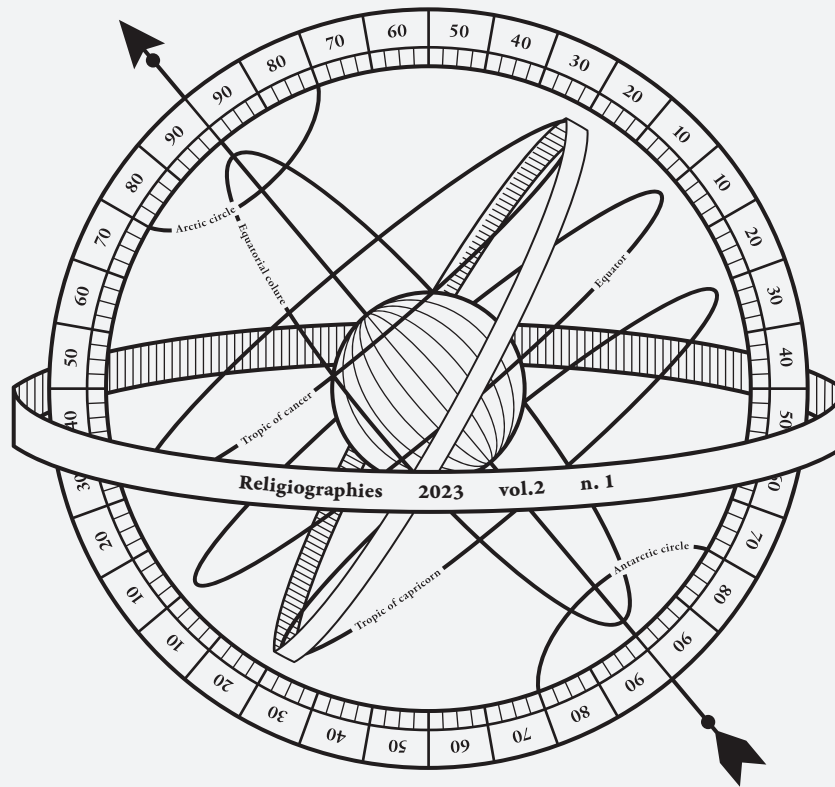


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Generous Hermeneutics: Hans Thomas Hakl and Eranos Wouter J. Hanegraaff



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Abstract

Inspired by Paul Ricoeur’s seminal discussions in *De l’interprétation* (1965), this article argues that the academic study of Eranos has suffered from a binary logic which falsely assumes that scholars must choose between either a hermeneutics of faith or a hermeneutics of suspicion. Hans Thomas Hakl’s *Eranos* exemplifies a neglected intermediary approach that may be referred to as the hermeneutics of generosity. Hakl’s insistence on the maxim *audiat et altera pars* allowed him to transcend narrow ideological positions and apply the principle of charity to thinkers across the political spectrum from left to right. Furthermore, instead of approaching scholars such as Jung, Eliade, Corbin, or Scholem as unique and isolated figures, he contextualized them historically as parts of a scholarly tradition that had been neglected by the academy. Although his true agenda was to discuss Eranos in terms of an *alternative Geistesgeschichte* with special attention to its “esoteric” dimension, the sheer pressure of the dominant discourse may have actually caused him to overemphasize political issues. Future studies of Eranos should be able to follow in Hakl’s footsteps while expanding the scope of inquiry to dimensions that still remain neglected, including that of Eranos as a characteristic manifestation of high modernity. It is suggested here that the famous “spirit of Eranos” reflects a refusal of the linguistic turn in twentieth-century thought and an insistence that meaning comes *to* the self rather than *from* it. Its characteristic hope of being *ergriffen* or *interpellé* by “the impossible” is best understood in terms of the dark existentialist mood among intellectuals during the period dominated by two world wars.

1

Paul Ricoeur, *De l’interprétation: Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 40.

2

Hans Thomas Hakl, *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos: Unbekannte Begegnungen von Wissenschaft und Esoterik. Eine alternative Geistesgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bretten: scientia nova, 2001; different in this regard from the title of the English translation and the revised second edition). All references in the rest of this article are to the second edition: Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: Nabel der Welt, Glied der goldenen Kette. Die alternative Geistesgeschichte* (Bretten: scientia nova, 2015). Page numbers of the English edition (Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* [Sheffield–Bristol: Equinox, 2013] are added within square brackets. For Eranos’ *Genius loci ignotus*, see Hakl, *Eranos*, 422–23 [219], and discussion below.

3

For the combination of these trends as essential to *la condition postmoderne*, see the impressive analysis in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984 [1979]). The original core texts are Ferdinand de Saussure, *Premier cours de linguistique générale (1907) d’après les cahiers d’Albert Riedlinger / Saussure’s First Course of Lectures on General Linguistics (1907) from the Notebooks of Albert Riedlinger* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1996); and Claude E. Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” *The Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (1948): 378–423, 623–56. Note that the idea of a “linguistic turn” was introduced in 1967 by Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical*

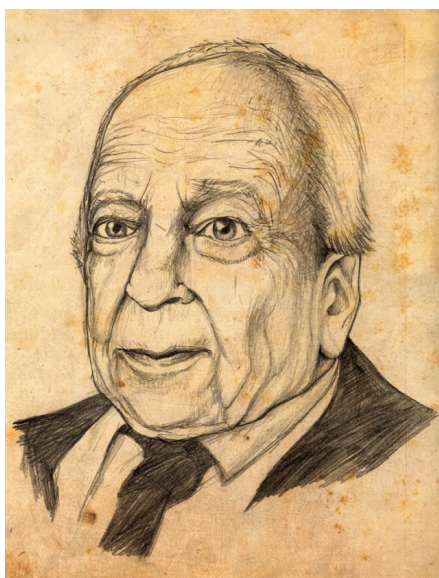
Le souci moderne pour les symboles exprime un nouveau désir d’être interpellé, par delà le silence et l’oubli que font proliférer la manipulation des signes vides et la construction des langages formalisés.¹

The quotation above, from Paul Ricoeur’s 1965 volume *De l’interprétation*, strikes me as a perfect summary of what the Eranos meetings were all about. It may not have been sufficiently noted that the famous “spirit of Eranos”—see the original title of Hans Thomas Hakl’s book²—was directing much of its energies against the so-called linguistic turn in modern academia and its implications, ranging (in Ricoeur’s formulation) from the “manipulation of empty signifiers” associated with post-Saussurian semiotics to the “construction of formalized languages” that would eventually result in modern information and computer technology.³ *Inter alia*, Ricoeur’s formulation *le silence et l’oubli* invoked Pascal’s spectre of a disenchanted universe that responds to all human desires with nothing but mute indifference (or rather, does not respond at all), and the strict impossibility of *gnōsis* as *anamnēsis* after the “death of metaphysics.”⁴

Ricoeur saw with perfect clarity that the popular and intellectual fascination with symbols and symbolism is a characteristically *modern* phenomenon that reflects a profound sense of loss: “Oubli des hiérophanies; oubli des signes du Sacré; perte de l’homme lui-même comme appartenant au sacré.”⁵ Haunted by the death of God and the death of metaphysics, the “spirit of Eranos” was driven by a profound desire: that *something should speak to us*, lest we would find ourselves all alone in the universe speaking just to ourselves. The meaning of Ricoeur’s “désir d’être interpellé” can be captured very precisely in German as “das Verlangen nach



Paul Ricoeur. Photograph © Juerg Mueller



Hans-Georg Gadamer. Photograph © Oto Vega Ponce

Ergriffenheit”—the longing to be “seized,” “grasped,” or “captured” by something from the other side of silence, in a spiritual experience of “immediacy beyond interpretation.”⁶ The importance of *Ergriffenheit* to Eranos has been noted by many scholars, including Gershom Scholem, Hans Thomas Hakl, Steven Wasserstrom, and Helmut Zander.⁷ Ricoeur (who collaborated closely with Corbin and Eliade but never made it to Eranos⁸) was explicit in emphasizing its centrality to what Thomas Hakl has taught us to think of as the “Eranos tradition” and its intellectual ancestors, while admitting that it ultimately inspired all his own work as well:

“... for would I be *interested* in the “object” . . . if I did not hope for this “something” to “*address*” me from the very heart of the process of understanding? Is this desire for the object not put into motion by the hope of being seized/captured [*interpellé*]? Finally, implicit in this hope is a confidence in language; it is the belief that the language by which symbols are carried is not so much spoken by humans as spoken to humans, that humans are born within language, in the midst of the light of logos “which illuminates each human that arrives on earth.” It is this hope, this confidence, it is this belief that lends the study of symbols its specific gravity. I owe it to the truth to say that it is this that animates all my research.”⁹

Ricoeur described this explicitly theological perspective, with its obvious reference to the Christian Logos, as the “hermeneutics of faith” (*la foi*).¹⁰ It was essential to his famous notion of a “second naïvety,” and he explained it with reference to such authors as Schelling, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Leenhardt, van der Leeuw, Bultmann, Eliade, and Jung.¹¹ The “first naïvety” of archaic culture meant living in a world of symbols and myths without interrogating their actual *truth*.¹² This “immediacy of belief” (*la croyance*) was destroyed forever by the spirit of modern critical self-reflection; but beyond a purely

Method, with Two Retrospective Essays (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1967]), but originally referred to logical positivist and ordinary language philosophers, not to the (post)structuralist thinkers who are most frequently quoted in this context: see the historical genealogy by Judith Surkis, “When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 700–722, here 705 and *passim*.

4

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 342–51. For Pascal, see of course the famous sentence in *Pensées* III 205: “. . . abîmé dans l’infinie immensité des espaces que j’ignore et qui m’ignorent, je m’effraie . . .” See also Nietzsche’s poem *Vereinsamt*: “Die Welt – ein Tor / zu tausend Wüsten stumm und kalt! / Wer das verlor / was du verlorst, macht nirgends Halt.” For the influential but problematic “gnostic” interpretation by Hans Jonas, see his famous essay “Gnosticism, Nihilism and Existentialism” in *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 320–40.

5

Paul Ricoeur, “Le symbole donne à penser,” *Esprit* 275, no. 7/8 (1959): 60–76; also in: Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité*, vol. 1, *La symbolique du mal* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), 61. A too literal translation leads to awkward English, but the meaning of this sentence may be rendered as “hierophanies are forgotten, signs of the sacred are forgotten, man’s very connection to the sacred gets lost.”

6

Helmut Zander, “Die ‘Ergriffenen’ von Ascona: Wissenschaft und Spiritualität im Eranos-Kreis” (review of Hakl), *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 271 (2001): 68 (“Im inneren Eranos-Kreis glühte die Sehnsucht nach Unmittelbarkeit jenseits der Interpretation”). On immediacy as a key dimension of *gnōsis*, cf. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 115, 324, 335–36. The concept of *Ergriffenheit* comes from Heidegger: see notably his lectures of 1929–1930 published as *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit* (G.A. II. 29/30) (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992), 9, 12–13. Further literature in Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 267 note 64 (= 302–3 note 83).

7

Gershom Scholem, “Identifizierung und Distanz: Ein Rückblick,” in *Denken und mythische Bildwelt / Thought and Mythic Images / Image mythique et pensée* (Eranos Yearbook 48), ed. Adolf Portmann and Rudolf Ritsema (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 1981), 463–67; Hakl, *Eranos*, 192–93 [96], 247 [125]; Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 31–32 (with 266 note 64), 121 (with 302 note 83), 152–53; Zander, “Die ‘Ergriffenen.’”

8

Hakl notes that during the 1960s, Ricoeur collaborated with Corbin and Eliade as patrons of the *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* (*Eranos*, 321 note 75 [354 note 76]).

Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, 38. Cf. "Le symbole donne à penser," 61, 70–71: "par delà le désert de la critique" and "à l'époque de l'oubli des signes du sacré . . . nous voulons à nouveau être interpellés." Translating the French words *attendre* and *attente* in terms of "expectation" would suggest a sense of confident certainty that is not intended here. The whole point of *Ergriffenheit* is that the agency or initiative does not lie with the person who is being seized/captured, so I interpret these words here in terms of "hope." Ricoeur's in-text quotation, of course, comes from the Prologue of the Gospel of John.

10

Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, 36–37.

11

The key text is Ricoeur, "Le symbole donne à penser" (1960). For a fascinating analysis and historical contextualization, see Patrick Vandermeersch, "The Failure of Second Naïveté: Some Landmarks in the History of French Psychology of Religion," in *Aspects in Context: Studies in the History of Psychology of Religion*, ed. J. A. Belzen (Amsterdam–Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), 235–79.

12

Ricoeur, "Le symbole," 70.

13

Ricoeur, "Le symbole," 71.

14

For the general intellectual history of this phenomenon, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

15

Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, 40–44; Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1970), 32–36. For the frequent "use and abuse" of Ricoeur's notion of a "hermeneutics of suspicion," see Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London–New York: Continuum, 2009), 59–77.

16

Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 32.

17

Jean Grondin, "Le sens un peu oublié de la première entrée de Ricoeur en herméneutique," *Sapientia* 67 (2011): 127–46.

18

While the number of publications on this topic is by now overwhelming (see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 302–303 with note 160), the most incisive analysis and critique I have come across remains Elaine Fisher, "Fascist Scholars, Fascist Scholarship: The Quest for Ur-Fascism and the Study of Religion," in *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade*, ed. Christian K. Wedemeyer and Wendy Doniger (Oxford

reductionist and nihilist acceptance of utter "silence and oblivion," it should now be possible to find the way toward a second naïveté—"what we now have in mind is a critique that will be restorative and not reductive. In other words, it is by *interpreting* that we can *listen* again."¹³ This was the very heart of Ricoeur's program of hermeneutics.

No less famous and influential than Ricoeur's "second naïveté" was his distinction between two mutually exclusive types of hermeneutics; but it is here, one must say, that something went seriously wrong in the reception and transmission process between French intellectual culture and its new Anglo-American audience since the 1960s.¹⁴ In *De l'interprétation* (1965), published in 1970 as *Freud and Philosophy*, a style of "interpretation as recollection of meaning" (associated, again, with Eranos luminaries such as Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade) was placed in sharp opposition against "interpretation as exercise of suspicion" (associated with the "masters of suspicion" Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud).¹⁵ In a brilliant recent analysis, Rita Felski explains what was at stake here:

" . . . Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche are at war not only with the commonplaces of their own time but also the oppressive weight of the past. Ricoeur hails their work as a radical break—a leave-taking from traditional theories of interpretation anchored in the study of religious texts. What unites them, in spite of their differences, is a spirit of ferocious and blistering disenchantment—a desire to puncture illusions, topple idols, and destroy divinities. In *Freud and Philosophy* Ricoeur contrast this iconoclastic verve to the yearning of the reader who approaches a text in the hope of revelation. . . . To interpret in this way is to feel oneself addressed by the text as if by a message or a proclamation, to defer to a presence rather than diagnose an absence. The words on the page do not disguise truth but disclose it. Such a "hermeneutics of restoration" is infused with moments of wonder, reverence, exaltation, hope, epiphany, or joy. The difference between a hermeneutics of restoration and a hermeneutics of suspicion, we might say, lies in the difference between unveiling and unmasking."¹⁶

Ricoeur himself was in search of a *third* path between "faith" and "suspicion"; and in this regard, all his later work would be influenced heavily by the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. But Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* did not become famous until its second edition of 1965, the very year in which *De l'interprétation* was published, and so he was absent from *Freud and Philosophy* as well.¹⁷ As a result, Anglo-American readers embraced Ricoeur's exciting concept of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" but were bound to conclude that it implied a categorical rejection of its sole alternative, now perceived as a conservative and intrinsically theological "hermeneutics of faith" associated with scholars of religion such as Mircea Eliade (after which, of course, the "Eliade scandal" of the 1980s¹⁸ could only strengthen such perceptions). What went wrong, then, is that the "third path" explored by Ricoeur and Gadamer simply fell out of the equation. As Felski reminds us, henceforth these French and German traditions received "scant attention in Anglo-American literary studies," and "thanks to a lingering aura of Teutonic fustiness, not to mention its long-standing links with biblical interpretation, hermeneutics was never able to muster the high-wattage excitement that radiated from poststructuralism."¹⁹

This brings me to my central thesis in this article. In the wake of

Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy* and its considerable impact, the study of Eranos has suffered quite badly from a false logic of mutual exclusion which leads scholars to believe that they must choose between either "faith/belief" (*la foi, la croyance*) or "suspicion" (often political in nature) since no third hermeneutical path exists. As the battles over Eliade's legacy were raging in the study of religion, it was typical to see the problem framed in dramatic binary terms such as "Are Historians of Religions [i.e. adherents of Eliade] Necessarily Believers?"²⁰ Regardless of whether the alternative was described as social-scientific reductionism or poststructuralist critique, Eranos always ended up on the side of "faith" or "belief." Standard scholarship on Eranos has been largely dominated by a hermeneutics of suspicion inspired by critical theory, from the pioneering early analysis of Hans-Heinz Holz (1984) to Steven Wasserstrom's *Religion after Religion* (1999) and a range of specialized studies devoted to central Eranos figures such as Jung and Eliade.²¹ In radical opposition to these approaches, we encounter an explicit hermeneutics of (esoteric) faith at Eranos as well, notably in the work of Henry Corbin and some of his followers.²²

However, in addition to these opposed perspectives, a third type of hermeneutics is grounded not in any confident certainties or dogmatic assertions but in an open-ended agnosticism. With Hans-Georg Gadamer as its most important and profound representative, it allows for deep critical analysis that may well include suspicious hermeneutics wherever required; but it also leaves room for the profound human longing or hope of finding oneself *interpellé, ergriffen*, hence *surprised* and possibly *inspired* by the wholly unexpected. Precisely this is what makes it different from *both* other types. The hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion have in common that they already *know* what to expect, as they are grounded in axiomatic beliefs or ideological certainties;²³ as a result, the "signs" that they are looking for are ultimately signs of confirmation or reassurance. As noted by Jason Josephson Storm:

"The central features of [the hermeneutics of suspicion's] self-description are its novel insights and its rejection of easy answers. But as a hermeneutic it relies on rote strategies and prepackaged rhetoric, and its insights are anything but novel insofar as they typically presume the things they are looking to unmask (racism, sexism, neo-liberalism, etcetera) behind every text."²⁴

The radical agnostic alternative to either faith or suspicion was expressed, in a particularly sharp formulation, by no one else than Gershom Scholem. Inspired very much by Jewish messianic traditions, and responding to the famous "crisis of historicism," he argued that we must have the courage to "descend into the abyss" of history, knowing that we might very well encounter nothing there but only ourselves, and guided by nothing but just a desperate hope for *the impossible*—that against all human logic, the inexplicable might inexplicably "break through into history" one day, like "a light that shines into it from altogether elsewhere."²⁵

I will refer to this third approach as *the hermeneutics of generosity*, or generous hermeneutics. Unlike the hermeneutics of faith represented for instance by Henry Corbin, it does not flee from "the terror of history" but fully recognizes its legitimacy and persuasive power. But unlike the hermeneutics of suspicion, it eschews dogmatic ideologies and their confident certainties as well, because the self-righteous gesture of "unmasking" is

University Press, 2010), 261–84.

19

Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 32.

20

Robert A. Segal, "Are Historians of Religions Necessarily Believers?," in Robert A. Segal, *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the Confrontation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 71–76. Cf. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward A. Yonan, eds., *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); discussion in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 2 (1995), 99–129.

21

Hans Heinz Holz's article ("ERANOS – eine moderne Pseudo-Gnosis," in *Religionstheorie und Politische Theologie*, ed. Jacob Taubes, vol. 2, *Gnosis und Politik* [Paderborn-Munich: Wilhelm Fink-Ferdinand Schöningh, 1984], 249–63) was clearly a major reference for Hakl at the time he was writing his book, as he spends many pages positioning himself against this scathing critique by a convinced Marxist representative of the Frankfurt School (Hakl, *Eranos*, 487–518 [257–73]).

22

I hope to discuss this dimension in a forthcoming analysis (Wouter Hanegraaff, "Henry Corbin as Knight of the Temple," in *New Perspectives on Henry Corbin*, ed. Hadi Fakhoury [Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming] focused on an article by Corbin that is central to Wasserstrom's critique in *Religion after Religion*: Henry Corbin, "L'Imago templi face aux normes profanes," in Corbin, *Temple et Contemplation* (Paris: Médicis-Entrelacs, 2006 [orig. 1958]), 327–477.

23

For this essential point, see my discussion of axiomatic and non-axiomatic empiricism in Hanegraaff, "Empirical Method," 101–2; with reference to Jan Platvoet, "The Definers Defined: Traditions in the Definition of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 2 (1990): 180–212. After several decades of further reflection, I find the basic argument remains as valid as ever.

24

Jason Ananda Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 214, with reference to Rita Felski and Eve Sedgwick.

25

Here I paraphrase a few sentences from my longer discussion of Scholem's perspective in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 296–99, here 297, with reference to Gershom Scholem, "Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum," in Scholem, *Judaica 1* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986 [1963]); his famous letter to Zalman Schocken about the "mountain of history" (Scholem, "A Birthday Letter from Gershom Scholem to Zalman Schocken," in *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, ed. David Biale [Cambridge, Mass.-London: Harvard University Press, 215–16]; and its earlier version reproduced in Peter Schäfer, " 'Die Philologie der Kabbala ist nur eine Projektion auf eine Fläche': Gershom Scholem



Hans Thomas Hakl. Photograph © Wouter J. Hanegraaff

über die wahren Absichten seines Kabbalastudiums,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 5 (1998): 1–25.

26

Thomas Mann, *Joseph und seine Brüder* (Grosse Kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe 8.2) (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 2018), vol. 2, “Zum Herrn” (the sentence is spoken by the traveling merchant who has saved Joseph from the well and will lead him to Egypt). I have myself advocated such a hermeneutics ever since my first theoretical article: “if we are radically honest, we must admit that none of us has a clue about what is *really* going on around us (and especially: *how* and for what reasons it is going on)” etc. (Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method,” 107; and see my recent advocacy of “radical empiricism” in Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 4–5).

27

This open-endedness and ultimate agnosticism is essential to Gadamerian hermeneutics, as I have tried to explain elsewhere: “our human consciousness (the instrument of interpretation) is defined precisely by its *historicity*, its horizon of temporality conditioned by our mortality and finitude” (Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 132–38, 345–51).

28

For the “aspiration to the impossible” in Scholem’s work, cf. Stéphane Mosès, *L’ange de l’histoire: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 189–92, esp. 190: “La Rédemption est toujours imminente, mais si elle survenait, elle serait immédiatement mise en doute, au nom même de l’exigence d’absolu qu’elle prétend accomplir.” For a somewhat similar focus on “the impossible,” see Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010) as well as Kripal’s discussion of three Eranos luminaries (Massignon, Eliade, and Scholem) in a chapter titled “The Visitation of the Stranger,” that is, of the alien: Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 103–18. See also Corbin’s poem to Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn: “Parce que là, l’Impossible, une fois, fut réalisé . . .” (Corbin, “À Olga Fröbe Kapteyn,” in *Henry Corbin* (Cahier de l’Herne), ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: Éditions de L’Herne, 1981), 264–65, here 264. Importantly,

not above suspicion either, but might itself be a mask of the will to power. Grounded neither in belief nor in unbelief (which, after all, is just another form of belief), the hermeneutics of generosity cultivates an attitude of radical openness to possibility, as beautifully formulated by a fictional character in one of Thomas Mann’s novels: “Ein Zweifler bin ich, wie ich hier sitze, nicht weil ich nichts glaubte, sondern weil ich alles für möglich halte” (“A doubter I am, as I sit here—not because I believed in nothing but because I consider everything possible”).²⁶ The basic assumption is that perfect certainty about “the really real” lies beyond the reach of human consciousness and hence of scholarly understanding; and while a deep desire for “knowing the truth” drives all scholarly research and gives it a sense of direction, the *telos* of that quest will always stay beyond the finite horizon of human minds.²⁷

The basic principle of radical doubt imposes no limits of any kind on the practice of critical inquiry, and therefore leaves plenty of scope for the hermeneutics of suspicion—after all, if perfect certainty is out of reach, any appearance could prove deceptive. Yet it also leaves room for the hope or desire of being *interpellé/ergriffen* by “the impossible,” as by some alien visitation.²⁸ Most importantly, any claim or expectation of epistemological closure (of final and definitive certainty, when all the masks will have fallen) must itself be regarded with suspicion and critical reserve.²⁹ The hermeneutics of generosity implies a *positive* attitude of open-minded curiosity and wonder, inspired by genuine interest in learning whatever may be there to be learned—especially from those who are different from ourselves and have other ways of looking at reality.

Audiat et altera pars

Precisely such a hermeneutics of generosity I find characteristic of Hans Thomas Hakl and his work. In the Preface to the English edition of Hakl’s *Eranos* volume, we encounter the following passage:

“This book is intended to serve—and why should I not declare this openly—as a plea for spiritual expansion [*geistige Erweiterung*]. This calls for tolerance above all—tolerance and understanding not only towards foreign cultures but also towards other forms of thought within our own cultural sphere even if they concern past political attitudes. As a trained lawyer I regard the ancient Roman maxim *audiat et altera pars* (hear the other side also)—especially when we do not really want to hear it—not as an outmoded relic but as a living principle that is close to my heart.”³⁰

This is in fact the heart of Hakl’s hermeneutics, and it explains why he had to part company with the approach of scholars such as Holz or Wasserstrom. The prime directive for him consists in making a serious attempt, driven by fascination with the unfamiliar and unknown, to *understand* what these “esoteric” traditions and their representatives are actually saying or trying to say—much more than with what they are supposed to be hiding. When Hakl’s book about *Eranos* appeared in 2001, this made it perfectly congenial to the academic study of esotericism as it was emerging at that time. Both rejected the temptations of *la pensée unique* or “single vision”³¹ and therefore positioned themselves deliberately in the—necessarily ambiguous—middle ground between overtly pro-esoteric apologetics (the “hermeneutics of faith”) and anti-esoteric polemics (the

“hermeneutics of suspicion”).³² The basic principle was that scholarly research in these domains, whether of Eranos or esotericism more generally, should be inspired first of all by a program of “hearing the other side”—listening to voices that used to be marginalized or excluded from acceptable academic discourse, in a spirit of tolerance and generous curiosity rather than outright rejection and suspiciousness. It was about taking esoteric traditions out of the “dustbin of history” so as to restore them to the status of normal objects of scholarly research, and should also make it possible to take their intellectual or spiritual contents seriously in general intellectual debate.³³

This strong congeniality notwithstanding, it would go too far to describe Hakl’s *Eranos* as a flagship example of what the new field was or is all about. As the author pointed out himself, his book was written by an academic outsider, an *amateur* in the best sense of the word;³⁴ and admittedly, it is not without certain weaknesses and limitations. Hakl’s interest in matters of theory or method has always been minimal at best, as can be seen for instance from how he handles the obligatory nuisance of defining “esotericism” in general and “Eranos-esotericism” more in particular.³⁵ One might also have hoped for a somewhat systematic analysis and historical-contextual interpretation of Eranos “religionism” as a specific type of modern esotericism, but Hakl knew very well that this was not his strength:

“There cannot yet be any question of an even moderately comprehensive history of Eranos . . . Even though the flow of this narrative is interrupted occasionally by digressions on matters of intellectual history or even “philosophy,” given the great complexity of the material involved I do not feel called to embark on a really comprehensive analysis of Eranos that goes beyond such obvious elements as anti-historicism, anti-positivism, interdisciplinarity, and the emphasis on spiritual perspectives.”³⁶

Hakl therefore restricted himself to a purely descriptive type of historiography that, admittedly, does not always avoid sliding into the merely anecdotal—his countless lengthy footnotes are often fascinating in themselves,³⁷ but also show how difficult he found it to resist the temptation of sharing countless small facts and interesting *petites histoires* with his readers, whether or not they supported his overall narrative. It is hardly unfair to think of *Eranos* as the proverbial “toppled-over bookcase,” or more precisely, as the expression of Hakl’s desire to share with his readers as much as humanly possible from all the priceless treasures in his famous Octagon Library.³⁸ Most of all, the volume reflects his wide erudition and shows his personal fascinations, based on decades of reading primary and secondary sources that are often difficult or even impossible for general readers to access.

Typical for Hakl’s generous hermeneutics, his first concern is always to humanize his protagonists. As he began delving deep into the sources, he discovered how *Wissenschaft* became *Menschenschaft*:³⁹

“. . . world-famous scholars from many academic disciplines turned into human beings. Their emotions—envy and joy, pride and vanity, but also their self-sacrifice and their metaphysical longings—came alive again. Their long-forgotten hopes and disappointments were revived—if only in my mind.”⁴⁰

generous hermeneutics carries no guarantee that its hopeful attitude will be justified or rewarded: for the radical possibility of “negative epistemology,” in which the “radical other” or the “really real” turns out to be monstrous, see Marco Pasi, “Arthur Machen’s Panic Fears: Western Esotericism and the Irruption of Negative Epistemology,” *Aries* 7, no. 1 (2007): 63–83; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Fiction in the Desert of the Real: Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos,” *Aries* 7, no. 1 (2007): 85–109.

29

Next to Thomas Mann (see text), another major testimony for this basic perspective would be Ingmar Bergman’s final masterpiece *Fanny och Alexander* (1982), which can be read as an extended meditation on ultimate reality as both revealed and concealed at the same time by “a thousand masks” (see the key conversation between Emilie Eckdahl and Edvard Vergerus after he has asked her to leave all her possessions behind).

30

Hakl, *Eranos*, 10 [xii] (with very minor modifications). Note that the words “even if they concern past political attitudes” do not appear in the German (second) edition. I translate *Denkformen* as “forms of thought” rather than “modes of thinking” because I assume a connection with Antoine Faivre’s famous understanding of Western esotericism as a *forme de pensée*, translated as *Denkform* in German. The history of this terminology would deserve some further study, as it also appears in the second volume of Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 2, *Das mythische Denken* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2010), where “myth” is discussed with frequent reference to Schelling’s notion of *tautegory* (a major concern in Wasserstrom’s *Religion after Religion*) and gets analyzed successively as a *Denkform*, an *Anschauungsform* and a *Lebensform*.

31

The expression *la pensée unique* was introduced into public debate by Jean-François Kahn in 1992: see Kahn, “Les risques de la pensée unique,” *L’Événement du Jeudi* (30 January 1992): 6. “Single vision” of course refers to a famous poem by William Blake, in a letter to Thomas Butts of 22 November 1802. As for Hakl’s perspective, see Baroni, “Philosophical Gold” (in this issue): “his ‘fight against one-dimensionality’ . . . —as he has himself declared—underlies all Hakl’s scholarly and intellectual work.” Same point in Otto, “Hans Thomas Hakl” (in this issue).

32

See Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method”; Hanegraaff, “On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions,’” in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, ed. Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Louvain: Peeters, 1998), 11–61 (with discussion of Eric Voegelin, Carl Raschke, and Marcello Truzzi as examples of an “anti-esoteric” perspective, *ibid.*, 28–42). With hindsight, I should have paid more attention to the “Frankfurt School” perspectives that were quite dominant during the 1990s and which I see as extreme manifestations of the basic (post)Enlightenment ideologies that caused “esotericism” to be dumped into the waste-basket of “rejected knowledge” over more than two centuries. In light of my argument in *Esotericism and the Academy* (see notably 280, 282, 302–3 with note 160, and especially 312–14; cf.

Hanegraaff, “Textbooks and Introductions to Western Esotericism,” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 178–200, here 193–95), my critique of such ideologies should therefore come as no surprise. Hakl notes correctly that “The chief source of attacks [*Hauptangriffsträger*] against esotericism and New Age movements was and still remains the Frankfurt School and its epigones” (*Eranos*, 510 note 73; the sentence is absent from the English edition, 383 note 73).

33

In terms of Asprem’s critique (Egil Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered: Some Methodological Notes on Esotericism and Marginality,” in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube [Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2021], I do embrace not just a strict understanding of “rejected knowledge,” but also a broader one that could be called “rejected knowledge *sensu lato*” (Asprem’s adjective “inflated” being clearly pejorative and therefore unsuitable for scholarly debate). I hope to return to this point in a separate publication.

34

Hakl, *Eranos*, 23 note 12 [294 note 10]: the book was written “out of love and pleasure in the spirit of a dilettante—from *diletto* (delight).”

35

Hakl, *Eranos*, 20–21 notes 8–9 [4, 293 notes 6–7].

36

Hakl, *Eranos*, 18–19 [3]; my translation.

37

Again, Hakl himself is well aware of the *Übermaß an Fußnoten* in his book: *Eranos*, 23 note 12 [294 note 10].

38

Octagon, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, 4 vols. (in German, English, Italian, and French) (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2015–18).

39

Otto, “Hans Thomas Hakl” (in this volume).

40

Hakl, *Eranos*, 16 [1]; my translation.

41

The iconic non/encounter in 1981 between Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer turned precisely around the notion of “good will”: Derrida’s response to Gadamer (“Three Questions”) focused on this notion and was originally titled “Bonnes volontés de puissance,” while Gadamer’s “Reply to Jacques Derrida” was originally titled “Und dennoch: Macht des guten Willens.” All documents with many commentaries in Diana Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, eds., *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); see my discussion in Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 345–51.

42

Hakl, *Eranos*, 24 [5–6]; my translation.

43

For some typical examples of Hakl’s basic attitude in this regard (with explicit reference to the Gospel

Hakl is willing to assume that his protagonists, for all their human flaws and limitations, were driven not by sinister purposes or evil intentions but by “good will”—an important notion that happens to be central to the confrontation between suspicious and generous hermeneutics.⁴¹ As Hakl explains,

“. . . I belong to those who are naïve enough to have a preference for Socrates’ teaching that the human will is by nature geared towards moral goodness (although admittedly, who has the right to define it?) so that evil comes essentially from ignorance; and so in this regard too, I have taken the risk of holding on to Socrates’ principle in trusting the “good will” of my protagonists.”⁴²

We have seen that Hakl practices this tolerant attitude towards Eranos perspectives “even if they concern past political attitudes,” because his primary impulse is always to understand rather than condemn—or at the very least, not to sit in judgment to condemn *before* one has understood.⁴³ Predictably, this has earned him his share of criticism, from readers who are suspicious of his motives or feel that *tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner*. But in fact, what I find most striking about *Eranos* is the remarkable extent to which Hakl is willing to bracket his personal sympathies and go out of his way to be fair to *both* sides in the critical debate “pro” and “contra” Eranos. In other words: the maxim *audiatur et altera pars* is applied deliberately and systematically into both directions.⁴⁴ In technical terms, Hakl applies what is known as the principle of charity,⁴⁵ which means that he insists on listening to the critics of Eranos closely and in great detail, in order to be fair in the way he represents their arguments. By taking such an approach, Hakl of course invites them (whether successfully or not) to follow his example by applying the same principle to Eranos – and to himself as well.

The fact is that, not even counting numerous minor remarks and digressions throughout Hakl’s book, more than one fifth of its total length is dominated by political controversies and attacks on Eranos! These discussions focus on Ludwith Derleth (a major early influence on Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, seven pages), Gustav Richard Heyer (thirteen pages), Carl Gustav Jung (fifteen pages), Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (twenty-four pages), Mircea Eliade (twenty-six pages), and Eranos generally (thirty-two pages).⁴⁶ If anything, such an amount of attention could be critiqued as disproportionate: it might be objected that Derleth was never part of Eranos, Heyer spoke there no more than four times (1933–1935, 1938), and Hauer even just one single time (1934). As the first years of Eranos happened to coincide with the beginnings of the Third Reich and many speakers came from the German-speaking world, a certain degree of political tension simply could not be avoided; notably, the simultaneous presence of Jakob Wilhelm Hauer and Martin Buber in 1934 seems to have led to an emotional discussion.⁴⁷ While the first years of Eranos are certainly important, still it is not obvious that these controversies should dominate a historical account that covers fifty-five years, from 1933 to 1988.⁴⁸

From a purely quantitative point of view, the fact is that 154 speakers gave at least one lecture at Eranos during that period, resulting in a total number of 575 lectures. About 44% of these Eranos speakers lectured just one single time, against a small elite of Eranos favorites who kept returning year after year.⁴⁹

Number of lectures	Names of lecturers (women are italicized)	Lectures total/%	Lecturers total/%
1 lecture	Alberry, D'Arcy, Baeck, Bänzinger, Baynes, Buber, Burkert, Buytendijk, Cammerloher, Citroen, Collum, Danzel, Dauge, Delfgaauw, Dronke, Eisler, Fierz, Gantner, Gerhardt, Goodenough, Guiomar, Hauer, Heller, Hendrix, Hoffmann, Hopper, James, Jensen, Kaegi, Kayser, Kirk, Klimkeit, Koppers, Löwith, Morenz, Mus, Pelliot, Peterson, Pettazzoni, Picard, Plessner, van der Post, Pretorius, Raine, Riedl, Sachsse, Schabert, Schrödinger, Secret, Shayegan, Strauss-Klube, Thomas, Thurnwald, Tillich, Tucci, Uexküll, Végh, Voegelin, Vysheslavtzeff, Weidlé, Weiss, Weisskopf, Werblowsky, Westmann, Weyl, White, Yatiswarananda, Zaehner	68 = 11.82 %	68 = 44.15 %
2-5 lectures	2: Baum, Beirnaert, Bernoulli, Campbell, Corti, Dessaur, Faivre, von Franz, Hadot, Heiler, Hough, Huyghe, Landolt, Lang, Leisegang, Masson-Oursel, Menasce, Merkelbach, Otto, Pietschmann, Przulski, Reinhardt, Schneider, Smith, Suzuki, Ziegler 3: Chang, Daniélou, Hulín, Jacobsohn, van der Leeuw, Nagel, Puech, Radin, Rousselle, Rowe, Stamm, Virolleaud, Whyte, Zahan 4: Armstrong, Heyer, Holton, Jaffé, Knoll, Lauf, Progoff, Rhys Davids, Schmidt, Ueda, Wilí, Zimmer 5: Giegerich, Kawai, Layard, Meier, Porkert, Pulver, Streich, Zuckerkandl	182 = 31.65 %	60 = 38.96 %
6-10	6: Rahner, Schmitt, Speiser 7: Ritsema, Servier, Wilhelm 8: Buonaiuti, Mann 9: Miller, Read 10: Hornung	83 = 14.43 %	11 = 7.14 %
11-15	11: Massignon 12: Izutsu, Kerényi 13: Brun, Eliade, Jung, Quispel 14: Neumann, Sambursky 15: Hillman	130 = 22.60 %	10 = 6.49 %
16-20	16: Benz, Durand	32 = 5.56 %	2 = 1.29 %
21-25	21: Scholem	21 = 3.65 %	1 = 0.64 %
26-30	26: Corbin	26 = 4.52 %	1 = 0.64 %
31-35	---		
36-40	36: Portmann	33 = 5.73 %	1 = 0.64 %

of John 8:7), see his concluding remarks about Jung in the chapter about Eranos and National-Socialism (*Eranos*, 154–55 [76]), or his critique of Karla Poewe's *New Religions and the Nazis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), where Hakl remarks that if scholars set themselves up as prosecuting lawyers, "this easily leads to the result that because of the 'omnipresence of evil,' one no longer takes the trouble to seriously engage the teachings or the contents of the books of the scholar who is being so vehemently attacked. *Warum sich da noch anstrengen?* [why still bother to make the effort?]" (my translation) (ibid, 56 note 51 [321 note 52]).

44

Next to the case of Holz (see note 21), see Hakl's generous and respectful positioning vis-à-vis Wasserstrom's hermeneutics of suspicion, see ibid., 13, 29, 305–7, 325, 329–30, 350, 452, 498–99 [xiv, 9, 156–57, 165, 167–68, 179, 236, 236, 263–64]. Even Horst Junginger's very personal attack on Hakl (Junginger, "From Buddha to Adolf Hitler: Walther Wüst and the Aryan Tradition," in *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, ed. Junginger [Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2008] 107–77, here 168–69) left no discernable impact on the latter's concern with objectivity and fairness in discussing Junginger's work (*Eranos*, 163, 173–74, 196–97 [80, 85, 98], and many footnotes). Interestingly, Richard Noll seems to be a relative exception, as Hakl's irritation is clearly evident (*Eranos*, 70, 137, 144–45 note 12, 259–60 note 87, 488 note 5 [32, 66, 318–19 note 12, 342 note 86, 380 note 5]).

45

The alternative to "straw man argumentation," the principle of charity in philosophy and rhetoric says that we should attempt to interpret other people's statements "in their best, most reasonable form, not in the worst or most offensive way possible" (Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* [Penguin, 2018], 55, 243–44). Socratic dialogue rests on the same principle. The objective is not to win the argument by "defeating" one's opponents, but to reach more clarity and better understanding so that *all* discussion partners may profit (cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Rejected Knowledge . . . So you mean that Esotericists are the Losers of History?," in *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J. Forshaw and Marco Pasi [Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019], 145–52, here 152).

46

Hakl, *Eranos*, 50–57 (Derleth), 128–40 (Heyer), 141–55 (Jung), 156–79 (Hauer), 331–56 (Eliade), 487–518 ("Delicate Questions and Attempts to Answer Them"). The sum total is 117 pages in the German edition, which has a total of 550 pages.

47

Hakl, *Eranos*, 173–74 [85–86], based on files from the German security service studied by Horst Junginger, *Von der philologischen zur völkischen Religionswissenschaft: Das Fach Religionswissenschaft an der Universität Tübingen von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Ende des Dritten Reiches* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1999), 137ff. For an excellent recent analysis, see Sam S.B. Shonkoff, "'Corporeality, Not Spirituality': Martin Buber's Resistance at Eranos in 1934," *The Journal of Religion* 101, no. 4 (2021): 505–23.

I see the classical Eranos tradition as running from 1933–1988, after which Rudolf Ritsema turned the meetings into a forum for discussing the I Ching, while others attempted to continue the original approach at other locations. For these post-1988 developments, see Haki, *Eranos*, 463–86.

For these calculations I rely on the overview of lectures on the official Eranos website http://www.erasosfoundation.org/page.php?page=12&page_name=lectures. For a more fine-grained discussion, one should distinguish between scholars who did not get invited again and others (such as Buber and Hauer) who were re-invited but either could not make it or did not want to return. One should also consider the fascinating list of people who received invitations but did not come: this included Salvador de Madariaga, André Malraux, Robert Oppenheimer, Erwin Panofsky, John Woodroffe, Arthur E. Waite, Arnold Toynbee, Alexis Carrel, Arthur S. Eddington, Walter Y. Evans-Wentz, and T.S. Eliot (Haki, *Eranos*, 192 note 57 [329 note 58]). Finally, one would have to take into account those scholars who lectured just a few times but often attended as visitors (for instance Antoine Faivre).

In Gadamerian terms, one could speak of a failure or obstruction of the hermeneutic circle: ideally, the interpreter's "horizon" is supposed to be modified by what s/he encounters in the text, as a result of which the text will keep revealing new dimensions, which again will cause the horizon to get modified, and so on *ad infinitum*. If the interpreter is more interested in his own *Vorurteil* or *Vormeinung* ("prejudice," "prior opinion") than in the full complexity of his sources, the ideal hermeneutic process of *Horizontverschmelzung* ("merging of horizons") (see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1986), 307–12) gets stuck. The result can be a kind of hermeneutic tunnel vision, as for example when Junginger goes so far as to claim that "the overlapping features between Jung's and Hauer's reasoning ought to be seen as the starting point and theoretical core of the Eranos movement" (Junginger, "Harmless of Dangerous? The Eranos Conferences in the 1930s from the Perspective of National Socialist Germany," *Archais* 14 [2010], 41–55, here 53).

To a somewhat lesser extent, see also the cases of Raffaele Pettazzoni, Kathleen Raine, Paul Tillich, and Eric Voegelin—all of them important thinkers with a considerable influence, but quantitatively minor figures in the history of Eranos.

See Haki, *Eranos*, 375 (Wilhelm), 454–55 (Miller), 456 (Hornung), 440–41 (Izutsu), 452–53 (Brun), 280–82 (Quispel), 292–94 (Neumann), 401–3 (Benz), 427–30 (Durand), 271–75 (Portmann). Here my concern is only with actual discussions of these authors and their work; for instance, Erik Hornung is mentioned much more often, but mostly in relation to attempts at continuing Eranos after 1988.

At present, the scholarly debate about Eranos still seems to be over-determined by a somewhat narrow obsession with politics, at the expense of a more balanced and comprehensive historical perspective open to other dimensions as well.⁵⁰ Haki's actual agenda was precisely to position Eranos in such a broader and more complex "alternative *Geistesgeschichte* of the Twentieth Century," with plenty of attention to the spiritual or "esoteric" dimension; but in responding to the sheer pressure of the dominant discourse, he ended up following the lead of Eranos critics by paying much more attention to a few controversial speakers than would perhaps be warranted in terms of their objective importance. Quite understandably, he seems to have been concerned to create some balance against the extreme case of Hauer by paying special attention to prominent Jewish contemporaries such as Leo Baeck and Martin Buber (5 pages each), even though they spoke just one single time as well. Some other speakers who appeared at Eranos just once or twice may have been put in the spotlight because of their sheer fame (D. T. Suzuki, ten pages) or their broader importance as influential academic figures (Giuseppe Tucci, eleven pages).⁵¹

On the other hand, while central Eranos luminaries such as Carl Gustav Jung, Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin and Gershom Scholem of course get a prominent place in Haki's narrative, some speakers who likewise kept returning year after year receive much less attention. Among the most notable examples we find Hellmut Wilhelm, David Miller, Erik Hornung, or Toshihiko Izutsu, and even such undoubtedly central figures as Gilles Quispel, Erich Neumann, Ernst Benz, Gilbert Durand, and Eranos' uncontested marathon lecturer Adolf Portmann.⁵² In some cases, this may have to do with Haki's attitude of discretion towards scholars who are still alive: "Ich rühre einfach nicht gerne am Lebendigen. Es zuckt zusammen und verkrampft sich."⁵³ For some others, the reasons seem somewhat unclear. In any case, while he may be right that the time for even a "moderately comprehensive history of Eranos"⁵⁴ has not yet come, we could at least ask ourselves what the desiderata for such a future project could be.

I would suggest that a new and updated history of Eranos should follow in Haki's footsteps, first of all by continuing his basic principle of listening closely to the *altera pars*, but while expanding that principle into new directions as well. Politics has received more than its reasonable share of attention by now; and partly due to that over-emphasis, we still do not know enough about all those "other sides" of Eranos—for instance, any non-political dimensions of its approach to myth and symbolism,⁵⁵ and the relevance to such domains as art and literature;⁵⁶ the exact nature of its "spiritual" agendas; its philosophical ancestors (notably German idealism, Schellingian rather than Hegelian) and basic commitments; its way of responding to modernity and the oft-evoked "crisis of meaning"; its approach to the question of "East versus West"⁵⁷; or indeed the very nature of its hermeneutical perspectives. To address these and many other aspects would require a systematic comparative analysis of all the lectures that were collected in the Eranos yearbooks, focusing on their actual *contents*—an enormous enterprise, to be sure, but one that nevertheless remains a desideratum, and would put the spotlight not just on the small group of famous Eranos superstars but also on those many lesser-known figures and their relative importance, including the notoriously small number of women.⁵⁸ What were these people really saying? What are the deeper patterns of thought that so many of them seemed to share?



Stone sculpture “To the Unknown Spirit of the Place” at Eranos

Which ruling ideas were animating their minds? What did they find at Eranos that perhaps they did not find so easily elsewhere? And could more perhaps be said about that famous “unknown spirit of Eranos?”—a spirit that, even in translation, turned out to be powerful enough to command very large popular audiences after World War II and became a major force in modern and contemporary understandings of what religion and spirituality are all about?⁵⁹

Genius ignotus

This brings me to what I believe to be Haki’s most important contribution to scholarship: the simple fact that—whether in spite of being an academic outsider or precisely because of it—he correctly perceived a large historical absence to which the official academy was all but blind. He had been reading how Eliade, in his *Diaries*, referred to “the spirit of Eranos” as “one of the most creative cultural experiences in the modern Western world,” while Michel Cazenave for his part had called Eranos “l’un des lieux de commerce de l’esprit et de l’âme parmi les plus riches de notre siècle” (“one of our century’s richest meeting places of spirit and soul”); and this importance seemed to be confirmed by the thoroughly impressive list of prominent Eranos contributors.⁶⁰ Haki therefore could not understand why solid information about such an obviously major phenomenon was so hard to find—notably, there were no entries devoted to Eranos in any of the major lexicons and encyclopedias, including even Mircea Eliade’s 16-volume *Encyclopedia of Religions* (an absence that would not be filled even in the second edition edited by Lindsay Jones in 2005).⁶¹ His point is confirmed by the remarkable fact that although many monographs had already been published during the 1990s by American scholars of religion who were intent on breaking with Eliade’s legacy, Eranos was utterly absent from their discussions as well; in fact, the battle slogan “always historicize!” does not seem to have inspired these theoreticians to actually study “*sui generis* religion” in its proper historical context.⁶² Any actual attempt at historicizing would have led them straight to Eranos as one of the most important intellectual and institutional settings in the study of religion during

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Haki, *Eranos*, 24 [5]. This wonderful sentence is hardly translatable into English, but amounts to the statement that living things (including human beings) are highly sensitive, and tend to respond with instinctive fear and resistance when they are touched. For Haki’s personal experiences in this respect, see *ibid.*, 463 [242].

54

Haki, *Eranos*, 18 [3], quoted *supra*.

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The question of myth has of course been explored at considerable length by a wide range of scholars (as *pars pro toto* in relation to Eranos, see for instance Robert Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C.G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999]), but apart from being over-determined by political concerns, these discussions tend to focus always on the same small number of famous figureheads while paying very little attention to all those lesser-known scholars who came to Eranos.

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For instance, it is striking to read about Jung’s visceral contempt for modern artists such as Pablo Picasso or James Joyce (Haki, *Eranos*, 377, 474 [193, 248]).

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The “encounter of East and West” was a major concern of Eranos, most explicitly during the first five years, but its perspectives hardly seem to fit the famous “Orientalism” framework that has dominated academic debate about that topic since the mid-1970s. Partly at least this has to do with a post-Saidian focus on French and English sources at the expense of the German context that would seem most relevant to a phenomenon like Eranos; but while Suzanne Marchand has filled this hiatus, her large monograph *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) is restricted to the period 1830–1930.

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See the italicized names in my overview. Interestingly, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn herself seems to have been the strongest opponent of female scholars at Eranos (Haki, *Eranos*, 191–92, 219, 369 [95, 111, 188]); but this would make it all the more interesting to ask how and why Cary Baynes, Vera Christina Chute Collum, Kathleen Raine, Sigrid Strauß-Klöbe, Marie-Louise von Franz, Hildegard Nagel, Aniela Jaffé, Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids, and Hildemarie Streich made it to the Eranos pulpit nevertheless.

59

The spectacular transmission of largely German scholarship on myth and symbolism to American popular culture was made possible by Mary and Paul Mellon and the Bollingen Foundation (McGuire, *Bollingen*). A major question that seems to have been neglected, although it does touch on politics, is how and why a predominantly conservative phenomenon like Eranos turned out to be so congenial to the generally much more leftist liberal orientations of the spiritual counterculture in the United States.

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Haki, *Eranos*, 25–26 [7], referring to Mircea Eliade,

Journal II (1957–1969) (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), xiii; and Michel Cazenave, *Jung: L'expérience intérieure. Pensée jungienne et travail d'une vie* (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 1997), 122.

61

The only exceptions were two short entries in the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* and the *Schweizer Lexikon* (Hakl, *Eranos*, 27 [8]).

62

See for instance Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion*, (London–New York: Cassell, 1999); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Russel T. McCutcheon, *Critics not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). McCutcheon claims that in the study of religion “there can be no release from the historical” (*ibid.*, 7), but I find that statement empty and misleading. In fact, the slogan “always historicize!” (*ibid.*) has nothing to do with historicity, historical consciousness, or historical-mindedness as professional historians understand those terms, but is taken from Fredric Jameson’s neo-Marxist dialectics (Preface to Fredrick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* [Ithaca–New York: Cornell University Press, 1981]). On the fatal terminological confusion that is operative here, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 411–15 (“historism” versus “historicism”). For good observations about why, in the circles of poststructuralist *critique*, history tends to be rejected as “the enemy of theory,” see Peter C. Herman, “Introduction: The Resistance to Historicizing Theory,” in *Historicizing Theory*, ed. Herman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 1–16, here 7. The paradoxical combination of a professed embrace and actual rejection of “history” seems peculiarly similar to Eliade as well.

63

In my own work too, I am profoundly indebted to Hakl in this respect: see my two long sections about Eranos before and after WW II in *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277–314.

64

When Jung came up with the idea of erecting a stone at Eranos with the inscription *Genio loci ignoto* (for Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn’s 1954 report to Paul Mellon, see Hakl, *Eranos*, 289–90 [148]), he cannot possibly have been oblivious of the resonance with Acts 17:23 or, for that matter, of Theodor Norden’s influential *Agnostos Theos* (1913), which claimed that the ancient Greeks worshipped an unknown God that did not belong to the Greek pantheon (extensive discussion in Pieter W. van der Horst, “The Altar of the ‘Unknown God’ in Athens (Acts 17:23) and the Cult of ‘Unknown Gods’ in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II 18/2* (Berlin–New York: De Gruyter, 1989), 1426–56).

the twentieth century.

Therefore, Hakl’s lasting contribution is that he did what professional academics should have done but had neglected. Instead of approaching scholars such as Jung, Eliade, Corbin, or Scholem as unique and isolated figures, he contextualized them historically as parts of a scholarly *tradition* that had not been perceived as such before.⁶³ What kind of tradition? As shown by the original second subtitle of the first German edition, *Eranos* claimed to provide nothing less than *Eine alternative Geistesgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Predictably, this was translated into English as “an alternative intellectual history of the twentieth century,” but the German term *Geistesgeschichte* has subtle connotations that simultaneously support a somewhat broader interpretation as “spiritual” history. What actually seems to have animated discussions at Eranos, making it into more than just another conference series, was precisely the fact that many participants felt they shared a certain *Geist* (“spirit”), a *daimōn* or *numen*—the *genius ignotus* or *agnostos theos*.⁶⁴

I would consider it a mistake to dismiss these references as merely anecdotal, or discredit them as just the reflection of some vague or irrational feelings without deeper relevance for what Eranos was all about. On the contrary, those who felt attuned to the *genius loci ignotus* were trying to convey their sense of being *ergriffen*, *interpellé* by something subtle enough to resist verbalization and yet so powerful that its presence had to be recognized and addressed. So what was it? And how (if at all) can we discuss it from a scholarly perspective? As a first step, it may be prudent to distinguish between the *genius loci* in a strict sense and the broader sense of a *genius ignotus*. Many people who have visited Eranos mention the special “energy” of the place, which seems to have been felt by many of those who are present.⁶⁵ Yet it is clear that a “hidden” or “unknown” spirit has also been experienced by many readers who never made it to Ascona but merely felt that the typical Eranos literature “spoke to them.”⁶⁶ One does not need to believe in ghostly presences to recognize that some written texts, like pieces of music or visual art, can make such a deep impression that readers feel they have been deeply “touched” or “addressed” by something that feels like a message or an appeal.

To understand this phenomenon and its relevance to Eranos, I suggest it is helpful first of all to look at the very earliest attempt at defining *la modernité*, by Charles Baudelaire in 1863: “Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent—one half of art, the other half of which is the eternal and the immovable.”⁶⁷ As I have argued elsewhere (with reference specifically to Eranos):

“. . . modernity implied an acute sense of conflict between the cherished idea of permanent stable values and the actual human experience of impermanence and instability. . . . In the most general terms, high modernity was marked by deep anxiety over what would happen to Western culture and society if “the eternal and the immovable” would vanish altogether and only “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent” would remain. By contrast, the “post”modern condition may be defined in terms of full acceptance and even an enthusiastic embrace of the disappearance of any transcendent reference. Behind the surface of appearances there can no longer be any dimension of depth.”⁶⁸

This process of gradual dissolution or evaporation would reach its culmination during the 1960s and after, but was far advanced already during the period of high modernity. For instance, it is well known that its most iconic literary figures (think of Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot) were all obsessed with the experience of time, the transient flux of phenomenal reality as reflected in the stream of human consciousness. What distinguishes them from the typical representatives of high *post*modernity is that they refused to give up on the quest for “depth”—the hope or belief that art or literature might be able to convey profoundly meaningful truths about the very nature of reality and the human condition.

My thesis here is that this existential quest for *depth*—driven precisely by a sense of lack, and the fear that it might get lost altogether—defines what modernity is all about.⁶⁹ While its critics and enemies have often described Eranos as “anti-modern” or (with somewhat greater accuracy) as reflecting an “anti-modern modernism,”⁷⁰ I suggest that Eranos should be recognized as a typical expression of high *modernity*. In a recent attempt to explain “the decline of the novel,” Joseph Bottum makes some remarks that strike me as highly relevant here:

“As modernity progressed . . . , the thick inner world of the self increasingly came to seem ill-matched with the impoverished outer world, stripped of all the old enchantment that had made exterior objects seem meaningful and important, significant in themselves. This is what we mean by *the crisis of the self*: Why does anything matter, what could be important, if meaning is invented, coming *from* the self rather than *to* the self?”⁷¹

The core tradition of Eranos affirmed precisely that meaning comes *to* the self, and therefore comes *from* somewhere else. Of course, this leads us back again to Ricoeur’s insistence on the experience of being *interpellé, ergriffen*. To borrow a famous formulation by Wittgenstein—another key representative of high modernity—“the mystical” as understood at Eranos could not be spoken but could only *show* itself.⁷²

How then, in the context of Eranos, did it show itself? As mythical narratives and symbolic images that could not be “decoded” but only *understood* in a direct experience of “immediacy beyond interpretation.”⁷³ I began this article by presenting the “spirit of Eranos” as directed against the “linguistic turn,” and it is here that we see more exactly what that meant. The core tradition of Eranos did not conceive of symbols semiotically, as in standard modern linguistics, where symbols function as “signifiers” referring to that which is being “signified” (or, in radical deconstructionist versions, to other signifiers). On the contrary, *signification* was to be understood in the most literal etymological sense: an utterly unknown numinous reality seemed to be manifesting its presence by “making signs” to human beings! Note that it would not be correct here to speak of a “transcendental signified,” implying an essentially passive object *to* which symbols refer; on the contrary, the source was understood as the active Signifier *from* which meaning flows.⁷⁴ It seems that this point was absolutely crucial to Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn’s understanding of what Eranos was all about. She believed that “the deepest things in human life can only be said or expressed in images [*bildhaft*],”⁷⁵ and such images and mythical stories were no human inventions but came (in her own words) from a wholly “esoteric” source.⁷⁶ In an urgent attempt to get through to

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Interestingly though, precisely Eliade seems to have been among those who did *not* share this sensitivity (Hakl, *Eranos*, 335 [171]).

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Hakl himself seems to have had such an experience particularly with Mircea Eliade’s writings (Otto, “Hans Thomas Hakl,” in this volume).

67

“La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable”: Charles Baudelaire, “Le peintre de la vie moderne,” *Le Figaro* (1863); repr. in: Baudelaire, *L’art romantique* (Oeuvre complètes III) (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1885). The word *modernité* itself appeared prior to Baudelaire in an article by Balzac (1822), but without an attempt at defining its “essence.” In English, the word “modernity” is attested since the seventeenth century as referring to a historical epoch after the Renaissance.

68

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Protecting the Sacred after (Post)Modernity,” *Creative Reading*, www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com (6 March 2021) (illustrated by Constantin Guys’ painting “Reception” [1850–1855] as typical of Baudelaire’s “modernity” and Jeff Koons’ “Michael Jackson and Bubbles” [1988] as typical of postmodernity).

69

Perhaps the ultimate formulation of the “post”modern end result of modernization, in this sense, is found in Nietzsche (a major early influence on Hakl) and his famous prophecy of “the last man”: “Was ist Liebe? Was ist Schöpfung? Was ist Sehnsucht? Was ist Stern?”—so fragt der letzte Mensch und blinzelt” (Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* 1.5).

70

Hakl, *Eranos*, 506–7 [267–68]; Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 60 (referring to Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* [New York: Schocken, 1976], 46: “My secularism is not secular”).

71

Joseph Bottum, *The Decline of the Novel* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2019), 12. Cf. Ricoeur *De l’interprétation*, 38 (quoted *supra*): “. . . not so much spoken by humans as spoken to humans.”

72

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 6.522: “Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische” (and of course, cf. the famous closing statement 7: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen”).

73

For this felicitous formulation by Helmut Zander, see above, footnote 6. For their belief that mythical symbols cannot be decoded, Corbin and Scholem referred to Schelling’s notion of *tautegory* (as distinct from allegory): see Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 27, 36, 52, 56–57, 63–65, 91, 96; and cf. Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (vol. 2), 5. This is why I write specifically that meaning according to Eranos showed itself not “through” but *as* mythical narratives

and symbolic images.

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Cf. my longer discussion in Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 324 (note 67).

75

Fröbe-Kapteyn, *Gleichnisse* [unpublished manuscript], quoted in Hakl, *Eranos*, 90 [43].

76

“Since the material is what it is, namely esoteric (!), (to use a much discredited word) . . .” (Fröbe-Kapteyn to Joseph Campbell, 6 May 1950: Hakl, *Eranos*, 286 [146]). Hakl suggests that Erich Neumann’s talk of “transpersonal powers” that “directed” the life of humanity on earth (during an Eranos lecture in 1950) must have given voice to her own deepest beliefs (ibid., 293 [150]).

77

Fröbe-Kapteyn to Joseph Campbell, 6 March 1953: Hakl, *Eranos*, 288–89 [147–48]; my translation.

78

Hakl, *Eranos*, 217–18 with note 9 [110 with note 12].

79

Hakl, “Interview with Thomas Hakl”; Otto, “Three Lives in One” (in this volume).

80

Although they were all highly critical and dismissive of Theosophy or Anthroposophy, this does not imply that they did not read Theosophical or occultist literature or were not influenced by it. Notably the importance of G.R.S. Mead for Jung (Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], 69) and of A.E. Waite for both Scholem (Konstantin Burmistrov, “Gershom Scholem und das Okkulte,” *Gnostika* 33 [2006]: 23–34; Hakl, *Eranos*, 309–10 [157–58]; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Mysteries of Sex in the House of the Hidden Light: Arthur Edward Waite and the Kabbalah,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 40 [2018]: 163–82, here 166–67) and Corbin (Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 341–42 with note 310; Corbin, “*L’imago templi*”) requires deeper investigation.

Joseph Campbell (who, in her opinion, was missing the whole point about Eranos) she tried to explain this as follows:

“Eranos has a very specific basic structure. (To me, it is a structure that (already in a super-world [*Überwelt*]) has its prior existence (pre-exists), as is the case with every creative and cultural work, issuing from an archetypal source, which we cannot name, although it is responsible for all great changes in the history of culture). Only separate fragments of this structure of Eranos ever become visible and tangible as the work develops, depending on our capacity of reception and of fathoming the subterranean outline. Every Eranos meeting with its central theme represents an essential unit within the complete structure. It is of the utmost importance, year by year to fathom [*erspüren*] the next bit of the unseen mosaic, because our task is to reproduce it in reality. [As for the volumes of the *Jahrbücher*:] Their value is that something is being *evoked* [“*Ihr Wert liegt darin, daß etwas hervorgerufen wird*”]. They touch upon unusual themes and facts and analogies. Each speaker, as it were, carries a lantern which illuminates points here and there in the landscape he has chosen for his lecture. It is only that. But in invoking the great archetypal images from the depths, he also touches the unconscious psyche of the listeners, and this is what creates the extraordinary dynamic atmosphere of the meetings.”⁷⁷

As it was Fröbe-Kapteyn herself who “fathomed” each year which part of “the unseen mosaic” should next be brought to light or quite literally “evoked,” as in a theurgical rite, the actual structure of the Eranos meetings between 1933 and her death in 1962 is worth some attention. The first five years (1933–1937) were devoted to the *East-West* encounter. Then after Fröbe-Kapteyn went through some intense visionary experiences connected with the “Great Mother,”⁷⁸ the 1938 meeting was devoted to that theme, which marked the beginning of a new series that lasted seven years (1938–1944) and was focused on *Gnosis and the Mysteries*. This was followed by a short two-year cycle focused on *Spirit* and its relation to Nature (1945–1946). After this intermission, all later meetings under Fröbe-Kapteyn’s direction were devoted entirely to *Der Mensch* (the Human Being; 1947–1962). It does seem as though any connection to the hidden “structure” got lost immediately after her death, for the sequence of themes from 1963 to 1988 shows no discernable pattern anymore.

Of course, Fröbe-Kapteyn’s personal understanding of numinous forces “which we cannot name,” or of hidden “structures” that are mysteriously revealed by means of symbols and myths, was not necessarily shared by other Eranos participants; but it did fit a broader understanding of what the “unknown spirit” was all about, as well as what it was *not* about. To define this difference, I find it relevant to take note of Hakl’s personal “esoteric” preferences since an early age. He was drawn to Jung, yoga, Tibet, India, and Eastern religions, but felt uninspired by Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and the New Age.⁷⁹ A very similar pattern of preferences can be observed in most of the key representatives of Eranos, such as Jung, Eliade, Scholem, and Corbin.⁸⁰ In an important interview, Scholem juxtaposed the “private symbolism” of modern individual spiritualities against the “objective symbolism” of traditional kabbalah, noting that whereas the former “does not obligate,” the latter “displayed a symbolic

dimension to the whole world.” His final remark was that “if humanity should ever lose the feeling that there is mystery—a secret—in the world, then it’s all over with us.”⁸¹ Referring to the same passage, I concluded my 1996 book about the relation between New Age and Western esotericism with a passage that is immediately relevant to the issue at hand here:

“Private symbolism and the dissipation of mystery are indeed connected. The New Age movement tends to make each private individual into the center of his or her symbolic world; and it tends to seek salvation in universal explanatory systems which will leave no single question of human existence unanswered, and will replace mystery by the certainty of perfect knowledge. The reader of this study will have to make up his or her mind about whether the attainment of such knowledge would save the world or, instead, deprive it of all meaning.”⁸²

Counter-intuitive as it might seem at first sight, the basic point here is that the types of esotericism which speakers at Eranos (and Haki himself) tended to reject or find uninspiring are ultimately driven by a project of *disenchantment* in the classic Weberian sense: they are confident that “if one *wished* to, one could always find out; that as a matter of principle, there are no mysterious incalculable powers . . .”⁸³ In a nutshell, modern forms of occultism such as Theosophy and Anthroposophy or its countless “New Age” derivations are profoundly *explanatory* systems of thought. They promise to explain exactly, often in meticulous detail, how everything works at all levels of reality, both visible and invisible; and furthermore (here I deliberately paraphrase Weber), they claim that “if one *wishes* to, one can always find out”—that is, by becoming an adept and attain a state of perfectly enlightened consciousness in which ultimately no question will remain unanswered.⁸⁴

By contrast—and this I believe is the very heart of the matter—the “spirit of Eranos” was not explanatory but profoundly *hermeneutic*. Its concern was not to explain but to *understand*, for whereas explanatory approaches are driven by a desire for ultimate epistemic closure, Eranos was motivated by hopes and experiences of *disclosure*. Thus, for instance, Jung had found himself *ergriffen* in 1913 by the “spirit of the depth” that proved infinitely more powerful than his feeble rational mind.⁸⁵ Scholem, for his part, admitted that all his work was driven by “a hope for a true message from the Mountain—for that most trivial, tiniest shift of history that makes truth erupt from the illusion of ‘development.’”⁸⁶ Eliade, too, lived his life in a desperate hope for mysterious hierophanic moments that would grant him at least some temporary release from “the terror of history.”⁸⁷ Corbin even claimed to be guided by angelic entities and the spirit of Suhrawardī, who lived in a superior world of eternal light to which human history was an irrelevancy.⁸⁸ While these hopes and experiences all offered some release from “the terror of history” (“the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent” in Baudelaire’s terms), none of them carried any promise of explanation. The only promise they held out, or were trying to keep alive, was *that there was something to be understood*—as opposed to the Pascalian and Nietzschean nightmare of a world in which nothing can have any meaning because “meaning” itself is a meaningless concept, and hence there is nothing at all to understand.

So what, then, was that famous spirit of Eranos? I would suggest that in the most simple terms, it was a spirit of *hope* in the face of existential

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Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 48.

82

Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 524.

83

Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf 1917/1919, Politik als Beruf 1919* (Studienausgabe der Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe Bd. 1/17) (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1994), 9; discussion in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 252–56; Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse 1900–1939* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2014), 17–49.

84

In Theosophy and Anthroposophy, of course, this is typically supposed to take many reincarnations and further development through higher spiritual dimensions; but that does not affect the basic point. With explicit reference to my closing paragraph quoted above, Egil Asprem reached very much the same conclusion in his *Problem of Disenchantment*, 532–33. See also e.g. his analysis of Theosophy’s “occult chemistry” (*ibid.*, 444–80).

85

Jung, *Liber Novus*; discussion in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Great War of the Soul: Divine and Human Madness in Carl Gustav Jung’s *Liber Novus*,” in *Religion und Wahnsinn um 1900: Zwischen Pathologisierung und Selbstermächtigung / Religion and Madness around 1900: Between Pathology and Self-Empowerment*, ed. Lutz Greisiger, Sebastian Schüler and Alexander van der Haven (Baden-Baden: Ergon, 2017). An explicit response to Nietzsche’s “death of God,” Jung’s *Black Books* and *Red Book* show how, beginning in 1913, Jung found himself *ergriffen* in dramatic fashion by a whole series of numinous entities, including the *Geist der Tiefe*, his own soul, and the mysterious *Seelenführer* Philemon. A key sentence at the very beginning of *Liber Novus* shows the reversal of agency that defines *Ergriffenheit*: “It did not occur to me that my soul cannot be the object of my judgment and knowledge: much more is my judgment and knowledge the object of my soul” (Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book: Liber Novus* [New York–London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009], 232; my emphasis). Since these experiences stand at the very origin of Jung’s mature oeuvre, I believe they should be seen as a key text for understanding Eranos as well.

86

Scholem, “Birthday Letter,” 216; German original in Scholem, *Briefe I 1914–1947* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994), 471–72.

87

Discussion in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 302–8.

88

For instance, Corbin relates how during his period in Istanbul between 1939 and 1945, “I learned the inestimable virtues of Silence, of that which the initiates call the ‘discipline of the arcane’ (*ketmân* in Persian). One of the virtues of this Silence was that it placed me in the company, one on one, with my invisible *skayk*, Shihâboddîn Yahyâ Sohravardî . . . At the end of these years of retreat, I had become an *Isbrâqî* . . .” (Corbin, “Post-Scriptum biographique à

un Entretien philosophique,” in Jambet, *Henry Corbin*, 38–56, here 46). In light of the spiritual perspective outlined notably in Corbin’s “*Limago templi*” (and see my short analysis in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 299–302), it seems beyond question to me that this description of a personal silent communion with Suhrawardī was understood by him not metaphorically but quite literally.

89

See Jonas’s famous appendix “Gnosticism, Nihilism and Existentialism” in Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 320–40; and on the deeply problematic nature of Jonas’ concept of “gnosticism,” see Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, 353–54. For a very useful discussion of this *Zeitgeist* during the interbellum, with much attention to the enormous influence of Karl Barth on an entire generation and a special focus on Hans Jonas, Leo Strauss, and Gershom Scholem, see Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

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In light of Scholem’s well-known remarks in his retrospective text “Identifizierung und Distanz” (notably 466: “Es war sozusagen ein bißchen Schwindel dabei”) it would be worth exploring the importance to Eranos of playful irony, not in the popular but in the deep Romantic sense.

91

Mircea Eliade, “Cultural Fashions and History of Religions,” in *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1–17, here 10. Although these remarks are more specifically about the journal *Planète* as a typical expression of the new *Zeitgeist* of “fantastic realism,” I find them to have a much broader relevance. For instance, although the worldview of Antoine Faivre (who frequented Eranos from the later 1960s and during the 1970s, and appeared twice as a speaker: Hakl, Eranos, 449–53 [234–36]; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 339–55) was far removed from that of *Planète*, much of the new spirit evoked by Eliade is also clearly evident in his (presently still unpublished) *Journal* for the 1970s.

despair. We are speaking of scholars who personally lived through the traumas of two consecutive world wars; and the *Zeitgeist* to which they responded was dominated by a pervasive sense of alienation, pessimism, depression, and metaphysical loneliness—or, as potently formulated by Hans Jonas in his understanding of “gnosticism,” the homelessness of the stranger who finds himself thrown in an absurd world where nothing makes sense.⁸⁹ As existentialist *ennui* came to dominate much of intellectual life during the interbellum and the post-war period, those who came to Eranos felt they were not ready to give up on the “impossible” hope of being *ergriffen*, *interpellé* by something not just conventionally but intrinsically meaningful.⁹⁰

Concluding Remarks

It took a couple of decades after World War II before this hopeful spirit of Eranos began to resonate with members of a new generation that was less susceptible to existentialist despair. These babyboomers had not personally experienced the traumas of war, but were on a spiritual quest for meaning in a brave new world that was dominated increasingly by capitalist consumerism and its global expansion—opposed, of course, by the “second world” of communism. Born in 1947, Hans Thomas Hakl was a typical representative of his generation, and I consider this fact important for understanding his approach to Eranos. In a well-known article, Mircea Eliade described the shift in “cultural fashions” that took place in France when this generation was coming of age during the 1960s:

“There was no longer the excessive preoccupation with one’s own existential “situation” and historical “commitment” but a grandiose overture toward a wonderful world: the future organization of the planet, the unlimited possibilities of man, the mysterious universe into which we are ready to penetrate, and so on. It was not the scientific approach as such that stirred this collective enthusiasm but the charismatic impact of “the latest scientific developments” and the proclamation of their imminent triumphs. . . . [S]cience was supplemented with hermeticism, science fiction, and political and cultural news. But what was new and exhilarating for the French reader was the optimistic and holistic outlook which coupled science with esoterism and presented a living, fascinating, and mysterious cosmos, in which human life again became meaningful and promised an endless perfectibility.”⁹¹

Far from reflecting a hermeneutics of suspicion (or, for that matter, of faith), these new perspectives since the 1960s were driven by a positive spirit of hope and underlying beliefs in a mysterious but deeply meaningful universe (or perhaps, with reference to Scholem’s remarks quoted above, one that was meaningful *because* of its mystery). Most definitely, for them, *there was something to be understood*. But whereas much of Eranos had been grounded in rather desperate hopes of being *ergriffen* by “the impossible,” the new spirit suggested that almost anything should be possible, by such means as expanding the mind or training its magical powers. This new hermeneutic horizon (in the Gadamerian sense) afforded a generous appreciation of Eranos and its spiritual search for “esoteric” meaning, although at the risk of underestimating its

dark existentialist backdrop. In this respect, too, Hakl's *Eranos* is a characteristic product of his generation.

As we have now entered the third decade of the twenty-first century, Western societies have moved from modernity through postmodernity and possibly toward what has been defined (in a fascinating recent analysis) as *metamodernism*, defined by the “turn toward humble, emancipatory knowledge that recognizes the existence of multiple modes of the real.”⁹² As such a program happens to be extremely congenial to Thomas Hakl's approach as well—but in a different key that completely integrates post-structural and related approaches while also going beyond them—we may be permitted to hope that a new scholarly generation will be able and willing to approach *Eranos* from fresh new perspectives less burdened by the weight of the past.