing it, Being was sending us a message through its oblivion. It makes no difference whether I write or not. They will look for other meanings, even in my silence. That's how they are. (Eco 1990b: 533)

Casaubon's despair at the end of the novel reflects the despair of all those who have tried to refute the lies of *The Protocols*. How can one refute a false history when real history has become so doubtful to so many? How can one offer a bland, factual response to a fictional narrative that has proved so compelling to so many? However, unlike Casaubon, Eco does not give himself over to despair. He still believes that it is possible to be both critical of our criteria for truth while still managing to keep out a vigilant eye for untruths:

How should we deal with intrusions of fiction into life, now that we have seen the historical impact that this phenomenon can have? I do not wish to propose that my walks through the fictional woods are a remedy to the great tragedies of our time. Nonetheless, these walks have enabled us to understand the mechanisms by which fiction can shape life. At times the results can be innocent and pleasant, as when one goes on a pilgrimage to Baker Street; but at other times life can be transformed into a nightmare instead of a dream. Reflecting on these complex relationships between reader and story, fiction and life, can constitute a form of therapy against the sleep of reason, which generates monsters. (Eco 2004a: 139)

While fiction can produce horrors like *The Protocols*, it can also help us to be more aware of such productions and see them for what they are. Fiction can pull the wool over our eyes, but it can also open them. In his introduction to Will Eisner's *The Plot*, a graphic novel that tries to do just that, Eco argues that Eisner's story 'is a story very much worth telling, for one must fight the Big Lie and the hatred it spawns' (Eisner 2005: vii). It is worth noting that Eco wrote this introduction at the same time that he was writing *Il Cimitero di Praga*, a fictional work that is engaged in the same fight.

And so, a work of historical fiction has been written to combat the pernicious effects of a fictional work that has been believed by too many for too long to be history. How can these contradictions be resolved? Is it possible to maintain a healthy skepticism

without becoming skeptical to the point of being suspicious and paranoid? Can one accept that much of what we believe is shaped by fiction without surrendering ourselves over entirely to fantasy? Perhaps the way out of such a trap is to do what Eco has done throughout his writings: maintain a healthy skepticism while being aware that a bad case of flu may always be somewhere around the corner. Eco encourages us to utilize the potentials of skeptical inquiry and criticism while always being on the lookout for its possible pitfalls. As Eco would readily admit, this is a perilous tightrope, but it is one that must be walked nevertheless. Nowhere can this can be seen more clearly than with this issue, an issue that has fascinated and disturbed Eco throughout his career. Despite the criticism that has been leveled at the novel since its publication, I believe that Eco does manage to walk this tightrope in *Il Cimitero di Praga*. Although I have read the novel in Italian, my Italian is unfortunately not adequate enough to provide a detailed critical analysis of *Il Cimitero di Praga*. A translation by Richard Dixon is expected to hit the shelves November 8.<sup>8</sup> Given Eco's fascinating treatment of the novel's history and themes in so many of his other works, I for one am looking forward to reading it.

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<sup>8</sup> It is unfortunate that William Weaver, who so wonderfully translated previous works by Eco, Italo Calvino and so many other Italian writers, will not be handling the translation, but Dixon's other translations give every indication that his translation of *Il Cimitero di Praga*—which will be retitled as *The Cemetery of Prague*—will be a good one. Eco's own intriguing views on the art of translation can be found in *Mouse or Rat?* and *Experiences in Translation*.

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