

## ***Numero Zero* – Eco's Last Rose or the Fading Away of the Mysterious Flame**

Umberto Eco is not only one of the seminal writers, but is also one of the seminal intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There's no need to talk in length about his contributions to the fields of literature and semiology, as well as about the impact of his work on countless generations in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His encyclopedic knowledge, renaissance curiosity and openness to all aspects of modern life are reflected in the multitude of genres in which he tried his pen during his life. This is attested by the fact that he was a productive writer to the end, as if all the knowledge that he had accumulated during his rich and fruitful life as a scholar and writer could never cease combining, communicating and creating new meanings, i.e. new stories. His last book *Numero Zero* was published in 2015, only a year before he departed from this world. The Macedonian reading public, thanks to the efforts of the publishing house Ars Lamina, had the opportunity almost at the same time as the rest of the world to read his last ever book in the translation by Maria Grazia Cvetkovska. Thus, we thought it would be interesting to check out whether Eco has maintained his usual high writing and intellectual standards in his last document as a writer.

### **The Echo of the Novels Before**

Even during the first reading, Eco's approach to the subject of *Numero Zero* seems quite familiar to us. One can make various parallels to his previous novels, as well to many of his more essayistic texts. Yet, the novel to which it is most closely connected and it most resembles is *Foucault's Pendulum*, whether it is because of the similar theme, the modes of the genres and narrative techniques it uses, or the similarities in the characters that populate both novels. This is not so odd as it might seem at first, having in mind Eco's own statement in a recent interview that he had already the idea for the novel at the time of the publication of the *Foucault's Pendulum*, though obviously putting it onto paper was left for a more convenient time in the future.

We can see that all the best features of Eco's novels are also present in *Numero Zero*, but in a rather more skeletal form. They serve as a frame of a loom or a matrix in which he inserts all the different literary, historical and political events, persons and genres, while the shuttle that moves along and weaves the thread of the tapestry of the novel is the familiar detective genre and style of narration. What is prescient about the genre of the detective novel is that the seed from which it grows is that of doubt, the suspicion of a violation, the traces of a potential crime, the sense of the inadequacy of the reality that surrounds us. Only societies that have managed a long sustained period of relative stability succeed in suppressing that sense of doubt into the dark alleys sprawled in the outskirts of the city where life is neither recorded, nor sanctioned by the official narratives. Yet, due to this both the life and the stories the periphery harbors are covered by a veil of mystique and secrecy which affords them the status of credibility by the very fact that neither their origin, nor their sources can ever be fully explored. However, no society can forever maintain the status quo, regardless of the fact that its legitimizing narratives make that very same promise or at least do everything in their power to stabilize the status quo. With the appearance of the first cracks, all the

suppressed stories rise from the periphery and disturb the carefully maintained balance, turn a mirror to reality and at least temporarily destabilize it.

Conspiracy theories are especially productive in this deconstruction and reconstruction of the process of textualising history as a mode of memory and form of perception, due to the fact that by their very nature they are unstable, fluid and easily adaptable to the changing circumstances in society. They always constitute apocryphal texts to the official history and serve as a repository of unauthorized historical facts or interpretations of famous historical events or persons. As such, they also carry within the doubt about their own validity, as well as about the validity of the texts of the official history. They are semipermeable texts without a truly defined boundary of interpretation, always allowing the outflow, as well as the influx of new elements in its semantic horizon and mechanism. Matter of fact, they need the constant integration of new elements or at the very least the recombining of the existing ones in order to keep its driving force alive, the doubt in the stability of the perceived reality. Maybe it's because of their semantic fecundity and the tested and proven formula of the mystification and demystification of conspiracy theories in metafictional historical novels, that Eco once again easily reached for them and used them in a novel with a similar subject and plot.

However, one gets the impression that the labyrinthine structure of *Foucault's Pendulum* in which the main protagonist Casaubon descends into the underworld of conspiracies and secret societies as a veritable Alice in conspiracy land, has exhausted the creative force and the source material to such an extent that not much was left for a second book within the same genre. In the former book, Eco collects and weaves together all the well-known and those not-so-well-known, exotic, religious and political conspiracy theories that he studied as part of his research into the medieval European culture and literature. Since no matter how comprehensive and fertile that source material and subject has proven in the past, Eco using it in writing his historical metafictional novels such as the aforementioned *Foucault's Pendulum*, *Baudolino*, *The Prague Cemetery*, ultimately they were exhausted and Eco was only left with the contemporary history of Italy as a source of inspiration. Certainly, his homeland and its modern history, politics and culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have already been a frequent subject for his columns, essays and novels such as the *Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, where one must notice a special fascination by the troublesome relationship of Italy with its fascist past.

### **The Numero Zero Paradox**

The novel is based on a somewhat paradoxical premise, though one that allows for the destabilization of one of the official discourses through which the perception of reality is formed and presented – the discourse of journalism. While this function in *Foucault's Pendulum* is given to the literary discourse, symbolized and located in the medium of publishing, in *Numero Zero* this role is played by journalism as the medium and discourse which is dominant in creating public opinion in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The premise of the story is that a famous business tycoon Vimercate, who is always lurking in the shadows of the

story or is residing somewhere in the spaces unattainable to mere mortals where the real decision-making takes place, decides to start a magazine called “Tomorrow” which would serve as his vehicle to reach the highest realms of power and business. However, the magazine is not intended for the general public, but its purpose is for its articles and reporting to be used as a form of blackmail or threat against the ruling institutions, which in order to be rid of it will have to either purchase it or allow Vimercate an entrance into their ranks.

To that aim, the editor-in-chief Simei recruits a ragtag group of failed journalists from a whole assortment of different media, hacks that are ready to write anything just to earn a check. The newsroom includes journalists who used to work in the tabloids (Maia Fresia), the crime news (Cambria), a police informant (Lucidi), crossword puzzle maker (Palatino) and a language editor (Costanza), as well the character which is the main source of conspiracy theories in the novel, Braggadocio – which means a braggart, a loudmouth. Among them, we also find the main character Colonna, a failed writer who other than as a journalist, is also hired to write the memoirs of the editor-in-chief about the period of work on the magazine, entitled “Tomorrow:Yesterday”. This word play points to another paradox in the operation of the magazine, which is that the newsroom is working on editions that will report on events that have already happened in the past, but under the guise that they are tomorrow’s news. As is the case with any paradox, the collision of two opposite terms results in a crack which sheds a light on the structure of our surroundings. Through the use of this premise, Eco sheds a light on the nature of the discourse through which we communicate our reality, through which we construct our past, but also construct the text of the present, and that is the discourse of history. One of Eco’s dominant themes is the way in which history as a recording of the past, but also a reservoir of societal memory is dependent on its nature as a text, but also how it impacts and helps create our perception of the reality of the present. This is why the loss of memory or the loss of specific texts as part of the cultural memory of a civilization is a frequent motif in the works of Eco. Yet, at the same it’s also a strategy to uncover the process of how we construct history and our perception of it. Eco, in his literary treatment of this topic as an experienced and skillful semiotician reveals how the process and the strategies for creation of narratives are also used to express and model the relations of power in the society. The perception of reality is constructed by using events and persons from the past as building blocks. The past functions as a kaleidoscope through which we see the present, while the official media and discourses determine the point where the kaleidoscope stops and the prism and color of our perception. In order to explain the present, we always turn to the past, while at the same time shaping our expectations of the future. This is also the origin of the phenomena that everything has already been said, everything has already happened, history just repeats itself, very often as a farce.

The journalists therefore are preparing the so-called zero editions, a type of ur-texts, pre-texts that talk about their presumed present from a position in the future, while at the same time pretending to have been part of that present that they are detailing, thus acquiring the status of bearers of truth. Such texts are well known throughout history, starting from Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, through the New Testament in the Bible, all the way to all the myriad of texts used as basis for conspiracy theories, such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Based on their version of truth, their followers or believers proclaim themselves and the texts as the only bearers of truth, which in reality only resulted in the proliferation of such texts as bearers of truth. In the eyes of their disciples, all these conspiracy theory texts have

the same relevance or weight and serve as raw material to feed the ceaseless machine producing conspiracy theories. In *Numero Zero*, Eco rightfully identifies the media as one of the major culprits, besides the secret services, for the ever increasing presence of these theories in this era of endless flow of information. Of course, Eco doesn't miss the opportunity to parody in his best manner the illusion that the print media are all-knowing and all-powerful, depicting them as puppets of business, politics, the mafia and the secret services in the corrupt Italian society. They are mockingly revealed as false prophets in a variety of ways, none more funny than the fact that they are unable to foresee the popularity of mobile phones, or deriding their false seriousness as media by underestimating their public and including all sorts of popular rubrics such as horoscopes, obituaries and popular ads at the expense of more serious culture.

The main character in the novel, Colonna, takes part in two relationships which impact his attitude towards the main theme of the novel, but also to a certain extent undermine and challenge his rather cynical and down-to-earth perception of reality. The first relationship is with the younger and idealistic female coworker Maia, while the other is his relation with Braggadocio who introduces him into the mysterious and vertiginous world of conspiracies. From a symbolical point of view, the former relationship leads him to the light, to the pure and clean air and nature, while the latter pulls him into the darkness of an underground world. This is further illustrated by the locations where they usually meet. He meets Maia in the light of the bistros, in the cosy atmosphere of her apartment, ultimately in her villa in the country. On the contrary, his meetings with Braggadocio during which he discloses the secret about Musolini's fate after his alleged execution, all take place in murky taverns in the undesirable part of town, as well as in the tombs of a monastery, surrounded by the dried bones and ghosts of the past, a veritable metaphor for the death, sickness and hell in which conspiracy theory always end up. In fact, the novel in this regard once again echoes the plot of *Foucault's Pendulum*, where the main character is torn between the hope for a new beginning that is offered by love and the madness that he descends into as he tries to interpret the secret history of the world. There the plot revolves around the historical conspiracies about the Holy Grail, while in *Numero Zero* Eco works with a rather more limited theme in scope and more local story. The conspiracy theory in this novel revolves around the holy grail of fascism and the far-right wing parties in Italy, i.e. the story that Mussolini survived World War II and secretly escaped and lived in South America.

Once again, Eco leads the plot with a deft hand to its logical conclusion where the deeper the characters are invested in the conspiracies, the more a twisted reality seems to expand and take over their lives. In both novels, their quest attracts the attention of mysterious outside forces that threaten to punish them for their original sin of reaching for the forbidden fruit of knowledge. In *Numero Zero*, this results with the murder of Braggadocio and Colonna's paranoid fear that he is followed which leads to his escape to Maia's country house, somewhat similar to the fate of the main characters in *Foucault's Pendulum*. However, one of the essential differences with its pre-text is that this time Eco does not provide his hero with the option to escape his paranoia through the healing power of love or via a start of a new life in some exotic former colonial location where it would be easy to surrender to the illusion of having a normal life. No, in his last novel Eco takes away even that last illusion and his hero becomes aware or becomes just convinced that the whole world has turned into an exotic colonial location, subject to the same forces of manipulation and exploitation that

rule everything, no matter their title or brand of ideology. As far as the narrative that the media and the centres of power produce is concerned, even Italy and its citizens have become part of the colonized Third World.

*“That is why I responded sharply to Maia.*

*-My love, can't you see that, step by step, even Italy is turning into the lands of your dreams that you want to escape to? If we have managed first to accept, and then to forget all the things shown by the BBC, that means we are slowly getting accustomed to losing our sense of shame. (...) All we have to do is wait: when it definitely becomes just like a third world country, our country will turn into a lovely place, a real paradise, a veritable Copacabana everywhere you go, the place where 'a woman is a queen, a woman is a dream'.”*

### **Instead of a summary**

As we have already detailed, *Numero Zero* talks about the events in the more recent Italian history, focusing more on the political and criminal events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though containing echoes also of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the modern Italian state was formed. Due to this fact, all the events and plots in the book might seem distant and obscure to the ordinary Macedonian reader, especially the one unacquainted with political events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The translator Maria Grazia Cvetkovska has done solid work in providing explanations in footnotes, though the scope of names and events prevents any attempt at full clarification. Still, Eco wouldn't be the master of his craft if he didn't imbue his work with multiple layers of complexity which helps the novel rise from the level of a run-of-the-mill historical detective novel. Macedonian readers can draw quite a number of interesting parallels with the current situation both globally and at home. First, we can find the close relations between media, business and politics in their attempt to manipulate public opinion, especially through the massive use of propaganda methods for the purpose of distorting reality. Furthermore, Eco with *Numero Zero* provides his readers with a manual on how methods of manipulation are used by today's media, examples of which we can find on a daily basis in our newspapers and on our screens. The awareness that we are under constant surveillance and control by the secret services echoes throughout the novel, symbolized by the ominous presence of the police informant Lucidi, a feeling which has become ever more present for Macedonian readers with the latest scandals in our country. Finally, the depiction of the presence, even one can say the contamination of the public sphere and discourse with the omnipresent conspiracy theories both on the global and the national level is one of the hallmarks of *Numero Zero*. This phenomenon has been greatly aided by the explosion of new media in the modern digital age and society, media that constantly hunger for new content and whose needs are best met by the process of creation of new and recombination of old conspiracy theories, an unending source of new content. They help feed the monster – the internet and the media universe – which then continues to distort our sense and perception of reality.

In conclusion, we must say that we don't find Eco in the best writing shape of his life in *Numero Zero*, but that doesn't make this a bad novel. It's just not the master piece that we are accustomed to receive from him. One can even look at the novel as a stylistic exercise in how a novel by Umberto Eco should look like. As we have already pointed out, he goes back

to all of his well-known topics, the characterization and the plot feel oddly familiar from his previous novels, as well as his encyclopedic knowledge and sense of humor, satire and irony. However, all of these elements are joined together in somewhat elementary fashion when compared to his previous works. Maybe it was the local nature of his topic or his rather old age that prevented him from delving deeper or put more thought in the development of his latest book, we cannot be sure. To a certain degree, *Numero Zero* represents a version of all his previous texts, which makes this novel a good read or introduction into his oeuvre for a novice reader. Or, maybe you can see it as a fun read, a book to accompany you on a trip, on holiday or before you go to sleep. Eco, as a writer who has always maintained that literature should primarily be fun, I would think would be pleased with that, too.