Foucault’s Pendulum Introductory Remarks – M. Thomas – Austin Athenaeum, March 2012

I struggled to compile my own thoughts about our author’s very challenging work Foucault’s Pendulum, wrestling with four competing thoughts throughout and after my reading of the book: its importance, purpose, effectiveness, and beauty.

1. Importance: The work met with much critical acclaim upon its release, sold quite well, and continues to receive consistently high reviews from the modern “common man.” While none of these in itself is enough to recommend any book, they nonetheless cause me to believe the work may be significant – and honestly were part of the reason I continued to plow through it, despite its tedium and my boredom at many points throughout.
2. Purpose: Eco is clearly well-educated, intelligent, and a Medieval history scholar; his semiotics pedigree is clearly on display. [Semiotics is the study of signs and sign processes, indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor, symbolism, signification, and communication. Semiotics is closely related to the field of linguistics, which, for its part, studies the structure and meaning of language more specifically.] But I was continually reminded of that man you meet at a party who wished to demonstrate his superior intellect at every turn but whose incessant references to arcane historical facts and esoteric knowledge makes the conversation both cumbersome and annoying.
3. Effectiveness: To call this work of literature a “novel” is, I think, doing both Foucault’s Pendulum and the term “novel” a disservice. Eco’s work would better be termed a complex blend of historical fact and conjecture, mysterious interworking of magical realism and drug-induced paranoia, all told with a sarcastic smirk and melancholy wink. But it lacked those elements of writing that make a novel readable, such as: cohesiveness (on purpose, you would say, to emulate life), structure (but of course! Like our very natures), plot (sorry, but there was so little as to make it incredibly tedious); and frankly, so many off-the-wall references to characters, symbols, and historically questionable episodes that frankly it felt more disjointed than the many lives of Saint-Germane. The goal of at least one of my favorite modern authors, on the other hand, is “to create engrossing stories that explore the dark psychologies within each of us, the longings we all feel for community, love, wholeness and beauty.”
4. Beauty: The “novel” had so much promise: A potentially exciting premise, historical characters full of zest and mystery, the creation of a fictional Plan that itself becomes reality. Eco is at his best during those sections of the book where he is truly acting as story-teller: During Belbo’s flashback accounts of his childhood (who can forget the gang warfare cowardice recounting, or the origins of his macabre yet romantic trumpet fetish?); or the masterful (yet still agonizingly unfulfilling) climactic scene of the Diabolicals at the museum? Yet Eco fills the bulk of the novel with so much deconstructing and reconstructing of the Plan that the writing becomes “as interminable as a medieval romance” of which Eco and Casaubon are so fond.

One commentator noted that “Conspiracy theories abound when the meaning of history if in doubt.” And based on one chapter epigraph from Karl Popper, “The conspiracy theory of society … comes from abandoning God and then asking, ‘Who is in his place?”, I think this provides a starting point for an attempt at understanding the (perhaps important?) meaning and purpose of Foucault’s Pendulum, its failings in my opinion as an enjoyable novel notwithstanding.