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**UMBERTO ECO AND STUDIES  
IN WESTERN ESOTERICISM**

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In the article works of well-known Italian semiotician Umberto Eco are considered through the prism of contemporary researches in Western esotericism. The idea of the so-called “hermetic semiosis” is explored by Eco in several of his works published after the 1980’s: *Limits of Interpretation, Kant e l’ornitorinco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation, Serendipities, Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, etc. But its roots lie in Eco’s early writings, directly in his semiotic theory. Eco has his own view regarding the formation of the whole of esotericism, which has expressed in a special perception of esoteric texts. From this perspective, Eco’s works seem to be not only semiotic in their essence, but also touch on the history of religious ideas and on the hermeneutics of heterodox texts.

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Assertion that Umberto Eco is a researcher of marginal religiosity may actually surprise the Russian reader. As a novelist Eco is well-known to all, and he may be a little less known as a semiotician, but how are these activities related to marginal religiosity? Quite directly. Anyone who has ever as much as skimmed through Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*, has to admit that it is overwhelmed with references to the body of Western esotericism, with its structure as the tree of the Sefirot, with its constant allusions to works of the alchemists, Kabbalists and various adherents of so-called secret societies. Moreover, the novel is actually devoted to the problem of existence of these societies. For researchers of marginal religiosity *Foucault's Pendulum* became a kind of a model where in the form of caricature and grotesque the followers of esoteric societies, as well as teachings that they preserve and hand down, are presented.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is evident that by the end of 80th beginning of the 90s Umberto Eco's theory of hermetic semiosis has taken its place in the ranks of hypotheses to explain the diversity of marginal religiosity. The clearest proof of that was Eco's speech on the famous Conference 1992 in Lyon, which was attended by many prominent researchers in the various fields of Western esotericism. The report was titled *Porquoi Lulle n'était pas un kabbaliste*.<sup>2</sup> So, why the famed semiotician got engaged in the theme of marginal religiosity and what is the concept of "hermetic semiosis"?

The first question can be answered as follows. First, as a semiotician Eco was constantly faced with various interpretive strategies, such as medieval, early modern, and modern. In the process of his search he came upon a strategy which was specific for the entire area of marginal religiosity, the one that he defined as "hermetic semiosis." This interpretive theory he liked so much, or rather he liked not, that he featured it in most of his novels<sup>3</sup> and devoted

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<sup>1</sup> So the novel describes by the lead researcher in the field of Western esotericism Antoine Faivre (See: *Faivre A. Access to Western Esotericism*. N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994. P. 106; and *Faivre A. Western Esotericism: A concies history*. N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2010. P. 105).

<sup>2</sup> See: *Eco U. Pourquoi Lulle n'était pas un kabbaliste // Aries*. 1992. No. 1. P. 85–94.

<sup>3</sup> Obviously, the presence of hermetic semiosis as a separate topic in "Foucault's Pendulum" (1988), "The Island of the Day Before" (1994), "Baudolino" (2000) and "The Prague Cemetery" (2010). The problem of interpretation related to the theory of hermetic semiosis explicitly expressed in "The Name of the Rose" (1980). Only in "The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana" (2004) these themes gave way to other interests of Eco but only for a while,

several research studies.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, it is obvious that esoteric literature has been familiar to Italian semiotician since youth and intrigued him well enough, even formed perhaps rather significant part of his worldview at some point. Since his youth Eco has been fascinated with Romanticism, with Gerard de Nerval's prose<sup>5</sup> in particular, and one of his first works was devoted to Nerval's *Sylvia*.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, while being immersed in Romanticism and its culture, Eco as inquisitive researcher could not avoid the areas of marginal religiosity as well, considering how brightly they embroidered the culture of that era.

Whatever it was that brought him to this area of studies, it should be noted that Eco can hardly be considered as original and self-sustained researcher of marginal religiosity. His approach is to generalize; he is familiar with specific cases only through the studies of others. Obviously, he read original sources as well, but the scale of such knowing is relatively small for a specialist. All the basic information both for his theoretical constructs and for his novels he drew from the books of his friends, Antoine Faivre, Massimo Introvigne, Moshe Idel. In addition, Eco is well-versed in basic researches on the topic, such as the works of Francis Yates, Gershom Scholem, Lynn Thorndike.<sup>7</sup> We'll refer to connection of Eco's texts with the works of Faivre and Introvigne in more detail a bit later, as first we have to introduce the reader to the actual concept of Umberto Eco's "hermetic semiosis."

## Semiotics – Brief Background

One of the main works, in which Eco's semiotic theory is presented, is the *Role of the reader*. In this work, he formed the concept of two types of texts: open and closed ones. Closed texts he defines as:

those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response of the part of more or less precise empirical reader (be they children, soap-opera addict, doctors, law-adding citizens, swingers, Presbyterians, farmers, middle-class

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"The Prague Cemetery", the last of his novels is build around the history of western esotericism of late XIX century.

<sup>4</sup> The main are "The limits of interpretation" (1990), "Interpretation and over interpretation" (1992), "Serendipities. Language and lunacy" (1998).

<sup>5</sup> On Nerval and Western esotericism see Dictionary of gnosis and western esotericism. P. 854–855.

<sup>6</sup> See: *Eco U. Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> For example see Bibliography to his article in ARIES 1992. P. 94.

women, scuba divers, effete snobs, or any other imaginable sociopsychological category) are in fact open to any possible «aberrant» decoding. A text so imponderably “open” to every possible interpretation will be called a *closed* one.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that the criterion of “closeness” of the text is the possibility of reading it with the wrong code. The question which immediately arises in the mind of the researcher is: and what is the correct code?

To answer this question we need to analyze Eco’s theory of an ideal reader. According to Eco, the text itself makes the rules of reading and its (text’s) reader. When the author is writing the text he has in his mind an ideal reader. That reader has the ability to decode the message in a way that would be consistent with the intention of the text. To be read adequately, many texts demand the knowledge of a certain “encyclopedia of competence.”<sup>9</sup> Under the “encyclopedia of competence” Eco understands the complex system of codes and subcodes of the language in which the text is written. In any case, the text requires from the reader some kind of activity and knowledge in certain areas and directions, thus participating in the formation of the reader, telling him certain rules of competence needed for its perusal. Such a reader, whose model the author imagined and meant during the creation of his text is called, according to Eco, a Model-reader.

The “open” text initially has labyrinthine structure, the one that has been invested there by the author.

You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however «open» it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation.<sup>10</sup> It means that the open text implies a special reader who can decode it in some way. The closed texts can be reinterpreted out of foppery and do not lose anything with that, though may not acquire anything either. The open texts, however, in the case of incorrect decoding may lose a lot. “It is possible to be stupid enough to read Kafka’s *Trial* as a trivial criminal novel, but at this point the text collapse – it has been burned out, just as a “joint” is burned out to produce a private euphoric state.”<sup>11</sup>

Open and closed texts have their own plot structure, distinct from each other. In closed texts reader has his choice of understanding how the story de-

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<sup>8</sup> *Eco U.* The role of the reader: Explorations on the semiotics of texts. Midland: Midland book, 1984. P. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* P. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* P. 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

velops, in one way or another, but the more the plot progresses, the less obvious the forks are, and the reader's path gets more and more like a cut – through made in the narrative woods.

The open text, on the contrary, invites the reader as its co-author and acknowledges the widest range of reader's interpretative assumptions. The distinction between the two types of plot structure is shown on the Figure 1.

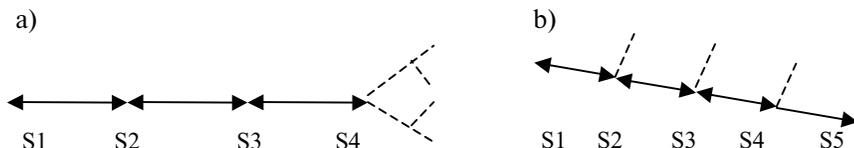


Fig. 1

In the Figure A, we see typical development of the narrative in the texts of the open type (letter S marks points-stages of a plot where some sort of predictions from the reader are expected). The author is taking the reader step by step to the point of plurality of interpretations. In such a text any final verdict is never possible, and any interpretation of the text could be only presumable, but due to this variability of endings the reader gets the freedom of interpretation of the whole narrative according to the version of the ending that he has chosen. One of the most telling examples of such endings is the final of *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym* by Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>12</sup>

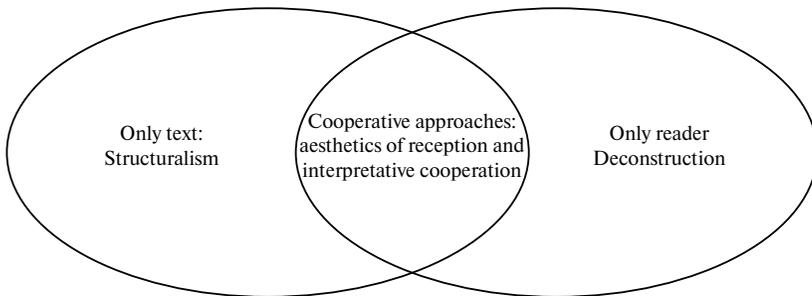
Figure B shows another type of construction of a plot in the texts of the closed type. Here the sender of the message, i.e., the author of the text suggests the reader again and again to predict the further development of the plot, but each time he confirms his own authoritative right for the correct reading of this text. All detective novels can serve as a model for this type of plot construction.

<sup>12</sup>In Poe's book we can read: "The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us. Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal Tekeli-li! as they retreated from our vision. Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but upon touching him, we found his spirit departed. And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway ashrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow." Eco likes this passage very much. He even wrote in *Six walks in the fictional woods*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994) that all other horror literature (such as H.P. Lovecraft A. Blackwood, A. Machen etc.) crossed the line at which Poe stopped.

The whole Eco's theory of textual interpretations is aimed only for one purpose: to show and to prove that the text has its own distinct meaning and certain rules for its perusal, and that the reader of the text is largely formed by the text. He marked that that it is possible to distinguish between the "freedom of interpretative choices" elicited by a purposeful strategy of openness and "the freedom taken by a reader with a text assumed as a mere stimulus."

In the latter case of the interpretation of the text the reader will be mistaken, because his interpretation will not be generated by the rules which lay inside the given text. This statement can be illustrated by an example. If Jack the Ripper told us that he did what he did on the grounds of his interpretation of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, few would argue that the text of the Gospel bears such intention. Although those critics, who completely eliminate any possibility of the text's autonomy, will most likely argue the legitimacy of this interpretation too. To interpret a text means to explain why these words can do various things through the way they are interpreted. It is the latter, radical version of the interpretation that Eco calls hermetical semiosis.

If we compare Eco's theory with other contemporary approaches of textual analysis, we could possibly come to scheme presented on the Figure 2.



**Fig. 2**

The approach of deconstruction in this scheme can be replaced by hermetical semiosis. According to Eco, adherents of these interpretive principles give the reader absolute rights of interpreting the text, and completely negate the idea of autonomy of the text. Let's note that if for deconstructionists the given strategy is a consciously chosen method, for hermetics it isn't so.

First of all, hermetic maintains that he has the only true key to the text and the rest of its readers are inaccurate or superficial. By conferring full privi-

leges of interpretation, the hermetic, in contrast to deconstructionists, argues that he is a representative of the true tradition of interpreting the text, and that he does not add anything of himself as a reader, but instead cleans up the original text of any accretions. In other words deconstructionists are consciously using the same interpretive strategy as hermetics, who are using this strategy unconsciously.

According to Eco, the basis for constructing the hermetic semiosis is the principle of similarity.

It is indisputable that human beings think (also) in terms of identity and similarity. In everyday life, however, it is a fact that we generally know how to distinguish between relevant, significant similarities on the one hand and fortuitous, illusory similarities on the other. Therefore, in real life the main feature is the principle of restrictive economy.<sup>13</sup>

Eco suggests to consider interpretations by the principle of economy of meaning, in hermetic semiosis interpreter's thought moves by the roundabout ways, absorbing ample of superfluous subjects and meanings. As it is very difficult and almost impossible to establish criteria for a correct interpretation, in recent years it has become subject for the endless and fruitless debates in the circles of semiotics and postmodernists. Much more possible and important, according to Eco, is to find criteria for the false and unacceptable interpretations. Eco offers here the path similar to Popper's theory of falsification. Though we can not establish criteria for the correct interpretation, we can identify interpretations which are economically inconvenient. Hermetic's mind moves from a flower through a complex system of correspondences of the planets and zodiac signs to determine the impact that flower has on the organs of the human body. This interpretation can not be considered as matching the criteria of economy.

This idea is an old one and comes from Augustine. In the work *De doctrina Christiana* he summaries that any interpretation of a certain part of a text can be accepted if it is confirmed and must be rejected if it is challenged by another part of the same text. In this sense the internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.

Eco broadens ideas of Augustine about the interpretation and tells about the possibilities of interpretation of texts, which were named in the culture of

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<sup>13</sup> Eco *U. Interpretation and over interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. P. 165.

the sacred. This refers not only to the *Bible* or the *Koran*, but the *Iliad* or the *Divine Comedy*.

In Eco's terms religious texts are more protected from overinterpretation, because there are certain traditions of interpretation, which were formed over centuries and based on religious authority. With secular texts everything gets much more difficult. Rescue from the trap of infinite interpretations is their restriction by any reasonable limits. These limits are set by the text. The text forms its reader. A model reader of the text is a reader who can identify the set of interpretations of the text which is determined by the text, without imposing values that the text cannot tolerate.

We can therefore conclude that it is possible to name text "hermetic," if it is based on a system of hermetic semiosis, this kind of text itself will be the interpretation of the narrative existing in culture.

To clarify the heuristic value of the method proposed by Eco, it is necessary to apply it to various texts, born inside the Western esotericism. In our paper, we plan to take two texts: *The Mystery of the Cathedrals* by Fulcanelli and *Esotericism of Dante* by Rene Guenon. These works represent, in our opinion, different versions of Hermetic semiosis in different directions.

*The Mystery of the Cathedrals* is an interpretation of the symbolic images of medieval cathedrals, in fact it is the application of hermetic method to visual images. *Esotericism of Dante* is one of the many interpretations of the *Divine Comedy* which uses hermetic semiosis as method of textual analysis. Eco holds this work up as an example in his lectures, though not specifically dwells on the analysis of its contents.

Let's start with the text of Guenon. In fact, from the very beginning Guenon creates a distinct system of integral interpretation of the *Divine Comedy* which he intends to apply. "O you possessing sound intelligence, Study well the doctrine which lies hidden Under the veil of my unusual verse! With these words Dante indicates quite explicitly that there is a hidden and, properly speaking, doctrinal significance to his work, whose external and apparent meaning is only a veil that must be penetrated by those who would understand it."<sup>14</sup>

It is obvious that Dante himself put more than one meaning into his comedy and, according to Eco's theory, *Divine Comedy* is a typical open text. Further Guenon specifies which variant of reading he chooses:

Elsewhere the poet goes still further, declaring that all writings, and not only sacred ones, can be understood and must be explained principally according to four

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<sup>14</sup> Guenon R. *Esotericism of Dante*. N.Y.: Sophia perrenis, 2004. P. 1.

levels of meaning... The difficulty begins only then it comes to determining these different meanings, especially the highest or the most profound, and it is here that different point of view naturally arise among commentators. They all generally agree on recognizing beneath the literal meaning in poetic narrative a philosophical (or rather philosophic-theological) meaning, and also a political and social one; however, counting the literal meaning, this still makes only three, and Dante advise us to look for a fourth meaning. What can it be? For us, it can only be a prophetic initiatic meaning, metaphysical in its essence...<sup>15</sup>

Here Guenon intentionally brings the Dante's text under hermetic interpretation, basing on four meanings that Dante himself emphasized in the text of his poem. And here Guenon elects a non-economic way of interpretation. In fact according to medieval tradition, it was generally agreed to provide four levels of interpretation of the Bible: literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical (elevate to the ideal). Medieval school poem explained their role: "Littera gesta docet; quid credes allegoria; Moralis, quid agas; quo tendas, anagogia."<sup>16</sup>

The whole range of meanings of a medieval text fits exactly into this pattern, as we can see, there is no hidden, accessible only to the initiated, meaning. From this assumption the whole system of Guenons work develops: Dante's relationship with secret societies, his connections with the Order of Trinitarian, broad interpretation of the places associated with the biblical text, etc.

Similar approach, we will find in the famous book by Fulcanelli. Here the author also looks for a hidden meaning of the symbolism of Gothic cathedrals, while treading the path of uneconomic interpretation. In order not to embark on a detailed analysis of the text, let us discuss here only one example.

In the final part of his work devoted to the cyclic cross of Hendaye, the author examines two inscriptions made on the cross. One is the traditional "INRI – Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum" Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, which Fulcanelli considers, basing on the original approval of the secret meaning of the symbolism of Gothic art as "Igne Natura Renovatur Integra."<sup>17</sup> Then the author subjects the second inscription on the cross to similar wide interpretation, using the fact that the words on a cross are not separated by spaces "OCRUXAVES PESUNICA" Fulcanelli interprets this not in the tra-

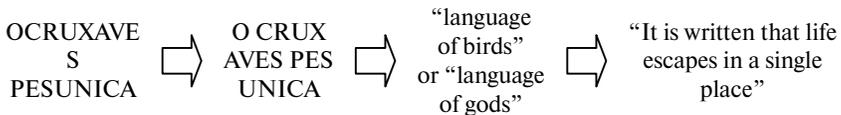
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<sup>15</sup> Guenon R. Op. cit. P. 2.

<sup>16</sup> This Medieval couplet is attributed to Augustine of Dacia. For details see: *De Lubak H. Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*. Grand rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> By fire nature is renewed all.

ditional way, as “o crux ave spes unica,”<sup>18</sup> but hermetically “o crux aves pes unica,”<sup>19</sup> as a set of unrelated words, which requires additional interpretation, which author makes, based on the Hermetic literature with the deceptions of the “language of birds” or “language of the gods.”<sup>20</sup> And he gets as a result a phrase completely corresponding with his alchemical theory: “It is written that life escapes in a single place.”<sup>21</sup> Uneconomic of the given interpretation is possible to illustrate with the scheme presented on the Figure 3.



**Fig. 3**

According to Eco’s theory, similar pattern as above can be found in the vast majority of texts generated by marginal religiosity.

Bringing out such pattern of interpretation leads Eco to the necessity for conceptual generalization of all its main characteristics. According to Italian semiotician marginal religiosity is forming around a specific type of uneconomic interpretation. The texts generated in the process of such interpretation have the following main principles, or, one might even say, the following main characteristics of the hermetic semiosis as a school of thought:

- A text is an open-ended universe where the interpreter can discover infinite interconnections.
- Language is unable to grasp a unique and preexisting meaning – on the contrary, language’s duty is to show that what we can speak of is only the coincidence of the opposites.
- Language mirrors the inadequacy of thought: our being-in-the-world is nothing else than being incapable of finding any transcendental meaning.
- Any text, pretending to assert something univocal, is a miscarried universe, that is, the work of a muddle-headed Demiurge.

<sup>18</sup> Hail o cross, the only hope.

<sup>19</sup> O cross, passionately wish a unique leg.

<sup>20</sup> See: Fulcanelli *Mystery of the cathedrals*. Las Vegas: Brotherhood of life, 1984. P. 166–168.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* P. 168.

- Language (and authors') fate is nevertheless redeemed by the pneumatic reader who, being able to realize and to show that Being is drift, corrects the error of the author-Demiurge and understands what the hylics (those who think that texts can have a definite meaning) are condemned to ignore.
- Contemporary textual Gnosticism is very generous, however: everybody, provided one is eager to impose the intention of the reader upon the unattainable intention of the author, can become the *Übermensch* who really realizes the truth, namely, that the author did not know what he or she was really saying, because language spoke at his or her place.
- To salvage the text – that is, to transform it from an illusion of meaning to the awareness that meaning is infinite – the reader must suspect that every line of it conceals another secret meaning; words, instead of saying, hide the untold; the glory of the reader is to discover that texts can say everything, except what their
- author wanted them to mean; as soon as a pretended meaning is allegedly discovered, we are sure that it is not the real one; the real one is the further one and so on and so forth; the hylics – the losers – are those who end the process by saying “I understood.”
- The Real Reader is the one who understands that the secret of a text is its emptiness.<sup>22</sup>

## **Rational and Irrational**

Having defined specific type of interpretation and having called it hermetic, Eco thereafter traces its origin. Thus, in his Cambridge lectures in 1990, he touches upon the history of this type of interpretation, and considers it to be rooted in the conflict of rational and irrational.

According to Eco, if we turn our eyes to the past, we'll see that in the history of thought since ancient Greek philosophy it's Ratio (reason) that has come into play. From Plato and Aristotle, reason goes through all the centuries up to the present day. Although the types of logic may differ, like, for example, Aristotelian and Hegelian, the basic laws of thought which were discovered then, remain the same and exist until now. These basic laws are well

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<sup>22</sup> *Eco U. Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. P. 158–159.

known to all: it's the law of identity, the law of noncontradiction and the law of excluded middle. In the Latin tradition this restriction of world with the laws of mind is well expressed by the words of Horace: "There is measure in everything. There are boundaries that should not be crossed." These are the principles upon which, according to Eco, the whole Western culture has been built. Even in the legend of Romulus and Remus we can read how Romulus builds a wall and then kills his brother for leaping it. This emphasizes the importance of law, of certain borders that people are not entitled to violate. No wonder the state borders were so crucial for the Roman Empire. Not only they separated by military force Roman inhabitants off barbarian tribes, but also served as a barrier that separated civilization from chaos.

Examples of such reverence for the laws of reason can be found throughout the whole history of Western culture, and they are especially evident in Medieval scholasticism, where reason was the main judge in theological disputes. Aquinas argues that even God is limited by the laws of reason, laws which He had made specifically not to break them. All modern sciences are shaped within these lines, as the notion of "Science" in general, ranging from Mathematics to Programming.

But along with rationality, the same Greek culture gives rise to another school of thought – irrationalism. It was reflected primarily in the Greek Hermetism. Hermes is the patron of arts, the god of merchants, but at the same time he's the patron of thieves, and he's old and young at the same time. In the image of Hermes we can see disappearance of all logical principles (such as identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle). His image ambiguous and counter-logical.

The triumph of Hermetism is the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. It was the time when many cultures merged in the melting pot of unified Roman Empire. Each culture had its own traditions, its own gods, its own myths. One of the basic assumptions of Hermetism is the search for the secret knowledge. The source of such knowledge are texts which are sometimes created in different cultures by people of various faiths, various ideals. This is the point where the principle of noncontradiction faces its crisis. If different texts say opposite things, yet the truth must necessarily be contained there, the only way to find it is to interpret the text allegorically. Each word, each letter is loaded with hidden meaning, and they can be understood in one sense as well as in the opposite. Secret knowledge is the knowledge that lies in the depths, that is unclear, vague, thus the truth in Hermetism gets to be implied, it's supposed not to be understood directly, but to be read between the lines.

Hence the strong interest in the Barbaric cults. Barbarian earlier was someone whose speech was incomprehensible. In Hermetism however, the Barbaric priest due to obscurity of his language is hiding something very important, a secret of some sort. This secret is based, first of all, in the principle of sympathy when, for example, the alphabet is the reflection of the planetary system and the planets relate to the parts of the human body, when all which is done by an image is transferred to the bearer of this image, when “what is above equals to what lies below.”

Christian thought of the first centuries (represented by Dionysius the Areopagite) argued that God is rather to be described in negative terms, that our language is inadequate to express the Divine Essence. Hermetism however, believes that the more conflicting senses the text contains, the more incomprehensible its words are, the more complex and more symbolically it could be interpreted, the better it is suited for the naming of the Absolute.

Thus, the chain of interpretation is infinite. Everything is derived from everything. This means that each object holds its secrets that are to be derived by interpreting. The main secret of Hermetic initiation is that everything is a mystery. As Eco notes, due to infinity of interpretation hermetic mystery turns out to be empty. The mystery in fact does not exist, the only thing that exists is the endless process of searching for it. The world in this system becomes a linguistic phenomenon, yet the language itself loses its communicative power.

The second victory of Hermetism in the history of Western culture occurs in the Renaissance era. There seemed to be no place for it in the era of scholasticism, where everything was complied with the strict laws of reason, but Hermetism was preserved among medieval alchemists and Kabbalists. It was preserved to be rediscovered in Florence. *Corpus Hermeticum*, the main text of the Hermetism, was found again by Renaissance Neoplatonists such as Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino and others, and considered to be the evidence of a certain ancient knowledge going back to the time before Moses. Hermetism along with Gnosticism generate the shared mystery syndrome. Insider knowledge of a certain secret gives them the sense of exclusivity and, as a consequence, the opportunity to gain political power.

## **Esoterism and Ethics**

According to Eco, hermetic semiosis must necessarily lead to a reflection on its ethical consequences. Italian semiotician clearly indicates the danger

of uneconomic interpretation. For example, in one interview he argued: “As a semiotician, I’m constantly trying to search for the meaning of things hidden in the subtext, but I am against the malignant tumor of over-interpretation, by which you just can not be satisfied, and thus continue to look for other answers.”<sup>23</sup>

In his work *Five Moral Pieces*, when talking about the roots of fascism as an ideology, Eco identifies the basic characteristics of the eternal fascism, or “Ur-Fascism,” as he calls it. There are a few aspects of interest for us in this portrait of Ur-Fascism, where we can easily detect the traits of marginal religiosity.

“The first feature of Ur-Fascism is the cult of tradition.”<sup>24</sup> Traditionalism is a quite ancient phenomenon, both culturally and historically. Its origin goes back to the late Hellenism, and it was reaction to the development of Greek philosophy. As Roman pantheon consisted of gods belonging to many different peoples and countries, the followers of so-called “Tradition” started to look for some common ground, for some ancient revelation that was given at the dawn of mankind and is now hidden in the Celtic runes, Egyptian hieroglyphs and sculptures of Asian religions. This phenomenon was later called syncretism. Eco defines a new aspect in this concept, diverging from the usual dictionary definition, namely, syncretism by Eco is “primarily the *neglect to contradictions*”<sup>25</sup> and “the principle to lump Augustine and Stonehenge together is the actual symptom of Ur-Fascism.”<sup>26</sup> Due to this erroneous approach a vast array of diverse ideas can be mixed in any pattern. All the differences are easily abolished by allegorical interpretation, that absolutely ignores any historical and cultural realities. “It follows thence, that there is *no place for the development of knowledge*,”<sup>27</sup> it turns out that all the knowledge has already been revealed by some omniscient ancient sages. From such an obscurant point of view, Eco argues, all new knowledge, that is truly science-based, is perceived with sharply negative attitude, and this is despite the fact that under the guise of ancient knowledge nothing more than pseudo-ancient fudge of vagabonds of Tradition is displayed.

These traits are fully consistent with the features of marginal religiosity stated above. If summarized briefly, it is hard to escape the conclusion that

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<sup>23</sup> Smith W. Umberto Eco // Publisher's Weekly. 1989. Vol. 236. No. 17. P. 51.

<sup>24</sup> Eco U. *Five moral pieces*. San Diego: Harcourt, 2001. P. 77

<sup>25</sup> Emphasized by Eco. *Ibid.* P. 75.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* P. 77.

<sup>27</sup> Emphasized by Eco. *Ibid.* P. 75.

marginal religiosity is a direct path to fascism, and the worst accusation is hard to imagine nowadays.

## The Question of Sources

Eco is certainly not original in his arguments, as he mostly founds them upon the works of researchers who have dedicated their whole lives to the study of Western esotericism. First of all, it's the idea of Hermetic tradition by Frances Yates, the one that can easily be spotted in the historical insight of his Cambridge lectures published under the title *Limits of Interpretation*.

Obviously, the interpretation of Gnosticism presented in the same Cambridge lectures assumes direct imprint of Hans Jonas' theory of Gnostic religion,<sup>28</sup> which has been preserved up to this day in the form of a certain world perception. So, Eco reasons upon Gnostic roots at the base of Romantic Idealism, Marxism and Leninism, upon Heidegger and Jung as exponents of "Gnostic worldview." Eco is also familiar with the works of Ioan Couliano, in particular, obvious parallels can be drawn between genealogy of gnosis by Couliano and Eco's view on the history of heresies. Direct evidence of such exposure is Eco's review of the book *The Tree of Gnosis* that was featured on its first page: "If Ioan Couliano hadn't unexpectedly disappeared, he could have given us more seminal books like this. A masterpiece of scholarship."<sup>29</sup>

In general theoretical terms Eco is experiencing significant influence of Antoine Faivre. It's sufficed to compare the basic characteristics of Hermetic semiosis by Eco and some features of Western esotericism as a form of thought by Faivre. Let us refer to the basic characteristics of his theory that were reproduced in the number of his works multiple times. Faivre describes esotericism as "a form of thought" and "a set of tendencies," which are characterized by four components:

a) *Correspondences*. Symbolic and real correspondences are said to exist among all parts of the universe, both seen and unseen. ("As above so below.")

b) *Living Nature*. The cosmos is complex, plural, hierarchical as we have just seen with the idea of correspondence. Accordingly, Nature occupies an

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<sup>28</sup> See: *Jonas H.* The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God & the Beginnings of Christianity. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.

<sup>29</sup> *Couliano I.P.* The Tree of Gnosis: The Untold Story of Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism. Harper: San Francisco, 1992.

essential place. Multilayered, rich in potential revelations of every kind, it must be read like a book.

c) *Imagination and Mediations*. The idea of correspondence presumes already a form of imagination inclined to reveal and use mediations of all kinds, such as rituals, symbolic images, mandalas, intermediary spirits.

d) *Experience of Transmutation*. “Transmutation,” a term borrowed from alchemy in our context, seems more appropriate. It should be understood also as “metamorphosis.” It consists in allowing no separation between knowledge (gnosis) and inner experience, or intellectual activity and active imagination if we want to turn lead into silver or silver into gold.

e) *The Praxis of the Concordance*. This shows up in a consistent tendency to try to establish common denominators between two different traditions or even more, among all traditions, in the hope of obtaining an illumination, a gnosis, of superior quality.

f) *Transmission*. Emphasis on transmission implies that an esoteric teaching can or must be transmitted from master to disciple following a preestablished channel, respecting a previously marked path.<sup>30</sup>

As we can see, the concept of Faivre has many parallels with Eco’s approach to this phenomenon. Let’s compare: Faivre determines esotericism as a specific form of thought, and according to Eco it’s a special way of interpretation. We can find characteristics highlighted by Faivre under paragraphs A), B ) and E) , in the Eco’s description of the Hermetic method of interpretation as well. Hermetics recognize the full accessibility of all the world’s levels via the system of similarities by which they can reach any of the higher worlds, and this opportunity is what separates them from the others and gives them a certain aura of mystery inaccessible to the uninitiated.

Besides, works of Eco have textual parallels with the works of Faivre, for ex., beautiful image of the hall of mirrors, metaphorically representing the Hermetic conception of the Universe, is found in the works of both researchers. Compare:

Eco:

The universe becomes one big hall of mirrors, where any one individual object both reflects and signifies all the others. Hermetic thought states that our language, the more ambiguous and multivalent it is, and the more it uses symbols and metaphors, the more it is particularly appropriate for naming a Oneness in which the

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<sup>30</sup> *Faivre A*. Access to Western Esotericism. P. 10–15.

coincidence of opposites occurs. But where the coincidence of opposites triumphs, the principle of identity collapses.<sup>31</sup>

Faivre:

We find again here the ancient idea of microcosm and macrocosm or, if preferred, the principle of universal interdependence. These correspondences, considered more or less veiled at first sight, are, therefore, intended to be read and deciphered. The entire universe is a huge theater of mirrors, an ensemble of hieroglyphs to be decoded. Everything is a sign; everything conceals and exudes mystery; every object hides a secret. The principles of noncontradiction and excluded middle of linear causality are replaced here by those of the included middle and synchronicity.<sup>32</sup>

In his fictional writing Eco also bases himself upon a study of marginal religiosity, in particular, in *The Prague Cemetery* he recreates the world of Paris of late 19 century, oversaturated with secret societies and all sorts of esoteric thinkers. In fact, the entire text of the novel is based on historical realia, and only the protagonist is a fictional character, connecting these realia. Data for his reconstruction Eco heavily based on the book of the famous Italian sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne *Study of Satanism. Satanists and Anti-Satanists since the 17<sup>th</sup> century till the Present Day*.<sup>33</sup> Eco's familiarity with other, less scientific researches on the topic is also noticeable. For example, in the scene of *The Prague Cemetery* where the Black Mass is described, one can easily see the intertextual dialogue between the Huysmans' novel *Là-bas* and Colin Wilson's *The Occult*. Eco corrects in his text the description of the Black Mass from *Là-bas* according to the comments of Colin Wilson, who, in particular, blames Huysmans for "the abundance of filth and disgust." Wilson wrote that "so much ugliness and unpleasantness can hardly make the mass sound wicked, for who would want to witness anything so nauseating?"<sup>34</sup> Eco makes the Mass a spectacle more appealing for the modern reader, thus demonstrating its horridness.<sup>35</sup>

Obvious parallels can be drawn between *Foucault's Pendulum* and the works on Kabbalah by Gershom Scholem and Moshe Idel. There is no need

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<sup>31</sup> Eco U. Interpretation and Overinterpretation. P. 151.

<sup>32</sup> Faivre A. Access to Western Esotericism. P. 10

<sup>33</sup> Introvigne M. Indagine sul satanismo. Satanisti e anti-satanisti dal Seicento ai nostri giorni. Milano: Mondadori, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson C. The Occult: A history. London: Watkins publishing, 2004. P. 450

<sup>35</sup> See the chapter "A night mass" Eco U. *The Prague Cemetery*. N.Y.: Mariner Books, 2011.

to actually confirm that, as the whole structure of *Foucault's Pendulum* is built around the tree of Sefirot and constant allusions to the texts, realia and personalities of the world of Kabbalah. It is also clear that for Eco there are two types of Kabbalah: "Neo-Kabbalah," generated by the syncretism of the modern world, and the Jewish Kabbalah.<sup>36</sup> As an argument to the latter statement, let's present in extenso a typical quote from the work of Eco that is formally unrelated to the problems of marginal religiosity. This text not only illustrates Eco's philosophy of history, where he inscribes marginal religiosity, but also clearly shows his emotional reaction to the described phenomenon. In the *History of Beauty*, referring to the art of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he inter alia notes:

The aberrant religiosity of the decadents took another path again, that of Satanism. Hence not only the excited interest in supernatural phenomena, the rediscovery of magical and occult traditions, a cabalism that had nothing to do with the true Jewish tradition, the fanatical attention devoted to the presence of the demoniac in art and in life (Huysmans' *Down There* being exemplary in this sense), but also participation in authentic magical practices and the calling up of devils, the celebration of all forms of excess, from sadism to masochism, a taste for the horrible, the appeal to Vice, the magnetic attraction of perverse, disquieting or cruel people: an aesthetics of Evil.<sup>37</sup>

## **Umberto Eco and the Study of Marginal Religiosity**

All this leads us to conclude that Eco's theory lacks of independence and contains relatively weak basis of sources. One should rather identify two aspects of the Hermetic semiosis: 1) the theory of interpretation, revealed by Eco via the analysis of large array of texts belonging to the sphere of margin-

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<sup>36</sup> Here one can draw a parallel between the preface to the Russian edition of "Kabbalah: New Perspectives," where Idel offers a similar division: "Kabbalah first developed from an obscure teaching adhered by a blessed few of Jewish elite as well as the individual Christian Kabbalists, into a type of knowledge that is commonly studied by all sorts of people, Jews and non-Jews alike. This change in the circle of readers of Kabbalistic books was very significant, and due to that educational centers for Kabbalah appeared all over the world, along with the sites on the Internet, and the infinite number of popular literature distributing, promoting and vulgarising different aspects of what their authors consider to be Kabbalah." (*Идель М. Каббала: Новые перспективы*. М.: Гешарим, 2010. С. 9.)

<sup>37</sup> *Eco U. History of Beauty*. N.Y.: Rizzoli, 2004. P. 336–337.

al religiosity, and 2) significant theoretical and philosophical generalizations upon the history of culture and ethics, based mainly on secondary sources, on researches already made by others. And in this second part Eco's theory looks very vulnerable and outdated. Despite the development in the overall research areas of marginal religiosity in the 90s, Eco's constructions still do not consider certain studies of the European and American schools, which depreciate significantly Eco's general arguments. All this is simply of interest to the Italian semiotician, as for himself, he has already found all the answers.

As for the researchers of marginal religiosity themselves, they can not ignore Eco's contribution to the development of these studies, but prefer to keep their distance from the excesses of his approach. For example, in one of his interviews Massimo Introvigne rather fully described Eco's views as outdated:

You may remember the old novel by Umberto Eco, Foucault's Pendulum, published in 1988. The novel is very entertaining, but you get the impression that esotericism is the province of the lunatic fringe. I know Umberto Eco and have discussed the matter with him several times. He still maintains that, in his own words, "Guénon is not much more respectable than Otelma the Magician" – Otelma being a self-styled occult master who appears often on Italian television and for Eco is the epitome of the occult charlatan. By the way, while Otelma has some unpleasant histrionic attitudes, he is by no means stupid and holds two academic degrees in History and Political Science. Many academics, particularly in Europe (perhaps less in the United States), still share Eco's quite low opinion of esotericism.<sup>38</sup>

Introvigne's words indicate that the problem regarding the theory of the Hermetic semiosis is not that it is wrong, but that basing on this theory Eco ends up with erroneous conclusions. On the one hand, the Italian semiotician completely negates the value of the work and personalities of marginal religiosity adherents, considering them mentally sick; on the other hand, he accuses them in crypto-Fascism, thus almost completely closing the subject to the serious scientific research. As is obvious to any person familiar with the current state of research in marginal religiosity, making unambiguous assessments and saying straight from the shoulder should be impossible therein, as well as it should be unacceptable to evaluate the whole judging on its part, which is exactly what Eco does in his *Five Moral Pieces*, where he distinguishes criteria applying not to esoterics as a whole, but only to one of its wings, integral traditionalism, which indeed has a number of intersections

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Massimo Introvigne // The Newsletter of the ESSWE. Fall 2012. Vol. 3. No. 2. P. 11.

with Fascism. Besides, the certain dangers should be noted in the blind application of Eco's theory in a broader context, as the antinomy of Rational and Irrational, on which his rejection of hermeticism is based, is quite extensive. The significant part of religious sphere can be more or less attributed to the Irrational, while reasoning by analogy, including the systems of similarities, can be easily found in the Christian exegesis, not only in the body of Hermetic texts.

Yet Eco's theory is of course not without interest, as the Italian semiotician highlighted an important trait of symbolic attitude to the world that adepts of marginal religiosity have, the one he called "hermetic semiosis." Such way of thinking can really be found in the texts of the adherents, and in all ages. Heuristic value of this approach is difficult to overestimate, yet how far it can be used and what implications can be made out of it remains to be discovered in the future.

Eco himself is well aware that his project to identify the hazards of Hermetic semiosis in the history of culture is a losing battle. The main reason for that being the totality of the semiosis itself, as even the arguments aimed at his exposure can easily be subjected to the same infinite interpretations, and finally turn to their polar opposites. This is what can be found in «Foucault's Pendulum», where in the final scene of the novel the hero, who has lost everything because of his passion to play the games of interpretation is sitting and waiting for his death from the hands of the followers of a secret society, while indulging in such reflections:

It makes no difference whether I write or not. They will look for other meanings, even in my silence. That's how They are. Blind to revelation. Malkhut is Malkhut, and that's that. But try telling Them. They of little faith. So I might as well stay here, wait, and look at the hill. It's so beautiful.<sup>39</sup>

According to Eco, it's impossible to explain anything to those who accepted Hermetic semiosis as the only system of interpretation. Like cancer (not by chance one of the heroes of the novel dies of that very disease), it corrodes the critical mind. Therefore, the only thing that remains for Eco is to "... wait, and look at the hill..."

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<sup>39</sup> *Eco U. Foucault's Pendulum*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1989. P. 623.

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В статье рассматривается творчество известного итальянского семиотика Умберто Эко через призму современных исследований в сфере западного эзотеризма. Идея так называемого герметического семиозиса разрабатывалась Эко в целом ряде работ, вышедших после 1980 г.: “Limits of Interpretation”, “Kant e l’ornitorinco”, “Interpretation and Overinterpretation”, “Serenidipities”, “Six Walks in the Fictional Woods». Главной чертой такой истолковательной стратегии Эко считал безграничный семиозис. Основываясь на этих положениях, он развил целую историко-культурную теорию, вписывающую западный эзотеризм (или, как он его именует, «герметизм») в историю мысли и культуры. В таком контексте работы Эко становятся не только семиотическими, но и религиоведческими, поскольку в них представлена система рассматривания западного эзотеризма как историко-культурного и религиозного феномена.

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*(на английском языке)*

Зав. редакцией оперативного выпуска *А.В. Заиченко*  
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