

Eco's tic

The Urth list — 7 messages, 6 voices, 25 Aug 1998

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m.driussi — 25 Aug 1998, 20:21

Rostrum,

Re: FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM (which incidentally ties in with PEACE by way of NECRONOMICON). I know what you mean in saying "we want more mysteries, not answers," and I know you don't mean to be absolutist about it--since there =are= limits: if an author keeps providing mysteries without =satisfying= solutions, that's no good either.

But mainly I want to argue that FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM, which I didn't like very much (agreeing with you, I'm guessing), is on second glance rather a lot like THE NAME OF THE ROSE (which I liked better). They both in their conclusions involve a destruction of the "fiction" which has been so carefully built up between the author and the reader over the course of the novel.

This amounts to a visceral "thumbing of the nose" or sucker punch from Eco to reader. Very po-mo.

Or in a different harsh light, one might say it points to a failure of artistic vision--at the very least, it suggests that Eco is a one trick pony: the guy can't write an ending; he loses steam and takes it out on the reader in his frustration.

So, IMHO, ILLUMINATUS! and HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL and THE CRYING OF LOT 49 (to name just three works that cover similar territory) are successful and satisfying where FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM is not; yet these three works give plenty of answers to the mysteries they pose.

=mantis=

Derek Bell — 26 Aug 1998, 15:55 · follows m.driussi

In message <199808252038.NAA10702 at lists1.best.com>, m.driussi at genie.com writes:

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I think that Foucault's Pendulum deals with matters of interpretation and over-interpretation. At one point the narrator mentions that Belbo had a list of 120 quotes from various people. I noticed that there were 120 short sections in the book, each with a quote at the start - hmmm... is Eco hinting that these are the quotes in Belbo's list?

On the other hand, it could also be read as a book about reason being enslaved to an obsession with power.

Derek - not a Knight Templar, honest!

Michael Straight — 26 Aug 1998, 14:29 · follows Derek Bell

On Tue, 25 Aug 1998 m.driussi at genie.com wrote:

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Yep. I think FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM is the only novel I've ever read that deliberately bores the reader as a literary device. But when something finally happens near the end, it hit me like a thunderclap. I'm not sure the payoff was worth the rest of the book, which I made my way through mostly crusing on goodwill from THE NAME OF THE ROSE.

THE NAME OF THE ROSE was sort of a Book of Gold for me. I picked it up either in late high school or early college expecting nothing more than a good mystery with a novel setting. At that time I had no interest in "literature," disliking most books I had to read at school and preferring SF along the lines of Asimov and Niven. Eco's book introduced me to pleasures I hadn't encountered in a novel before, and although I didn't immediately seek out similar books, I think it had some effect on the direction my aesthetic tastes went. Had I taken other paths, I doubt I would have enjoyed Wolfe when I met him in SHADOW OF THE TORTURER.

I think all the pomo stuff went completely over my head. I have a vague memory of thinking the end was weird and not entirely satisfying, but it was overwhelmed by my love for the book as a whole.

I haven't actually reread NAME OF THE ROSE since then. I really should.

I wonder if I'll be disappointed? (I know, I know, "You found the Book of Gold and you only read it once?!?)

-Rostrum

Peter Grimes — 27 Aug 1998, 08:54 · follows Michael Straight

On Tue, 25 Aug 1998 m.driussi at genie.com wrote:

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So, IMHO, ILLUMINATUS! and HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL and THE CRYING OF LOT 49 (to name just three works that cover similar territory) are successful and satisfying where FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM is not; yet these three works give plenty of answers to the mysteries they pose.

Ugh, I just can't let this go by unremarked. Illuminatus is garbage writing. There is not a single female character in the book who is not there solely for the purpose of having sex with one of

the male characters. This is a 1000+ page novel. Pretty pathetic.

Plus, it has the opposite 'problem' of Foucault's Pendulum. Every 40-50 pages you are basically told that everything you had been told before that point was wrong and you are then given another 'explanation'. While this is effective the first couple of times it starts to lose its effectiveness after the 700th time.

AND the prose is just plain poor. Wolfe is probably my favorite prose writer (along with a few others) and Eco is definitely in the same league. They are both interestingly in a stylistic sense. Robert Anton Wilson and his co-conspirator are just not terribly good writers.

I agree, Crying of Lot 49 is a great book, although I preferred Foucault's Pendulum. Pynchon can be a bit self-indulgent in his writing and I get tired of his showing the reader how clever he is every few paragraphs (This got really annoying about 400 pages into Gravity's Rainbow, at which point I just gave up).

So what if Foucault kills the conspiracy at the end? That's more or less the point of the book. Its about how an obsession with conspiracy leads someone to see them everywhere and in fact contributes to their creation.

-Dave

J. Schultz — 28 Aug 1998, 02:22 · follows Peter Grimes

Apples and Oranges

or if I may say so.... Golden Apples and Oranges

Illuminatus is "garbage" only if you are looking for an Eco book or a Woolfe book. Or if your looking for anything other than what it is.

I'm a huge fan of RAW. Do I think he has the command of language that Woolfe has? Not on your life. RAW's purpose in his 1000 pages is to play with ideas and he invites you along. The book DOES NOT continually rehash things that the reader has already been told WITHOUT looking at the events with a different world view.

As to your comment that all the women are present only to have sex....

All the main female characters are aspects of the Goddess. Whose religious role is one that is sexual (as the first mother-goddess religions arguably were) ---This doesn't get him off the hook completely because he still is refusing to deal with women as other individuals.

The story in Illuminatus is secondary, the characters are simply vehicles for ideas. RAW has the ability to write a book that causes many readers to question their own dogmas and beliefs. RAW deals with how we cope with the confusing world around us by constructing our philosophies.

Eco's 'trip' is the study of 'how' we attack the unknown. What we as humans employ to understand the confusing world around us. There is a slight difference here. The moral of Foucault's P is a simple one. If we act as if there is a huge and ancient conspiracy then it becomes reality. The BIG mystery in FP is that THERE IS NO BIG MYSTERY! However, since all those involved BELIEVE and ACT as if there is a huge conspiracy it might as well be true. (If you believe there is a monster in the basement it doesn't matter if there really is one or not. You will act as if there is a monster in the basement. You will never enter the basement. If you ever got the courage to go in the basement every shadow would be that monster comming to get you. Any noise you heard would be the monster shuffling his feet.) FP simply says that if we believe that there is a deep, dark secret that people will kill for--- then, people will start killing to find

out the deep, dark secret-- whether it really exists or not. To put it in RAW's terms - if everyone believes that paper money is really worth something, then it becomes so. If everyone thinks that RED means stop. Then it does. I don't know if Eco is asking us to question the government's authority over us, or question the Federal Reserve, but both writers are approaching the same subject.

Foucault's P. and Illuminatus! are both warnings against dogma.
FP is not satisfying because we want to know the truth. FP tells us what it is not. Illuminatus fabricates an elaborate story that we know is not true, but it's an answer.

Our drive to know the truth, even when applied to fiction, is so strong that we even set up discussion groups to analyze and over analyze a piece of fiction as if it were something in the real world that could be tested with the Scientific Method. :) (last statement is not an insult, I include myself in this group)

Jim Jordan — 07 Sep 1998, 00:58 · follows J. Schultz

At 04:55 PM 8/26/98 +0100, you wrote:

I think that Foucault's Pendulum deals with matters of interpretation and over-interpretation. At one point the narrator mentions that Belbo had a list of 120 quotes from various people. I noticed that there were 120 short sections in the book, each with a quote at the start - hmmm... is Eco hinting that these are the quotes in Belbo's list?

The Foucault of FP is not only the inventor of the famous pendulum, which swings back and forth, but also the Foucault of deconstructionism, Eco's enemy. Eco agrees with the decons to this extent: that the role of the reader is very important. But he also insists that any text creates a reader who can get it right, if the reader allows the text to speak to him (See **Six Walks Through the Fictional Woods**). Literary criticism swings back and forth between the supreme authority of the author and the role of the reader.

Now, in FP, the various post-Christian actors deconstruct their own lives as they deconstruct the text. The Jewish actor gets cancer, as his own body deconstructs. Belbo, the post-Calvinist, winds up generating the conspiracy he has invented. Thus, in this fantasy novel, the errors men make come to life and kill them. Against this Eco, a devout Catholic, posits the "public gnosis" of the Christian revelation.

Both **The Name of the Rose** and FP are very concerned with modern approaches to texts, though there is clearly more in both. Especially in FP, it is the women who have common sense and are grounded in reality -- perhaps reflecting a Catholic doctrine of Natural Law, women being more close to nature because of their biology (childbearing, lunar cycles, etc.). (I'm not arguing that this is correct, only seeking to understand Eco.)

Eco's point in **Name** is that the world CAN be understood, something Baskerville's disciple fails to learn, but that it cannot be COMPLETELY understood until we come to the eschaton -- which is why there is something right about Burgos's keeping a book of joy reserved until the end of history. Well, one could discuss both Eco books at length, but:

Like to Wolfe: Jorge Luis Borges as an important character as the librarian in **Name** and in **Shadow of the Torturer.** Borges is much like Eco, and in **Name** is not quite as evil as a superficial reading of the book might lead the reader to think.

Nutria (James B. Jordan)

Derek Bell — 07 Sep 1998, 18:40 · follows Jim Jordan

Note, this message contains spoilers for Foucault's Pendulum!

Also, I'm not claiming to have a definitive argument or interpretation of FP or even just a consistent one, I'm just speculating out loud.

In message <199809070603.XAA00263 at lists1.best.com>, Jim Jordan writes:

The Foucault of FP is not only the inventor of the famous pendulum, which swings back and forth, but also the Foucault of deconstructionism, Eco's enemy.

Yep - Michel Foucault, IIRC. I know a little of Foucault's work: he was interested in how power produced the subject and I think he tried to write a genealogy of power, similar to Nietzsche's genealogy of morals.

This also brings up the subject of how power is dealt with in the novel - Causabon spends ages trying to figure out the password to Belbo's computer, which asks him "Do you know the password?" (The password is "No".) Similarly, Aglie pretends to have powers of a supernatural nature (well, that's my interpretation) and uses this as a hook to lead the authors down the garden path, so to speak and lead them into a trap. (Framing them for the bomb on the train.)

I think Eco's taking on several postmodernists at once - Diotavelli seems like a parody of Derrida. I've heard several comments on how cabalistic Derrida's work is and Derrida is from a family of assimilated Jews. (I can't remember if Diotavelli is actually of a similar background to Derrida, but there were comments from the other characters on Diotavelli's obsessive interest in Jewish life - he seemed to live vicariously by watching the lives of Jewish men.

Eco agrees with the decons to this extent: that the role of the reader is very important. But he also insists that any text creates a reader who can get it right, if the reader allows the text to speak to him (See **Six Walks Through the Fictional Woods**). Literary criticism swings back and forth between the supreme authority of the author and the role of the reader.

Eco doesn't believe in a "Death of the Author", he believes in a two-way relationship, right?

Now, in FP, the various post-Christian actors deconstruct their own lives as they deconstruct the text. The Jewish actor gets cancer, as his own body deconstructs. Belbo, the post-Calvinist, winds up generating the conspiracy he has invented. Thus, in this fantasy novel, the errors men make come to life and kill them.

This notion of the power of words being cabable of altering nature itself seems quite cabalistic! (I know it works on a psychological level, the characters either interpreting what befalls them as a result of their "Plot" or they start seeing the agents of the "Plot" working against them.)

Another Caballistic reference - Belbo named his computer "Abulafia", after Abraham Abulafia, a 12th century Jewish philosopher and Calallist.

Derek