

The Stories That Destroy Us

Master's Thesis in Literary Studies

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Introduction

"But our governments [...] are manipulated by these bigwig Illuminati who just want to get rid of us because for their plants (sic) they want to eliminate 90% of the world population [...] they'll say it's for our own sake they will introduce Marchal law, we'll have military in the streets everywhere in the world they'll want to force us to wear the devil's mark we will only be slaves for them. [...]"

But we are very dangerous for their plants (sic) because just a big handful of us humans, Divine Being of light, children of The Source by spreading love & light from our ethereal heart we can thwart their plant (sic) because if all of us awaken and send love & light we all are stronger than this small 3% of the world population that controls us since thousands of years."¹

Fleur de Lyse Québec, post on the Facebook Group « Mouvement Collectif Éveil de Conscience (Clan du Québec) », May 18th, 2021.

Fleur de Lyse Québec would undoubtedly be quite surprised to be quoted in this way in a Literary Studies thesis, a type of text that more readily analyzes Gabrielle Roy and Jean Racine than Facebook conspiracy theorists. However, her vibrant testimony against the dangers of the Marchal law and the conspiracy theories behind it are also based on literary devices, more specifically literary devices used in narrative fiction.

This statement naturally raises a number of questions. The field of conspiracy theories remains understudied from this angle and, until recently, was relatively unknown to the general public. What's more, conspiracy theorists themselves obviously don't regard conspiracy theories as literature, but rather as universal truths cleverly concealed from the public eye. So why link these theories to the world of literature?

First, it is important to note that this observation does not necessarily apply to *all* conspiracy theories. We will focus on two theories with very similar narratives, yet very different narrative systems: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*², an anti-Semitic work published in Russia in the early 20th century, and QAnon, a virtual conspiracy community formed in the U.S. in 2017 around the enigmatic figure of "Q". The study of the former will be limited to the text itself and its history, while the analysis of the latter will go beyond the "canonical" text (i.e., the part of the conspiracy theory developed by "Q") to explore the co-construction of QAnon's narrative through the interactions between "Q" and his community.

It is worth noting that the study of conspiracy theories is complicated by the lack of reliable data on their popularity and impact, as conspiracy communities often refuse to cooperate with academic researchers. What is clear, however, is that the world of conspiracy theories has grown tremendously in recent years.

¹ Translation note: The original post is in French and contains many, many more typos.

² The version of the *Protocols* used for this thesis is Victor E. Marsden's American English translation, published in 1923 and archived by the FBI in 1941.

Fundamentally anti-scientific and anti-institutional, pitting the methodology of established researchers against a worldview often based on intuition, "common sense", and YouTube, some conspiracy theories have rallied a large following since the appearance of QAnon in 2017, and their popularity exploded with the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the latter marked by the spread of unsubstantiated anti-Trump voter fraud theories. The universe of these theories is as rich and creative as it is dangerous, and deserves to be better understood in order to be better countered. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is twofold: to identify the narrative devices used in the *Protocols* and QAnon, and to try to understand the impact of these devices on their popularity.

But before delving into the analysis, it is important to define the concepts involved, specifically conspiracy theories and narrative fiction.

What is a conspiracy theory?

First, it should be noted that History is full of real conspiracies, some of them very recent (Watergate or the Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election, for example). It is important to distinguish conspiracy theories from what researcher Jovan Byford calls "investigations into actual conspiracies³." These investigations are often carried out by researchers or journalists. The existence of the conspiracy is merely a hypothesis that must be confirmed or disproved with method and rigor: these investigations are purely journalistic, take nothing from the realm of fiction, and are not the subject of this thesis. Moreover, according to Byford, real conspiracies often share certain characteristics that distinguish them from conspiracy theories: "They [involve] different actors, with disparate aims and goals, limited to certain locations and time frames. [...] They cannot be reduced to a single, common denominator⁴."

How, then, do we identify what constitutes an actual conspiracy theory? Marc Pauly identifies two possible types of definitions⁵: the first is neutral and minimal, while the second is epistemologically charged. An example of a neutral definition is that of Brian L. Keeley, for whom a conspiracy theory is the explanation of an event as the work of a small group acting in secret⁶. Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French suggest a more loaded definition: "an unverified and relatively implausible allegation of conspiracy, claiming that significant events are the result of a secret plot carried out by a preternaturally sinister and powerful group of people⁷." Byford adds a further distinction between conspiracy theories and investigations into conspiracies: for conspiracy theorists, the conspiracy is not a hypothesis but an absolute certainty. Conspiracy theories are

³ Jovan BYFORD, "How to spot a conspiracy theory when you see one", in *The Conversation* [online].

⁴ *Idem*.

⁵ Mark PAULY, "Conspiracy Theories", in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online].

⁶ Brian L. KEELEY, "Of Conspiracy Theories", in *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XCVI, n° 3, p.109.

⁷ Robert BROTHERTON & Christopher C. FRENCH, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy", in *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, vol. XXVIII, n° 2, p. 238.

impervious to anything that does not reinforce them: any new information, even if it refutes the conspiracy idea, is incorporated into the theory's narrative as evidence of the conspirators' skill at concealing their plan⁸.

Brotherton and French's definition will be used for the purposes of this thesis: it is perfectly consistent with the *Protocols* and QAnon.

What is narrative fiction?

It is important to make a distinction here: the conspiracy theories studied in this thesis are not considered *works of narrative fiction*, but rather *stories that use devices from narrative fiction*.

To explain the difference, it is necessary to establish a clear definition of narrative fiction, and by extension literature. The difficult task of defining such a broad (and in many ways subjective) as literariness has been attempted by numerous theorists over the decades, none of whom have managed to achieve unanimity. For the purposes of this thesis, three definitions have been considered:

1. That of Gérard Genette, who divides literariness into two regimes (constitutive, i.e., in which literariness is automatic, and conditional, i.e., in which literariness is subject to aesthetic judgment) and two criteria (thematic, i.e., in which literariness is derived from theme, and rhematic, i.e., in which literariness is derived from style). Fiction and poetry belong to the constitutive regime (for thematic and rhematic reasons respectively), while prose in general belongs to the conditional regime;
2. That of Alain Viala, for whom literature encompasses "the set of texts - and the practices of creating, transmitting and preserving these texts - characterized by an aesthetic that must in itself ensure their justification (the interest that can be found in them and the adherence - first by capturing the attention, then getting them to share the views and feelings there proposed - of the reader or spectator";
3. That of Alain Vaillant, for whom literature represents "that specific form of discursive activity whose main objective, for the author and/or reader, is the pleasure derived from the exercise of imagination applied to discourse, whatever the subject and nature of that discourse". Vaillant identifies three types of literary imagination: fictional, dictional (which derives from the manipulation of writing forms and procedures), and intellectual (which encompasses the literature of ideas).

⁸ Jovan BYFORD, "How to spot a conspiracy theory when you see one", *art. cit.*

The definition used is that of Gérard Genette. In *Fiction et diction*, Genette places narrative fiction in the constitutive regime. His definition of narrative fiction derives from that of John Searle, according to which "fictional texts are feigned assertions⁹." These feigned assertions, or fictional statements, do not meet any condition of sincerity, commitment, or provability¹⁰. In other words, the enunciator of a feigned assertion neither believes the assertion nor requires anyone else to believe it; instead, the feigned assertion serves as an invitation into a fictional universe. One of the most famous feigned assertions is "Once upon a time...": what this statement actually says, according to Genette, is "It is not a fact that once upon a time [...], but by saying it, I make you think of it as an imaginary state of affairs¹¹."

This definition automatically disqualifies any conspiracy theory from the status of narrative fiction: the assertion of the conspiracy theory is not feigned, i.e., despite its falsity, it aims to convince. According to the logic of Searle and Genette, if a conspiracy theory qualifies as a literary object, it does so only conditionally, i.e. via its stylistic and aesthetic characteristics; it is denied the constitutive mode of literariness.

Are the *Protocols* and QAnon literature? This question will find no answer here, as this thesis is not concerned with their literary status, but rather with the devices they borrow from literary fiction. Indeed, even if these two theories are not, strictly speaking, works of fiction, they share many of the same characteristics: hence the designation of *stories that use devices from narrative fiction*.

And these devices are numerous. Genette classifies them in regimes of order, speed, frequency, mode, and voice, but the *Protocols* and QAnon also employ extratextual devices, including literary clichés and participatory storytelling.

Therefore, our analysis will begin by delving into the world of an obscure text from early 1900s Russia that set the world on fire and whose influence persists to this day: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

⁹ Gérard GENETTE, *Fiction et diction*, 1979, p. 133.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Chapter 1: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fictionalization of reality

"[*The Elders of Zion*] candidly assert that 'we have boundless ambition, a devouring greed, we are hell-bent on ruthless vengeance and burning with hatred' (displaying an exquisite masochism as they gleefully reproduce the cliché of the evil Jew that was already circulating in the anti-Semitic press and which will adorn the covers of all editions of their book) [...].

'All in all,' Belbo observed, 'the Elders of Zion were a bunch of assholes.'"

Umberto ECO, *Le Pendule de Foucault*, p. 494.

"The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which the Jews officially deny with such vehemence, have shown in an incomparable way how the entire existence of this people rests on a permanent lie. [...] They clearly and knowingly expose what many Jews may carry out unconsciously. And that is what's important."

Adolf HITLER, *Mein Kampf*, p. 307.

The history of the *Protocols* is a long and bloody one. Used as an anti-Semitic propaganda manual in virtually every region of the world, from Nazi Germany to Arab countries, the U.S. and the USSR, this text has managed to survive the countless experts who have proven its utter inauthenticity.

But where do the *Protocols* come from, and what terrible story do they tell?

The uncertain origin of a conspiracy

In 1903, Pavel Krushevan, an obscure Russian far-right activist, published in his newspaper *Znamya* a nine-part text entitled "Программа завоевания мира евреями", or "Jewish Program for World Conquest". Two years later, this text was taken up by Russian Orthodox Sergei Nilus¹² in his book *The Great in the Small; The Antichrist is an imminent political possibility*. The *Protocols'* influence, previously confined to their homeland, exploded with the arrival of Russian migrants in Europe and North America after the Bolshevik takeover. Translated into virtually every language and embraced by numerous newspapers (including the prestigious *Times* of London), they set the entire West ablaze¹³.

¹² Most critics of the *Protocols*, including Umberto Eco, make the mistake of portraying Sergei Nilus as a monk or mystic, a rival of Rasputin at the Russian imperial court. In fact, he was an Orthodox Christian. For further information on Nilus, see Michael HAGEMASTER, "Nilus, Sergei", in *Antisemitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*, vol. II, 2005.

¹³ Michael HAGEMASTER, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Between History and Fiction", in *New German Critique*, n° 103 (Winter 2008), p. 89.

These are the verifiable facts surrounding the appearance of the *Protocols*. However, their true origin (which long predates Pavel Krushevan and Sergei Nilus) has never been fully elucidated. The mystery surrounding the text's origin is a key factor in its reception by certain audiences and in its narrative identity; we'll come back to this later.

What is certain is that the influence of the *Protocols*, which peaked in the 1920s, has never completely disappeared despite countless refutations of their authenticity: let us quote "The Truth about the Protocols: A Literary Forgery", published in 1921 by Philip Graves in the *Times* of London¹⁴, as well as books by Herman Bernstein¹⁵, Norman Cohn¹⁶, John Shelton Curtiss¹⁷ and Hadassa Ben-Itto¹⁸. In 1936, at the Berne trial between the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities and the Swiss National Front, Judge Walter Meyer described the *Protocols* as "laughable nonsense¹⁹." In 1964, in the United States, a bipartisan Senate committee called them a "vicious hoax²⁰." And yet, against all odds, the terrible Elders of Zion survive to haunt us, even today.

But what do these abominable old men want?

What the *Protocols* recount is an alleged series of secret meetings of the great sages of Judaism held in 1897 during the First Zionist Congress. During these meetings, the sages laid out a terrible plan, carefully conceived and set in motion in the time of Solomon, to conquer the world, overthrow Christianity, and impose the tyranny of the King of the Jews on all the peoples of the earth.

How do they plan on doing that? The short answer: it's quite unclear.

By all accounts, the *Protocols* are poorly written and constantly contradict themselves. The 1964 Senate Committee Report describes the text as follows: "Because of the rambling, incoherent, and turgid style of the 'Protocols,' it is difficult to make any sense of them²¹." This "incoherent" text is divided into 24 "protocols" of varying lengths, written in a pamphleteering style with occasional bursts of lyricism, like this candid exclamation: "The goyim are a flock of sheep, and we are their wolves. And you know what happens when the wolves get hold of the flock²²?"

¹⁴ Philip K. GRAVES, "The Truth about the Protocols: A Literary Forgery", in *The Times* (August 16-18th, 1921).

¹⁵ Herman BERNSTEIN, *The History of a Lie*, 1921, 94 p.

¹⁶ Norman COHN, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, 2006, 200 p.

¹⁷ John SHELTON CURTISS, *An Appraisal of the Protocols of Zion*, 1942, 117 p.

¹⁸ Hadassa BEN-ITTO, *The Lie That Wouldn't Die: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, 2005, 390 p.

¹⁹ Valery KADZHAYA, "The Fraud of the Century, or a Book Born in Hell", in *New Times* (December 2005).

²⁰ ANONYMOUS, *Protocols of the Meetings of the Learned Elders of Zion*, archived by the FBI in 1941, p. 115.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Each protocol has its own theme, detailing one tool of the Elders' plan. And there are many, many tools: Freemasonry, gold, alcohol, education, Darwinism, Nietzscheism, Jewish women, the media, the law, torture, famine, pandemics, liberalism, communism, usury, pornography, taxes, the stock market... and many others. Even anti-Semitism is seen as a tool.

All this time, it was a novel

The *Protocols* are full of devices used in literary fiction. And for good reason: they are *literally* a novel. Several novels, in fact. In 1921, Philip Graves discovered that the *Protocols* were largely plagiarized from an unknown book: *Dialogue aux Enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu, ou la Politique de Machiavel au XIX Siècle. Par un Contemporain*, published in 1864 by Maurice Joly²³. Far from concerning itself with Jewish world domination, *Dialogue aux Enfers* actually criticizes Napoleon III. In the *Protocols*, ideas attributed to Machiavelli are slightly rewritten and attributed to the Elders of Zion²⁴. According to Umberto Eco, *Dialogue aux Enfers* is itself plagiarizing *Les Mystères du Peuple*, a novel by Eugène Sue published between 1849 and 1856.

But the story doesn't end there: the *Protocols*, not content with plagiarizing two French books, also borrow key elements from the novel *Biarritz*, published in 1868 by German author Hermann Goedsche under the pen name Sir John Retcliffe. *Biarritz* describes a meeting in Prague's Jewish cemetery between representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel; this meeting was later republished in a non-fiction pamphlet, "The Jews, Masters of the World", by none other than Pavel Krushevan²⁵ - the editor of the 1903 version of the *Protocols*, which faithfully reproduces the concept of a Zionist meeting in a cemetery. In this pamphlet, Krushevan presents the scene as a historical event recorded by Rabbi... John Retcliffe. And to muddy the waters even further, it is important to point out that Goedsche's novel itself is not an original work: the cemetery meeting scene is largely taken from Alexandre Dumas's novel *Giuseppe Balsamo*²⁶.

In this maelstrom of plagiarism and inspiration, it is hard to pinpoint a single literary point of origin for the *Protocols*. What is certain is that this hodgepodge of scenes, ideas, and paragraphs copied from so many different novels helps to endow The *Protocols* with a variety of literary devices straight out of narrative fiction.

²³ Philip K. GRAVES, "The Truth about the Protocols: A Literary Forgery", *art. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁴ Svetlana BOYM, "Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and the Protocols of Zion", in *Comparative Literature*, vol. II, n° 51 (1999), p. 101.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁶ Umberto ECO, *Six promenades dans les bois du roman et d'ailleurs*, 1998, p. 135-136.

The narrative structure of real life, simplified version

Among the few scholars who have analyzed the *Protocols* not strictly as a social or historical object, but as a literary one, the most well-known is certainly Umberto Eco. The *Protocols* are only briefly mentioned in his celebrated novel *Le Pendule de Foucault*, but two of his later works analyze them in depth: the novel *Le Cimetière de Prague* and the collection of essays *Six promenades dans les bois du roman et d'ailleurs*. In his essay "The Fictitious Protocols", which traces the literary genesis of the *Protocols* from Sue to Nilus, via Goedsche, Joly, Dumas, and others, Eco points out that the fictitious dimension of the text is clear to anyone who takes the trouble to think about it, but that the story, by borrowing all the devices of a 19th-century soap opera, remains narratively convincing enough for many to take it very seriously²⁷. Why is that? Because, according to Eco, real life is complex, contradictory, and provocative, whereas fictional worlds are comfortable²⁸. Therefore, we naturally try to reinterpret real life as if it were a work of narrative fiction. The *Protocols* make perfect use of this human tendency, taking the narrative structure of the Jewish plan for world domination published in Eugène Sue's *Mystères du Peuple* and reorganizing it as a nonfiction text. The result is what Yugoslav novelist Danilo Kiš calls "faction²⁹", a hybrid of fact and fiction, or a fictionalization of reality. As early as 1921, Herman Bernstein noted that what became the *Protocols* was in fact "a clumsy piece of blood-curling fiction of the dime-novel variety³⁰".

Svetlana Boym, examining the structure and history of the *Protocols*, concludes that they show how "a certain archetypal plot travels from medieval demonology to gothic fictions, then to the classical nineteenth-century novel, and finally to right-wing popular culture³¹." This is what Eco demonstrates throughout *Le Pendule de Foucault*, in which he analyzes the archetypal narrative structure shared by many conspiracy theories spanning centuries: this canvas appears with the destruction of the Templars by Philip the Fair (14th century), continues with the Rosicrucians (17th century), moves into the era of Freemasonry (18th century), continues through the memoirs of Abbé Barruel (1797-98), who exposes the terrible machinations of the Jacobins and the Illuminati... and finally, after a few detours through Garibaldian Italy, the Jesuits and the anticlericals, turns into a plan for Jewish world domination in 19th century European public discourse... embodied, among others, by Eugène Sue. All these conspiracy theories are, in fact, more or less the same conspiracy theory, detailing the complex machinations and diabolical motives of a secret cabal. In this sense, the *Protocols* do not invent anything: they are no more than a sequel of sorts, continuing a long tradition of

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

²⁹ Svetlana BOYM, "Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and the Protocols of Zion", *art. cit.*, p. 115.

³⁰ Herman BERNSTEIN, *The History of a Lie, op. cit.*, p. 15.

³¹ Svetlana BOYM, "Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš and the Protocols of Zion", *art. cit.*, p. 99.

fictionalizing reality in order to make real life more acceptable to those who, in Umberto Eco's words, want to live in a horror novel³².

The bad guys speak for themselves

A pamphlet or essay, in its classic form, tends to adopt its author's point of view. When denouncing an ideology or group, it will say "We don't want Jews in our homes" or "Let's fight anti-Semitism". The *Protocols*, on the other hand - drawing inspiration from Maurice Joly's *Dialogue aux Enfers* - adopt a completely different method: they are written from the point of view of a wise man of Zion. As early as the second paragraph, a very clear "I" appears: "What I am about to set forth, then, is our system from the two points of view, that of ourselves and that of the goyim³³." This first-person narrative continues through each of the text's 24 protocols.

In narratology, the dissociation between author (real enunciator) and narrator (fictional enunciator) is one of the most easily identifiable features of narrative fiction³⁴. The result of this choice is twofold: on the one hand, any serious reader will immediately doubt the credibility of this text in which the Elders of Zion so brazenly declare their evil plans³⁵; on the other hand, as history has proven, many readers have fallen into the trap. After all, narratively speaking, it's far more exciting to hear the villain's monologue directly than to hear an indirect version of it. And a Jewish plot reported directly by a Jew is far more credible than a Jewish plot denounced by a Russian Orthodox Christian.

The super memory of an anonymous witness

The *Protocols* claim to be the faithful transcription of a secret meeting in 1897 - before the age of audio recordings. This alleged meeting was infiltrated by an anonymous witness³⁶ who carefully listened to each of the 24 protocols - some of which are very long - and then faithfully transcribed every single word, resulting in a final manuscript of some sixty pages (57 in Marsden's English version), which, according to the *Protocols'* defenders, represents a completely faithful account of the aforementioned meeting. Either our anonymous witness had a superhuman memory, or the *Protocols* are heavily fictionalized.

Käte Hamburger lists "the presence of detailed scenes, dialogue reported verbatim and literally, and extensive descriptions³⁷" among the indicators of a text's fictionality. The *Protocols* contain neither detailed

³² Umberto ECO, *Six promenades dans les bois du roman et d'ailleurs*, op. cit., p. 196.

³³ ANONYMOUS, *Protocols of the Meetings of the Learned Elders of Zion*, op. cit., p. 7.

³⁴ Gérard GENETTE, *Fiction et diction*, op. cit., p. 114.

³⁵ Umberto ECO, *Six promenades dans les bois du roman et d'ailleurs*, op. cit., p. 195.

³⁶ The exact identity of this witness is, of course, never revealed. Some versions speak of a journalist, while others mention a woman without giving further details.

³⁷ Gérard GENETTE, *Fiction et diction*, op. cit., p. 149-150.

scenes nor extensive descriptions: indeed, the text itself provides no context whatsoever, offering the reader no place, year, or name. All of these elements are found in the notes by Krushevan and Nilus that accompany their respective editions. But the *Protocols* themselves are one thing only: a monologue (or series of monologues³⁸) reported verbatim over 60 pages.

This naturally raises a question: why did the authors of the *Protocols* choose to report the discourse of the “Elders” in this way, undermining the credibility of their text? In *Le Cimetière de Prague*³⁹, Umberto Eco seems to consider this a deliberate choice. The weight lost by the *Protocols* as a historical or journalistic object is amply compensated for by the narrative possibilities conferred by verbatim narration. The main character in *Le Cimetière de Prague*, the cynical Captain Simonini, insists that the text must contain “a few very strong statements, something that sticks in the mind, to symbolize Judaic evilness⁴⁰.” And if we think of the *Protocols* not as a forgery designed to be *plausible*, but as a forgery designed to be *interesting*, we have to admit that the phrase “We have unlimited ambition, a devouring greed, a ruthless desire for vengeance and intense hatred⁴¹” stirs the imagination more than “The Elders of Zion share their ambition, their greed, their desire for vengeance and their intense hatred”.

After all, as Captain Simonini so elegantly puts it, “the crowds need to be outraged⁴².”

Naturally, a manuscript

The text of the *Protocols*, as we have seen, borrows certain devices from narrative fiction. But the story surrounding the document may be even more literary than the document itself.

Indeed, while they had little concern for questions of historical veracity, the *Protocols*’ publishers still had to explain how such a secret and important text had come into their hands. The result? A bizarre story wrapped in a generous dose of literary cliché, in many ways even more fascinating than the *Protocols*, which has contributed to their legend and longevity.

Naturally, as with everything concerning the *Protocols*, we are dealing here with a plurality of narratives: there are many stories explaining the text’s arrival in the public eye. Herman Bernstein identifies

³⁸ Each of the protocols is narrated by an Elder of Zion, but it’s impossible to know whether a single Elder explains all 24 protocols or whether several Elders take turns.

³⁹ A word of caution is in order when using *Le Cimetière de Prague* and *Le Pendule de Foucault* as illustrations of Eco’s thought: unlike “The Fictitious Protocols”, these are novels, not essays. Some elements are de facto and intentionally fictitious, such as the attribution of authorship of the *Protocols* to Captain Simon Simonini (an invented character) in *Le Cimetière de Prague*. Nevertheless, these novels are the result of actual research into the *Protocols*, and express views on the text that Eco has also expressed in his other non-fiction works on the same subject.

⁴⁰ Umberto ECO, *Le Cimetière de Prague*, 2012, p. 542.

⁴¹ *Idem*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 544.

several literary clichés and declares that the document's alleged history has all the ingredients of a melodrama: “a villain, a mysterious woman, a Grand Duke, a conspiracy to destroy the world, and a saint - Nilus⁴³.” Bernstein found no less than three explanations, all from Sergei Nilus himself⁴⁴. In the first, an eminent (but anonymous) Russian conservative entrusts him with the document, which he himself received from an (equally anonymous) woman who had stolen it from a French Masonic leader (also anonymous). In the second version, it's no longer the woman who stole the document from the Freemasons, but her Russian friend who stole it directly from the headquarters of the French Jewish Society. And in the third, a few years later, the *Protocols* no longer come from France but from Switzerland, their origin is no longer Jewish-Masonic but Zionist, and the illustrious Russian curator is given a name: Alexey Nikolayevitch Sukhotin - who, coincidentally (!), had just died.

In all these contradictory versions, one element remains: the text is a manuscript whose exact origin was clarified. And this assertion is not unique to Nilus: Filipp Stepanov, the presumed editor of a Russian version of the *Protocols*, claimed in a 1927 interview that he “received the handwritten copy of the Protocols in 1895 from a friend of his, Alexis Soukhotine. The latter had received it from a Russian lady who had taken it in Paris 'from a Jewish friend of hers⁴⁵.'” According to Cesare G. De Michelis, this story “is shrouded in a veil of mystery that seems uniquely conducive to the appearance of an allegedly authentic forgery⁴⁶.” The cliché of the found manuscript, besides being very useful in concealing the true origin of the text, is not unknown in literary circles: how many works of narrative fiction claim to be the transcription of a lost manuscript, a discovered diary, or forgotten “historical facts”? Umberto Eco, in *Confessions d'un jeune romancier*, explains that he himself deliberately used this cliché in *Le Nom de la rose*, which begins by explaining how the narrator discovered a text dating back to the Middle Ages⁴⁷. Said narrator begins his explanation with “Naturally, a manuscript,” Eco being well aware of the irony of the proposition: he specifies in *Confessions d'un jeune romancier* that this is a nod to the “topos (i.e. the literary commonplace) of the unearthed manuscript, [which] possesses a venerable pedigree⁴⁸.”

Sergei Nilus himself was well aware that the myth of the manuscript would not stand up to careful philological examination, such as that later carried out by Cesare G. De Michelis and Michael Hagemester. But then again, the *Protocols* were not intended to be a *plausible* forgery, but an *interesting* one; which is why, in a grand display of candor later suppressed by his non-Russian publishers, he declares in the 1905 edition:

⁴³ Herman BERNSTEIN, *The History of a Lie*, op. cit., p. 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Cesare G. DE MICHELIS, “Les Protocoles des sages de Sion [Philologie et histoire]”, in *Cahiers du monde russe : Russie, Empire russe, Union soviétique, États indépendants*, vol. XXXVIII, n° 3 (July-September 1997), p. 271.

⁴⁶ *Idem.*

⁴⁷ Umberto ECO, *Confessions d'un jeune romancier*, 2013, p. 35-36.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

“We may perhaps be reproached, and justly, for the apocryphal character of the document presented. But if it were possible to demonstrate its accuracy by documents or through the testimony of trustworthy witnesses, if it were possible to unveil the faces of those who are at the head of the world conspiracy [...], then the very 'mystery of lawlessness' would be infringed upon⁴⁹.” In other words: don't think too much about it, it'll spoil the good story I'm telling you. A peculiar warning for an ideological pamphlet... but perfectly understandable - and even common - for narrative fiction. It's almost as if Nilus is trying to make a “suspension of disbelief” pact with his reader, a pact typically reserved for works of fiction... while still trying to convince him to believe in the *Protocols*.

The canvas that refuses to die

Plagiarism, an easy-to-understand narrative structure, narration in the first person, monologues reported verbatim, and the cliché of the manuscript: all these elements come together to make the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* a fascinating story, unhindered in its dissemination by its many implausibilities, its incoherent style, or its constant contradictions. And yet, despite their resounding international success, the *Protocols* have more or less disappeared from public view. In the 21st century, very few have ever heard of them, and even fewer believe in them.

Danger averted, then? Not so fast.

As early as 1921, Herman Bernstein predicted that the *Protocols* might survive by evolving: “Perhaps someday these new legends and absurd, malicious myths may evolve into a new and revised edition of secret Jewish 'protocols’⁵⁰.” Umberto Eco goes even further in *Le Pendule de Foucault*, noting that the *Protocols*, beyond their current form, also represent a canvas that would migrate from one conspiracy theory to another⁵¹.

Bernstein and Eco were right: just as the conspiracy theories about the Templars, the Rosicrucians, and the Jesuits evolved into the *Protocols*, the *Protocols* themselves transformed in order to endure. Their narrative structure has given life to several conspiracy theories over the last decades.

The most infamous of these heirs is named QAnon.

⁴⁹ Herman BERNSTEIN, *The History of a Lie*, op. cit., p. 61.

⁵⁰ Herman BERNSTEIN, *The History of a Lie*, op. cit., p. 93.

⁵¹ Umberto ECO, *Le Pendule de Foucault*, 1990, p. 499.

Chapter 2: QAnon, the most dangerous *fanfiction* in History

"Be here tomorrow.

The story unfolds.

Q"

"Q", QDrop 242, December 1st, 2017⁵².

On October 28, 2017, a curious post appears in the "Politically Incorrect" (or /pol/) thread of the anonymous 4chan forum. This military-style message, packed with acronyms and cryptic references, stands in stark contrast to /pol/'s usual posts, usually far-right memes and personal attacks. It immediately starts garnering interest; its author, none other than the mysterious "Q", is set to become the figurehead of the most important conspiracy movement of the 21st century: QAnon.

Donald Trump versus Satan & Co.

What exactly *is* QAnon all about? Because of the movement's extremely fragmented (some might say confusing) structure and multiple facets, it can be difficult to summarize it in a few sentences.

According to QAnon adherents, the United States are secretly controlled by a globalist cabal working in secret to establish a new world order. This cabal, made up of the political, economic, mediatic, and scientific elite (including Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, George Soros and Bill Gates), is not satisfied with mere world domination: its members are also Satanists who kidnap children and torture them in order to extract adrenochrome, a substance allowing them to artificially maintain their youth. The main opponents of this "deep state"? The U.S. military, of course, but above all Donald Trump, 45th President of the United States and a heroic - indeed, almost messianic - figure for followers of the theory. QAnon's second hero is "Q", an enigmatic figure who takes his pseudonym from "Q clearance", which refers to members of the U.S. government with access to restricted or secret classified information - usually senior officials close to the President himself.

⁵² It is worth noting that nothing happened on December 2nd, 2017.

Through anonymous forum posts⁵³, this high-ranking official disseminates information about Donald Trump's ongoing battle against the Deep State in order to awaken the public to the hidden realities of the world.

These posts, commonly known as “QDrops,” are intentionally cryptic. Like “Q's” first post on 4chan, QDrops never appear as sustained explanatory texts. They are fragmented messages filled with obscure references, acronyms, prophecies, and numbers that may seem random. Between 2017 and 2020, “Q” has posted several thousands of QDrops.

It may seem surprising that a theory as implausible as QAnon managed to catch the public eye. But it has succeeded, and brilliantly. In May 2021, according to a survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute⁵⁴, no less than 14% of Americans - over 30 million people - would subscribe to QAnon. Among Republicans, that number jumps to 25%. And this was after six months of silence from “Q”! The FBI itself, in an internal memo dated May 2019, declares that it considers conspiracy theories like QAnon to be potential sources of domestic terrorism⁵⁵. On January 6, 2021, in the wake of the 2020 presidential election protests, QAnon followers played a leading role in the assault on the Capitol, which resulted in five deaths.

From one evil cabal to another

This summary of QAnon's narrative bears many similarities to that of the *Protocols*. This observation is not groundbreaking: genocide scholar Gregory Stanton claimed in 2020 that “QAnon's conspiracy theory is a rebranded version of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*⁵⁶.” He identifies many similarities between the narrative of the two theories: a secret cabal working to conquer the world, with members occupying high-ranking positions in government, media, banking and finance (among others), children kidnapped and tortured in order to extract their blood, the desire to disarm the police, the promotion of homosexuality and pedophilia, and above all, the war against the white race⁵⁷.

The comparison becomes even clearer when we place QAnon and the *Protocols'* Actantial Models side by side:

⁵³ “Q” began his publications on 4chan, transitioned “Q” to 8chan, and ended his career on 8kun after 8chan's closure.

⁵⁴ COURRIER INTERNATIONAL, « Le chiffre du jour. Les vrais croyants complotistes de QAnon aux États-Unis », via *The New York Times* (May 28th, 2021).

⁵⁵ FBI PHOENIX FIELD OFFICE, « Anti-Government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories Very Likely Motivate Some Domestic Extremists to Commit Criminal, Sometimes Violent Activity », in *Federal Bureau of Investigation – Intelligence Bulletin* (May 30th, 2019).

⁵⁶ Gregory STANTON, « QAnon is a Nazi Cult, Rebranded », in *Just Security* [online].

⁵⁷ *Idem*.

FIGURE 1 – ACTANTIAL MODEL OF THE *PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF ZION*

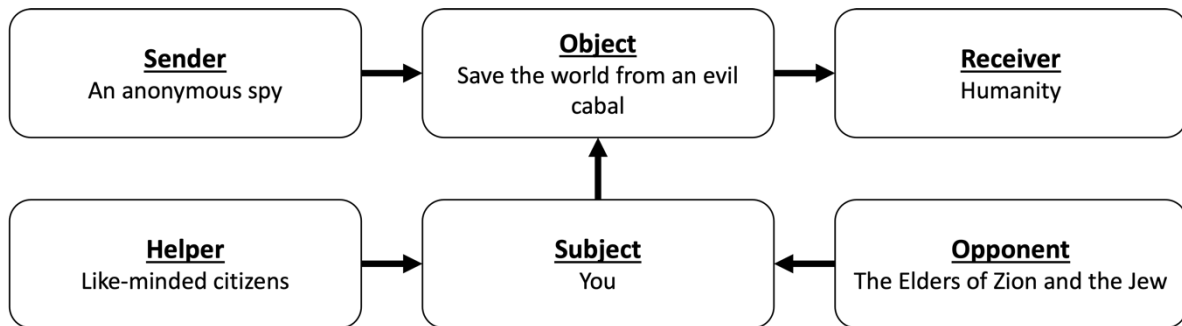
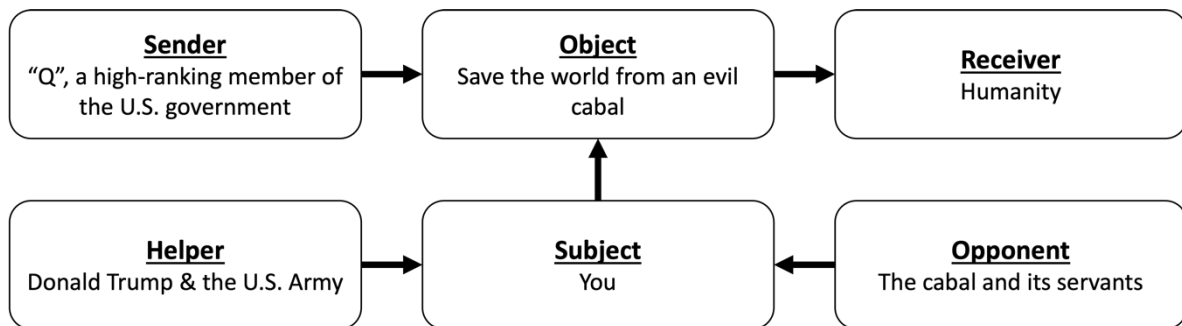


FIGURE 2 – ACTANTIAL MODEL OF QANON



QAnon and the *Protocols* basically tell the same story. The object, receiver, and subject are exactly the same, while the sender, helper, and opponent have only been slightly modernized to reflect the social realities of the 21st century.

All observations made about the narrative structure of the *Protocols* in the first part of this thesis therefore apply to QAnon. Anonymity is particularly noteworthy here. Ron Watkins, the main moderator of 8kun, bluntly states: “I have a lot of theories about who or what Q might be but, sometimes, the mystery is more important⁵⁸.” Fredrick Brennan, creator of 8chan and notorious opponent of QAnon, also believes that “Q is whoever you want it to be⁵⁹”. This freedom of belief and the importance of mystery are reminiscent of Sergei Nilus’ attitude toward the “mystery of lawlessness” surrounding the real origin of the *Protocols*, which he claims he would rather preserve than investigate.

But while the story being told is the same, the narrative devices are vastly different. So, while the *Protocols* can be dissected using traditional methods of narratology, the analysis of QAnon must call upon the notions of participatory storytelling, *fanfiction*, and interpretive communities.

⁵⁸ Cullen HOBACK, *Q: Into the Storm* (2021), episode 3, 43:50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, episode 1, 14:51.

That too was (partially) a novel

However, it remains important to point out that QAnon, like the *Protocols*, has its fair share of inspirations in the realm of narrative fiction. For the sake of modernity, Maurice Joly and Eugène Sue have been abandoned in favor of more recognizable influences.

One of these is the novel *Q*, published in 1999 by Luther Blissett (the pen name of Italian writers Roberto Bui, Giovanni Cattabriga, Federico Guglielmi and Luca Di Meo). In this novel, the eponymous character spies on Protestant rebels on behalf of the Catholic Church. One of the authors of *Q* claims that there are many similarities between his book and QAnon: “Secret messages, signed Q. And this Q presence himself, or herself, as being at the top level of power, who has important information about the inner workings of the system, and he starts to share them drop by drop, dispatch by dispatch, crumb by crumb⁶⁰.” Of course, it's impossible to claim with certainty that the person(s) behind QAnon's “Q” were inspired by Luther Blissett's *Q*, but the coincidence would be surprising, to say the least.

Another of “Q's” literary influences, this one openly acknowledged, is... fairy tales. The expression “crumb by crumb” used by Luther Blissett doesn't come out of nowhere: in the mythology created by QAnon, clues leading back to the cabal are referred to as “breadcrumbs”, an element very much inspired by the folk tale of Hop-o'-My-Thumb, in which the eponymous character tries to find his way out of the forest by leaving small pieces of bread in his path. The tale of Snow White is also used by “Q”, who repeats “Snow White” in several of his QDrops without providing any justification.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* also serves as inspiration. One of QAnon's slogans, “Follow the white rabbit,” is a direct reference to the white rabbit that takes Alice to Wonderland. Here, the white rabbit represents the search for truth. Even less subtly, “Q” repeats “Alice in Wonderland” over and over again - 11 times in a single day on November 5, 2017⁶¹. On that day, contrary to his habit, “Q” himself explains his metaphor: Alice represents Hillary Clinton and Wonderland represents Saudi Arabia. What exactly does this comparison mean? Well, for that... follow the breadcrumbs.

The effect of these constant references to folk tales and popular stories is a blurring of the line between reality and fiction. QAnon mixes the real, the fake, and the fictional, immersing its followers in a confusing universe of fictional references and historical events, promising that the truth is out there for those who look hard enough. The result? A vision of the world based not on facts, but on an increasingly complex

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, episode 3, 2:18.

⁶¹ ANONYMOUS, « Alice In Wonderland », in *QAnon News* [online].

and implausible narrative. Like a bad TV show whose plots become more and more exaggerated with each passing season. Only this time, the TV show is real life.

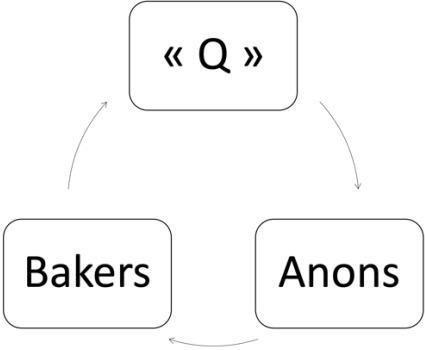
Reality belongs to your imagination

QAnon tells essentially the same story as the *Protocols*, but its true innovation lies in the way the story is told. While its ancestor uses very traditional (or hierarchical) storytelling methods, QAnon revolutionizes the formula by democratizing it: every actor has a role to play in the reconstruction of the “reality” presented by QAnon. In other words, “Q” is not the movement’s sole narrator. Far from it. Let’s observe the differences between the two methods:

FIGURE 3 – TRANSMISSION OF INFORMATION IN THE *PROTOCOLS*



FIGURE 4 – TRANSMISSION OF INFORMATION IN QANON



The usual process of a QDrop on 8chan is as follows: “Q” posts his (usually very cryptic) message. Anons, the site’s anonymous users, receive the message and start brainstorming on its meaning, often using other QDrops, YouTube videos, and obscure historical facts as references. They then share their findings by the hundreds in response to the initial message from “Q”. Specialized Anons, known as Bakers, are then tasked with analyzing each response, selecting the best explanations, and putting them all together to give the world a synthesized and coherent version of “Q’s” message. But the process doesn’t always stop there:

sometimes, “Q” himself uses the Bakers’ synthesized information to select his favorite answers and incorporate them into his narrative. In other words, “Q” chooses after the fact the meaning of the original message he himself posted⁶².

For example, when “Q” posts a message asking “What is the keystone?”, each Anon suggests an answer: whether it’s the Federal Reserve, the State of Pennsylvania, Roger Stone, a political ideal, the Deep State, or Robert Mueller, everyone has their interpretation. The Bakers eventually declare that “keystone” is a metaphor representing control over the public narrative. Soon after, “Q” posts a confirmation of this theory⁶³.

This democratization in the transmission - or rather creation - of information, perfectly suited to the age of the Internet and social media, is not unlike the techniques employed by a particular form of narrative fiction: *fanfiction*. François Sébastien defines *fanfiction* as “the stories that some fans write to extend, modify, or even radically transform the media product they love, whether it’s a novel, a manga, a TV series, a movie, a video game, or even a celebrity⁶⁴.” It’s a recourse for members of an interpretive community who want to have their say on a work of art they care about. Today, the practice has exploded in popularity, with sites like FanFiction.Net hosting countless stories posted by millions of users. But QAnon is very different from the usual texts published on FanFiction.Net: instead of writing about universes such as *Pokémon*, *Game of Thrones*, or *Twilight*, “Q” and his community work together on a complex *fanfiction* about... real life.

In QAnon’s mythology, historical events and figures become stories and characters; each has the power to offer their own narrative about Robert Mueller, Tucker Carlson, or Jeffrey Epstein. “Q’s” posts serve as a sort of incipit to the stories of the Anons who follow him. And the Bakers aren’t investigative journalists using a rigorous methodology to confirm or refute Anons’ suggestions: they simply choose the best-crafted stories, like a published *fanfiction* story would receive several “likes”. And when a particularly well-liked story, forwarded by the Bakers, receives the canonical approval of “Q” himself - supreme honor! - it’s a phenomenon rather similar to what happened in the *Harry Potter* fandom when, after years of homoerotic fan fiction, J.K. Rowling officially confirmed Albus Dumbledore’s homosexuality.

Real life has one thing in common with the most *fanfictionned* of fictional universes: gaps. Most popular fanfiction subjects are series - whether book series like *Percy Jackson* or movies like *Star Wars*, TV shows like *Doctor Who*, anime like *Naruto*, video game franchises like *Mass Effect*... The serial nature of these

⁶² Translation note: There are interesting similarities between this system and the co-construction of stories between dev and player present in the game *Kentucky Route Zero*. This game, as Lindsey Joyce puts it, “situate[s] the player not as a single actor on stage, but instead as the director of the play” (Joyce, 2015) ; every answer is valid because it’s never about finding the *right* answer, it’s about telling the game what you want it to be. This note was not in the original thesis.

⁶³ Cullen HOBACK, *Q: Into the Storm* (2021), episode 1, 40:39.

⁶⁴ François SÉBASTIEN, « Appropriations et transpositions amateurs des mass-médias sur Internet », doctorate’s thesis, 2010, p. 2.

narratives creates gaps, i.e. holes or ellipses between episodes. For François Sébastien, gaps “allow for the insertion of transitional narratives or unexpected plot twists, a mechanism that is obviously at the heart of *fanfiction* composition⁶⁵.” The value of *fanfiction* for interpretive communities becomes abundantly clear here: it ensures the continuous production of new stories, since the canonical work can obviously never fill all of its own gaps. *Fanfiction* writers thus give their own interpretation of the ellipses present in any work of narrative fiction, whether they are creating the summer adventures of Luna Lovegood and her crazy dad, or exploring the extramarital adventures of a bored, middle-aged Harry Potter.

The same mechanism can be applied, in a twisted way, to reality: our History is also a narrative that spans millions of years, billions of human lives, and more events than we can count. Life is full of gaps, some of which we may never be able to fill. What lies beyond the walls of Area 51? Did Jeffrey Epstein really commit suicide? What skeletons lurk in the closets of Mohammed Ben Salmane, Bill Clinton, Xi Jinping, and Angela Merkel? So many questions about facts that elude us, but that might nonetheless affect our societies and our lives. In the absence of official answers, it becomes tempting to fill these gaps ourselves. And this is where QAnon becomes a lifeline. For QAnon, there are no coincidences or mistakes. Each event is part of a larger narrative mosaic. “Q” offers everyone the chance to piece together the story of History: unlike the world of official media, with its fussy journalism and complicated methodology⁶⁶, in QAnon, “almost any theory was welcome⁶⁷.” A community where everyone can reconstruct reality itself: how could one resist such power?

According to several scholars, one of the strengths of *fanfiction* is its ability to make a work of art more inclusive for marginalized communities. For Nickie Michaud Wild, “*fanfiction* reflects both emotional engagement with and resistance to the source material [...]. Stories are reworked to include marginalized and underrepresented groups, as well as narrative preferences that expand the limited scope of what is commercially available⁶⁸.” In the canonical narratives of popular culture, for example, the representation of women and queer communities is not always optimal. Certain types of *fanfiction*, such as slash⁶⁹, deliberately distort the established canon in order to give these groups a voice and a presence. By operating outside the institutional paradigms that largely control the production of popular culture, *fanfiction* can also explore important but often overlooked themes, such as adolescent sexuality or queer identity. QAnon operates on a similar principle of inclusivity and democratization... in a slightly twisted way, of course.

⁶⁵ François SÉBASTIEN, « Fanf(r)ictions. Tensions identitaires et relationnelles chez les auteurs de récits de fans », in *Réseaux*, vol. I, n° 153 (2009), [online].

⁶⁶ Not to mention that, sometimes, the mainstream media really *does* have problems with transparency and conflicts of interest that can undermine trust in institutions, as in the case of brothers Andrew and Chris Cuomo.

⁶⁷ Cullen HOBACK, Q: *Into the Storm* (2021), episode 1, 21:32.

⁶⁸ Nickie MICHAUD WILD, « The active defense of fanfiction writing: *Sherlock* fans' metatextual response », in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. XXIII, n° 2 (2020), [online].

⁶⁹ A type of homoerotic or homoromantic *fanfiction*.

Indeed, one of the central elements of QAnon's narrative is the reclaiming of power by the people, for the people. In the troubled era of the 2010s, many Americans no longer recognize themselves in the economic, political, and cultural elite that runs the country. Helplessly observing the sterility of the public debate between Democrats and Republicans, watching the costs of living rise and its financial means diminish, seeing in the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements a war on the white man, fearing the growing power of multicultural communities, this segment of the population has come to feel excluded from the "canonical" social narrative. Relegated to the shadows, powerless, it finally receives the helping hand it's been hoping for: that of "Q", a high-ranking White House official who validates all its concerns. Yes, there is a war on the white race, yes, the Democrats and Republicans no longer represent you, yes, you are the heroes of the story. Take back the power that was stolen from you: these are the bad guys, the pedo-satanist cabal that caused all your problems. Let's take them down together, for the glory of America!

This alternative canon is a breath of fresh air for groups who perceived themselves as marginalized and threatened. And, just as women and queer communities use *fanfiction* to carve out the place in narrative fiction that the canon denies them, millions of Americans on the right and far right use QAnon to carve out the place in reality that they feel they deserve.

Filling the void

In three years, QAnon has moved from the dark confines of the anonymous Internet to the forefront of public debate. And for good reason: although as implausible as the bizarre story of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, QAnon's narrative has proven extremely appealing to millions of followers. The *Protocols'* narrative canvas, modernized to appeal to a contemporary audience, has benefited from the use of several new narrative devices: repeated references to folk tales and popular stories, a participatory storytelling method, inclusivity in the creative process... all these elements contribute to a romanticized rewriting of reality that gives its adherents "a sense of control over the uncontrollable⁷⁰."

All the evidence suggests that "Q" himself is gone for good. His publications ended on December 8, 2020. But, as with the *Protocols*, it's too soon to claim victory. "Q" was the instigator and driving force behind QAnon for just over three years, but the movement did not die with him. Even if he never returns, it's only a matter of time before the *Protocols* canvas begins a new migration (as Umberto Eco would say), and the void is filled. After all, "Q" may be gone, but his millions of followers remain.

So... what now?

⁷⁰ Cullen HOBACK, *Q: Into the Storm* (2021), episode 6, 15:37.

Conclusion: What Now?

"Whether this is a forgery or not, still the events of today are hitting the contents of [The Protocols of the Elders of Zion] right on target."

Anonymous American Citizen, Letter to the FBI, February 3rd, 1968⁷¹.

The *Protocols* were certainly not the first conspiracy theory to borrow devices from narrative fiction. QAnon was certainly not the last.

There is no doubt that the *Protocols* and QAnon do not tell the truth. Both theories have been rigorously and systematically debunked several times by specialized researchers and journalists. But facts have not prevented their rise to prominence, because a fact never disproves a good story. Followers of the *Protocols* and QAnon are so first and foremost because they find in these theories narratives that reinforce, accept, and validate them. Facts that contradict these stories automatically become fake news, lies, and fabrications.

In his three years of existence, "Q" has stunned the entire planet by amassing millions of followers despite the phenomenal implausibility of his story about a pedo-satanist cabal of baby-eating billionaires. The factors behind its success are many: some are social or technological, others stem from the narrative systems and devices used by QAnon. The end of "Q"'s posts leaves a gaping void in the conspiracy world. Who will fill it? How will this new theory work, what will its narrative be, and what devices will it employ? At this stage, all hypotheses are valid. But one thing is certain: sooner or later, the void *will* be filled.

And when it is, it will be up to the rest of us to fight against a new story.

In the early 20th century, the *Protocols* played a major role in anti-Semitic violence. Adolf Hitler himself quotes them in *Mein Kampf*, and lighter versions of the text were used to indoctrinate the Hitler Youth⁷². It would be simplistic to hold the *Protocols* solely responsible for the Holocaust, but they certainly played a role in the anti-Semitic radicalization of the far right at the time. At the beginning of the 21st century, QAnon took on the mantle, leading millions of Americans in search of meaning in an assault on the foundations of science and democracy. The murderous 2021 assault on the Capitol horrified the world, but despite its violence, it was only one manifestation of QAnon's perverse influence.

⁷¹ ANONYMOUS, *Protocols of the Meetings of the Learned Elders of Zion*, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁷² Benjamin SEGEL, *A Lie and a Libel: The History of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, 1995, p. 30.

Stories have power. And sometimes, one of them leaves the pages of a book or the posts of an anonymous forum to make its mark on the world. When QAnon's heir rises, political scientists, sociologists, scientists, and journalists will have to begin anew the essential work of refuting it. But it will be equally important for literary scholars to dissect its narrative systems. If facts alone cannot defeat the stories that destroy us, perhaps they will be more successful if they join forces with experts whose job it is, precisely, to study stories.

This thesis was originally published in French, alongside a short novel.

Both texts can be found [here](#).

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