Certain things about postmodernism today feel very familiar. For example, Italian literature (among others) can boast a long tradition of self-reflexive self-theorizing, dating back to Dante's pilgrim/poet doubling and Boccaccio's use of framing devices. Many more recent writers - Volponi, Calvino, Manganelli, Eco - also operate within this formal tradition, but with postmodernity has come a certain, almost embarrassed self-consciousness that in turn has brought with it not a little irony. This irony can be seen in many ways, on many levels of their texts, and with many different functions, not the least important of which is the paradoxical mocking as well as milking of literary conventions and of the authority of the author as both creative writer and critical commentator. In addition, this irony self-reflexively turns back upon the reader - especially the reader as critic - undermining our presumed (or presumptuous) authority as arbiters, as interpreters, as hermeneutic guides. At times (like the present), it seems as if there is little remaining for the critic to do but to repeat the text's own discourse. What do we do, for example, with a novel like *Il pendolo di Foucault* by Umberto Eco - a most puzzling ironic novel in which contradictions get welded into a totalizing vision of order, where life imitates art, where the narrative structure, while seemingly loose and baggy, is in fact obsessively ordered around the form of the occult Tree of the Sefirot, where the individual subject is asserted, even at the point of annihilation?

Unlike his first novel, this second is not really a traditional detective story: it ends rather than begins with the requisite deaths, but there is a plot - indeed a plethora of plots wedded together into a «Plan». The detective as the metaphor of order and logic is ironized in a lot of post-
modern fiction - by the decisive presence of chance or accident - as in Il nome della rosa - or by hyperbolic expansion - as in this portrait of the totalizing mind imploding. The flip side of positivism - hermetic thought - here structures a novel whose self-confirming, circular mode of including mutually contradictory elements is at one and the same time put into motion and called into question. For the mystic adept, every word becomes a sign of something else, the truth of what is not said. Therefore one must learn to read with suspicion, lest something be missed. Irony, of course, is also a sign of something else, the not said, and to be sensitive to irony is also to read with suspicion. Il pendolo di Foucault shows what happens to hermetic thought when it confronts the irony that is structurally its twin.

In 1986 Eco gave a course in Bologna on hermetic semiosis, the interpretative practice of seeing both the world and texts in terms of relations of sympathy and resemblance. You may recall that in The Order of Things (Les Mots et les choses), Michel Foucault (in one of the title’s most obvious allusions) had argued that this kind of thought was historically limited: a Renaissance paradigm which gave way over time to a modern, scientific one. Eco, however, argued that this kind of thought never really disappeared, that there was no final epistemic break: instead, hermetic semiosis developed clandestinely in the medieval period, triumphed in the humanistic rediscovery of hermetic writings in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and continues to exist in parallel to the quantitative science that then developed - often crossing it, more often opposing it. Newton, for example, is known to have combined modern science and cabalistic speculation. More recently, think of Derrida's statement that «Between rationalism and mysticism, there is... a certain complicity» - or would the better image be that of the swinging of a certain pendulum between the two extremes? In this novel, we have three erudite and playful editors - Casaubon, Belbo, Diotallevi - who invent a Plan about the Knights Templars' plot to rule the world. Out of data and desire, with the aid of a computer program to randomize information, they set out deliberately and ironically to deploy - rather than decode - hermetic semiosis. Their rule was simple: «Suspect, only suspect». The ironic play in English

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on E.M. Forster's «Connect, only connect» marks its exaggeration, not its negation. They start with verifiable facts; the fictionalizing is in the «order of things», so to speak, and my echoing of Foucault is deliberate. Soon, everything from the cabala to Bacon to Shakespeare to the Templars to the Rosicrucians to the Freemasons to the Jesuits to Hitler are linked in a plot whose climax should take place (by the Plan's reasoning) and does take place (thanks to credulous believers) in Paris at the Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers where hangs Foucault's pendulum — the laboratory proof of the earth's diurnal rotation.

The three Planners have to keep reminding themselves that the idea is to create not discover the Templars' secret, that their Plan is a fake. But the problem is that gradually they lose the ability to tell the similar from the identical, the metaphoric from the real. They come to decide that their story is plausible, even rational, and because it is backed by facts, it must be true. Unfortunately, others also decide likewise. So, what, if anything, makes Eco's plot different from this Plan? I would say: irony. Without irony, Eco's novel would be an exemplar of hermetic semiosis; with irony, it becomes simultaneously both an exemplar and a critique, and thereby sets up a way of defining the postmodern.

This is «both/and» thinking of the first order and, as the temporal pendulum swings, medieval hermeticism and contemporary postmodernism are shown to share the ability to juggle «complexity and contradiction» in what postmodern architect Robert Venturi calls «the difficult unity of inclusions». Il pendolo di Foucault - structured as tightly, indeed rigidly, as any modernist novel - carries structure to such an extreme that it implodes; it ironically turns in on itself and metamorphoses into a postmodern and «open» work, by Eco's own definition. It both continues and contravenes the modernist project. The pendulum swings. And it is irony that provides the magnetic field to make it swing. In calling Il nome della rosa postmodern, Eco foregrounded this double-talking trope: «Irony, metalinguistic play, enunciation squared. Thus, with the modern, anyone who does not understand the game can only reject it, but with the postmodern, it is possible not to understand the game and yet to take it seriously. Which is, after all, the quality (the risk) of irony»". In Il pendolo di Foucault, one might argue, it is the ironizing of the specifically modernist elements of both reflexivity and intertextuality that activates the particular game of resemblances and connections. A few of the rules of this reflexive and intertextual game are what I would now like to address.

For the reader, referred to in the text (in a parody of T.S. Eliot parodying


Baudelaire) as «apocryphe lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère», textual reflexivity operates at many levels. Each of the 120 sections begins with a citation - presumably one of the 120 that the narrating Casaubon found in his friend Belbo’s computer files. These 120 sections are divided into 10 chapters of uneven length, each labelled according to one of the parts of the mystic Tree of the Sefirot and each usually explained within the text itself. The first (Keter), for instance, is called the Crown, the beginning, the primal void; the second (Hokhmah) is strangely described as the sign of wisdom in a box - strangely, that is, until you realize that this is the section in which Casaubon finds out how to enter Belbo’s computer system and achieve, if not wisdom, at least information.

Eco has printed a visual representation of the Tree of the Sefirot as the frontispiece to the novel - not merely to help us follow the order, for that is not difficult. I think it’s there to help us visualize the novel’s swing, its rhythm, for the movement of the order of the named chapters is, not surprisingly, that of the horizontal swing of a pendulum from side to side, also forming an elliptical movement, if viewed vertically, rather than horizontally. The real pendulum of Foucault, of course, does the same thing. In naming his novel *Il pendolo di Foucault*, Eco was not terribly subtle in pointing us to this level of reflexivity in the text, but perhaps there is more. This pendulum, hung from what the narrator calls the only Fixed Point in the universe, eternally unmoving, but representing, indeed demonstrating, the working of time", is as inherently paradoxical a symbol as the place in which it hangs. The truly bizarre Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers in Paris is a post-revolutionary museum, deliberately set up in a church (St-Martin-des-Champs); it is a poorly kept museum of industry and technology housed in a gothic priory, and that mix makes it the perfect setting for a climactic occult ritual.

From the first pages of this novel the Conservatoire’s pendulum is presented to us in language both mystic and scientific, both overblown and precise, signalling the swing between magic and reason. But what we might call pendular thinking, oscillating between opposites, has always characterized Eco’s work - creative and theoretical. We need only remember the importance of non-order to order, instability to stability in his semiotic theorizing, or the undercutting of reason by chance in *Il nome della rosa*. As the second novel progresses, its titular pendulum becomes, in fact, a plurivalent sign whose allegorical meanings proliferate in the text to form a complex set of reflexive mises-en-abyme. At the climax of the novel, as Belbo hangs from the pendulum, however, something changes. While it is described both as Belbo’s Sinai and as his Calvary,

the ironic paradoxes that have constituted its reflexive identity seem to resolve, as the pendulum is said to be no symbol, no sign, symptom, allusion, metaphor, or enigma: we are told that it was what it was and did not stand for anything else. Yet, it is hard not to notice that this resolution into non-paradox, non-irony comes ironically at the moment in which a literalization of the so-called postmodern death of the subject results in the very affirmation of subjectivity, when the so-called postmodern crisis in representation is in fact denied in both literary and scientific terms: we read a letter from a scientist explaining precisely how a pendulum would work if a man were hanging from it - a literal re-presentation of the scene we have just read. What one critic calls the charm of a pendular mind? endures, no matter what the thematic and structural resolution that might seem to stop the pendulum's swing. These ideological ironies, these undercuttings of contemporary truisms, constitute yet another layer of reflexive mise-en-abyme.

There are still other layers, of course. The naming of characters, as well as of the novel itself, functions ironically. The Foucault of the title is both the nineteenth-century French physicist, Jean Bernard Léon Foucault (1819-1868), and Michel Foucault (1926-1984), the modern French theorist of the «order of things». Casaubon is the name of both a scholarly character satirized as the great resemblance-seeker, the author of the Key to All Mythologies, in George Eliot's 1871 novel, Middlemarch, and a Renaissance philologist, Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614) who was known for his apposite but profuse illustrative commentaries on texts. Here perhaps it is Eco as much as his character who is (self-)ironized. But this historical Casaubon also wrote a book which challenged the authenticity of certain hermetic texts which were crucial to Renaissance occultism.

The title of my own text here contains an intertextual connection that I was unable to resist making in reading Eco's novel. Douglas Adams, the author of the infamous trilogy in four parts, Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, has also created a series of parodic detective novels around a character he calls by the pseudonym Dirk Gently. The yellow pages advertisement for this fellow is as follows:

**DIRK GENTLY'S**

**HOLISTIC DETECTIVE AGENCY**

We solve the whole crime
We find the whole person

Phone today for the whole solution to your problem
(Missing cats and messy divorces a speciality)
33a Peckender St., London NI 01-354-91128

7 A. Berardinelli, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
He describes his unorthodox methods as «holistic and, in a very proper sense of the word, chaotic»? - that is, related to Chaos Theory - because he operates by investigating the fundamental interconnectedness of all things as a way of working towards what he calls «a Grand Unified Field Theory of Everything»!". You can see why the intertext was irresistible. Dirk Gently is to detection what the Planners are to plotting; he could probably undo the plots they create. While this holistic connection might be rather idiosyncratic on my part, I don’t think another one is: the one that would see *il pendolo di Foucault* as Eco’s version of Peirce’s «unlimited semiosis» - here as much ironized as invoked. The literalization and the exaggeration (the not only unlimited but rampant semiosis) of the Plan are the most obvious signals of irony. But another is that, on the level of theory, the immediate contact of signs with their referents that is not part of Eco’s (or Peirce’s) theory is what the climax of the novel is all about. The autonomy of the semiotic system (the Plan) is jeopardized by the believers’ need to link signs and world. There are fatal consequences here of the ironic literalization of the theory that sign systems pre-exist reality and are thus autonomous of any referent.

There are many other reflexive recalls of Eco’s own theorizing in this novel. For example, the Planners’ (and Eco’s) holistic thinking is relatable to Eco’s notion of the encyclopedia, as well as to his work on abduction. Indeed, this novel is an example of abduction run amok, with the Planners making too much meaning by connections and relations between signs. It is certainly an example of what Eco has wittily called «cogito interruptus», a mode of thought common «both to the insane and to the authors of a reasoned ‘illogic’», a mode that sees the world as inhabited by symbols or symptoms!.

One result of all this proliferation of relations, all this holistic and reflexive thinking, is to cast doubt on the «naturalness" of any narrative - including that of the novel itself. The Plan is an ordered, narrativized, connected account of historical data; the fictionalizing is in the construction, in the connections - and these are ironically man-made (not, significantly, woman-made). As in many postmodern «historiographic metafictions»!", history and fiction are both revealed as constructions, fictionalizations. In showing but also ironizing the process of construction within the novel itself, Eco has produced yet another aesthetically self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme* of the narrative act.

The linear form of narrative writing is also parodied in the novel as the Planners construct their plot from data drawn from the computer, which they have named Abulafia. So the plotting moves from a (Abulafia) to b (Belbo, the computer operator) to c (Casaubon, the narrator) to d (Diotallevi, the man whose cancerous body enacts its own diabolical plan). But Abulafia, the computer itself, takes on allegorical - and ironic - function. As the novel progresses, it implicitly becomes the sign of the true secret of world power: not telluric currents, as the Planners speculate, but information is the real source of power in today's world. An ironized Grail, it nourishes, heals, wounds, blinds, strikes down, as the text tells us. But the ironic play does not stop there, as you might well by now expect: the computer's very binary thinking is both emblematic of the pendular thought of the novel and tied in with the occult numerology of the Plan. And Abulafia also has a role to play in the ironizing of the Foucault as well as the pendulum of the title. In The Order of Things, Foucault wrote: «man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and... he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form!». In the age of information technology, many have wanted to see the computer as that «new form» of knowledge. But, as it is presented in the novel, the computer can never replace the human, for it cannot create knowledge, only combine and randomize knowledge that is given to it and even that is done more effectively by a human - the assistant, Gudrun.

Perhaps the greatest Foucaltian irony in the novel's presentation of the computer, however, is that its limitations - its ability only to randomize, to use only what is fed to it - turn out to be the limits that Foucault ascribes to the mechanisms of resemblance in pre-seventeenth-century hermetic thought, when he writes of «the plethoric yet absolutely poverty-stricken character of this knowledge»!, always working with the same things: «Hence those immense columns of compilation, hence their monotony»!. Some reviewers have said similar things about Il pendolo di Foucault, of course. The novel's intertextuality also, as I have been suggesting, literalizes and ironizes at the same time many of Foucault's statements about occult thought based on a theory of resemblance: the Plan is its literal enactment and the irony comes from both its overtness of construction and its temporal dislocation. If Foucault were right, this mode of thought should have died out by the end of the Renaissance; but it does not - at least here.

Even without the signal of the title, it would be hard to miss the many

14 The Order of Things., op. cit., p. 30.
15 Ibid.
Foucauldian intertexts that Eco invokes and renders ironic. Parody is clearly one of the major modes of reflexivity in *I/pendolo di Foucault*, making it into an «intertextual collage» - his term to describe the film *Casablanca*. It's simply hard to read any of Eco's essays of the last decade or so without seeing allusions to or reflexive *mises-en-abyme* of the novel he was writing. Reviewers have had fun pointing to other intertexts to the novel besides the author's own works, making connections to Calvino and Del Giudice, as well as to the films featuring both Sam Spade and Indiana Jones. That these latter are overt in the novel itself makes this task somewhat straightforward. Everything is fodder for Eco's broad echoic cultural play. Popular culture and high art meet in all of Eco's work, theoretical and novelistic, and in all cases the allusions are not hidden. A few quick examples: as Casaubon - and Eco - know, any story about a pendulum inevitably suggests Edgar Allan Poe's «The Pit and the Pendulum» and indeed Eco tries to one-up Poe in the eerily macabre and the terrifyingly fatal. Similarly, any tale about the occult, with references to the Tetragrammaton, the names of Yahweh, and the aleph recalls such tales by Jorge Luis Borges as «Death and the Compass» and «The Aleph».

In Belbo's computer files, there are also many direct citations or ironic allusions to the work of T.S. Eliot, Conrad, Joyce, and Proust - that is, to the modernist masters. And, as Hugh Kenner" has put it, the modernist aesthetic and linguistic paradigm is that of a combinatory process within a closed field, where what is important is the relations of elements with each other. Suddenly, when you look at it that way, modernism too reveals itself to be modelled on hermetic semiosis. If Belbo is the modernist, is Casaubon the postmodernist? Certainly he sounds like it, at times, clearly echoing Derrida and Barthes, as well as Foucault. But one of the features that makes it difficult to decide precisely what kind of allegorical fun Eco might be having with the tenets of postmodernism, as well as modernism, is that irony. While irony is clearly a frequent trope of the postmodern, it also characterizes much modernist writing. I have been arguing that *I/pendolo di Foucault* is an obsessively structured novel that is about the implosion of structuring. It is also a novel that foregrounds its own ironies, as characters talk constantly about irony or yearn for its distancing control.

The trope of the unspoken and the unsaid is indeed a privileged one here. Belbo writes on his computer that the irony of language is that it is the gift nature has given us to keep silent the secrets of our spirit. The structural and thematic irony of this statement, of course, is that this is a novel in which there is no final Secret - or, if there is, it is simply kept silent. The rug is constantly pulled out from under the feet of the reader. Chapter epigraphs that conventionally look forward, guiding

the interpretation of the reader, here often look backward and comment ironically on the last chapter or else become totally integrated in (and illustrate) the holistic logic of the Plan.

In a novel full of images of inversion, of upside-down worlds, of mirrored reversals, it is not surprising to find many allegories of ironic hermeneutics. I mentioned earlier that irony demanded an “attitude of suspicion” as much as does hermetic thought. If II nome della rosa is, by Eco’s own admission, «irony-clad» in its obvious scaffolding, then I would like to suggest that Il pendolo di Foucault is «irony-clad». One of the effects of this pervasive irony is that ambiguity reigns, even unto the end. How are we to read Belbo’s death? Is it murder or suicide? Is it accidental or planned? The language of the Conservatoire death scene, as narrated by Casaubon, is a virtuoso playing with the inventions of the nineteenth-century physicist, Léon Foucault (after whom were named, not only a pendulum, but magnetic currents, mirroring prisms, a polarizer, and a «knife-edge» test - all of which figure in the language of the novel’s final scene). So too do the concepts of the twentieth-century Michel Foucault play their role, once again. In fact, this scene and the remainder of the novel that follows it can be read as an ironic literalization, once again, of the later Foucault's description of the semiosis of resemblance, as described specifically in the chapter on «The Prose of the World» in The Order of Things. In fact, as he presents it, resemblance becomes the precise inversion of the trope of irony. Both «require signatures» to be interpreted, so that «the space inhabited» by both «becomes like a vast open book; it bristles with written signs... All that remains is to decipher them»! Irony becomes a kind of inverted extension or perverse variant of hermetic similitude, exploiting what Foucault calls the inevitable if «slight degree of non-coincidence between the resemblances» 19. This slight degree of non-coincidence provides the space for and of irony. What Foucault writes about the process of deciphering similitude also defines the intent of ironic reading: «to find a way from the visible mark to that which is being said by it and which, without that mark, would lie like unspoken speech, dormant» 20.

Eco has been called an author who has irony in his soul; his novel has been dubbed a work of irreverence and irony - and no doubt this

18 Foucault, op. cit., p. 27.
19 Ibid., p. 30.
20 Ibid., p. 32.
21 C. Vita-Finzi, op. cit., p. 225.
is what caused the Pope to get upset at what he saw as a desecration of faith. But just as, in Eco's words, «If Lacan is interesting it's because he resumes Parrhenides-"», so Eco is interesting in part at least because he resumes Foucault. Remember: he once defined the postmodern as «the orientation of anyone who has learned the lesson of Foucault, i.e., that power is not something unitary that exists outside us» 24. You might also recall that Foucault once described himself (not unironically) as participating in «the great warm and tender Freemasonry of useless erudition-". The pendulum has come full swing again, but with another of those «slight degrees of non-coincidence» that turns resemblance into irony, hermetic semiosis into postmodern semiosis. There is a reason, then, that postmodernism looks familiar. Foucault characterized sixteenth-century language as that which «simultaneously promises and postpones26, as what offers all signs as «written matter for further discourses?". What Eco sees as the «slittamento inarrestabile del senso»28 that fuelled hermetic thought has become the postmodern deferral of meaning, the intertextually ironic, deferring deference to other texts, other commentaries, other discourses. In Foucault's words: «It is the traversal of this futile yet fundamental space that the text of literature traces from day to day»?", So too does criticism.

23 Travels in Hyperreality, op. cit., p. 127.
24 S. Rosso, op. cit., p. 4.
26 The Order of Things..., op. cit., p. 41.
27 Ibid., p. 41.
29 The Order of Things, p. 44.