

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

by *Gadi Luzzatto Voghera*

The old - but always present - political ideology known officially since 1879 as Anti-Semitism is one of the most studied subjects in the field of contemporary history. Whole libraries have been dedicated to it, and in many countries (unfortunately not in Italy), Universities have also offered courses specifically dedicated to this topic that is justifiably considered one of the most problematic aspects of Modernity. In particular, scholars have often discussed its trans-political characteristics, aptly exemplified by the well-known Dreyfus affair, in which Anti-Semitism revealed its potential as an important shared political language, able to unify around political battle forces and groups seemingly incompatible. In this way intransigent Catholics worked side by side with their strongest enemies, the revolutionary trade unionists, and a similar experience engaged many Liberals, Socialists and Nationalists. Jean Jaures, the leader of French socialism, worked precisely on this issue in order to bring to fruition his important work of political rupture finally leading his political party to side in favor of Dreyfus in the name of the defense of the supreme value of Justice (considered fundamental basis of the French Revolution) and in the name of the defense of Truth. Jaures personally worked on a philological deconstruction of Dreyfus's so-called "confessions", and proved them to be false. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet reminds us in one of his writings, "when the historian shows the reality of facts and reconstructs the actual concatenation, he can only be Dreyfusard."

In his new novel Umberto Eco wants to open a debate concerning the concept of Truth and Propaganda and introduces the reader to this discussion, proposing it as a fundamental part of Modernity. Let's briefly present the plot of a rather confused (and at times boring) story. Simone Simonini (the main character, whose name reminds us of one of the best known "victims" of a blood libel in Trento 1475) and his alter-ego abbot Dalla Piccola are remembering in a continuous flash back, some of the most important historical events of the second half of XIX century Europe. Living near Turin in the dark atmosphere created by his Jesuit tutors, Simonini later becomes a master forger of documents and attracts the attention of the Piedmontese Secret Service. As a spy, Simonini is sent to Sicily in the wake of Giuseppe Garibaldi and his thousand heroes. In the next few years he moves to Paris where he works for the French counterintelligence, and where he begins to manufacture a fake document, first directed at discrediting the Jesuits, then at discrediting the Jews. The document reveals a supposedly secret meeting of the most important chief rabbis of Europe held during a night in the old Jewish

cemetery in Prague. During this meeting they share their plans for world domination and the destruction of Christianity. As scholars know, this is also the plot of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the false pamphlet produced by the Czarist intelligence service *Ochbrana* in 1905 - a mix of different stories written during the XIX century by Maurice Joly (*Dialogues in hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*) and by Hermann Goedsche (*Biarritz*). By telling his story, Simonini remembers his involvement in many other plots including revolutionary anarchist projects, the terrible days of the Paris Commune, the Freemasons' operation organized by Leo Taxil, and the Dreyfus affair. At the same time, to add to the general textual confusion, the book elaborates an open declaration of love for good food and includes many old Italian and French recipes.

Due to Simonini's language and his focus on almost every classical aspect of the Anti-Semitic stereotype, Umberto Eco has been accused of helping the diffusion of this prejudice. I don't think this is the point and Eco openly repudiates this dangerous interpretation. In an interview in the Italian magazine *L'Espresso* he tells us that he "wrote a novel. It's a novel, which rather than an essay, doesn't come to conclusions, but allows the contradictions to remain. Just as I put on stage the two aspects of the Risorgimento, the anti-garibaldini and the enthusiasts, I did with the birth and development of anti-Semitism. From Barruel onwards hundreds of books and magazines with anti-Semitic stereotypes have been published. I'm interested in recounting how through the accumulation of these stereotypes the 'Protocols' were constructed. [...] My intention was to give the reader a punch in the stomach. I think it should be clear in the narrative how every stereotype used first against the Jesuits, then against Napoleon III, then against the Masons, could then be used against the Jews. It's always the same framework, only the target changes."

As a literary work the *Cemetery of Prague* does not seem to be the best work written by the Semiologist from Piedmont: in recent years he has been able to write much more readable and enjoyable novels. *The name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* were definitely constructed in a more exciting style and, although they certainly offered several levels of interpretation, they remain two literary works, two novels in the true sense of the word. The *Cemetery of Prague* does not have the same evocative power, and in a problematic way, offers many points that indicate a whole cultural agenda. The writer openly declares his intentions to the reader even before starting the long and admittedly confusing story. Using a citation from the novelist Carlo Tenca as an exergue he tells us that "the episodes have the advantage of diverting more than ever the mind of the reader from the main thing." That is to

say: dear readers, you're going to read a long and rather confused novel, but I really want to communicate something very specific, beyond the story itself. This is not a new method, and Umberto Eco has used it many times in the past. Then, what exactly does the writer want to communicate? I think that in order to understand the deepest sense of the *Cemetery of Prague* we need to connect it with other recently published books that are thematically connected to this novel.

The first is the essay *Costruire il nemico (Inventing the enemy)* written in May 2008 but published with the same title in a collection of articles in the Spring of 2011 (Umberto Eco, *Costruire il nemico*, Bompiani, Milano 2011). The second is an interesting research conducted by Michele Battini, *Il socialismo degli imbecilli. Propaganda, falsificazione, persecuzione degli ebrei* (Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2010 - *The socialism of fools. Propaganda, forgery, and persecution of the Jews*). What Umberto Eco really wants to share with us is written in the essay on the “enemy”, and I can only agree with Eco’s idea: throughout History there have been countless ideologies that have sought to offer artificial enemies in order to govern present difficulties more easily, playing on a natural fear of what is seen as different. In the Nineteenth century - the forerunner of the modern age - this dynamic of fear has become more present, but its roots go back to ancient literature. Eco makes it clear that “it is not the case of the so-called ‘different’ who threatens us directly (as in the case of the Barbarians) rather it is clear that there is someone who has an interest in representing an ideal enemy as threatening us even if this enemy doesn’t threaten us directly, so that it is his actual diversity that becomes an essential element of his menace to us.”

Umberto Eco wrote these reflections in 2008 while also writing the *Cemetery of Prague* and it is evident that he was considering these same concepts in both works. While writing his novel Eco is not solely writing about the Jacobins, nor even about the Jews (who are the principal negative protagonist in the book). He is clearly writing about an abstract prototype of the Enemy, which in Italy 2008 was represented by the stereotypical image of the Romanian immigrant, who may soon be replaced by someone else. He states: “widening the characteristics of some of the members of a particular ethnic group living in a marginalized situation to the entire group, means in today’s Italy building the image of the Rumanian as ‘the’ enemy, an ideal scapegoat for a society that is overwhelmed by a process of ethnic transformation, so that it is no longer able to recognize itself.”

While Eco’s critical essay is interesting, in his important book Michele Battini works in a more scientific manner with the sources, and conducts a more fully articulated analysis of the expressions of Anti-Semitism of the XIX and XX century. Although the focus of the book by Battini relates mostly to the dynamics of the labor movements of the last two centuries, the actual theme is the same and the sources overlap

completely (and are much better documented than) those used by Umberto Eco - *Les juifs rois de l'époque* by the socialist Alphonse Toussenel, *La France Juive* by the anti-Dreyfusard journalist Edouard Drumont and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the final product of the twentieth century anti-Semitic propaganda. These sources, widely used by Umberto Eco throughout his novel, are analyzed by Michele Battini both from a literary and an ideological perspective with perhaps more convincing results. Infact Battini develops the argument to a level that Umberto Eco does not even reach, but which in reality is necessary in order to connect it to the historical assumptions and the construction of the propaganda of the enemy. The theme of the denial of the extermination of Jews during the Second World War is an issue that cannot be circumvented in this context because it is structurally and ideologically linked to the idea of what is False both in history and politics. That is to say; the mere discussion of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and its literary and political fortunes must lead to an examination of Holocaust denial.

If this assertion is correct, then both Battini's and Eco's books must be connected to another work translated and published in Italy by Valentina Pisanty, who coincidentally is a student of Umberto Eco. This book by Wolfgang Benz, *I protocolli dei savi di Sion. La leggenda del complotto mondiale ebraico* (eds. Andrea Gilardoni and Valentina Pisanty, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2009 – *Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The legend of the World Jewish Conspiracy*) was published as part of a project that focused on the manipulation of language and reality. The introductory remarks by Valentina Pisanty –entitled “The Lie” (“la menzogna”) – confirm the idea that while studying the *Protocols* and their effects we are not solely talking about anti-Semitism, or “Jewish conspiracy.” From a reading of this text it is clear that tracing the history and the fortune of the *Protocols* means not only questioning the absurdity of disseminating a volume of artifacts that spreads lies, and does not allow us to reiterate the logical condemnation of the eternal re-emergence of Anti-Semitism. This is not, or rather, not the only point. History continues, and in the early decades of the XX century Adolf Hitler, Alfred Rosenberg, Julius Streicher and many others quote this famous false text extensively (suggesting and affirming that it is truthful). At the end of the century and the beginning of the new millennium this same text has been published, cited and adopted in thousands of websites politically located both on the far right and on the extreme left, as well as linked to websites of Islamic fundamentalism and anti-conciliar Catholicism (an environment where Simonini - the protagonist of the *Cemetery of Prague* – would feel fine). Certainly, by reading Benz's book, and by following the intricate patterns of the story of Simonini we are touched by the extraordinary ease with which, in different contexts, the “conspiracy theory” maintains its unaltered persuasive force, by constructing the artificial icon of the

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eternal Jewish enemy, synonymous with and metaphor for negativity and danger. The figure against which people have to fight in order to survive. In conclusion, we must note that the “Protocols” are a real paradigm that must be studied in order to better deconstruct its negative effects. Currently the modern use of the “closed” and self-sustained discourse has an extraordinary capacity to become a disruptive political message that has the obvious advantage of catalyzing sympathies across a broad political spectrum.