

DISCUSSION

Umberto Eco, *Il Cimitero di Praga*, Milan: Bompiani, 2010, pp. 523.

by *Simon Levis Sullam*

Umberto Eco, Narratives of Conspiracy and the Anti-Semite "Among Us"

“Non male per un romanzo d’appendice.”¹ As Simone Simonini, the protagonist of Umberto Eco’s last novel, is putting his last touches on one of the texts that will eventually develop into the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, he contemplates the aesthetic quality of his creation, at a time when the new literary genre – mass literature published in newspapers – is enjoying its first boom. Simonini also seems to be commenting on the novelistic nature of his own story, proceeding through maskings and forgeries, conspiracies and revolutions, the running thread of which is an unchanging personal hatred for the Jews which, in turns, constantly generates new stories and imaginary plots. Umberto Eco has in the past given an important scholarly contribution to the understanding of the narrative sources of anti-Semitic discourse and ideology.² In his new book, *Il cimitero di Praga*, he enters directly into the literary and ideological workshop of European, especially French and partly Italian, anti-Semitism, this time not through a traditional academic enquiry but – as he has done before for other periods and topics – through fictional forms. The characters of Eco’s novel, however, as the author warns us in a closing note, have “all existed and have done and said what they do and say” in the book. And this is true also for the protagonist, Simonini, a sort of mastermind of modern anti-Semitism, who has “in some way existed”; or, “actually, to tell the truth, he is still among us”. This final statement highlights the special moral implications of Eco’s return to literature and the broader interest of his new experiment on grounds which are neither exclusively artistic nor narrowly inspired by erudition, as was perhaps more the case in his previous, successful forays into the genre of the historical novel. The literary results, the quality of the latest novel, are disputable and overall not very successful. The combination of the historical materials and of Eco’s narrative hypotheses and strategies, however, raise important questions about, and offer relevant insights into, the nature and forms of modern anti-Semitism at the time of its formation, in the last decades of the Nineteenth century.

Simone Simonini – whose name recalls both that of the Catholic child who was the supposed victim of a ritual homicide in fifteenth-century Trento, and of captain Simonini the supposed author of a letter to the

¹ “Not bad for a penny dreadful”. See Umberto Eco, *Il cimitero di Praga* (Milan:

² See the chapter “Protocolli fittizi” of Umberto Eco, *Sei passeggiate nei boschi narrativi. Harvard University, Norton Lectures 1992-1993* (Milan: Bompiani 1994), orig. ed. Harvard UP 1994.

Jesuit Augustin Barruel (the father of modern conspiracy theories) and, in the novel, Simone's grandfather – is a Piedmontese forger and charlatan who lives in Paris between the 1870s and the 1890s. Before moving there he participates in Garibaldi's expedition of the Thousand, with the secret aim of boycotting it, since he belongs to an anti-liberal, reactionary milieu and is easily bought over to counter-revolutionary plots.³ In Paris he happens to mix with struggling writers and young scientists making their first forays into the journalistic and the academic (or, often, pseudo-academic) scene. Among the academics in-the-making Simonini crosses paths with a Viennese student of medicine, “doctor Froïde”, who is still emerging from a nebulous of scientists and magicians. The struggling writers, on the other hand, are often the future or soon-to-be major ideologues of modern anti-Semitism, and they include Alphonse Toussenel, Gougenot des Mousseaux, and Edouard Drumont. Sometimes they will turn out to be the unaware, but very influential inspirers of anti-Semitic theories, such as Maurice Joly, or the obscure Hermann Goedsche (met by Simonini on a trip to Munich)⁴, who were the authors of, respectively, a pamphlet and a novel that would become the sources for the *Protocols of Zion*. Simonini, through a not entirely convincing narrative device, has a second identity: that of the Italian abbot Dalla Piccola, who also lives a licentious life on the fringes of Parisian society. The two characters constitute provocatively a couple of Mr. Hydes (with no Dr. Jekyll), and perhaps represent the two souls at the origin of modern anti-Semitism: the Catholic, dissolute inspirer, and the secular, hustler ideologue. In the novel, as in history, the second will prevail, although the history of anti-Semitism will not easily get rid of its abbots Dalla Piccola, who will continue to play a not at all “small” role in the production of anti-Jewish hatred for decades to come. Masonic lodges and satanic cults are also the occasional setting of Simonini's

³ Conspiracy theories about the Risorgimento, which have recently become fashionable again, included the question of the Jewish participation (evoked also by Simonini, see *Il cimitero*, 154) or, better, the Jewish responsibility in Risorgimento plots. In the face of the threat posed to the Church by the process of Italian unification, this accusation was spread already in mid-Nineteenth century, for example by Antonio Bresciani's novel, *L'ebreo di Verona*, first published in 1850-51 in the Jesuit periodical *Civiltà Cattolica* (see Lynn Gunzberg, *Strangers at Home. Jews in the Italian Literary Imagination* (Berkeley-Los Angeles, Oxford, University of California Press 1992) 66-89. The accusation would become common place in post-1870 reactionary press (see Annalisa Di Fant, “La polemica antiebraica nella stampa cattolica romana dopo la breccia di Porta Pia”, *Mondo Contemporaneo*, 1, 2007: 87-118).

⁴ Under the pseudonym Sir John Retcliffe, in his novel *Biarritz* (1868), Goedsche was the author of a chapter, which also provided the title for Eco's novel, “In the Jewish cemetery in Prague”. This chapter would both circulate as the document of a supposedly historical “Rabbi's Speech”, and would later become one of the sources of the *Protocols of Zion*. It had in turn been inspired – as Eco first suggested in *Sei passegiate* – by a scene of Alexandre Dumas' novel *Joseph Balsamo* (1849).

adventures, thanks especially to the contribution of a true historical character that would seem, but is not, the fruit of a novelist's imagination: Leo Taxil. Taxil is a sort of third alter-ego for the protagonist, who shifts from anticlerical masonry, to ecclesiastical and Jesuit dungeons (and even papal protections), while at the same time mocking and rendering services to both.

Eco's novel reads at times like a handbook to the history of modern anti-Semitism, or like one of the classic accounts of the origins of its bible, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Norman Cohn's *Warrant for Genocide*. The major characters of the story are all in place, or occasionally recovered from the past, if only through brief mentioning like in the case of Martin Luther.⁵ Some of its most infamous moments and turning points are described while they are taking place (the Dreyfus affair), or they are evoked or indirectly anticipated through ominous references to "final solutions". The concentration of plots, accusations, and conjurations displayed by the novel's plot or produced by the imagination of its characters – a display which early critics of *Il cimitero di Praga* have accused of possibly generating in the public the suspicion that some part of all this must, after all, be true – actually provokes in the end more a feeling of incredulity and saturation. Unfortunately this reaction emerges in the face of accusations and of imaginary stories which, historically, have been presented as true, and which have been very concretely, and at times still are, at the core of anti-Jewish feelings, ideologies and movements. Playing with this conspiratorial imaginary, making fun of it, and even laughing about it (or at least indulging playfully in its game) is more than legitimate, even healthy. At the same time, although Eco is careful to allude to the future, bloody consequences of this collective storytelling, the fact that many people have believed and still believe in Jewish conspiracies and Jewish projects of world control will probably escape many readers as the chapters of the novel, and the list of Jewish plots, sift away. In the same vein, despite the ominous anticipations, one is hardly induced to reflect on the historical fact that these fables would indeed be turned, just a few decades later, into the main narratives which motivated mass political movements and, in the end, sustained ideologically monstrous death projects and actual genocidal actions, killing millions.

A further unconvincing or reductive aspect of the interpretative dimension of the novel is the biographical explanation of the genesis of anti-Semitism. Although we know that Judeophobia and misogyny have often gone together or proceeded in parallel,⁶ Simonini hating Jews and

⁵ *Il cimitero*, 258.

⁶ See for example the classic account by Hans Mayer, *I diversi* (Milano: Garzanti 1992²), orig. ed. Frankfurt am Main 1975.

women (on this note the novel opens, and later the protagonist explicitly reflects upon it)⁷ can recall popular psychological readings of Hitler or Adolf Eichmann, and theories of the development of their anti-Jewish hatred out of traumas from their childhood. One certainly cannot discount the biographical motivations – perhaps even the profound psychological origins – of certain anti-Semites, and there has been an important (though not very conclusive) line of enquiry on the psychoanalysis of anti-Semitism. However, the dangers of isolating individual explanations and personal perversity behind even the deadliest anti-Jewish hater are clear, and biographical motivations should probably always be integrated with cultural, political and social factors and influences. It is also true that we certainly cannot accuse Eco of ignoring contexts if he has even taken the pain – or the pleasure – to browse through restaurant guides and recipe books of the time while reconstructing everyday life in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. We should also never forget that we are dealing with a novel, a fact which reminds us that one of the uplifting purposes of storytelling and fictional literature is, after all, to incarnate in the life of individuals, in personal apoloques, historical and moral dilemmas.

At the same time, since we are aware of Eco's ethical concerns, we cannot help but notice that one problem of representing the anti-Semite as a sick man or a pervert is the fact that in doing so one enters into a mechanism which is paradoxically analogous to that presiding over the anti-Semite's imagination. The same Eco has called this mechanism or process "the construction of the enemy" in a lecture given in 2008, while he was probably immersed, and well advanced, into the writing of his novel.⁸ The enemy is the fruit of a construction, Eco reminds us: he is the result of the production of an 'other'.⁹ But if the anti-Semite is also an 'other', he is not one of us; at most – as Eco writes at the end of his novel, under the ironic heading "Useless Erudite Clarifications" – he is "among us".¹⁰

"I could say, from an autobiographical point of view, that there are things which I do not feel like claiming or treating in a clear and

⁷ *Il cimitero*, 247-248.

⁸ It is available online at <http://www.golemindispensabile.it/index.php?idnodo=16773&idfrm=107> and has just been collected in Umberto Eco, *Costruire il nemico e altri scritti occasionali* (Milan: Bompiani 2011).

⁹ A rich survey of the cultural and ideological materials at work in the construction by the anti-Semite of the 'Jew' as an 'Other' in late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe (and especially in France), has recently been offered by Francesco Germinario, *Costruire la razza nemica. La formazione dell'immaginario antisemita tra la fine dell'Ottocento e gli inizi del Novecento* (Turin: Utet 2010). See also Id., *Argomenti per lo sterminio. L'antisemitismo e i suoi stereotipi nella cultura europea* (Turin: Einaudi 2011).

¹⁰ *Il cimitero*, 515 (emphasis added).

definitive way in an essay,” Eco said in a 2003 interview on the historian and the novelist, “while I prefer to stage the problem narratively.”¹¹ In *Il cimitero di Praga* Eco has chosen not simply the narrative, but the metanarrative form, since he represents and reflects upon the forging of stories, and thus tells the story of the origins of certain narratives. This is clearly one of the motivating factors in Eco’s fascination with the anti-Semitic Simonini and his fellow travelers. In this novel Eco investigates, in fact, one of the most rich and powerful traditions of the genre that, perhaps, has always most intrigued him: stories and theories of conspiracy. This was partly the case, in a noir setting, with his first novel of over thirty years ago, *Il nome della rosa* (1980); and more explicitly so, with a socio-political dimension comparable to his latest work, in his second novel, *Il pendolo di Foucault* (1988). *Il pendolo*, set in another, most recent, dark *fin-de-siècle*, reflected upon the possible developments, implications, and consequences of the spread of social fear, and it actually anticipated, in about fifty pages, the development of some of the conspiracy theories that we now encounter, often incarnated by their inventors, in *Il cimitero*.¹²

After all, Eco has devoted a great part of his scholarly activity to the investigation of the nature and powers of narratives. Almost twenty years ago, in his Norton Lectures at Harvard, while explaining that storytelling is a fundamental mode of thought, a way to organize reality and the world, Eco also warned us already of the deadly consequences of the special kind of narratives centered on supposed Jewish plots. Thus he contributed to the unearthing of the narrative dimension of anti-Semitic discourse and ideology,¹³ even of certain aesthetic qualities that may motivate their success. The semiologist and novelist, therefore, already denounced what might happen – what has, indeed, tragically happened – when certain imaginary narratives have been taken to be real. Also for this reason Eco leads the reader of *Il cimitero di Praga* to reflect upon the creation of forgeries, and specifically of fake documents as the source for forged narratives, which are central to the construction of anti-Semitic discourse, ideology, and political propaganda.¹⁴ Eco’s reflection on this

¹¹ Alessandra Faggioli, “Il romanziere e lo storico. Intervista a Umberto Eco”, *Lettera internazionale*, 75, 2003 (see: http://www.letterainternazionale.it/testi_htm/eco_75.htm).

¹² In *Il pendolo* the protagonists reconstruct the origins of the *Protocols of Zion*. The same figure of captain Simonini, grandfather of the character at the center of *Il cimitero*, is evoked. See Umberto Eco, *Il pendolo di Foucault* (Milan, Bompiani 2010), 1st ed. 1988, 504-588.

¹³ In this perspective, concerning the blood libel, see Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales. The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press 1999); on the narratives which ‘prepared’ the Dreyfus Affair, see Marce Angenot, *Ce que l’on dit des Juifs en 1889: antisémitisme et discours social* (Saint Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes 1989).

¹⁴ It is surprising and highly questionable, from this point of view, that Eco’s publisher Bompiani recently issued two volumes of the fake diaries attributed to Mussolini, which

seems to develop in the novel on two levels. On one hand there is the question of the truthfulness of the narrative told by the anti-Semite, who is himself a forger. In the words of Simonini's master in the art of forgery, the Piedmontese notary Rebaudengo, one 'does not produce fakes, but copies of an authentic document which has been lost. Or which, by accident, was never produced, but could have been or should have been produced'.¹⁵ Similarly, the anti-Semitic forger attempts to demonstrate the authenticity of the documents on which he bases his claims and accusations. However, since the accusations of conspiracy are periodically proven to be false, there is a longstanding rhetorical tradition in the history of anti-Semitism, spanning from Drumont to Hitler, via Monsigneur Jouin (French translator of the *Protocols* and editor of the *Revue internationale des sociétés secrètes*), reaffirming the truthfulness or veracity of inauthentic accusations and documents. It was probably Drumont who started this tradition, defending the truthfulness of his most popular book, the infamous and hugely successful *La France Juive* (1886), by claiming that his work was founded on a 'superior truth [...] which, in history as in art, is sometime different from factual truth'.¹⁶ Later this pseudo-epistemological approach was applied by people like Jouin, Hitler, or Evola,¹⁷ with no declared artistic or historical ambition but no less depravity, to the *Protocols of Zion*.

On the other hand, in coherence with his theory of semiotics, Eco plays with the idea that the truthfulness of a text, and of a narrative, is established primarily by the reader, the interpreter, or the listener.¹⁸ Thus Eco makes the anti-Semitic forger knowingly produce texts and narratives which are aimed specifically at certain audiences. Eco's anti-Semite produces, in fact, 'different discourses, one for the clergyman, the other for the socialist, one for the Russian, another one for the French. [...] In such a way he would be able to sell the right discourse to different buyers, according to the needs of each.'¹⁹ Indeed, Simonini

were definitively shown to be forgeries by expert historians of fascism, such as Emilio Gentile. This publication has clear historical and ethical consequences as the diaries, for example, tend to mitigate Mussolini's attitude toward fascist anti-Semitism. On the entire question see Mimmo Franzinelli, *Anatomia di un falso. I Diari di Mussolini e la manipolazione della storia* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri 2011).

¹⁵ *Il cimitero*, 104-105.

¹⁶ Edouard Drumont, *La France Juive devant l'opinion* (Paris: Marpon et Flammarion 1886), 59.

¹⁷ See Carlo Ginzburg, "Rappresentare il nemico. Sulla preistoria francese dei *Protocolli*", Id., *Il filo e le tracce. Vero, falso, finto* (Milan: Feltrinelli 2006), 198; Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, 202; Julius Evola, *Introduzione* in *L'Internazionale Ebraica, I «Protocolli dei Savi Anziani di Sion»* (Rome: La vita italiana 1938²), vii-viii.

¹⁸ See especially his works from *Opera aperta* (1962), to *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975), to *Lector in fabula* (1979).

¹⁹ *Il cimitero*, 313.

speaks openly of an ‘anti-Jewish market’.²⁰ If attributing the decision about the truthfulness of a text, a narrative, or a theory to different kinds of potential anti-Semitic ‘buyers’ may seem both morally and cognitively irresponsible, Simonini’s shrewd statement (and Eco’s rhetorical inventiveness) shed light on a typical procedure adopted by the producer of anti-Semitic texts. This procedure is based on setting or anchoring the text, through specific references contained in the paratexts, in the historical and cultural context of the audience, and it has been a key to the success in the spread of the *Protocols of Zion* through their countless translations.²¹

Although Eco imagines that the clerical alter-ego of the protagonist, abbot Della Piccola, will disappear at the end of the story, possibly as a way of suggesting that the modern anti-Semite is in the end secular, this narrative escamotage raises the question – discussed by scholars of anti-Semitism – as to whether conspiracy theories are indeed entirely secular, or, better, secularized narratives. Without entering here into the debate on secularization theories, it is fair to suggest, contrary to what has been recently argued,²² that conspiratorial schemes do in fact preserve elements of theological narratives:²³ the idea of a superior hand or mind guiding events from above, and a sort of providentialism whether aiming to, or ending with, disaster or redemption. As Pierre André Taguieff has suggested in discussing the genesis of the *Protocols of Zion* – although, in the end, he argues that a secular or secularized narrative prevails – there is an intertwinement between the providentialist and the conspiratorial visions.²⁴ And we should in any case consider how anti-Semitic conspiracy theories were produced and fed essentially by the Christian, and especially Catholic world, from its inception between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century with Barruel and Simonini, through the re-issuing of forged texts as supposed documents in the late 1870s-early 1880s by the French Catholic newspaper *Le Contemporaine*,²⁵

²⁰ *Il cimitero*, 228.

²¹ Simon Levis Sullam, *L’archivio antiebraico. Il linguaggio dell’antisemitismo moderno* (Rome-Bari: Laterza 2008), 49.

²² Germinario, *Costruire la razza nemica*, 14-15.

²³ Renato Moro, “L’atteggiamento dei cattolici tra teologia e politica”, *Stato nazionale ed emancipazione ebraica*, eds. Francesca Sofia and Mario Toscano (Rome, Bonacci 1992), 320.

²⁴ Pierre André Taguieff, *Les Protocoles des Sages de Sion. Faux et usage d’un faux*, nouvelle édition (Paris: Berg International-Fayard 2004), 22-27. Elsewhere Taguieff has underlined, on the wake of Cassirer, the persistence in conspiracy theories of a “mythical”, even “magical”, thinking (Id., *La Judéophobie des Modernes. Des Lumières au Jihad mondial* (Paris: Jacob 2008)), 151.

²⁵ The same Taguieff has recently returned on this, with a clear synthesis, in *La Judéophobie des Modernes*, 151-157. See also the relevant texts reproduced and

to the first translations of the *Protocols* in the early 1920s, by Catholic clergymen.²⁶

What is perhaps entirely modern and secular, on the other hand, is the anti-Semite's intuition of turning the theological hatred against the Jew into 'a civil passion'²⁷: in the double sense of a secular passion, and of a passion which concerns, almost shapes, the 'civitas', i.e. the city, modern society. In his novel Eco describes this process through the words of Juliana Galinka, the historically-based character of a Russian aristocrat working for the Ochrana in Paris. However, he does so right before introducing, or re-introducing, the historical figure who can rightly be considered the founder of modern anti-Semitism, of anti-Jewish hatred as a 'civil passion': the French journalist Edouard Drumont. In a recent essay Carlo Ginzburg has returned to the question of the role of Drumont as a plagiarist in his anti-Semitic campaigns, even as a possible, remote inspirer of the *Protocols of Zion* (a research hypothesis first laid out in 1939 by Henri Rollin in his *L'apocalypse de notre Temps*).²⁸ Drumont came from a Catholic background and, more importantly, returned to Catholicism through a conversion inspired also by the French Jesuit, father Stanislas Du Lac. In his *La France juive*, as well as in other writings, he clearly displays a traditional Catholic anti-Judaism mixed with an economic anti-Semitism with pseudo-Socialist, populist roots.²⁹ Although Drumont's relations with the Roman Catholic Church would deteriorate to the point that the Church considered putting his work on the *Index*, this condemnation never happened and we actually know from the press of the time – including Drumont's own *La libre parole*, or the Catholic *La Croix* – that the prolific journalist and writer had an enormous following among the French Catholic clergy (he was in fact quite well known to, and followed by, the Italian clergy as well).³⁰

In his novel Eco mockingly represents the Catholic world and its relationship with anti-Semitism quite grotesquely, as a relic of the past,

contextualized in Paul Airiau, *L'antisémitisme catholique au XIX et XX siècles* (Paris: Berg 2002).

²⁶ Cesare G. De Michelis, *Il manoscritto inesistente. I Protocolli dei savi di Sion: un apocrifo del XX secolo* (Venice: Marsilio 1998), 121, mentions the Polish translation by father Evrard (1919), the second French by Mgr. Jouin (1920), the Italian by Mgr. Benigni (1921), to which we may add the contemporaneous one by the ex priest Preziosi.

²⁷ *Il cimitero*, 400.

²⁸ Ginzburg, "Rappresentare il nemico", 200-201; Henri Rollin *Apocalypse de notre temps. Les dessous de la propagande allemande d'après de documents inédits* (Paris: Gallimard 1939).

²⁹ This ideological mixture has been recently explored again by Michele Battini, *Il socialismo degli imbecilli. Propaganda, falsificazione, persecuzione degli ebrei* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri 2010). An important reference remains Zeev Sternhell, *La droite révolutionnaire (1885-1914). Les origines françaises du fascisme* (Paris: Gallimard 1998), 1st ed. 1978, 189-223.

³⁰ Grégoire Kauffmann, *Edouard Drumont*, Perrin, Paris 2008. I am currently working on the first Italian reception of Drumont.

even as he clearly enjoys depicting in an ironic mode the secret world of masonic lodges and satanic cults, seen through the eyes of contemporaries who constructed parallel conspiratorial worlds. However, Catholic anti-Judaism and its modern developments remained historically one of the core factors of anti-Semitism: most importantly, Catholicism and Protestantism, their respective clergy and literature, were for European societies of the Nineteenth and the first half of the Twentieth century probably the main channel of access and reception of anti-Jewish doctrines and hatred. In many ways, especially for the Catholic Church and for wide sectors of the Catholic world, anti-Semitism did not represent in this period a remnant of the past, but a specific way of dealing with modernity and a foundational aspect of their worldview.³¹ At times, therefore, we pause in front of Eco's anti-Semites and find them too caricatural. Thus, if Simonini was, like the Drumont he so much admired, to borrow Eco's words, 'neither a philosophical and political anti-Semite, like Toussenel, nor a theological one like Gougenot, [but] an erotic anti-Semite'³², who was drawn into his anti-Jewish hatred by an almost sexual impulse, centuries of anti-Jewish representations, doctrines, and narratives seem plainly made fun of, even suddenly erased. On the contrary, as we know, they have mobilized thousands, perhaps millions of peoples throughout history (and in this sense the sexual analogy partly holds true). These doctrines and narratives have also been transformed over time; but in new forms, and fortunately with much less success, they are often – this is the Eco we prefer – 'still among us', as the novelist writes about the anti-Semite in the conclusion of *Il cimitero*.³³ The reasons for this survival, or continued liveliness, are well described by Eco in his recent essay 'Costruire il nemico', with words which, though applied to the functioning of racism and xenophobia more generally, seem to capture also one of the essences of the religious roots of anti-Semitism: 'On one hand we can recognize ourselves only in the presence of an Other [...]. But more often we find the Other unbearable, because in some ways he is not us'.³⁴ And this dialectic between 'ourselves' and the 'other', 'they' and 'us' – whether concerning our relationship with the 'other', or with the anti-Semite (who is certainly much less of an 'other') – continues to remain worth exploring, in fact as in fiction.

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³¹ Moro, "L'atteggiamento dei cattolici tra teologia e politica", 329.

³² *Il cimitero*, 401.

³³ *Il cimitero*, 515.

³⁴ See Eco, *Costruire il nemico*, cit. (my translation).