The message whose message it is that there is no message. (Foucault's Pendulum)


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Abstract:

An essay on reflexive paradoxes and the paradoxes of 'self-knowledge and self-reference' in Umberto Eco's 'Foucault's Pendulum' is presented. The question of how to read a text such as 'Foucault's,' which conveys the message that there is no message, is explored. Called a self-voiding text, the literal meaning of the novel is examined. It is suggested that Eco's intention with the novel is to help readers understand what self-referential paradoxes teach about meaning.


"The most powerful secret [in other words~], is a secret without content"

(Foucault's Pendulum, 621).

"Let us be realistic: there is nothing more meaningful than a text which asserts that there is no meaning"

(Limits of Interpretation, 7)

Since classical times, philosophers have been fascinated by puzzles of reflexivity. "Reflexivity," as Lawson points out, "as a turning back on oneself, a form of self-awareness, has been part of philosophy since its inception" (9). Champlin identifies several forms of reflexive paradoxes: self-deception (Can you deceive yourself by telling yourself a lie?); self-contradiction ("p and not-p"); self-movement and self-causation (Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas); self-evidence and self-explanatoriness (vs. petitio principii); self-killing and self-generation of life; self-membership of classes (Russell's paradox); self-knowledge and self-reference (the Liar). Since Foucault's Pendulum is without a doubt the most suggestive--and fun--romp through the thicket of reflexivity since Douglas Hofstadter's Godel, Escher, Bach, let's entangle ourselves in the "moronic thinking" of these "strange loops." We may not become converted, or even corrupted, but I'm betting we'll become addicted.

For two thousand years of philosophy, arriving at a reflexive paradox was considered unmistakable evidence that there was something very wrong with one's assumptions. One was counseled to go back and start from the beginning. "So long as the security of the possibility of
knowledge remained" (Lawson, 30), philosophers could rest content in the conviction that self-reflexive paradoxes indicated a fundamental error in one's assumptions. "They~ must be avoided, or in some way contained" (Lawson, 125).

The ploys used to avoid or contain were often similar: if you deceive yourself then it is because one part of you does the deceiving and another is deceived; if a proposition is self-contradictory, it is because one part contradicts another part; if something moves itself then it is because one part does the moving and another is the moved. And so the problem is circumvented by maintaining that nothing strictly speaking deceives itself, contradicts itself or moves itself. It is for this reason that Kant relegates any ascription of teleology (which the eighteenth century understood as self-organization) to only the regulative and not the constitutive judgment. Self-organization cannot be explained because it is essentially a non-linear phenomenon, "a special kind of causality" unknown to us (cf. Kant, 23, 65).

I

Because this essay is about Foucault's Pendulum I am interested only in those reflexive paradoxes which Champlain calls the paradoxes of "self-membership of classes" (Russell's paradox) and those of "self-knowledge and self-reference" (the Liar), whose common characteristic is their reliance on reflexivity in combination with generality and negation (172). Bertrand Russell's solution to these paradoxes is the well-known "theory of types," which bears a certain resemblance to earlier approaches, although instead of dividing the problem into parts at the same level, he distinguished between predicates at various levels or orders. One can avoid the apparent paradox of the sentence "Everything I say is false" by postulating that the sentence itself is of a higher logical type than those sentences to which it refers and indirectly presupposes.

The twentieth century circumvents paradoxes of reflexivity, in other words, by postulating a meta-level in which the contradiction is resolved or taken up. The problem, of course, reappears if the higher level itself generates a further paradox. So either one is left with an endless regress of meta-levels, or "in the end there must be a level at which the claim 'There is no truth' no longer applies" (Lawson, 18). From approximately 1650 to 1800 it was supposed that at this ultimate level Truth not only exists, it can be discovered if we find the correct description that accurately (1:1) represents it.

"Modernity (Toulmin) claimed that the timely, historical, concrete and particular were of no concern to philosophy. Truth was achieved when one's descriptions corresponded to a level of reality that is universal, stable, unchanging and eternal. Accordingly, mind was assumed to function as a "mirror of nature" (Rorty), discovering concepts and natural kinds, rules and principles, which mapped (represented) this reality. In no way were the embodied, cultural or imaginative aspects of human beings thought to taint principles thus discovered. Observation and description were supposed not to affect, much less constitute, the observed. Kant's epistemological "Copernican revolution" signaled the end of Modernity, but its splendid architecture did not collapse easily: the notion of descriptions transparent to the world makes a brief reappearance in Logical positivism's "atomic sentences."
Fifty-five years or so ago, however, Kurt Godel proved that there is no ultimate, all-embracing meta-level, that no formal system can be complete as well as consistent, its incompleteness being due to its inability to include in itself statements about itself. Philosophy was forced to recognize, as Nietzsche had insisted, that self-referential paradoxes are inescapable. With the work of Thomas Kuhn philosophy of science was confronted with the historical, temporal, contextual embeddedness of the practice of science. One can say that Wittgenstein's about-face from the Tractatus to the Philosophical Investigations symbolizes the philosophical phase-change that was taking place. Post-modern philosophy finds itself wondering reflexively about the relationship between symbols and the context that gives rise to meaning.

Explicitly acknowledging reflexivity significantly alters the system of signification, reinterpreting old philosophical rules and thus causing their evolution. The evolutionary change Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida effect is marked in philosophy's shift "from a world of the individual subject to a world of the text" (Lawson, 126). The reason the text that asserts that there is no meaning is the most meaningful of texts is that it is about meaning. And about the limits of meaning mediated by symbols.

What's Eco up to in this tale of the secret whose secret it is that there is no secret? Foucault's Pendulum is a textual world whose message is that there is no message, that attempts to find a final, fixed point on which to hang one's pendulum will meet with death. That the only final, fixed point is death. How should we read a self-voiding text like this?

In The Limits of Interpretation Eco states that there are two ways to read a text: the first, semantic or semiosic interpretation, "is the result of the process by which an addressee, facing a Linear Text Manifestation, fills it up with a given meaning." The second, critical or semiotic interpretation, is "a metalinguistic activity . . . which aims at describing and explaining for which formal reason a given text produces a given response" (54). Eco insists that critical readers look first for a text's "literal" meaning, given by the historical period in which the work is written (not the intention of the author), as well as by the context within the fictional "small world" of the work itself.

In opposition to the current fashion which, since deconstruction's "il n' y a pas de hors de texte," insists that any critical reading is as good as any other, Eco argues as follows: If every reading is a misreading, then a misreading of everything equals a misreading of nothing, which would imply that the text exists for its own sake and does not need to be compared with any other text. Since it does need to be compared, then not every reading can be a misreading. This is not to imply that a text has a univocal meaning; only that context constrains the range of plausible interpretations. "A text is a place where the irreducible polysemy of symbols is in fact reduced because in a text symbols are anchored to their context" (Limits, 21).

In Lawson's terms, "through language, theory and text we close the openness that is the world. The closures we make provide our world. . .each closure textures the world and thereby enables us to do things in the 'world'" (129). Contexts supply the closures that create the more or less settled meanings that constitute "a world." Within a given closure--within a given stable frame of reference--symbols do converge (a la Peirce) asymptotically, and thus, as Eco insists, the process of semantic reading is limited.
So, what literal meaning do self-voiding texts have? "In verbal texts the representation of impossible possible worlds can be taken superficially as conceivable for pages and pages before the contradiction they display is realized" (Limits, 78). Naive readers of Foucault's Pendulum can read for only the "illusion of a coherent world" (Limits, 77), the good read that Foucault's Pendulum undoubtedly is. Naive readers who enjoy the fun romp through every conspiracy theory imaginable are in this sense no different from St. Paul who, in his letter to Titus, says that we must believe that all Cretans are liars because Epimenides tells us so and he should know since he's a Cretan (Limits).

But one can read self-voiding texts semantically only so far. If contexts provide the closure that limits the range of plausible interpretation, the paradoxically self-referential character of self-voiding texts prevents the stabilizing of context from which to disambiguate their meaning. Semiosis is blocked as the seemingly straightforward reading at one level loops back on itself and declares its own impossibility. When faced with a claim that denies itself (Lawson), the reader realizes that there simply is no wider context from which to fill up the text with a given meaning. Self-referential paradoxes shortcircuit closure: in the end we realize that, try as we may, we cannot conceive the world Casaubon, Belbo and Diotallevi make up, a world whose secret it is that there is no secret. Language allows us to mention such a world, but forbids us to get inside it. Self-voiding texts are, therefore, incomprehensible.

Once the full force of the paradox hits you, a second reaction is bemusement: "The pleasure we draw from impossible possible worlds is the pleasure of our logical and perceptual defeat" (Limits, 77). And since language's ability to mention or refer to a world that is impossible to conceive is at the heart of the puzzle, should we simply enjoy the trick the magic of language plays on us and leave it at that? We can't. Once we appreciate the paradox, that the secret is that there is no secret, we realize we've been had semantically, but like children wanting to figure out just how the magician performs the trick, we just can't leave it at that.

Like an Escher or Reutersward drawing, self-voiding texts--texts embodying self-referential paradoxes--prevent the semantic process from coming to a conclusion and force a second-level, critical or semiotic reading--which is why this conference has been organized! However, since logic's answer is that nothing follows from a contradiction (and self-referential paradoxes are most certainly that--more, they are loopily self-contradictory), once we see the paradox, are we to conclude that because it is impossible to fix a stable frame of reference from which to disambiguate the paradox, at least in the case of self-referential paradoxes, any critical reading is as good or bad as any other? How are we to read a text like Foucault's Pendulum?

A self-referential paradox's lack of a stable frame of reference brings to the fore the role context plays in determining meaning. (It is not coincidental that the goings-on in Foucault's Pendulum begin during the troubles of 1968; there are flashbacks to WWII; much of the action takes place during unfamiliar rites, in exotic locales. The difference between Lia's and Casaubon's frames of reference is what makes their decodings of the list different.) The usually silent framework of cultural conventions in terms of which textual meaning is decoded suddenly itself becomes content. The reason the assertion in Foucault's Pendulum that there is no message is the most important message of all is that its message is about how one goes about determining the meaning of messages.
Self-voiding texts semantically blow up in our face because when reflexivity pervades the whole text it is "no longer a form of self-reference, a paradoxical puzzle, or a philosophical argument, but an inescapable movement which is still present in moments of apparent stillness. It is as if we are caught in the metaphors of language and there is no way to halt their shifting character" (Lawson, 28). The rest of this paper will examine this "inescapable movement." I want to suggest not only that modeling this movement along the lines of the theory of evolution helps us understand what self-referential paradoxes teach us about meaning, but also that that is precisely what Eco is up to in Foucault's Pendulum.

II

Peirce's "unlimited semiosis" allows us to "know something more." "To know more . . . means that, from interpretant to interpretant, the sign is more and more determined . . . the interpretation approximates (even though asymptotically) the final logical interpretation" (Eco, Limits, 28). We can know more only if we presuppose a context which constrains what is relevant and what is not. So that even if semiosis "is potentially unlimited from the point of view of the system . . . it is not unlimited from the point of view of the interpretive process." (Limits, 28)

By disallowing the stabilization of a context which would serve to constrain interpretation, paradoxically self-referential texts do not permit us to "know more." At this point the ability of readers to derive meaning from self-voiding texts such as Foucault's Pendulum comes to a halt. Foucault's Pendulum cannot communicate because it cannot signify. It cannot signify because there is no dictionary or encyclopedia from which to disambiguate the textual meaning. There is no dictionary or encyclopedia because these "record that a given entry means one thing in a certain context or for given uses, and in other cases means another." (Theory of Semiotics, 99) And there is no stable context. At this point, then, the reader is forced to resort to "invention" (in Eco's sense of the term), that is, a mode of sign production that redraws the system of signification and therefore its code (Theory of Semiotics).

Eco characterizes the Hermetic drift (of, say, the Diabolicals) as a process in which, since "no contextual stricture holds" (Limits, 130), "everything can recall everything else," which results in a perennial shift and deferral of any possible meaning" (Limits, 27). In this view "a sign is something by knowing which we know something else" (Limits, 28). It is a process whereby "every content . . . of an expression . . . is interpreted by an expression endowed with its own content, and so potentially ad infinitum . . . [T]~here is a sort of growth of the global content, an addition of determinations" (Limits, 32). I believe that what Eco is telling us is that when we reach a semantic dead end as we do in Foucault's Pendulum, Hermetic drift is the inventive evolutionary strategy to use. But not Diabolically; playfully.

During normal times (Kuhn), an accepted network of conventional semantic connections is in place which, functioning as the silent channel of communication, constrains philosophical, or scientific--or literary and textual--meaning. This explains why under normal conditions, as mentioned above, although semiosis is "potentially unlimited from the point of view of the system" it is not~ from the point of view of the interpretive process." Transmitting no message about itself, this contextual background that "goes without saying" fosters or at least permits the illusion of objectification of the semantic content of the discourse. In periods of radical change
the conventional web of semantic associations calls attention to itself and thereby becomes the
content of the conversation (the linguistic turn in philosophy and the two-slit experiment in
quantum physics attest to this).

While a given paradigm (i.e., a given network of connections) is in place, we specify the
meanings of words by providing concise, irreducible definitions. When we look up meanings in a
dictionary we learn something more about a given word. These dictionary meanings, in turn, are
backed up by an accepted encyclopedic web of connections. As time passes, the ambiguity of
language results in an increasing mismatch between the continuously changing environment and
the sedimented (Winter) dictionary definitions and encyclopedic network of connections
representing the decodings of experience that took place in an earlier environment.

As the mismatches increase, metaphors suggesting that "one should see certain individuals of the
reference world as characterized by unheard-of properties" (Eco, Limits, 68-69) will be tried out.
While the mismatch between the sedimented definitions and the world as presently experienced
is minor, the changes that such metaphors propose will be assimilated via definitional
enlargement into the meanings (Piaget) in place at the time. A given paradigm has played itself
out when a larger environment from which to disambiguate anomalies is unavailable.

The numerous references to self-referential paradoxes in Foucault's Pendulum are, I believe,
meant to draw our attention to what happens when paradigms become exhausted. At moments of
such radical instability, metaphors (A = B) cease being shortened similes (A is as or like B), and
become much more serious business. A revolutionary metaphor establishes new rules that
warrant the reinterpretation of old ideas; that is, a revolutionary metaphor redraws the whole
topology of the network of associations warranted by convention. At bifurcation points (and only
at the radical instability of a bifurcation point), when the established context has broken down--
or, to say the same thing differently, when established meaning no longer "maps" the
experienced environment—a new metaphor offered up by a strong poet or an "abnormal" scientist
cuts the world up in a radically new way: it is not just a matter of seeing for the first time this
individual (identified by preestablished categories that accurately map the world 1:1) as being
characterized by this property (individuated by preestablished categories that represent 1:1 the
world out there). Rather a revolutionary metaphor redraws the boundaries of the categories
themselves. As Michel Foucault, Thomas Kuhn, and others have pointed out, "sex," "disease,"
even "madness" come to mean something entirely different as a web of semantic connections is
redrawn. At a bifurcation point strange metaphors and odd connections will be (and must be!)
invented that are either unintelligible or literally false under the earlier paradigm, in the hope that
some extra-linguistic experience may amplify one of these metaphors and redraw the topology of
the semantic web. Connections between interpretants will be redrawn into a "network of new
relationships" such that the meaning of the revolutionary metaphor which, if taken literally under
the old encyclopedia "would not have told~ the truth" (Eco, Limits, 138), now literally does (in
part, of course, because the boundaries of the subject of the metaphor have also been redrawn). A
new code is in the process of being created. "Something is mapped from something else which
was not defined and analyzed before the act of mapping took place. We are witnessing a case in
which a significant convention is posited at the very moment in which both the functives of the
correlation are invented." (Theory of Semiotics, 250). Despite the similarity in the marks on the
paper, "mass" in the Einsteinian framework does not mean the same as "mass" in the Newtonian one. Far from proving or falsifying them, new metaphors deconstruct old categories.

In the case of radical inventions such as Impressionist painting, Eco says, "addressees absolutely refused to 'recognize' the subjects represented and said that they 'did not understand,' that the painting 'did not mean anything.'" (Theory of Semantics, 254). Whereas under the Newtonian regime "mass is energy" would have "simply obscurely suggested that one see a certain feature of the world as characterized by unheard-of properties", in the larger textual environment of relativity theory that Einstein's gedankenexperiment of riding on a light beam led to, "mass is energy" is now literally true. After the phase-change the demand for normal philosophers or scientists—or linguists--skyrockets as dictionaries and encyclopedias telling us more about these reinterpreted terms must be rewritten. New definitions emerge as new relationships between the components of the system, and between the system and its environment, implicit in the new rules are traced. This latter function--establishing something more--is the job of "normal science," in contrast to the contribution of Bloom's "strong poet" who, by proposing the revolutionary metaphor, teaches us "something (radically) else" by redrawing the framework that earlier defined the system. A whole new set of meanings appears as the same expression is now linked to a new semantic "content unit."

Foucault's Pendulum is radically self-voiding because Eco's self-referential paradoxes, by foreclosing even in principle on contextual closure, leave readers with the inventiveness of Hermetic drift as their only option. When a stable context cannot in principle be found, we have no choice but to resort to the "play of musement," to multiply connections in total disregard for context--as in the game mentioned in both Foucault's Pendulum and The Limits of Interpretation that asks players to get from e.g., peg to Plato in six steps (Limits, 127)--and hope that one of these connections will be the fruitful metaphoric mutation that will keep the game going.

As happens with all mutations, not all new metaphors will be successful; indeed, most will be noxious and die out. There is not even any guarantee that a successful mutation will be produced. The species may just die out. Those mutations/metaphors that do succeed are the ones amplified by the environment. Unfortunately (or fortunately, because it means that emergence, creativity and novelty are real possibilities), we cannot know ex post ante which metaphor will succeed.

The unguaranteed hope of this evolutionary strategy is that the environment will amplify one of these mutant connections and enable the drift to settle down as a stable context is agreed upon and a new system of signification together with its code is set. This openness language permits, however, is never absolute; it is constrained by history and tradition acting as diachronic contextual constraints that are pre-semiosically "always and already there." As a result, encyclopedias cannot be rewritten any old way. But they can be rewritten (Theory of Semiotics, 256).

And then this evolutionary spiral begins anew.

"Each of the earlier philosophers [Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida-- proposes a new mode of using language. In conjunction with this we are offered different notions of both truth and value" (Lawson, 126). What are the new notions of truth and value announced in Foucault's Pendulum?
By barring the possibility of a stable contextual background that can "go without saying," self-referential paradoxes shatter the illusion that meaning is univocal and decidable. There is no 1:1 mapping between a syntactically well-formed formula and its meaning. We learn from self-voiding texts that meaning exists in the relationship--in the gap--between form and openness, context and text. "[A]ny act of interpretation is a dialectic between openness and form, initiative on the part of the interpreter and contextual pressure" (Eco, Limits, 21). We learn that the world does not come prepackaged with ready-made categories and labels. When language is no longer believed to be the transparent glass which mimetically records an external reality but does not alter it, this "reality" loses its status as a univocal "work" just waiting to be read. A philosophy--or a literature--that takes reflexivity and contextual embeddedness seriously cannot be committed to an ontology of presence, of fundamental, eternally stable and unchanging particles or Forms which can be perfectly mirrored or mapped by a clear mirror.

By permitting nature non-linear, reflexive relationships, the contextual embeddedness of meaning can now be accepted as a feature of ontology, not just a limitation of epistemology. But it is no longer an ontology of presence, or of substance; rather it is an ontology of process, change and difference. In this light, meaning must be rethought, not as univocal or ultimately decidable, found at neither the level of type nor token, but created (actualized?) in the irreversibly dynamic, changing relationships between contexts and participants. Meaning cannot be either discrete or completely decidable because it is a function of the flow of information between a system and the context in which it is embedded. Meaning-making is for that very reason necessarily interpretation, a matter not of "closing things off and providing solutions" but of constantly widening the horizon.

And self-referential paradoxes remind us that both moments of the dialectic are necessary: that although, thanks to the polysemy of symbols and the rich ambiguity of language, interpretation is open and partially dependent on the interpreter, plausible interpretation is constrained by context. From this perspective parts derive their meaningful characteristics from a system of signification, from the context (the whole) in which they are embedded (Gadamer, MacIntyre). As Artigiani ("Constitutionalism") notes, constraints make choices meaningful. Just as phenotypes are genotypes as decoded by the environment, the process whereby we decide what something means is very much like an ongoing conversation between two interlocutors: the system and the environment in which it is embedded. Or between the meanings and the textual environment in which these are embedded. And as interlocutors can be individuated (and the meanings disambiguated) only in terms of the overall conversation in which they are participating and which they help constitute--the conversation is an emergent higher level of organization, temporally subsequent to its constituents but explanatorily primary once in place--so too meaning and context can be distinguished only as moments of a co-evolving process.

Instead of another metaphor purporting to tell us what the world is like (which would be the latest in a long list of metaphors proposed in the course of the history of philosophy), Eco creates a (meta-)metaphor describing the process whereby we locally and temporally settle on and change the encyclopedias that purport to tell us what the world is like. Foucault's Pendulum, that is, doesn't tell us what the world is like, it tells us how we go about deciding what the world is like. If in earlier times people were unaware that they were rewriting encyclopedias, as was perhaps the case during the period of Hermetic philosophy in the late middle ages, which
justified bizarre connections in the belief that the transcendent ground was itself contradictory (Limits), the interesting question today is whether we can be self-consciously Hermetic.

"Code-making and invention are aesthetic activities," Eco states, thus implicitly calling on us to live that way (Theory of Semiotics, 254). If ambiguity "functions as a sort of introduction to the aesthetic experience" (263), self-referential paradox functions as a challenge to live that way. Foucault's Pendulum, as a work of art, means not "to communicate contents" but to "stimulate reactions" (Theory of Semiotics, 267). It attempts to change the way in which we see the world (274).

But to live in an aesthetically self-aware manner is also to recognize our inability to determine which metaphor will be picked up by the environment to become the new paradigm, and therefore it is to trust in the possibility of epiphanic events. Like the Diabolicals we live at the end of an era and must make weird connections. Or die. Unlike the partisans of Hermetic philosophy, we must do so not because we believe the connections are true (history is irreversible) but fully aware that offering up new metaphors is just our job: at thresholds of instability--whether thermodynamic, biological or semiotic--the evolutionary thing to do is to be playfully creative, to throw up as many mutations--strange metaphorical connections--as possible in order to keep the process going.

One must learn not only to trust in but to actively seek out the trumpet, even as we accept that understanding will come only in retrospect, only after we experience its blast.

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