CHAPTER 17

The Death of the Author and the Birth of the Luciferian Reader: Ur-images, Postmodernity and Semiotic Self-Apotheosis

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These metaphysics of magicians
And necromantic books are heavenly;
Lines, circles, signs, letters, and characters:
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.
[...] All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command: emperors and kings
[...] But his dominion that excels in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man:
A sound magician is a demi-god

MARLOWE, The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus (1616)

Introduction

This essay analyzes the function of esoteric symbolism, specifically the imagery in a series of Luciferian engravings, in Arturo Pérez-Reverte's novel El Club Dumas (1993), and the film that was based on it, The Ninth Gate (Roman Polanski, 1999). My argument is that the fragmentation of these images in the novel, where it becomes impossible to reach the "ur-images", is a commentary on the postmodern condition and a perceived shattering of grand narratives and objective divine (or diabolic) truths. Signs and symbols become unstable and polyphonic floating signifiers. This renders the esoteric enlightenment, the single "true" meaning of the symbols, impossible to reach. The protagonist is helped by Lucifer to accept this, and to realize that it sets him free: the absence of a limiting pre-scripted esoteric metanarrative enables him to create his own narrative as he embraces the liberty the postmodern condition brings. The metaphoric death of the "author", and the dissipation of his one

1 Marlowe, The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus, 3, Act 1, Scene 1, lines 46–59. Marlowe's play was staged as early as the winter of 1592–1593, but the version employed here was not printed until 1616.
true narrative, frees the "reader" of esoteric signs and symbols and lets him be reborn as a "creator god". Polanski's film, on the other hand, retains the benevolent Lucifer, but here the figure instead acts as an initiator into a more classic esoteric enlightenment, where the series of engravings is ultimately restored to its complete, pristine condition and its riddle solved, dispelling the threat of postmodern dissolution of the symbolic. *The Ninth Gate* thus negates Pérez-Reverte's reconfiguration of esoteric Luciferian enlightenment. In the film, as we will see, esoteric symbols are reintegrated into a metanarrative once more.

In spite of *El Club Dumas* being a global bestseller, its author may require a brief introduction. Pérez-Reverte (b. 1951) has been described as the most commercially successful Spanish author of recent times, as well as the most popular outside of his native country. The literary establishment in Spain was at first quite sceptical of him, but his status has gradually improved. In 2003 he was elected to the Real Academia Española, the Spanish Academy, a decision that was not uncontroversial. What sort of books does he write, then? Umberto Eco light, would perhaps be a convenient shorthand. Michael Dibdin of the *New York Times* has pronounced him a leading figure in the subgenre of 'thrillers for people who don't want to be seen reading thrillers', an author who 'flatters his reader's sophistication and intelligence while delivering suspenseful stories'. *El Club Dumas* is Pérez-Reverte's fourth novel and very obviously a light-hearted rejoinder to Eco's *Il pendolo di Foucault* ("Foucault's Pendulum", 1988). It treats a similar theme (though, as we shall see, from a slightly different angle), the tendency to over-interpret a half arbitrary selection of the myriad of signs one comes across as being bearers of esoteric signification. The Spaniard in no way attempts to hide the resemblance to Eco's novel, instead playfully indicating that he knows that we know.

The hero of the story is Lucas Corso, a "book detective" who specializes in finding rare books for fanatical wealthy collectors. He is hired by a certain

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2 When Umberto Eco received his honorary doctorate at Uppsala University in January 2008, I had the opportunity to ask him what he thought of Pérez-Reverte and the parallels to his own work. Eco seemed amused by the work of his Spanish colleague. He agreed there are similarities, which he felt are a flattering tribute.

3 Dibdin, 'The Cocaine in Spain'.

4 The theme of over-interpretation also ties in with a well-known theoretical book by Eco, Richard Dorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and Over-Interpretation* (1992, ed. Stefan Collini, based on Eco's 1990 Tanner lectures). In this work, Eco debates with the other scholars who also contribute, and he cautions against relativistic notions of all interpretations being equally valid. For more on this, see below.

5 For example, one of the methods Eco has developed in his scholarly works on semiotics appears in the novel, and at the climax an unnamed professor of semiotics from Bologna (the same position Eco holds) makes a brief appearance. Pérez-Reverte, *The Club Dumas*, 164, 323.