On Umberto Eco’s “The Prague Cemetery”
Ugo Volli

1. The latest novel of Umberto Eco, as is well known, recounts the tale of one Simone Simonini, whose life story unfolds in the period between the 1830s and the 1890s. The novel presents this invented character as a spy working for various police organizations, an assassin, an *agent provocateur*, a trafficker and swindler, a man whose only interest in life is the pursuit of strange and extravagant gastronomic delights. Simonini is a psychotic individual afflicted with split personality, an asexual figure who exhibits various forms of disturbed behavior. But above all he is a forger of political documents, an author of texts that are variously anti-Masonic, anti-Jesuit, and above all anti-Semitic in character. The anti-Semitic material includes the texts that serve unjustly to incriminate Dreyfus, as well as those that would later find their way into the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the text that proved so influential for twentieth century anti-Semitism. The novel traces the life of Simonini, with various complications in the plot that help to make that life story more interesting, beginning with his early betrayal of fellow university students who had agitated and demonstrated against the restoration of the monarchy, and concluding with his accidental death in the course of preparing to commit a murder. Given the ambition and the dimensions of the novel, and the complex personality of its author, the story in question needs to be analyzed on a variety of levels. The following remarks will concentrate briefly upon the literary level of the work, and then touch more generally upon the historical and theoretical level of the text.

2. Like Eco’s other novels, *The Prague Cemetery* is specifically written in such a way that it lends itself to two forms of reading, forms which Eco himself has described as “ingenuous” and “critical” respectively. As Eco writes: “There are two ways of walking in a wood. The first way involves trying to find a path, or perhaps more than one, that will get us out of the wood as quickly as possible. The second way involves trying to understand how the wood is disposed as it is, and why certain tracks or

---

paths are negotiable and others not. Likewise, there are two ways of moving through a narrative text.”

The hasty and “ingenious” reader of *The Prague Cemetery* will take it as the kind of nineteenth century *feuilleton* literature that it *pretends* to be, and will skip or rush over the many descriptions and quotations that seem to clutter the text in order to grasp the complicated relationship between the two figures that both speak in the first person (and turn out to be the same person), or to try and understand how things actually turned out in the numerous plots and schemes that are related abruptly and discontinuously, a traditional technique for creating suspense. The “critical” reader, on the other hand, will appreciate the reflecting mirror-play of the narrative, and will be more interested in the author’s fondness for abundant citation within the text than in the story itself. Such a reader will grasp the various allusions and recognize the historical figures invoked in the play of the text, will enjoy the feigned innocence and straightforwardness of the plot, and see the various visual and narrative insert for what they are, namely as the ingredients of a puzzle. The utter obnoxiousness of the protagonist, his bizarre and perverse inclinations, and the psychological extremity of his personality—which almost make him sympathetic rather in the manner of the comic book villain—are also part of the play of the text, allowing for a certain entertainment value, but also performing a clearly metonymic role in a narrative that asks to be unmasked.

Given the double reading that the text demands, and the author’s predilection for introducing various exotic materials and making ironic use of coded messages of one kind or another, the book clearly manifests a postmodern logic that Eco himself has often claimed to reject, one that has been espoused in a literary sense by John Barth and in a critical sense by Harold Bloom, even before Lyotard developed it in explicitly philosophical terms. For a literary sensibility of this kind, to narrate is to assemble and deploy materials that are “readymade,” and to falsify, to imitate, to misinterpret, or to satirize them, as the case may be; it is to play with the complicity of the reader, and at the same time to deceive the latter; to deny what the text recounts and to affirm what the text appears to deny; to introduce a systematic but effectively tacit discrepancy with respect to the perspective of the figure who is also the narrator and organizing agent of the text itself. The accomplished reader is the one who knows how to negotiate this labyrinth or hall of mirrors, who refuses to be deceived, who enjoys the literary chess game that we are here being invited to share.

3. From the historical point of view, the reconstruction of events that Eco provides is inevitably inadequate. For it is produced from a perspective that is itself specifically false. Anyone who tried to read this book as an accurate reconstruction of the origins of modern anti-Semitism, rather than as a highly imaginative and barely credible fictional autobiography of the individual who compiled the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, would certainly find the presentation fundamentally defective with regard to the specific content and actual developments of such anti-Semitism. As far as Simonini is concerned, anti-Semitism involves the production of grotesque fabrications of documents that accuse the Jews of one thing or another. Simonini has no real contact with

---

Jews of actual flesh and blood, apart from a pathetically fleeting adolescent romance for a girl from the Turin ghetto whom he had glimpsed on the street. While his anti-revolutionary activity consists in betraying actual individuals, in acts of murder and "real" acts of provocation, while he has some contact with the world of the Masons and the Jesuits (both groups are constantly defamed as well), the world of the Jews is entirely absent, entirely fantasized. Simonini’s forgeries are the fruit of his own delirious imaginings, recycled from ancient accusations and also confected from materials produced for quite different purposes, and even involving the rewriting of certain literary passages. Indeed the most significant element that provides the keystone of the novel is the dependence of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion on the novel Joseph Balsamo by Alexandre Dumas, something that is suggested by Eco and explicitly accepted by the figure of Simonini. The title of Eco’s novel, The Prague Cemetery, is itself derived from the text copied from Dumas, and even the feuilleton character of the material is a further homage to its original source. The practical dependence of reality on literature here is the critical theoretical point of Eco’s book.

And yet all this fictive activity draws its strength solely from the fact that Simonini is specifically paid and employed to write up his delirious imaginings by the various agents and agencies that commission such products from him and use them for their own purposes: by the French police, by the Russian police, by certain figures of the Church. Rather like the skilled expert who is wholly absorbed in constructing the complex mechanism of a firearm or preparing the chemical constituents of a bomb, Simonini delights in the invention of grotesque calumnies of one kind or another, but he is not interested in where, or how, or by whom, or in alliance with what other weapons, his own lethal mechanism will be used. And we, of course, are compelled to follow him in this respect, partly because Eco’s narrative strategy focuses the narrative itself precisely on Simonini’s thoughts and actions, deploying the omniscient narrative style of old-fashioned serialized tales and novels only to conceal useless details from us, or to produce the degree of suspense and the teasing character that are required by postmodern literary technique.

As a result, if we follow the letter of the novel itself, we are compelled to see the anti-Semitic activity that characterizes the end of the nineteenth century as the product of the bizarre graphomania of a perverted mythomane. This is certainly not Eco’s view of the matter, and we have no grounds to entertain such a hypothesis and many good reasons to reject it. Yet this is an almost inevitable effect of the novel itself. To put the point in terms of Eco’s theory of reading: the effect in question is certainly not the intentio auctoris, but it is indeed the intentio operis. One cannot appreciate the whole Rossinian crescendo of Simonini’s crimes if he is not essentially defined, as Eco has also always done, as “the author of the forgery of the Protocols.”

Yet the fact is, from the historical point of view, that the “forgery of the Protocols” was of course only one of the numerous instruments of propaganda also employed for expressly political purposes not simply by grotesque forgers and falsifiers of evidence but by publicly recognized authors, and religious and political leaders, who openly endorsed the anti-Semitic cause. This is not the place to discuss the historical context of the origins of nineteenth century anti-Semitism, but it is clear that the principal European power that explicitly and persistently promulgated an anti-Semitic political outlook (and also a specifically modern one that drew on social and economic as well
as religious arguments) from 1815 onwards for at least a century was nine other than
The Holy See. As David Kertzner has copiously documented, the Vatican identified
the modern world that it opposed with the emancipation of the Jews, and attempted
in every possible way to contest these developments – both within its own territories
with laws regarding the ghetto communities and the resulting civic disqualifications,
and outside of them with a continual propaganda campaign that also availed itself of
certain forgeries even earlier than the Protocols, such as the terrible fabrication that
was turned against the Jewish community in Damascus in 1840 when they were
accused of having murdered a monk for the purpose of drinking his blood. But the
struggle against Jewish culture, depicted as something destructive of economic stabil-
ity and social peace in many different countries, as a force that was eager and deter-
mined to take control of the whole world, was quite explicit and expressly pursued in
parts of the Church, even dominating the pages of publications like Osservatore romano
and Civiltà cattolica. This struggle gave rise to explicitly anti-Semitic Catholic groups
and parties (in Austria and France for example) that were strongly supported by the
Vatican, and in short effectively represented a clear and public policy throughout the
nineteenth century.

Eco’s work does not deny such facts; it could not do so, and would probably not
wish to do so. In a certain way, the book assumes such things, or alludes to them
indirectly, by mentioning the instructions that Simonini receives from ecclesiastical
figures in particular, prompting him to fabricate his various calumnies. But the man-
ner in which the text is fixed and focused on the protagonist, and the absence of any
extradiegetic perspective that might contradict the argument of his particular narra-
tive, effectively excludes the real historical process from the picture, giving the less
alert reader a certainly false impression of the apparently autonomous importance of
the protagonist’s schemes and falsifications. We encounter the same effect when we
come to the Italian Risorgimento, which we are only shown through the keyhole
of the missions of provocation and defamation that Simonini is said to receive from
circles close to the Court of Savoy. Yet no one could reasonably believe that a com-
plex historical process of enormous dimensions, like that which eventually led to the
unification of Italy, was simply the product of a series of more or less criminal plots
and counterplots – and if certain fanatical supporters of the Bourbon cause still think
like this even today, nobody could possibly take them seriously. The difference here
lies in the fact that the politics and the protagonists of the Risorgimento are very well
known, whereas in the wake of the Shoah a kind of obligatory and deliberate silence
has fallen over the political origins of modern anti-Semitism (including, for example,
the complicity of certain socialist tendencies and perspectives in this regard). Thus
the notion that anti-Semitism could be the result of a plot or conspiracy may look less
evidently absurd and more plausible than it is.

In fact the principal theoretical interest behind Eco’s narrative work is specifically
concerned with the “superstitious” mechanisms that encourage us to believe in the
symbolic efficacy of certain texts (as in The name of the Rose) or in conspiracies of one

---

kind or another (as in *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *The Prague Cemetery*). The object of Eco’s novels is precisely the mechanism of the belief in conspiracy. In accordance with the double level that is characteristic of this kind of literature, this belief is simultaneously described and exhibited, seductively rendered in the narrative so as to exercise its effect of drawing the ingenuous reader in, while its internal mechanisms are exposed to the eyes of the critical reader.

From the perspective of traditional literary criticism, we might question the reasons behind Eco’s obvious fascination with these mechanisms of collective psychology. And yet Eco himself, along with Roland Barthes and may others, has emphatically shown us just how inappropriate questions of this kind actually are, and has taught us to attend exclusively to the text and ask instead about the specific ways in which it functions. And with *The Prague Cemetery* we are dealing with a text that is deliberately ambiguous, that expounds a conspiratorial vision of things and unmasks the latter precisely in the act of expounding it; but the text can only unmask it in narrative terms by making the vision seductive in turn. The text contains not one philosophy of history, but two – and it plays each off against the other. Yet it is still legitimate for us to question the collective effects of the text, for we are not talking here about a specialist or scholarly work but about a book with a considerable and far-reaching distribution. From this point of view there is certainly some reason for concern. For as journalists know all too well, a denial does not extinguish defamatory claims, but redoubles their effect. And as Eco himself relates in his narrative, it is quite possible to draw lethal calumnies and political theories from novels and other works of fiction.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

Ugo Volli
Università di Torino
ugo.volli@unito.it

---

**The Counter-Protocols are no Better than the Protocols**
Gloria Origgi

In an old Woody Allen movie, *The Sleeper*, some scientists in the future try to reconstruct the culture of the past world through the testimony of its only survivor. They show him a series of documents, including various videos, a centerfold of *Playboy*, pictures of various political men, chattering teeth and, at the end, a video of Howard Cosell, a famous American sports anchor in the Seventies. One of the scientists says: “First we didn’t know exactly what it was, but then we developed a theory: when citizens in your society were guilty of a crime towards the State, they were forced to watch this.” The joke applies perfectly to Umberto Eco’s latest literary effort, *The Prague Cemetery*: a 523-page torture that could indeed be inflicted as a major punishment on Italians who still have nightmares about their school years and the countless hours dedicated to the *Risorgimento*, Garibaldi, the expedition of the “Thousand” and
Ippolito Nievo. And if this would not seem tedious enough for the non-Italian reader, let us add an elaborate conspiracy theory: a complex plot involving the Christian Church and the Monarchic movements in Italy and in France and their efforts to get rid of Freemasonry and the Jews, and that ends up with the forgery of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A tour de force you would not wish to inflict upon your worst enemy.

The first thing that came to my mind while reading the book was that once you become a bestseller writer in Italy, then you probably start intimidating your editors, who no longer dare to edit the sacred words of a heavyweight author of the publishing house or, worse, do not even see the point in making the effort, given that they know the book will sell in any case. And it is true: the book has already sold more than 300,000 copies, will be translated into forty different languages and the first edition is already at its third printing. But it is most certainly not a good book.

I am not a literary critic, so I will try to avoid offering judgments regarding aspects of style and structure, even if I must confess I found it too long, confusing and difficult to read. Rather, I will concentrate my criticism on the content. The plot is so intricate that the author adds a “story-line” at the end of the volume that summarizes the major events in chronological order. We are presented with an ignominious central character, captain Simone Simonini, a Franco-Italian adventurer and a forger, whose virulent anti-Semitism goes back to his grand-father. All the characters but Simonini are real historical characters, sometimes appearing under their own real names, sometimes under fictional names because they condense more than just one historical figure. Simonini’s grandfather was thus an historical character, one who played a major role in the diffusion of poisonous anti-Semitic literature in the nineteenth century as the purported author of a letter to the French Jesuit priest Augustin Barruel. Barruel, a counter-revolutionary priest who fled to England during the Revolution, and in 1797 published his Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism, a conspiracy theory on the role of a coalition of philosophers, Freemasons and the secret society of the Bavarian Illuminati to overthrow the throne and the altar not only in France but everywhere in Europe. According to Barruel, the plot had been inherited by the Jacobins during the Revolution. After its publication, he received a letter from an Italian military officer, who claimed he possessed evidence that the founders of all the secret societies in Europe were Jewish.

Simone Simonini thus grew up as a convinced anti-Semite and decided to devote his life to participating in various plots and conspiracies aimed at destroying the Jews. A lonely and sinister figure, whose only pleasure is to gorge himself on rich French cuisine in good restaurants, Simonini has a double, the clergyman Dalla Piccola, whose role in the story is rather confused (Eco says that all the characters but Simonini are real: is Dalla Piccola a real character? I tried to find some traces of his existence on the Web but ended up with nothing). Under the guise of the Dalla Piccola character, Simonini infiltrates other anti-Masonic and conservative circles, especially religious circles that were fabricating a document exposing the horrendous anti-Christian rituals of various Masonic societies.

Although it is obvious from the beginning that Simonini and Dalla Piccola are one and the same person, the mystery is maintained until the end of the novel, which is partly written in the form of Simonini’s journal, interrupted at various points by some annotations by Dalla Piccola. A case of amnesia caused by sexual intercourse with a
young woman, Diana, member of a Satanic sect, makes Simonini forget that he himself is Dalla Piccola. Following the suggestion of a young Jewish doctor whom he met at the restaurant – a then unknown Sigmund Freud visiting Charcot in Paris – Simonini decides to heal his amnesia by writing a journal. The therapy is successful and, while retrieving the memory of the Satanic Sabbath, he ends up realizing that Dalla Piccola and Simonini are one and the same. The reader should be surprised, but is not.

Simonini’s journal spares the patient reader nothing regarding his life and adventures: trained as a forger by the notary Rebaudengo in Turin, Simonini becomes a spy and is sent by the Secret Service of Savoy to Sicily in the wake of Giuseppe Garibaldi’s expedition of the “Thousand.” There he meets the writer Ippolito Nievo, treasurer and lieutenant of the army of volunteers. In order to get rid of some documents in Nievo’s possession that could prove undercover funding by the House of Savoy, Simonini is responsible for the sinking of the ship on which Nievo is travelling, and thus bringing about his death.

Back in Paris, Simonini begins to manufacture a fake document inspired by the feuilletons of Dumas and Sue, first to discredit the Jesuits and then the Jews. It relates a supposedly secret nocturnal meeting in the old Jewish cemetery in Prague where the leading rabbis of European Jewry reveal their plans for world domination and the destruction of Christianity. Another source of inspiration is the French pamphlet written by the satirist Maurice Joly, a Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu, who are depicted as two diabolical plotters aiming to overthrow the power of the French monarchy. The document circulates from hand to hand and under different forms, growing and ultimately turning into the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Simonini, though, will not admit to being the author of it, for he sells the material to the Russian Secret Police and delivers it to an agent named Matvei Golovinskij.

While writing his master forgery, Simonini continues with his extra activities as a spy and a counter-revolutionary. He provides the fake documents to condemn Captain Dreyfus, goes on to take part in various terrorist acts, and ends up making a bomb that will probably terminate his evil career: the journal stops on the date of his last terrorist mission...

Eco excels in the manufacturing of a “fake” with a collage of real existing characters and documents. But to make matters even more confusing, Eco fabricates a sort of “counter-fake,” that is, the mirror-image of one of the best-known frauds of our history: the fabrication of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. His anti-hero Simonini is at the center of a multiple and many-sided (and indeed fictional) plot, aimed at destroying Jews, revolutionaries and Freemasons. But, of course, since the Protocols themselves are a fake, Eco’s fabricated plot is fictional: even if it is based on real characters and documents that reveal the presence in our history of such sentiments and fantasies, the idea of an international conspiracy against the Jews, the Jesuits and the Freemasons orchestrated by the Catholic Church is as imaginary as the Protocols are. Submerged in a Google-governed archipelago of real facts, books and characters, the simple truth that unfortunately there are no serious conspiracy-based explanations of the major tragic events of our history, seems to disappear. Conspiracy theories have never made good novels, although we all know that they work very well for airport best-sellers. And they are historically untenable, an interesting subject today for sociologists, psychologists and experts in folklore.
So, what is the point of all this effort? I have no time for *ad hominem* arguments, but if I tried to find the most charitable explanation of why a well-respected and sophisticated intellectual such Umberto Eco has written *The Prague Cemetery*, and imposed the monstrous Captain Simonini on his readers, I would be tempted to say that the feeling of being a forger must have floated in the author’s mind, as is probably the case for all talented and successful people: hence the fascination of writing a story from the “wrong-side.” Eco is an academic who has used his erudition and intelligence to write novels: he must sometimes have felt he was a novelist among academics and an academic among novelists. This feeling of misplacement could have motivated this strange literary experiment, perhaps best described an exercise in perplexity which leaves the readers perplexed as well.

Gloria Origgi
Paris, CNRS – Institut Nicod
origgi@ehess.fr