Philosophers believe that "the soul is simply what a person does," Simone Simonini tells us. He wants to know, however, what he is like inside and concludes: "Odi ergo sum. I hate therefore I am."

Whom does Simonini love? "No one comes to mind." He hates the Germans, the French and the Italians. He hates Freemasons and Jesuits. He hates women, though he knows little of them. Most of all, though he claims he's never met one, he hates Jews.

In "The Prague Cemetery," Umberto Eco, professor of semiotics, philosophy and medieval studies at University of Bologna and author of "The Name of the Rose," uses Simonini, the only fictional character in his novel, to explore the shadowy and sordid world of anti-Semitism in 19th-century Europe.

Mr. Eco puts readers unfamiliar with the unification of Italy, the Paris Commune, the Dreyfus Affair and The Protocols of the Elders of Zion at a distinct disadvantage. And, although the novel's awash in sewers and Satanists, Black Masses, murder and mayhem, it is not all that suspenseful.

Off-putting as well is the by now cliche-ridden postmodern self-consciousness of "The Prague Cemetery." Compelled, for some reason, to remind us that his book is a work of fiction, Mr. Eco has his narrator interrupt the narrative to suggest that the epistolary exchanges between Simonini and his alter ego, the Abbe Dalla Piccola, are a literary device; acknowledge (alas, all too accurately) that they are "rather tiresome"; and then speculate that (because they refer to events that actually took place) they still "might be worth using one day as the basis for a novel."

As an anatomy of anti-Semitism, however, "The Prague Cemetery" works remarkably well. A market for antipathy against Jews, Mr. Eco demonstrates, flourished throughout Europe, not only among Christians, but among revolutionaries, republicans and socialists. To sell the story of a Jewish conspiracy, Simonini realizes, he does not have to offer anything accurate or original: "People believe only what they already know."

Especially when the enemy is on the doorstep. And so, Simonini recycles horror stories, from here, there, and everywhere, from his grandfather and from Dostoevsky, about Jewish predators, parasites, and pornographers: Jewish resistance to physical illness; Jewish fecundity ("they're producing children twice as fast as we are"); Jewish artistic prowess (after the crocodile, they are "the most musical of all animals"); and, of course, the "overweening ambition" of Jews to dominate the world.

In a chilling reminder of the power of creativity, Simonini reveals how the experience of inventing texts to document the Jewish conspiracy transformed a "repugnance" that in his youth "had been no more than (how can I say?) imaginary," instilled in him like "voices in a catechism," into something deep, irrepressible, and "real."

Only after he reread the document he had forged, did Simonini fully understand his mission: "I had to sell my report to someone, but only if he paid its weight in gold would he believe it, and help in making it credible."

Mr. Eco wants Simonini to be the most cynical and disagreeable character in the history of literature. And it is hard to identify anyone more abhorrent. "It wasn't up to me to eliminate an entire people," he asserts. "As a rule," the liar adds, he shrank from physical violence. But he was making a contribution to "the final solution" in his "own modest way. And it was, after all, a profitable business."

With a reminder that hate remains alive and well, Mr. Eco gives himself the last word. Simonini, he writes, "did in some sense exist. Indeed, to be frank, he is still among us."

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