Foucault’s Pendulum and the Hermeneutics of Umberto Eco

Kevin West

Abstract: In his fictional and theoretical works, Umberto Eco continually presents and confronts the challenges of construing meaning from text. In his novel Foucault’s Pendulum, for example, Eco entertains the impossibility of distinguishing rational from irrational interpretation, whereas in such books as the Limits of Interpretation, he works to check fanciful reading. I present and interrogate some of the hemeneutical parameters that Eco proposes—particularly textual economy and internal textual coherence—and consider to what extent these parameters are relevant to the reading of scripture and the ambiguous “text” of the world.

Umberto Eco is a remarkable figure in contemporary literary studies for his ability to move within the often disparate worlds of theory and practice. Both a world-renowned semiotician and a best-selling novelist, with five novels now to his credit, Eco is routinely associated with postmodern discourse and theory by virtue of his creative use of pastiche, his revisiting of the materials of the past with various degrees of irony, and his important intervention on postmodernity in the Postscript to The Name of the Rose. In this paper I focus on Eco’s second novel, Foucault’s Pendulum (Il pendolo di Foucault), which both proposes and rejects a conspiracy theory of history—and I must state here for anyone unfamiliar with the text that Foucault’s Pendulum both precedes The Da Vinci Code and far exceeds it in literary value. In Foucault’s Pendulum Eco questions and challenges the very parameters of valid interpretation, especially textual economy and internal textual coherence, that he upholds in his theoretical texts. Such complication of his own material reveals Eco’s keen appreciation of the mysteries surrounding signification (and thus also significance), mysteries which continually challenge the theorist and fascinate the artist.

1 The author wishes to thank Stephen F. Austin State University for its support of this research with a Faculty Research Grant.
2 As a semiotician Eco works in the field of semiotics, which may be defined as the study of signs and signification. Arising historically out of linguistics, a general semiotics nevertheless stands above any particular language, since there are sign systems (e.g., animal tracks, clouds in the sky) that are not linguistic. “In this sense a general semiotics is a branch of philosophy, or better still, it is the way in which philosophy reflects on the problem of semiosis [the relationships of sign and meaning].” Umberto Eco, “Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language,” in Rocco Capozzi, ed., Reading Eco: An Anthology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 4.
I will move from a fairly detailed consideration of textual economy and coherence in *Foucault’s Pendulum* and Eco’s criticism to larger issues of interpretation, including relationships between intra- and extratextual hermeneutics. Intratextually, one task of hermeneutics is to develop coherent, plausible readings of particular texts; that is, to say what a given text means and to explain how it means that. Extratextually, however, the hermeneutical task is to understand the degree to which the implicit or explicit claims the text makes upon or about the world obtain; that is, to say whether or not the text is true or precisely to what extent it is significant. Clearly, this latter sense, which is of course inseparable from the former, has profound ramifications for the reading of scripture, which makes dramatic claims about the real world. Indeed, the world may itself constitute a “text” to be read for clues as to its origins and composition; certainly Judeo-Christian scripture claims that it does. In the cases both of scripture and of the real world, different communities of inquiry read things differently, with respect to the “texts” themselves and what might be thought to lie behind the texts. These different groups may be deemed conspiratorial by outsiders. One person’s conspiratorial reading is another’s full and proper accounting of the facts. One believer thinks it pious and natural to mine the Bible for hidden, predictive codes, whereas another considers this a foolish—even blasphemous—error. Eco’s second novel, by entertaining alternative explanations of the past, demands that we consider the retrospectively constructed nature of history; it furthermore demands that we attend to the challenge of ascertaining the two-way relationship between text and world. Read in conjunction with his theory, it allows us to delineate elements of a tentative but salutary post-postmodern textual hermeneutic.

*Foucault’s Pendulum* can be read on one level as a cautionary tale about the dangers of uncontrolled interpretation. Three Milanese editors—Casaubon (the narrator), Belbo, and Diotallevi—have reviewed scores of paranoid manuscripts claiming the existence of Masonic cabals and Rosicrucian alliances. So they decide for fun and out of arrogance to pursue their own inventive interpretation of past events. Working with the attitude “suspect, only suspect,” they follow the enigmatic conspiracy buff Colonel Ardenti in reading a fragmentary, fifteen-line, (possibly) fourteenth-century French document as if describing a Templar plot for controlling the earth’s telluric currents.3 With this idea of a transhistorical conspiracy guiding their thoughts, they conduct a radical rereading of Western history which is not only entertaining but also disturbing, given the possibility that our received history is more inventive than descriptive. Their fantastic revision of the past ultimately begins to collide with present reality when the “Diabolicals,” a group of occult conspirators, learn of the editors’ narrative and greet it as true. Lia, Casaubon’s girlfriend, sums up this thread of the plot rather moralistically: “Beware of faking; people will

---

believe you.” She later emerges as the voice of reason, determining the French fragment to be a “laundry list” rather than a message regarding a cosmic plot. But her seemingly reasonable intervention occurs too late, and at a midnight meeting of the Diabolicals, Belbo pays with his life for his fabrication, hung by the neck from the Pendulum’s wire, while Casaubon escapes through the sewers and streets of Paris. The novel ends with Casaubon alone in a house in northern Italy, awaiting his own demise and lamenting the loss of Lia and their unborn child.

A key aspect of the novel, then, is the matter of Ardenti’s reading of the French fragment versus Lia’s reading. I should point out that matters are a bit more complicated in the novel than I am able fully to convey here—and not only since I am limiting my inquiry to the English translation—as there are actually two fragments involved, one in a secret code, the other in plain text; I am concerned primarily with the plain text document. Ardenti produces for the editors a fragmentary text which is a photocopy of a nineteenth-century manuscript that he assumes to be a faithful transcription of a fourteenth-century text. It appears as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
 a la . . . Saint Jean
 36 p charrete de fein
 6 . . . entiers avec saiel
 p . . . les blancs mantiax
 r . . . s . . . chevaliers de Pruins pour la . . . j.nce.
 6 foi z 6 en 6 places
 chascune foi z 20 a . . . 120 a . . .
 iceste est l’ordonation
 al donjon li premiers
 it li secunz joste iceus qui . . . pans
 it al refuge
 it a Nostre Dame de l’autre part de l’iau
 it a l’ostel des popelicans
 it a la pierre
 3 foi z 6 avant la feste . . . la Grant Pute.4
\end{verbatim}

Ardenti expands what he assumes to be abbreviations, offering, for example, “iterum” (Latin “again”) as an expansion for “it”; he fills in lacunae in the “original” with his own interpolations. Even then, he admits that the text “still needs interpretation,” which he proceeds to offer by way of a complicated narrative that posits the Templar order staging its own dissolution so as to advance secretly into the future toward a moment of restored power. Into this narrative Ardenti weaves such material as the implausibly swift demise of the

4 Ibid., 135.
powerful Templar order, the undeniably persistent Grail legend, the enigmatic Cathars, and perverse Nazi occultism. When Ardenti then disappears, reportedly last seen murdered in his hotel room, the editors, who have already been hooked despite themselves by the exuberance of Ardenti’s narrative, begin to work on what they call “the Plan,” a rereading of Western history as outworking of Ardenti’s Templar conspiracy.

Much later in the novel, Lia dives into the French fragments with the express purpose of rescuing Casaubon from his narrative fancy. Explicitly invoking Ockham’s Razor—“the simplest explanation is always the best”—Lia assumes the plain text to be “ordinary,” since the majority of texts are, by tautology, ordinary. Preferring probability over ingenuity, she looks to the text’s supposed provenance (Provins, France) for information toward constructing a historical context. Based upon a variety of abductions and suppositions, in turn based upon principles of paleography and “common sense,” she replaces Ardenti’s supposedly “unassailable” surmises with her own and offers Casaubon the “simplest hypothesis,” that the text is simply an agenda for someone making deliveries. Whereas, for example, Ardenti had read “36 p charette de fein” as the temporal marker “36 (years) p(ost) hay wain,” Lia reads it instead as “36 sous for wagons of hay,” simply a price. Likewise, where Ardenti had read “3 foiz 6 avant la feste . . . la Grant Pute” quasi-apocalyptically as “3 times 6 [666] before the feast of the Great Whore,” Lia, based on the fact that there is a street in Provins named “rue de la Grand-Pute-Muce,” reads the line as “three bunches of six before the feast, in the whores’ street.” Instead of “iterum,” Lia expands “it” as “item,” meaning “likewise” and pertaining to deliveries rather than covert meetings. Casaubon, somewhat chagrined by his “ardent” fabulation, agrees that her hypothesis is “ingenious” but “no more valid than the colonel’s.” She replies, “So far, no. But suppose you make one conjecture, then a second and a third, and they all support one another. Already you’re more confident that you’re on the right track.” But of course Ardenti’s conjectures all supported one another as well; they just happened to be wrong—we think (for how can we know that there is not a Templar conspiracy at work in the world?). With respect to the coded text, she agrees that it is in code but performs additional analysis that yields additional messages, including the author’s renunciation of codemaking. Her conclusion is that someone was simply amusing himself by writing in code, not actually secreting the truth.

Lia prefers simplicity in her reading/reconstruction. But simplicity lies in the eye of the beholder; moreover, the truth is not always simple. In a longer study of textual economy, one could include Eco’s first novel, The Name of the Rose, where Ockham’s Razor is challenged even further. Here, the detective William, investigating a series of murders that are not connected according to the apocalyptic pattern that he has come to see as the best and simplest explanation, nevertheless causes the pattern to obtain and to perpetuate itself by his interference. Only by accepting inelegance rather than reducing complexity does the truth emerge; or, as William tells his protégé,
of complexity or simplicity are always made relative to some frame determining the application of these descriptions. As Robert Artigiani points out, Lia’s reading is only one interpretation among many which moves from message to meaning by means of inferences that are, “formally, no more justifiable than those of the Diabolicals. Every meaning is a decoding—even the ones we find ‘realistic.’” Fortunately, our cases do not normally seem so unique as a fragmentary manuscript “whose Latin abbreviations could be written in the language of either commerce or conspiracy”—clearly Eco has stacked the deck here with the Ps and the ITs, construable in a variety of ways. Yet in the sense that no text ever fully specifies, an ineluctable element of what passes for “probability” or “economy”—only relatively justified by such factors as semantic priming and historical context—always accompanies the interpretive act.

In his theoretical work, Eco champions textual economy as a valuable tool in interpretation. He writes, “I strongly believe that there are certain ‘economical’ criteria on the grounds of which certain hypotheses will be more interesting than others.” These criteria dictate, for example, that one not “look at the whole of [Giacomo] Leopardi’s poems in order to find improbable acrostics of the word ‘melancholy.’ … It is not economical to think that he wasted his precious time with secret messages when he was so poetically committed to making his mood poignantly clear by other linguistic means.” Eco continues, “I am not asserting that it is fruitless to look for concealed messages in a poetic work; I am saying that, while it is fruitful for De laudibus sanctae crucis of Raban Maur, it is preposterous for Leopardi.” Yet even this commonsensical attitude raises problems. Although Eco seems justified in saying that an interpreter “probably ought first to make certain conjectures about the possible sender and the possible historical period” of a text—and we do make these judgments all the time, and Hans-Georg Gadamer well argues the impossibility of unprejudiced interpretation—such judgments nevertheless have the potential to rule out what could actually be the case. Per Eco’s example, Leopardi could be as much a cryptographer as Raban Maur, but ruling out such a possibility on prior economical grounds would preclude its discovery.

Of course there are not worlds enough and time to pursue such endless, hermetic readings of every text one acquaints (even if it would be desirable to

---

8 Ibid., 869.
11 Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 5.
do so), and in this light textual economy serves a necessary limiting function, controlling “the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.”\(^\text{12}\) But one must always remember that textual economy alone is not a guarantee of accuracy but merely one of a cluster of parameters that help us in discerning the “indefinite, but by no means infinite, interpretations allowed by the context.”\(^\text{13}\) Eco himself observes this elsewhere, writing that

> when we find fossil remains of fish far in the interior of the country, we can suppose that the sea once washed this land. A whole previous paleontological tradition seems to encourage such an abduction. But why not to privilege some other explanations, for instance that some alien monsters have provoked all this after a picnic? . . .

> _Coeteris paribus_ . . . the paleontological general explanation would look as the most economic one. But there were many false scientific explanations which looked as very economic (for instance geocentrical paradigm, phlogiston or other) and that had nevertheless to be substituted with something apparently less ‘regular’ or less ‘normal.’\(^\text{14}\)

In bringing up context as a delimiter of meaning in the statement that there are “indefinite, but by no means infinite, interpretations allowed by [a given] context,” Eco takes on a certain model of deconstruction that would seem to imply the absence of meaning due to unlimited semiosis or inherent textual indeterminacy. Eco repeats his sentiment elsewhere: “I accept the statement that a text can have many senses. I refuse the statement that a text can have every sense.”\(^\text{15}\) In yet another place, Eco adds, “To say that the interpretation of every text is potentially unlimited does not mean that there are no criteria for interpreting it.”\(^\text{16}\) Undoubtedly, most readers are sympathetic to this viewpoint, as am I. Yet one can always invent a context, as Jonathan Culler demonstrates with an example from Wittgenstein, in which any utterance can in fact come to mean anything at all. “But this lack of limits to semiosis does not mean, as Eco seems to fear, that meaning is the free creation of the reader,” Culler claims. “It shows, rather, that describable semiotic mechanisms function in recursive ways, the limits of which cannot be identified in advance.” “Deconstruction,” continues Culler, “stresses that meaning is context bound—a function of relations within or between texts—but that context itself is

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 21.


\(^{15}\) Umberto Eco, “Reply,” in Collini, _Interpretation_, 141.

boundless: there will always be new contextual possibilities that can be adduced, so that the one thing we cannot do is to set limits.”

In one sense, the seeming disagreement between Eco and Culler over deconstruction is only seeming, since Eco agrees that “what Being might be is always an hypothesis posed by language,” which is, in my estimation, what Jacques Derrida meant by his infamous remark that “there is nothing outside of the text” (“Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”). Nevertheless, Eco turns to indication for proof that the gulf between sign and referent—at least practically—is not always absolute, that under certain conditions we can possess sufficient knowledge of context to fix semiosis: “It is irrefutable that in the act of indication (when one says this and points his fingers toward a given object of the world), indices are in some way linked to an item of the extralinguistic or extrasemiotic world.” Though we may never know that we know the Ding an sich, “the process of semiosis produces in the long run a socially shared notion of the thing that the community is engaged to take as if it were in itself true.” Eco’s belief in some asymptotic model of semiosis has distinct ramifications for textual economy. Economic considerations would matter little in a system of truly unlimited semiosis, but for Eco, “a text is a place where the irreducible polysemy of symbols is in fact reduced because in a text symbols are anchored to their context.” Anchored may be too strong, given Culler’s qualifications, but context does serve to limit meaning and can itself be provisionally limited (by disallowing anachronism, for example); this is yet another economic consideration.

Turning to textual coherence, in his theoretical works Eco supports the idea of “the text as a coherent whole” as the touchstone for any conjecture about the text’s meaning: “Any interpretation given of a certain portion of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed and must be rejected if it is challenged by another portion of the same text.” But even this seemingly straightforward, quasi-intuitive principle of non-contradiction is challenged in Foucault’s Pendulum by means of the Plan. The editors as re-readers of history at least believe their interpretation to possess global coherence (and so it often appears to the reader): “It was the most economical, the most elegant solution to the problem, and all the pieces of our millennial puzzle fit together,” concludes Casaubon. Yet their solution, while internally consistent, and capable at moments of seeming better to explain aspects of events such as the Holocaust than does received history, turns out (we think) not to correspond to the

19 Eco, Limits of Interpretation, 38.
20 Ibid., 41.
21 Ibid., 21.
23 Eco, Foucault’s Pendulum, 448.
extratextual reality that it presumes to explain. In this sense the Plan becomes an “ironic literalization of the structuralist theory that sign systems exist independently of reality and are thus autonomous of any referent.”24 An additional problem inhabits the perception of coherence: readerly desire. Do the pieces of the text really fit together in the manner observed, or is this “fit” a product of the reader’s needful activity? Lia blames what she comes to view as transcription errors in the fragmentary French text on precisely such desire in Ardenti; “the point is, he wanted to find something resembling ‘post 120 annos patebo.’”25

Pragmatist Richard Rorty, discussing Foucault’s Pendulum, attributes all presumed internal coherence to the interpreter’s cognitive activity rather than any intention of the text: “Coherence is no more than the fact that somebody has found something interesting to say about a group of marks or noises.”26 Yet Eco responds to this reductive claim effectively, arguing two points with respect to the intention of the text: (1) “The fact that I recognize my novel (and I think that others can do so) through and in spite of [Rorty’s] interpretation, does not change my theoretical approach but undoubtedly challenges his own”; and (2) Rorty, finding Eco’s fiction and theory in conflict, implicitly assumes (according to Eco) that different texts by a single author “can be seen as a textual corpus to be investigated in terms of its own coherence.”27 Eco’s position that the hermeneutic circle of textual coherence stands as an arbiter of interpretation appears strong, although more in a negative than a positive sense; that is, interpretations are falsifiable but not verifiable on the basis of coherence alone. In this sense Rorty correctly observes that internal coherence cannot differentiate among equiprobable suggestions, a notion that Eco concedes with his principle that coherence allows us, if not to determine “good” readings, at least to eliminate “bad” ones.28 Also rejectable as “unsuccessful” are interpretations that cannot produce new interpretations or explain previous ones.29

However, narrative desire remains an unresolved tension for coherence. What Casaubon calls the desire “to give shape to shapelessness,” narrative desire has the potential to influence observations of coherence to a great degree, causing one to emphasize, de-emphasize, or even ignore elements that support or refute a particular reading, to gloss over apparent contradictions within a system. The Plan is the extreme example of desire influencing perceptions of coherence. Casaubon observes in retrospect that “wanting connections, we found connections—always, everywhere, and between everything.”30 He is

27 Eco, “Reply,” 139, 141.
28 Rorty, 97; Eco, Limits of Interpretation, 60.
29 Eco, “Reply,” 150.
30 Eco, Foucault’s Pendulum, 463.
careful to note that they do not invent information, that they only “arrange
the pieces” supplied by interpretive tradition. The constellation serves as
a perfect figure in the novel for selective coherence. As Ardenti tells
Casaubon, “Everything depends on how you draw the lines. You can make a
wain or a bear, whatever you like, and it’s hard to tell whether a given star
is part of a given constellation or not.” Belbo completes the idea: “You just
have to decide which stars to omit.” Eco as theorist concedes that no one can
pretend to have a “privileged” understanding of the text as a whole. All
interpretations are partial, which is why “there are [only] degrees of
acceptability of interpretations.”

We have seen that the interpretive keys of textual economy and internal
textual coherence, which Eco justly defends in his theoretical works, are less
efficacious in the acts of interpretation dramatized in his novels. Ideas of
economy can be misguided; a “simple” reading may or may not be an accurate
one. Internal consistency guarantees no relationship between model and
modeled; judgments of coherence are forever enmeshed in the complex of
narrative desire. Subjectivity necessarily impinges upon all interpretation,
context refuses to remain fixed, and distinctions between use and interpretation,
interpretation and paranoia, become blurred. As Eco allows, “Every act of
reading is a difficult transaction between the competence of the reader (the
reader’s knowledge of world) and the kind of competence a given text
postulates in order to be read in an economical way.” Adding to the difficulty
of this transaction is the fact that Foucault’s Pendulum challenges the very
consensus model of textual interpretation that Eco elsewhere espouses by
offering an exciting and at times compelling rereading of world history
produced by seemingly well-informed subjects working together. Although the
Diabolicals end up being wrong (we think), and the editors as well, the ease of
distinguishing a reasonable from an irrational interpretation becomes
inexorably complicated. The obvious relevance to reading scripture is that a
faith community’s notion of scripture as divinely inspired could likewise be
wrong—a given religious community could be a conspiracy of believers finding
ultimate meaning in what is only human comment, perceiving plot where there
is only sequence, simply desiring a cosmic order. This possibility is explicitly
raised at least twice in the novel, once when Casaubon wonders if the world is
not simply “a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to
interpret it as though it had an underlying truth” and again when he thinks that
the story they invent is “plausible, rational, because it was backed by facts, it
was true—as Belbo said, true as the Bible.”

31 Ibid., 147.
32 Ibid., 142, 149.
33 Eco, “Reading My Readers,” 822.
34 Eco, Foucault’s Pendulum, 95, 493.
As C. W. Spinks considers in his reading of *Foucault's Pendulum*, there is a "very real and likely possibility that our explanations, on the way to the Ultimate Interpretant, are just conspiracy theories in need of discussion by the Community of Inquirers." The more inclusive this community, *ceteris paribus*, the greater the likelihood that suspicion mirrors fact, that an act of interpretation *is* interpretation, not overinterpretation. In the novel, the paranoid community needed to be a larger and public one so as to be checked against the entire world encyclopedia, not just an esoteric sub-encyclopedia. But the largest possible community comprises all humanity, and humanity cannot agree as to the existence of God or his nature, especially in our current context (when so much that once required religious explanation no longer does). Given the difficulty of falsifying conspiratorial thinking, and given the lack of the certainty of correspondence between words and world, both intra- and extratextual hermeneutics will always remain—indeed, must always remain—a science of provisionality. "Recognizing that our history has been shaped by many stories that we now regard as false must make us cautious," Eco writes, "and always ready to call into question the very stories that we now hold as true, since the criterion of wisdom of the community is based on constant wariness about the fallibility of our knowledge." Of course, this does leave room for faith: faith seeking understanding, faith always seeking, the faith that, according to Jürgen Moltmann, "hopes in order to know what it believes. Hence all its knowledge will be an anticipatory, fragmentary knowledge forming a prelude to the promised future. . . . The hope that is continually led on further by the promise of God reveals all thinking in history to be eschatologically oriented and eschatologically stamped as provisional." Hermeneutics, incorporating valid principles of economy and coherence, yields knowledge, but seldom the certainty in and of knowledge that we desire. What we know is always subject to refinement and revision. What we want to know always exceeds what we think we do know. That we remain conscious of this is essential, as self-consciousness with respect to knowledge encourages every community of inquirers to test and re-test its hypotheses, question and elucidate context, interrogate the desires potentially complicit in this or that perception of significance, assay alternative explanations and narratives, and consider or reconsider the relationship between language and reality. As George Steiner writes,

Each and every reading, . . . each and every hermeneutic-critical mapping, remains provisional, incomplete and possibly erroneous. . . .

---

No external ruling, be it the trope of divine revelation, be it the author’s express dictum, can guarantee interpretation. Nor can consensus, itself always partial or temporary, across ‘canonic’ and general literacy. It is empirically possible that we are getting it wrong, whatever our labors and unanimities. It is logically conceivable that the text before us signifies nothing, that it purposes or enacts non-sense. It is just possible that the author seeks to ironize his work into playful ghostliness. But the assumptions underlying this non-reading, this dissemination into the void, are themselves arbitrary . . . . I have . . . proposed the contrary wager: on the relations, however opaque, of word to world, on intentionalities, however difficult to unravel, in texts, in works of art, soliciting recognition. Here, as so often in our muddled being, the vital grain, the life-pattern is that of common sense.

But I repeat: all understanding falls short.38

Certainly my understanding falls short, so I will give Eco the last word with this passage from *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*:

The problem with the actual world is that, since the dawn of time, humans have been wondering whether there is a message and, if so, whether this message makes sense. With fictional universes, we know without a doubt that they do have a message and that an authorial entity stands behind them as creator, as well as within them as a set of reading instructions.

Thus, our [literary] quest for the model author is an Ersatz for that other quest, in the course of which the Image of the Father fades into the Fog of the Infinity, and we never stop wondering why there is something rather than nothing.39

Kevin West is Assistant Professor of English at Stephen F. Austin State University.