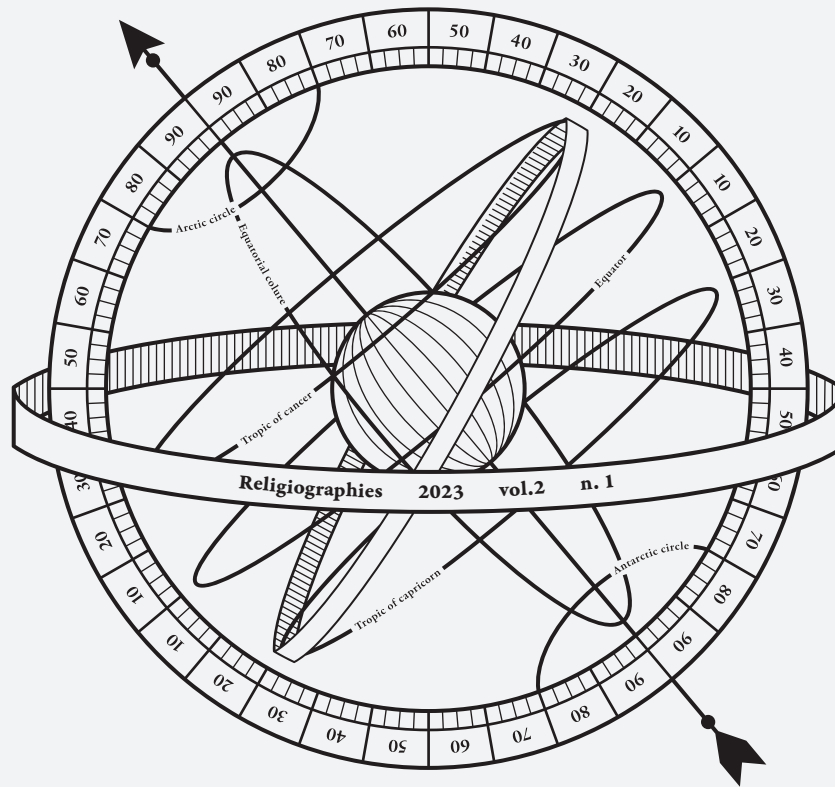


# *Religiographies*



Special Issue  
“Hans Thomas Hakl and His Library”  
edited by  
Marco Pasi

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# Editorial:

## *Introducing Hans Thomas Hakl and His Library*

Francesco Piraino



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
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1

Egil Asprem, review of *Esotericism, Religion, and Politics*, ed. Arthur Versluis, Lee Irwin, and Melinda Phillips, *Aries* 14, no. 2 (2014): 247–52.

2

Horst Junginger, *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, vol. 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

3

Hans Thomas Hakl, "Die Integrale Tradition," *Sezession* 11 (October 2005), 20–26.



Fig. 1. Hans Thomas Hakl. Photograph © Hildegard Frietsch.

Hans Thomas Hakl, born in Graz (Austria) in 1947, is a lawyer, businessman, and independent scholar in the fields of history of religion, spirituality, magic, and esotericism (Fig. 1). Hakl has presented many papers on these topics in important academic venues and has published several articles and books in prestigious scientific journals and publishing houses. Despite his lack of training in the social and human sciences, Hakl's research has been generally well-received. Other scholars have criticized Hakl's shortcomings,<sup>1</sup> possible religionist leaning regarding Eranos, and claimed that he implicitly whitewashes the extreme right intellectual Julius Evola.<sup>2</sup> Hakl distanced himself from traditionalist politics as destined to "nasty totalitarianism"<sup>3</sup> but at the same time the question about how to discuss problematic authors, such as Evola, remains open (see Marco Pasi's Introduction in this special issue).

Hakl is a bibliophile and book collector who founded an impressive library called "Octagon" (Fig. 2, Fig. 3), composed of 50,000 books, plus his vast archives with notes, letters, and documents originally belonging to the protagonists of the intellectual, religious, and political history of the twentieth century.

In 2017, I met Hakl at an ESSWE conference in Erfurt. Hakl was looking for an institution willing to provide a home for his library, open it to the public, and promote scientific research. In 2019, thanks to the mediation of Prof. Marco Pasi (the guest editor of this special issue), Hakl donated his library to the Giorgio Cini Foundation, to be transferred after his death. Cini decided to invest in Hakl's library because this collection resonates with its other collections, such as Alain Danielou's library and archives ([Institute for Comparative Music](#)), Nino Rota's archives ([Institute for Music](#)), and Tiziano Terzani's library and archives ([Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities](#)). Hakl's collection will become part of Cini's library, which already includes almost 50,000 books on comparative religions and spiritualities. Finally, Hakl's spiritual quest resonates with Cini's mission to promote spiritual humanism and dialogue among different civilisations and religions.

This special issue is dedicated to Hakl and his collection. We consider this publication a starting point for further exploration of Hakl's library and archives. The first article by Bernd-Christian Otto describes Hakl's



Fig. 2. Octagon Library. Photograph © Hildegard Frietsch.



Fig. 3. Octagon Library. Photograph © Hildegard Frietsch.



Fig. 4. Julius Evola. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 5. Mircea Eliade. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 6. Giuseppe Tucci. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

multifaceted biography by focusing on the personal, financial, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of his life. Otto narrates Haki's "success story," the story of a brilliant student, a lawyer, and a wealthy businessman. Nevertheless, Otto also describes his less successful metaphysical quest. Haki's initiatic search for magic and the absolute resulted in many disappointing experiences. He failed to find a master, a discipline, or a body of knowledge capable of satisfying his thirst for the absolute. His "metaphysical disappointment" was thus transformed into an academic endeavour. The love for esotericism became the love for books on esotericism, and, later, for the history of esotericism.

In the second article, Francesco Baroni describes Haki's research and his connections with the Italian esoteric milieu, analysing in particular his relations with the Italian esotericist and extreme right intellectual Julius Evola (1898–1974) (Fig. 4). Baroni explains how Haki's research focused on Evola's interest in Orientalism, spirituality, and magic, whereas he is mostly known for his racist and political theories. This new focus was understandably considered suspect by many scholars and intellectuals, as it was perceived as a legitimisation strategy or a sort of "spiritual-washing." By contrast, Baroni shows how Haki not only identified some key elements of Evola's spirituality, but can be credited with highlighting the intellectual connections between Evola and the academic milieu, especially with Mircea Eliade (Fig. 5), Giuseppe Tucci (Fig. 6), and Ernst Jünger (Fig. 7), thus showing the resonance of his thought and playing a significant role in establishing Evola as an object of academic study.

In the third article, Wouter Hanegraaff focuses on Haki's research on the Eranos Colloquia. Haki published a ground-breaking book on Eranos's history,<sup>4</sup> which challenged many stereotypes about the intellectual history of crucial intellectuals such as Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), Henry Corbin (1903–1978), Martin Buber (1878–1965), etc. By highlighting both the merits and shortcomings of Haki's understanding of Eranos, Hanegraaff addresses an

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Hans Thomas Haki, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).



Fig. 7. Ernst Jünger. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



imperative epistemological knot at the heart of the social sciences, which goes well beyond Hahl, Eranos, and this special issue. Through his elaboration on Ricoeur's categories of hermeneutics,<sup>5</sup> Hanegraaff questions the two main hermeneutical perspectives in studying religious phenomena: first, the "hermeneutics of faith," which reproduces the religious emic perspective, and second, the "hermeneutics of suspicion," which focuses on power, domination, and economic dimensions, exposing hidden religious and cultural structures. Hanegraaff draws on Ricoeur to propose an intermediary third option: a "hermeneutics of generosity" that makes it possible to consider the social construction of reality and its material dimensions, without denying the value of ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions. From such a perspective, the task of scholars should not be reduced to either "unveiling" esoteric truths or to "unmasking" them as delusions, but involves an open-ended and therefore never-ending quest for deeper understanding.<sup>6</sup> Hanegraaff argues that despite some shortcomings, due his lack of training in history and the social sciences, Hahl can be credited with offering an alternative reading of the Eranos Colloquia that exemplifies this hermeneutics of "generosity."

In the first heterography, Joscelyn Godwin describes his own personal reminiscences of Hans Thomas Hahl, which helps us in retracing not only Hahl's life and passions, but also the recent constitution of the scientific field of the study of esotericism.

In the third heterography, we have the honour of featuring the work of David B. (Fig. 8), one of the foremost comic artists, who has contributed to establishing the field of graphic novels. His works are not just comic strips, but novels with images—*littérature dessinée* in French. In his rich artistic production, David B. explores his biographical dramas, dreams, desires, nightmares, and fears by using esoteric and mystical symbols and narratives. As many surrealist artists before him (André Breton, Leonora Carrington, and Max Ernst, to name just a few), David B. moves between different worlds, challenging the boundaries of the secular and the religious, of reality and dreams. In the heterography he created for our journal,



Fig. 8. David B., *L'ascension du Haut Mal*, detail.

David B. narrates the library of his parents, which held a wealth of esoteric books. The teenager David B. found in these “bizarre” texts a mysterious and fascinating world, often puzzling and sometimes frightening. In addition, David B. portrays his father’s spiritual quest through his silences and empty spaces. Both David B. and Hakl discovered their passion for esotericism in their youth, exploring alternative worlds, rationalities, and desires. This heterography depicts the emotional and wondrous dimension of spiritual quests.

The third heterography is written by Wu Ming 1, who is a member of the artistic collective based in Bologna called Wu Ming (previously known as Luther Blissett). This group has authored several important novels, translated into many languages, such as *Q, 54, Manituana, The Army of Sleepwalkers*, etc. (Fig. 9). Wu Ming novels are not only masterpieces, historically informed and craftily written; they also represent historical and sociological research using other (artistic) means, as witnessed by the many collaborations between these artists and academia (e.g., Carlo Ginzburg, Adriano Prosperi,<sup>7</sup> and the Nicoletta Bourbaki collective<sup>8</sup>). A good example of this artistic research is Wu Ming 1’s latest book, *Q di complotto* (Fig. 10) (reviewed by Massimo Introvigne in this special issue), where the author not only reconstructs the genesis of the QAnon movement, using Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* as a research instrument; he also masterfully connects QAnon with other conspiracy theories and moral panic phenomena. Finally, Wu Ming 1 was able to describe conspiracists’ emotions and “guts,” which are rarely considered by scholars of conspiracy theories.

Wu Ming 1 follows in the footsteps of Umberto Eco and Carlo Ginzburg, and before them Antonio Gramsci, in proposing a Marxist reading of society that “takes religion seriously.” Far from superficial Marxist readings which reduce cultural and religious phenomena to false consciousness—a superstructure concealing power relations—these authors describe popular religion, esotericism, and spiritual movements in the dialectic between hegemonic and subaltern narratives and struggles. In his heterography, Wu Ming 1 discusses the complex relationship between esotericism and politics, revealing different political dimensions of modern and contemporary esotericism.

This special issue also highlights the scientific, cultural, and political relevance of alternative spiritualities, a field that has grown steadily in the last twenty years with the creation of research centres (e.g., the Centre for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents based in Amsterdam and the recently founded [Centre for Advanced Studies “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective”](#) at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), journals (e.g., [Aries](#), [Correspondences](#), and [Nova Religio](#)), and book series (e.g., the [Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism](#), the [SUNY series in Western Esoteric Traditions](#), and the [Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities](#)). Finally, the field of the study of spiritualities and esotericisms is opening towards social sciences, engaging with postcolonial, feminist, LGBTQ literatures and overcoming Western centrism.<sup>9</sup>

Far from marginal topics destined to be eliminated by the supposed secularisation process, religious and spiritual phenomena are crucial to understanding social, cultural, and political changes in contemporary society. See, for example, the impact of spirituality and esotericism in contemporary art (e.g., the last [Venice Biennale](#) and the [Guggenheim exhibition](#)

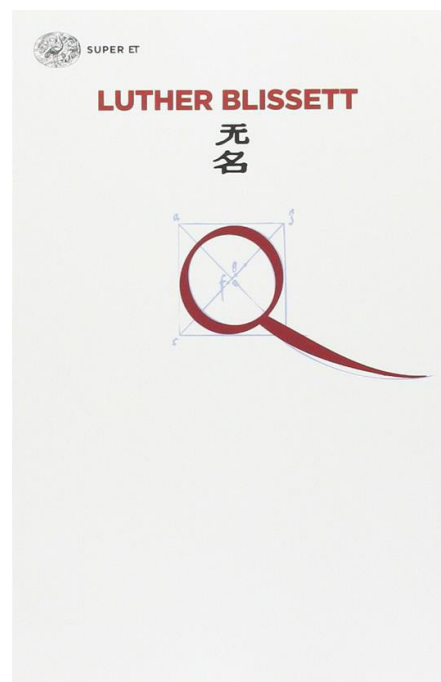


Fig. 9. Cover of *Q*, Luther Blissett, 1999.

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<https://archive.org/details/radiogiap-b27>.

8

<https://nicolettabourbaki.medium.com>.

9

Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2020).



Fig. 10. Cover of *La Q di Qomplotto*, Wu Ming 1, 2021.

Francesco Piraino, Marco Pasi, and Egil Aspre, eds., *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends* (London–New York: Routledge, 2022).

Christopher Partridge, “Occulture Is Ordinary,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Aspre and Kennet Granholm (London–New York: Routledge, 2014), 123–43.

[on magic and surrealism](#)), in contemporary politics (e.g., the political and media success of Alexander Dugin, Steve Bannon, and Olavo de Carvalho), and in cultural changes (e.g., the dissemination of conspiracy theories<sup>10</sup> and the occulture in pop culture<sup>11</sup>).

Once we acknowledge the importance of this field, we have to face the question of how to study these complex phenomena. As explained in the first editorial of [Religiographies](#), we do not propose a manifesto, a univocal method, or a meta-language capable of synthesis. On the contrary, we believe we need an infra-language capable of connecting different methodologies and approaches, such as philology, history, anthropology, sociology, and comparative literature. For us, it is vital to study the agency, values, and practices of our subjects, acknowledging the material dimensions (economics, psychology, and power) but without limiting ourselves to them, and overcoming the intertwined biases of the “hermeneutics of faith” and the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Finally, we value the study of alternative and/or marginalised rationalities, religions, cultures, and politics, which does not mean simply to “tolerate otherness,” but to describe subaltern discourses, ideas, and practices, which of course change according to each socio-historical context.

This opening to otherness is reflected in our activities and publications. In line with the Cini Foundation, our Centre is a place of dialogue among different and often opposing perspectives. We welcome different voices coming from different religious, secular, liberal, conservative, post-colonial, feminist, and Marxist milieus. The only voice excluded from this dialogue is the supremacist voice (in all its forms), which attempts to create hierarchies among ethnicities, religions, cultures, genders, and sexual orientations. This preamble is necessary to dispel any possible misunderstandings, in particular, in acquiring archives on Evola and extreme right movements, which represent a small portion of Hakl’s library dedicated to religions, spiritualities, and esotericisms. In an historical period of political and epistemological tensions, we prefer to state the obvious rather than to run the risk of misunderstandings; holding and studying books and documents on extreme right movements does not legitimise these political currents. On the contrary, a better understanding of past political ideas and practices is crucial to understanding new forms of discrimination and political struggle.

# Introduction:

## *Hans Thomas Hakl: Reminiscences and Reflections on the Challenges of Studying Esotericism in Problematic Contexts*

Marco Pasi



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
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1

I would like to thank Francesco Piraino, Francesco Baroni, Wouter Hanegraaff, and Bernd-Christian Otto for reading a first draft of this introduction and giving me useful suggestions for improvement. Obviously, all remaining errors are mine.

This special issue of *Religiographies* is devoted to the scholar of esotericism and book collector Hans Thomas Hakl.<sup>1</sup> The original idea for this issue came from a conversation I had a couple of years ago with one of the editors of this journal, Francesco Piraino, who is also the director of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities at the Giorgio Cini Foundation. Francesco and I were discussing the donation, which we had proposed and facilitated, of Hakl's library, also known as the Octagon Library, to the Cini Foundation. For quite some time Hakl had been looking for a research institution or a public library that could ensure the preservation and accessibility of his vast collection, counting over 50,000 printed items, mostly books and journals, and a large amount of archival material related to the history of Eranos and of twentieth-century esoteric movements. Being a personal friend of Hakl's, I had been following his unsuccessful attempts at finding a convenient place for such an extraordinary cultural treasure. When I first met Francesco at the ESSWE conference in Erfurt in 2017, we started talking about his activities and plans at the Cini Foundation, and the idea came naturally to inquire whether he would be interested in proposing Hakl's collection to the Foundation. This collection would fit perfectly with the interests and purposes of the Centre directed by Francesco, and would join other collections (such as Alain Daniélou's) in what was already a marvellous library for the study of spirituality and comparative religions. It was definitely a long shot, but in the end it hit the target. Our conversation was the beginning of the process that led, a few years later, to the actual donation of Hakl's collection to the Cini Foundation. While the deed has already been signed and is therefore effective, the collection will materially remain with Hakl until the end of his life and will then be transferred to the Foundation.



H. T. Hakl and W. N. "Nick" Schors, Dutch bookseller specialising in occult books, Amsterdam, September 1994. Photograph © Hans Thomas Hakl.

I have visited Hakl's library many times at its present location in Graz and I have a clear sense of its exceptional scope and value. When it finally becomes publicly available to scholars, it will turn the Giorgio Cini Foundation and the city of Venice into one of the most important research hubs for the study of alternative spirituality and esoteric currents in the world. Consequently, Francesco and I thought it would be a good idea to devote an issue of this journal to the library's creator, partly as a gesture of appreciation but also, more

importantly with the idea of putting together useful historical and contextual documentation for those who will one day be using the library and might take an interest in its history. We invited a number of scholars—all of whom have met H. T. Hakl personally at some point or another—to write about him and about different aspects of his work.

I met Thomas Hakl for the first time in January 1997. I was then a PhD student at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, with Antoine Faivre as supervisor. Some time before Christmas, knowing I would spend the holidays with my family in Italy, Faivre mentioned to me that a group of friends and colleagues were going to gather for a few days in Villa Saraceno, a historic house close to Vicenza, in the Veneto region, and he invited me to join the party. Joscelyn Godwin, also the author of a personal memoir for this special issue and a good friend of Hakl's, had organised the get-together. Everyone there shared an interest in the study of esotericism and alternative spirituality. I was the youngest in the lot and, while I had already met a few of them, such as Wouter Hanegraaff, Christopher McIntosh, and Deborah Belle Forman, most of the others I knew only by name.



Joscelyn Godwin, H. T. Hakl, and Wouter J. Hanegraaff at Villa Saraceno, January 1997. Photograph © Hans Thomas Hakl.

The idea was simply to spend some quiet, relaxed time together at Villa Saraceno, talking informally about our respective research interests. The event was so pleasant and successful that it was decided to repeat it. Because Villa Saraceno had been designed by the famous Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio, one of the participants later referred to the gathering half-jokingly as a “Palladian Academy” in a report of the event, and the name was then adopted by the group. Over the following years, the Palladian Academy reconvened several times at different places. Some people who had been invited to Villa Saraceno but could not make it, such as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, joined the group as well. The second meeting was organised by Hakl himself in Austria, not far from his hometown of Graz. From the third meeting on, the location became Rosalie Basten’s residence in the south of France, which she generously put at our disposal. At some point in the mid-2000s, the enthusiasm slowly waned and the meetings came to an end.

These were still pioneering times for the scholarly study of esotericism.



The seminal meeting for the foundation of the Society also took place at Rosalie Basten's residence and several of the attending scholars had also been previously involved in the Palladian Academy.

A description of the journal, together with the tables of contents of the whole series, can be found on the website of the publisher, AAGW: accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.aagw-gnostika.de/gnostika-zeitschrift/>.

There was no professional association to organise large conferences, no journals or book series hosted by internationally renowned academic publishers, and no broad, international community of scholars such as it exists today. When these meetings started, there was just one place in the world where esotericism could be studied as a recognised scholarly subject on its own, and that was the EPHE in Paris, where Faivre had his chair. The meetings of the Palladian Academy, in which Hakl was involved so actively, functioned therefore as a breeding ground for the emerging field of esotericism, in which ideas were exchanged and projects were discussed by people who wanted to elaborate a vision for the future of this new area of research. It is from those meetings, for instance, that the idea of a scholarly association for the study of esotericism was conceived, which would eventually lead to the foundation of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) in 2005.<sup>2</sup>

Starting from that first meeting in 1997, I saw Hakl on many occasions and spent time with him not only during the successive iterations of the Palladian Academy, but also at a number of scholarly conferences, and since I was regularly in Graz because of family connections, I also visited him there. He had an impressive knowledge of the subjects I was also interested in, and there were always so many fascinating discoveries to make in his library. Over the years, I have come to appreciate all the work he has done for the study of esotericism. He belongs to what is usually referred to as the category of “independent scholars,” that is, scholars who have not had a typical academic career and who are not formally affiliated with a university or a research institute. In most fields independent scholars are a very small, almost invisible minority, and this is perhaps also the case for the study of esotericism today. But in the past independent scholars played an important role in this field, especially before it gained a decent foothold in academia. The field has now grown and become more mature by including a significant number of people who have started a professional career through a regular course of studies, going from dedicated graduate study programs up to tenured positions. Before ESSWE was founded, however, it was quite common to meet people not formally attached to any academic institution but who were interested in the scholarly study of esotericism and were able to produce good, or at least decent, research. Generally, our field has taken an inclusive attitude towards independent scholars, without compromising too much in terms of academic quality, and I think this was—and remains even today—a good thing to do. While the increasing professionalisation of the field has definitely been a progress, and I see no particular need to indulge in nostalgia for pioneering times, I feel we should recognise the efforts of people like Hakl who contributed to the study of esotericism for quite some time out of sheer intellectual passion and using their personal means to pay for their research.

Hakl's contributions to scholarship show the value, and occasionally the weaknesses, of such endeavours. Apart from a large number of essays that he has published in journals and collective volumes, two major achievements should be singled out here. One is the journal *Gnostika*, which was created by Hakl in October 1996 in collaboration with the German publisher AAGW.<sup>3</sup> Originally and for many years a quarterly, then a biannual, and since 2020 an annual periodical, over the years it has presented an immense wealth of essays, archival material, and interviews with both prominent scholars and practitioners of esotericism. Each

issue would also include a comprehensive, very useful overview of news about the international world of esoteric studies, usually written by Haki himself. The other important work is Haki's monograph on the history of Eranos, originally published in German in 2001, then in a revised, expanded edition in 2015, and finally in a version made available in English by Equinox in 2013.<sup>4</sup> The book bears witness to Haki's deep fascination for the long history of these meetings and for the biographical trajectory of the high-profile scholars and intellectuals who participated in them. This fascination is actually mirrored in his library, which seems to have been created precisely with the purpose of covering all the interests, ideas, and preoccupations that were so central in the Eranos project.

Apart from these two achievements, one should of course also mention all the work that Haki has done on the Italian traditionalist Julius Evola, the author to whom he has devoted most of his attention and efforts. This work is scattered across a number of essays and other occasional publications (such as introductions and forewords to translations of Evola's books, especially in German and English) and has not been presented systematically in a single comprehensive monograph. In terms of dedication and commitment, it is however as important as his work on Eranos. This is the reason why one of the articles in the present issue of *Religio-*

*graphies*, by Francesco Baroni, focuses specifically on Haki's work on Evola and other Italian esotericists. Because of his well-known racist and antisemitic ideas, Evola is by far one of the most controversial authors in the history of twentieth-century esotericism. But he is undoubtedly also a complex author, whose growing influence in the context of contemporary esotericism and politics cannot be ignored by scholars.

How to study authors who have such a problematic reputation, whether political or of any other kind, is an issue that has not been fully addressed by scholars of esotericism so far. This inevitably raises larger questions than the figure of Evola himself, questions that have to do with the perceived connection between modern and contemporary esotericism and far-right politics. As I have argued elsewhere, it would be disingenuous to deny that such a connection has existed historically and still exists today.<sup>5</sup> But that does not mean that all forms of esotericism can be reduced to a particular political colour. On the contrary, many different political trends and orientations can be observed in the authors and movements that are being studied under the general rubric of esotericism.

It is quite obvious that one can study authors without necessarily sympathising with their ideas. But the fact that, especially after the Second World War, a persisting prejudice has tended to see esotericism as inextricably connected to fascism and reactionary politics has also cast a long shadow of suspicion upon scholars working in this field. Some of these scholars, including myself, have had personal experiences of such suspicions, and know that this is not just an imaginary issue. But, while direct experiences of hostile prejudice and stigmatisation can be unpleasant, one should never lose sight of the bigger picture. In fact, it seems to me that scholars of esotericism should probably come to terms with the fact that there is something irritating in esotericism as a subject of study, and that suspicions around it are so deep-rooted that they will probably never entirely go away, no matter how much political correctness is injected into the field.<sup>6</sup> So, rather than wasting time in fearing overblown suspicions, scholars should look at these forms of prejudice today as objects worthy

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Hans Thomas Haki, *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos: Unbekannte Begegnungen von Wissenschaft und Esoterik. Eine alternative Geistesgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bretten: scientia nova, 2001); Hans Thomas Haki, *Eranos: Nabel der Welt, Glied der goldenen Kette. Die alternative Geistesgeschichte* (Bretten: scientia nova, 2015); Hans Thomas Haki, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Sheffield-Bristol: Equinox, 2013).

5

See Marco Pasi, "The Modernity of Occultism: Reflections on Some Crucial Aspects," in *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 59–74 (esp. 61). See also Julian Strube, "Doesn't occultism lead straight to fascism?", in *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J. Forshaw, and Marco Pasi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 225–31; and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Esotericism and Democracy: Some Clarifications," 7 Oct. 2022, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com/2022/10/esotericism-and-democracy-some.html>.

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That this irritating quality has to do with the long history of esotericism as "rejected knowledge," as has been reconstructed by Wouter J. Hanegraaff in his *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), seems evident to me. Whether the idea of "rejected knowledge" can be used as a single, general framework for conceptualising esotericism is surely debatable. But it can still be seen as a sort of red thread in the history of the ideas, beliefs, and practices that scholars today subsume under the rubric of "esotericism."

See Amy Hale, “The Pagan and Occult Fascist Connection and How to Fix It,” 5 Aug. 2019, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://medium.com/@amyhale93/the-pagan-and-occult-fascist-connection-and-how-to-fix-it-d338c32ee4e6>. According to Hale, “entryism occurs when people promoting particular political or cultural values infiltrate an organization with the express objective of spreading that position to other members.” It should be noted that Hale’s article does not focus primarily on the scholarly context, but on the religionist one. Its main purpose in fact is to warn practitioners of “Pagan and occult subcultures” about the dangers of infiltration from the radical right and to help them preventing it. It seems to me, however, that the picture Hale draws could easily be applied to scholarly communities as well. I would also add that her argument about entryism would be stronger if she could refer to actual radical right sources where it is explicitly theorised and encouraged. Without clear evidence the idea of a self-conscious tactic of entryism from the radical right, as distinct from a more general desire for legitimization, remains more suggestive and hypothetical than factual.

See <https://www.fondazionejulius-evola.com/>. The website offers a comprehensive overview of its activities and publications. The Foundation was created soon after Evola’s death in 1974.

I will just mention here the philosophers Franco Volpi (1952–2009) and Massimo Donà, and the political scientist Giorgio Galli (1928–2020), all of whom have contributed essays and introductions for the series of Evola’s complete works supervised by the Evola Foundation and published by the Edizioni Mediterranee. Other forms of conversation could be mentioned, even outside the direct context of the Evola Foundation, such as the interesting interview given by Francesco Germinario for the anthology edited by Marco Iacona, *Il maestro della tradizione. Dialoghi su Julius Evola* (Napoli: Controcorrente, 2008), 407–15, significantly titled “Visto da sinistra” (“Seen from the Left”). Germinario is one of the best specialists of far-right culture and antisemitism in Italy today. He has written a critical study of Evola’s racist and antisemitic ideas (*Razza del sangue, razza dello spirito. Julius Evola, l’antisemitismo e il nazional-socialismo* [Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001]). Quite a few other examples could be given.

of study in themselves. Forms of prejudice, by the way, which often speak more about the social and historical contexts in which they emerge than about esotericism itself.

At the same time, scholars should be aware that far-right milieus very often do show a deep interest in esotericism, not only in terms of practices or beliefs but also as a subject of scholarly research, and are more than willing to open up conversations with the academic scholars who study it. For these milieus, whether academic scholars support their ideas or not is often secondary, because for them it is the conversation in itself that has value. This can be seen as being part of a strategy of legitimization, used to evade marginal political contexts and expand the limited outreach afforded by them. In fact, some observers have even suggested that in some cases the radical right may even engage in a self-conscious tactic of “entryism.”<sup>7</sup> This is why scholars of esotericism are more than justified in being wary of the contexts in which they operate. But this is of course much easier said than done. Scholars may not always be so sure whether a particular context is appropriate for a conversation and they may sometimes also incur errors of judgment. This, by itself, cannot justify stigmatisation and vilification. One can find oneself in such contexts for a variety of reasons, not necessarily because of sympathy with the ideas that are expressed there by others. It is certainly wise for academic scholars to avoid contexts that have an extreme political orientation, and there are issues, such as racism and antisemitism, on which no ambiguity is tolerable. But, apart from cases where racism, antisemitism, and other forms of discrimination are openly defended and promoted, which would make any form of conversation impossible, where is the exact line between objectionable extremism and acceptable political positions, whether on the right or on the left? And who draws the line? Quite clearly, these are questions to which people may give very different answers, depending on their own political perspective and, consequently, their own biases. Political activists of various kinds may have strong opinions about such issues, and can understandably be quite vocal about them, but that does not give them any special authority to draw that line.

No matter how deeply one can disagree with the problematic ideas expressed in milieus that are, in one way or another, directly connected to the subject of one’s own scholarly research, it is often difficult to avoid contact with such milieus. This can be for very practical reasons, such as having access to relevant literature, archives and documentation. But, in some cases, even an open, public conversation with these milieus can be useful, especially when they produce research of their own that has some scholarly merit. The value of this research cannot always be reduced to simple apologetic intents and ideological biases. An interesting example of this may be the “Fondazione Julius Evola” (Julius Evola Foundation), which was created to study Evola’s work and preserve his intellectual and material legacy.<sup>8</sup> I am personally very critical about the political value of this legacy, and one should also be wary of the apologetic aspects unavoidable in the care-taking mission of such institutions, but there is much more to study in Evola than his political ideas alone, and it would be quite difficult to do so today without taking into account the large amount of research produced by the Fondazione. Research, by the way, that has been often carried out with the collaboration of professional academic scholars, some of whom do not have a right-wing political background at all.<sup>9</sup>

What should really count in the end is the critical attitude with which



the material produced by such milieus is studied and analysed, even if this involves some form of conversation. Is this enough to offset the risks of legitimising odious ideologies? It is hard to give a definite answer to this question, but I still remain convinced that, if there is one idea we can still retain from the legacy of the Enlightenment today, is that critical scholarly research remains the best tool we have to oppose and dissolve the false pretences of ideologies.

The reason for these reflections will appear immediately evident to the reader. They lead us to discuss what many would consider a controversial aspect of Hakl's public persona. It is no secret that he has been accused of being involved in far-right networks and of professing far-right ideas himself. He discusses this issue extensively in an interview originally published in *Gnostika* and now also available on the AAGW – Gnostika website.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most significant example of such accusations can be found in an essay by the German scholar of religion Horst Junginger, published in a book devoted to the study of religion under the impact of fascism, also edited by him.<sup>11</sup> As the reader will see, the matter is discussed in the contributions to this special issue, although it is not a special focus of any of them. But I believe this introduction would not be complete if I did not offer my personal views on it. I actually think that this special issue of *Religiographica* gives us a very useful opportunity to reflect on these problems, both from a very general point of view, as I have just done, and more particularly with respect to Hakl's individual case.

First of all, I think it is important to look at the facts of the matter. If we get to the bottom of Junginger's statements we find that the only reason for associating Hakl with far-right milieus, apart from the very subject of his researches, is the unquestionable fact that he has published some of his works on Evola with publishers that have such a political reputation.<sup>12</sup> In the interview I have already referred to, Hakl explains that the reasons for which he found himself in such a position were purely instrumental.<sup>13</sup> They had to do with the fact that nobody else at the time was interested in publishing translations of Evola's works in Germany. According to Hakl, his involvement in such publishing ventures had the sole purpose of presenting Evola's works with sufficient scholarly accuracy, avoiding misunderstandings and errors of translation.<sup>14</sup> Readers may reach their own conclusions about these explanations, but I certainly invite them to read Hakl's interview integrally. His whole discussion of the matter looks reasonable to me. He had to make a choice between publishing the results of his research in problematic contexts or not publishing at all. Not being a professional scholar, he decided that publishing in those contexts was an acceptable compromise, as long as no other option was available to him. I personally do not think that such a compromise was a very wise choice, but I also do not believe that this justifies the prejudice and the harsh treatment to which Hakl is subjected in Junginger's essay.

The main problem with the kind of suspicions and accusations of which Hakl has been the target is that they are usually based not on an author's explicit expression of ideas, but on something much more impalpable and elusive: their hidden intentions. However, the way we perceive the intentions or the supposed "hidden agenda" of an author often depends more on our pre-conceptions than on demonstrable facts.<sup>15</sup> This is why the distinction introduced by Hanegraaff in his contribution between a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of generosity can be useful here. A hermeneutic of suspicion can have very valuable heuristic power

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See "Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl," accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.hthakl-octagon.com/interview/interview-english/> for the English version.

11

Horst Junginger, "From Buddha to Adolf Hitler: Walther Wüst and the Aryan Tradition," in *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, ed. Horst Junginger (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2008), 107–78 (see esp. 167–69).

12

More particularly, Junginger mentions the long introduction that Hakl published under his nom-de-plume "H. T. Hansen" in the German translation of Evola's book *Gli uomini e le rovine*: "Evola's politisches Wirken," in Julius Evola, *Menschen inmitten von Ruinen* (Tübingen: Hohenrain, 1991), 7–132. According to Junginger, "the Hohenrain publishing house that printed the book belongs to the Tübingen Grabert-Verlag, a leading right wing publisher in Germany particularly proficient in Holocaust denial." (Junginger, "From Buddha to Adolf Hitler," 167–68). Hakl's introduction is certainly one of the most important essays he has written on Evola and is almost like a monograph in itself. An English version was later published in the American edition of Evola's book: H. T. Hansen, "Julius Evola's Political Endeavors," in Julius Evola, *Men among the Ruins. Postwar Reflections of a Radical Traditionalist* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2002), 1–104.

13

"Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

14

"Of course I was aware that I was risking my reputation by entering into cooperation with a publishing house well known for its right-wing political stance. But what other publisher would have dared to bring out *Men Among the Ruins*? ... It's always easy to be wise after the event, but this was a fortunate decision, as it enabled me to correct numerous translation errors." "Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

15

The scholarly value of Hakl's interpretation of Evola is of course open to discussion and could be the object of a specific analysis, which might reveal weaknesses and flaws. Junginger, however, does not engage in such an analysis and simply seems to take such weaknesses and flaws for granted.

See Hans Thomas Hakl, "Die Integrale Tradition," *Sezession* 11 (2005): 20–26, 26. Also available online: accessed May 20, 2023, [https://sezession.de/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Hakl\\_Die-Integrale-Tradition.pdf](https://sezession.de/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Hakl_Die-Integrale-Tradition.pdf). It should be noted that *Sezession* is published by the "Institut für Staatspolitik," which is a New Right think-tank in the German-speaking area. See Felix Schilk, "'Heroismus als Weg zur Transzendenz.' Metadiskursive Religionsbezüge und apokalyptische Diskurspraxis der Neuen Rechten," *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 5 (2021): 445–69, 456. Schilk also refers to Hakl's article (458), but in my view gives the erroneous impression that in it Hakl is discussing "Integral Tradition" from the normative point of view of a practitioner, whereas what he is actually doing is offering a description of the concept of Integral Tradition from the perspective of an external observer. His critical comments about the political application of Traditional ideas should make this clear enough.

"Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

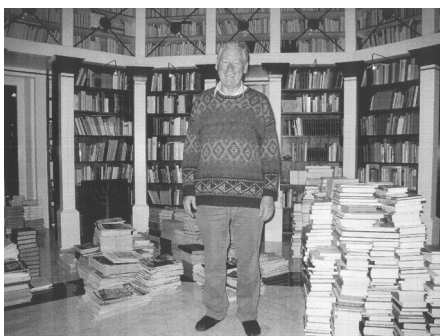
and there are contexts where it can play an important role for research. But whenever the evidence cannot go beyond the simplistic logic of "guilt by association" and there is a real danger of unjustified stigmatisation, it is in my view a hermeneutic of generosity that should prevail. This is obviously not just a scholarly issue, but also an ethical one.

Things would be different of course had Hakl expressed ideas that would characterise him as a far-right author, but that is precisely what, to my knowledge, he has never done. More than that, I have not encountered even one single sentence in Hakl's publications that could suggest sympathy with or support for fascist or racist politics, nor have I ever heard him make any such statement or allusion in the many conversations we had over a period of twenty-six years. By contrast, he has occasionally expressed his conviction (in writing, but in conversation as well) that any attempt to turn Traditionalist beliefs into political practice is "dangerous" because it will lead not to some ideal utopia of social harmony but to a "nasty totalitarianism."<sup>16</sup> He has also expressed a clear opinion about Evola's political ideas:

"I too find much to reject in Evola. I could mention his numerous unambiguously racist outpourings, especially in the newspaper *La Vita Italiana*, which are clearly unacceptable. But there is also his distinctly Manichean way of thinking, which is what lies behind his sharp separation of tradition and modernity, north and south, man and woman, Ario-Roman and Semitic. Then there are his conspiracy theories and his anti-emotionalism. His occult view of world history, which he took partly from Theosophy and which he develops in the second part of *Revolt against the Modern World*, does not appeal to me any more than the similar cosmologies of Helena Blavatsky or Rudolf Steiner."<sup>17</sup>

Whatever one chooses to think about the points raised above, we should not forget that Hakl has published most of his scholarly essays in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Aries* and *Correspondences*, and in edited books with respected academic publishers such as Oxford University Press and Brill. Moreover, most of these essays were presented originally as papers at scholarly conferences, such as those of ESSWE, that apply a strict selection policy. These essays and papers could find their place in those contexts for the simple reason that their scholarly merit was evident enough to those who were evaluating them. They have in fact brought an important contribution to the scholarly discussion not only of Evola, but also of other subjects such as modern esotericism in Italy and in the German-speaking countries, sexuality and esotericism, and the history of Erano. It is certainly fair to criticise Hakl's works for any flaws or faults they may have, but that is of course true for any other scholarly work and has nothing to do with the search for dangerous hidden agendas. Based on my personal acquaintance with Hakl, I have no doubt that he would welcome any such criticism as a compliment to his work and as an opportunity for learning and improvement. Even as an independent scholar, and like most of his peers, he knows that this is how the scholarly game works.

In conclusion, we may return to where we started. The fact that Hakl's Octagon Library has finally found its future home is wonderful news for the future development of research in religious studies, spirituality, esotericism, and related subjects. It will be an extraordinary resource for the whole international community of scholars working in these fields, and the



H. T. Hakl in his Octagon Library in Graz. Photograph © Hans Thomas Hakl.

beautiful premises of the Cini Foundation on the San Giorgio island, right in front of San Marco square, will offer the perfect location for enjoying endless hours of fruitful research. This is undoubtedly the most important, long-lasting contribution to scholarship that Thomas Hakl could ever make and for which he will be remembered in the years to come.

# *Hans Thomas Hakl: Three Lives in One*

Bernd-Christian Otto



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE

*fondazione* ONLUS  
GIORGIO CINI

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### *Abstract*

Who is Hans Thomas Hakl, the man behind the Octagon library? Based on 10 hours of semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in March 2021, the project "Hans Thomas Hakl: Three Lives in One" presents for the first time an extensive biographical account of the entrepreneur, scholar, publisher, book collector, and spiritual seeker Hans Thomas Hakl. As much of Hakl's work was driven by a "respect for the honest—I might even say honourable—losers in the clash of world views"<sup>1</sup> and thus a strong interest in marginalised and disputed topics, authors, and ideas, many of which manifested in the Octagon library, Hakl himself became somewhat of a disputed figure. This article hence aims at portraying a nuanced and multifaceted picture of the founder of the Octagon library, which seeks to transcend one-sided political or ideological perspectives.

### **Praeludium**

In order to prepare the biographical sketches published here, I met Hans Thomas Hakl in late March 2021. Our meetings took place in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic and shortly after Hakl had completed a demanding course of chemotherapy for an outbreak of Hodgkin lymphoma that was diagnosed in 2020. Our meeting was of course affected by Hakl's physical condition—in addition to the chemotherapy, he had also received a shot of the Biontech/Pfizer vaccine on the day of our first interview—but his mind was nonetheless extraordinarily keen, sympathetic, and humorous. Indeed, it was striking to find the "man behind the library" in such a positive and open frame of mind whilst his body was battling such a severe illness. I would like to thank the Giorgio Cini Foundation for this special issue and for their courageous commitment to making Hakl's outstanding library publicly available.

The conversations on which this biography is based took place over three consecutive days, on each of which we spoke for three to four hours. The topics covered each day fell into three rough categories: Hakl's personal and economic life, his scholarly and intellectual life, and his pursuit of spiritual and "magical" matters. This biographical sketch is divided accordingly. Even though Hakl's life as a businessman and entrepreneur; as a lover, collector, scholar, and publisher of books; and as a spiritual seeker were, of course, heavily intertwined, it is still as apparent as it is impressive that the man lived "three lives in one." It therefore seems appropriate to deal with each in turn. The information in each part of the sketch is based for the most part on Hakl's personal reports.



## Methodology

The following biographical sketch is based on 10 hours of interviews that were guided by the following methodology:

(1) *Preparation*. While preparing for the interviews, I read extensively through Hakl's written oeuvre, some autobiographical remarks and interviews already published, and additional relevant literature, such as selections from the *Octagon* volumes or the *Gnostika* journal. I then prepared a thematic scheme (the "interview guide") containing all the available biographical data and a long list of open questions, structured around Hakl's various interests and biographical trajectories.

(2) *Epistemology*. My guiding epistemological principle was an awareness that I could not simply "mine" biographical truths through interviewing Hakl, instead acknowledging that biographical narratives are generally construed, especially in interview settings, with all their potential limitations (interviewees may be driven by a conscious or subconscious desire to create an idealised image, by distortive or selective memories, or may even engage in deliberate attempts to deceive the interviewer). My greatest concern was Hakl's physical condition, the state of his memory, and his ability to speak comprehensibly. To my surprise, my experience of Hakl was of an open-minded and seemingly trustworthy interview partner who spoke freely even on controversial matters (e.g., on Evola, fascism, sexual magic, etc.), and there was no topic about which Hakl was reluctant to talk. It was, in fact, only Hakl's fading memory that occasionally hampered my attempt to understand his various biographical trajectories. In the aftermath of the interviews, Hakl's wife functioned as an additional corrective regarding various details. Notably, I attempted to not enter into the interview with preconceptions about Hakl's political agenda(s), and I also decided afterwards that the written outcome should be as neutral as possible with regard to Hakl's political or ideological viewpoints. My intention was to convey a nuanced and multifaceted picture of Hakl that seeks to transcend one-sided political or ideological perspectives.

(3) *Techniques*. Drawing on the prepared interview guide, I conducted an audio-recorded semi-structured qualitative interview<sup>2</sup> in German with a narratological focus on the three dominant aspects of Hakl's "life story". We agreed to devote each day to a different aspect of his biography, and I for the most part guided Hakl through the interview using prepared questions drawn from my interview guide, reacting creatively to replies with spontaneous follow-up questions.

(4) *Recording*. The interviews were recorded in Hakl's living room in Graz by two independent digital devices, while I simultaneously took extensive notes. In the aftermath, I compared my written notes with the digital audio recordings, which were of good quality, and partially transcribed the latter. Through this procedure, a written summary of the entire interview emerged, amounting to some 40 pages, which I shared with Hakl, along with the digital recordings, in accordance with standard ethical practices for academic interviewing. While reading the summary and listening to the recordings, Hakl himself felt the urge to compose a brief partial autobiography, which he shared with me, thereby correcting some of his own previous statements (as mentioned, Hakl occasionally struggled with his memory during the interviews, and ultimately remembered or re-checked divergent datings of events or other details in the aftermath). I then composed an independent three-part article on the basis of the digital audio recordings, my own written notes during the interview, my

own written summary, Hakl's autobiographical sketch, further autobiographical notes and interviews previously published by Hakl, and further literature written by both Hakl and other authors. Hakl read a first version of the present three-part article and provided some minor corrections and suggestions. Of course, I remain exclusively responsible for the narrative provided here. The present text was copy edited by Paul Scade.

## Part I | Personal and economic biography

### 1 *Childhood and adolescence (1947–1965)*

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Hans Thomas Hakl, “‘There once was a young man who left home in order to buy lots of books, and even as an old man he hadn’t got any wiser and still diligently kept buying them . . .’ The History of a Library and the Personal Reflections of a Collector,” in *Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 2, *The quest for wholeness: mirrored in a library dedicated to religious studies, philosophy and esotericism in particular: esoteric and religious studies research by academic authors* (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2016), 1–23, 11.

Hans Thomas Hakl was born on February 27, 1947, in Graz, Austria. An only child, he grew up in the southern part of Graz, close to the woods. Here, he often roamed about and climbed the trees as a child, forging the bonds of a pronounced love of nature that would accompany him throughout his life. Hakl's father was a manager in the payroll accounting department at the Austrian company Steyr Daimler Puch; his mother took on the role of homemaker. Hakl had a particularly strong connection with his father, rooted in admiration for his intelligence and courage. Hakl's relationship with his mother, by contrast, was sometimes strained. Whereas she was largely preoccupied with raising a “good child,” from his earliest memories Hakl's own opinions about what was proper departed significantly from hers.

Already as a young child, Hakl was very fond of books. In fact, “as a two- to four-year-old in the days before television, I was most easily kept quiet by the provision of a few books, which I apparently proceeded to leaf through from cover to cover and back again for hours on end. I would have been still happier scribbling in them, but my father—a great bibliophile—knew how to thwart the urge.”<sup>3</sup> Hakl enrolled in primary school (*Volksschule*) at the age of five, and later attended a secondary school that focused on modern languages and mathematics (*Realgymnasium*). His school career was characterised by high talent (*Hochbegabung*) and the gift of an eidetic memory, with the result that the young Hans frequently felt unchallenged, to the point that he would regularly play chess with himself under his classroom desk to cope with the frequent boredom. Hakl also learned Jiu Jitsu as a young boy, which gave him a physical advantage over his comrades (later, Hakl would practice full-contact Karate).

A talent for languages also emerged during this period. Hakl first learned English through his father and then developed his understanding by devouring American Wild West dime novels by authors such as Zane Grey and Max Brand. By the time he was nine years old, he was nearly fluent. In secondary school, from the third year onwards Hakl was introduced to Latin (6 hours per week), through which he discovered his fascination for ancient philosophy, religion, myth, and old things in general. Hakl's gift for languages enabled him to pick up Italian with little effort in his teenage years as a result of his love for Italy and his reading of Italian romance novels (thus his advice for learning languages: do not focus on grammar but read texts imbued with emotions). At the same time, he started to learn French. At the age of seventeen, he won a local youth contest for translation from Italian, and the following year he won in the English category. Hakl wanted to compete in the French contest as well, putting to use the other language he had learned, but by the time the competition came around again he had just passed his eighteenth birthday and was no longer eligible.

Hakl's early love of books quickly extended beyond fairy tales, Karl May, Edgar Wallace, and foreign novels, so, as the shelves of his parental home were unable to satisfy his voracious appetite, he spent a lot of time in the library of his father's company. Around the age of twelve, Hakl began to monetise his talents by giving private lessons in Maths, English, and, later on, Latin. The money earned through this early entrepreneurial endeavour was usually spent on books. In fact, it was around this time that his urge to collect books, especially those with esoteric subject matters, emerged. This impulse was sparked by his accidental reading of Lobsang Rampa's *The Third Eye*,<sup>4</sup> which was published as a serial novel in an illustrated magazine Hakl had come across in the family home. Enthralled by this allegedly authentic, but in fact "invented story of a fake Tibetan monk"<sup>5</sup> and his opening the *ājñācakra*,<sup>6</sup> Hakl craved more. He found his first source of esoteric books in an advert in one of his beloved Wild West novels for Thorson Publishers, the then-well-known English publisher of esoteric literature and books about alternative healing methods. The young reader soon ordered books about Tibet, India, Yoga, Buddhism, Theosophy, and even modern witchcraft. Hakl's "pursuit was aided by a [German] publisher at Freiburg im Breisgau, Hermann Bauer Verlag, which regularly sent out catalogues on esoteric books, and which I soon visited in order to rummage through its in-store offering."<sup>7</sup> Hakl's journey as a book collector and a connoisseur of all things esoteric had begun.

Driven by his fascination for esoteric lore and Eastern religions in particular, in his early teenage years Hakl began to practise *Hathayoga* in Graz. His teacher was an eighty-year-old self-proclaimed Austrian Yogi, who had had undergone an operation on his nasal septum to enable him to publicly pull a snake from his nose through his mouth—Hakl regularly assisted him on stage. Hakl practised yoga and pranayama daily and diligently, albeit without undergoing any impressive experiences, and he even gave voluntary lectures about yoga for his friends. However, Hakl's intensive routine of yoga practice came to a halt around the age of 18, after his mentor was involved in an accident and had to stop giving classes.

## 2 Higher education and business career (1965–1989)

Hakl received his *Matura* (high school diploma) with distinction at the age of 18. Putting his sound grasp of languages to good use, he sought out work at international hotels during his vacations, finding jobs in Switzerland, England, and France. During the summer vacation immediately following his *Matura*, Hakl worked at the Palace Hotel in St. Moritz, where he was often assigned as the local guide for famous hotel guests—among them Greta Garbo and Eliette von Karajan. The next summer, in 1966, Hakl worked at a plush hotel on the British island of Jersey. While visiting London, Hakl stumbled across the famous Watkins bookshop and began to hunt out works by Aleister Crowley, which he found fascinating due in part to Crowley's provocative and luciferian habitus (at that time, as Hakl recalls, first editions of Crowley's works were sometimes available for less than ten pounds).<sup>8</sup> This first visit to England also gave Hakl the opportunity to acquaint himself with various new religious movements, such as the Hippies (Hakl was and remained uninterested in drugs and entheogens), the Children of God, and the Hare Krishnas. However, despite his interest in their views, Hakl did not join any of these groups, with the exception of a short stint as a member of the Children of God ("I was never attracted to becoming part of a group. When all say the same, I become sceptical"<sup>9</sup>). At a symposium during this period, Hakl also encountered Jiddu

4

Lobsang Rampa, *The Third Eye: The autobiography of a Tibetan lama* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956).

5

Hans Thomas Hakl, "Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness," in *Transcultural Diplomacy and International Law in Heritage Conservation A Dialogue between Ethics, Law, and Culture*, ed. Olimpia Niglio and Eric Yong Joong Lee (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 48–62, 49.

6

Lobsang Rampa was a British author born Cyril Henry Hoskin (1910–1980). *The Third Eye* was his debut novel, with eighteen further novels following until 1980. Hoskin / Rampa is an interesting figure in the history of Western esotericism: even though he was never in Tibet and his works thus raised authorship controversies, he was nonetheless influential in creating a fascination for Tibet within and beyond esoteric circles, even prompting some of his readers to become professional Tibetologists (see Lopez 1998, 112).

7

Hakl, "There once was a young man," 12.

8

Hakl, "There once was a young man," 12.

9

Personal communication from Hans T. Hakl (Graz, March 2021). My translation.

Krishnamurti, by whom he was deeply impressed. This was the only period in Hakl's life when he lived completely as a vegetarian. As Hakl often preferred to expend his resources on books rather than meals, he willingly reduced his food rations and even accepted the consequence of occasional hunger if it helped him to buy an interesting book instead.<sup>10</sup> The most precious of these he carried around in his backpack, unwilling to leave them unattended in case they should be lost or stolen. Sometimes, after spending all of his money on books, Hakl gave public lectures in Hyde park in his free time, hoping that someone would be sufficiently interested to invite him to share a meal with them.

After his schooling finished in 1965, Hakl studied law in Graz. While finding little to interest him in the subject (apart from occasional courses on the philosophy of law or old Roman law), he chose law for the entirely strategic reason that it would allow him to achieve a doctorate with the minimum of effort. As in his schooldays, the combination of an eidetic memory and a talent for learning made the study largely effortless and he was able to complete the course without actually visiting the university, apart from the two days per term on which he attended the first and last lecture.

At the age of 20, Hakl decided to take up a well-paid job in parallel to his studies, working for his father's company, Steyr Daimler Puch, in the sales department serving Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries. In order to meet the prerequisites for the position, he spent 30 days working to add Spanish to his portfolio of languages. Despite working full-time from this point onwards, Hakl was awarded his university degree and doctorate in law at the age of barely 21 (in 1970), receiving the title of Dr. iuris (including canonical law). Hakl was never interested in working in the realm of law, and he in fact never did, but his juridical knowledge was to provide substantial benefits when his commercial career began to flourish later on.

In 1972, Hakl served for one year in the Austrian military. This was an enjoyable period for the young man, who was able to exercise and test his physical strength in addition to his intellectual prowess. Hakl particularly enjoyed the challenge of orienteering and impressed military superiors with his extensive knowledge of astrology. His assignment as an aide to the commander of the military headquarters in Graz meant that his time for sports was strictly limited; the commander was writing a handbook on military tank tactics at the time and Hakl's skills with a typewriter were much in demand.

1972 was also the year in which Hakl married his wife Franziska, whom he had met at Steyr Daimler Puch. Hakl quit his job at his father's company and briefly worked as an export manager for a company named Famulus, which had specialised in electrical and household goods. However, this position was short lived. Spurred on by his long-standing love of Italy, Hakl decided to move to Milan with his newlywed wife in 1973, where he soon took up a position in an Italian import-export company. At the same time, Hakl began to build up an export firm of his own. Legal restrictions on foreign currency in Italy meant that Hakl had to travel abroad on a weekly basis to carry out the necessary transactions. To resolve this problem, he founded a subsidiary in Switzerland, where all currencies could be exchanged freely. There, he became acquainted with two Swiss entrepreneurs, Werner Hausheer and Charles Pierre Schöbi, who had already built up successful companies in Switzerland. The three men decided to merge their respective firms and expertise to found a trading company named



HHS (standing for Hakl, Hausheer, Schöbi). Over the next two decades, HHS enjoyed great commercial success, gradually expanding to control 14 subsidiaries operating in 13 different countries. In 1976, Hakl moved to Zurich with his wife to focus on the expansion of HHS. The city would remain his primary home until 1991.

Hakl's involvement in HHS was economically very lucrative, but also demanding and time-consuming. In the company's heyday, Hakl would spend up to three weeks out of each month travelling the world to oversee operations, typically flying between 200,000 and 250,000 miles each year. HHS focused on importing and exporting a large variety of goods, with a particular focus on the Far East, where offices were opened in Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and India, and business relations were established with mainland China. While building up an HHS subsidiary in Taiwan in the late 1970s, Hakl learned Chinese through language tapes and with the aid of Chinese assistants working at the subsidiary. He remembers his time in Taiwan with particular fondness: he was young, felt smart and strong, and was surfing on a wave of economic success.

Hakl explains the great success of HHS as the result of various factors. Among these were his and his partners' solid understanding of emerging import-export markets, their expertise in modern languages (which between them extended to German, English, Italian, French, Spanish, Swedish, Chinese, and also some Japanese and Russian), their excellent contacts in the Swiss banking sector, and, not least, their strategic utilisation of gourmet restaurants for holding business meetings. For this reason, the company also invested in a luxury restaurant in Pero, Italy (near Milan), and in a wine company, although these two particular investments were rather less successful than expected.

As his commercial career thrived, from the late 1970s onwards Hakl often combined his personal interests with his business activities. While he rarely discussed his private undertakings and esoteric interests with his business partners, he often tried to make the best out of business trips and pauses in his work schedule. For instance, in the late 1970s Hakl spent a few days meditating in a Taiwanese Zen monastery, an opportunity that was only possible because his Chinese was already quite advanced at that time (Hakl did not continue the pursuit of meditative paths later in life). On many of his trips, Hakl also visited local bookstores and antiquarian booksellers—such as the Watkins bookshop in London, the Samuel Weiser bookshop in New York, the Librarie du Graal and the Table d'Émeraude, both in Paris, the Libreria Aseq and the Libreria delle Meraviglie, both in Rome, or the Caves Book Shop in Taipei, to name just a few—in order to enlarge his collection.<sup>11</sup>

From the late 1970s onwards, Hakl also began a secondary career as a scholar and translator, initially focusing on the writings of Julius Evola (see below, Part II). Hakl claims never to have been a workaholic, but as he was rarely interested in amusements such as the theatre, cinema, or television, he tended to spend his free time in the evenings and weekends translating and editing the works of Evola or working on other publication projects. Despite working full-time for his company, Hakl was thus able to translate and publish three books from Evola's corpus over the course of the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> During a working trip to Italy in 1972, Hakl also briefly met Evola for one-and-a-half hours in the latter's private apartment in Rome. The encounter was not overwhelming, but the memory is nevertheless one that Hakl holds close to his heart.<sup>13</sup>

11  
*Octagon*, 2:48–62, 50.

12  
Julius Evola, *Revolte gegen die moderne Welt*, ed./trans. Hans Thomas Hakl published anonymously (Interlaken: Ansata, 1982); Julius Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, ed./trans. Hans Thomas Hakl - aka H. T. Hansen, Band 1, *Praktische Grundlegung der Initiation* (Interlaken: Ansata, 1985); Julius Evola, *Die hermetische Tradition*, ed./trans. Hans Thomas Hakl - aka H. T. Hansen (Interlaken: Ansata, 1989), original title *La tradizione ermetica* (Bari: Laterza, 1931).

13  
“Unfortunately there is nothing sensational to relate. I was received by his housekeeper, who escorted me to him. I can no longer remember whether he was in bed or in a wheelchair, but at any rate he looked wretched—sick, exhausted and embittered. But mentally he was fully alert. I told him about my high-flown plans to publish the monographs of the Group of Ur in German as soon as my circumstances would permit, and this obviously pleased him, [‘but he would not believe I could really do it’; amendment by H. T. Hakl, 2021]. [...] In response to my further question whether there were any initiatic groups in the present day, he merely shook his head. He knew of none. After perhaps an hour and a half the conversation was over. Evola wanted and needed to rest.” “Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl”.

Starting in the 1980s, Hakl became an enthusiastic hiker and thus explored large parts of his natural surroundings, especially in Switzerland and Austria, usually accompanied only by his dog (see also below, Part III). Hakl also explored select mountain areas in Taiwan, deliberately neglecting warnings of poisonous snakes and other dangers, driven onwards by a feeling of invulnerability. One of his life dreams—a hike from Northern Sweden to Northern Africa (Morocco)—remains unfulfilled at the time of writing.

### 3 Early “retirement” and its ramifications (1988–)

14  
Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 19f.

15  
Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 18.

In 1988, Hakl decided to sell his shares in HHS. He had contemplated the possibility already in previous years both because times had become harder for the import-export business and because he was no longer motivated by further expanding either the company or his personal wealth. When an interested buyer appeared on the scene with a good offer, his decision was made quickly, and his partners soon agreed as well. Hakl remained at the company for an additional year to instruct the new owners, but from 1989—aged 42—he essentially lived from the fortune he had made through the sale of his company and from his investments. Hakl and his wife Franziska made a round-the-world-trip in 1989 and then decided to move back to Austria, to their hometown of Graz, where they acquired a large estate. The move from Switzerland to Austria, which took place in 1991, also gave Hakl the opportunity to reunite the fragmented parts of his book collection, which had by now become quite substantial but was distributed across several locations. In 1993, Hakl built an Octagon-shaped extension on his newly purchased estate in Graz, inspired by the Castel del Monte of Friedrich II in Apulia.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to the sale of his company, Hakl could now afford to add the rarest and most costly of volumes to his collection.<sup>15</sup> For instance, one of the most precious items in the Octagon library is a fully illuminated 1598 printing of the *Aureum Vellus*, for which Hakl spent 50,000 Deutsche Marks (roughly €25,000) in 1990.

Since his “retirement” from regular employment in the late 1980s, Hakl has dedicated his time to expanding his book collection, to reading (which becomes more and more difficult for an enthusiastic book collector as the collection grows), to his editing and publishing activities, to traveling and hiking and, not least, to maintaining his capital through on-going reinvestments. The latter task is not to be underestimated, given that one of the most difficult things for a wealthy person to achieve is to maintain their wealth. Up to the present day, Hakl continues to spend several hours each day on this work. Since the early 2000s, this task has become increasingly difficult due to changes in the global economy. Indeed, during the financial crisis of 2007–2008 Hakl lost a significant portion of his capital assets, which, in turn, affected his book collecting endeavours.

During the early 1990s, Hakl underwent a pronounced midlife and identity crisis, partly due to a fundamental fear that had emerged during his previous experimenting with lucid dreaming (see below, Part III). Hakl attempted to handle this crisis through hiking and, later on, through the practice of Qi Gong. Over the past decade, Hakl has suffered from various health-related problems. In 2011, Hakl had two strokes, which he attributes in hindsight to a period of extraordinary stress. From 2015 onwards, Hakl developed polyneuropathy, an apparently incurable disease that affects the peripheral nerves, causing them to die off gradually. This condition has made it increasingly hard for Hakl to use his extremities, impacting his ability to walk and write. In addition, an outbreak of Hodgkin lymphoma

was diagnosed in 2020, for which Hakl underwent a demanding course of chemotherapy. At the time of writing (July 2021), the treatment appears to have been successful. Initially, Hakl attempted to cope with this succession of bodily calamities by means of Qi Gong practice, acupuncture, and other alternative healing methods (in addition to conventional medicine). However, the limitations to his physical mobility have become so severe in recent years that he could only choose to endure his situation with patience and serenity. While doing so, his wife Franziska—whose love, tolerance, and assistance has been a great support to Hakl over the past decades—has remained his calm and calming anchor, for which Hakl feels a sense of deep gratitude and admiration.

## Part II | Intellectual and scholarly biography

### Praeludium

This second part of Hakl's biography focuses on Hakl as a reader, thinker, publisher, writer, and collector. It seeks to answer the following questions: What were his intellectual interests—which inevitably manifested themselves in his library—and how did these change over time? To what extent did these interests have repercussions for his activities as a publisher? And what were Hakl's motivations and intentions as a writer? The following sketch will examine each of these questions in a concise form, concluding with some biographical notes on the material manifestation of Hakl's mind: the Octagon library.

#### 1 Intellectual interests and influences

As outlined above (Part I), Hakl's interest in esotericism, as well as his journey as a collector, began around the age of twelve or thirteen, sparked by his reading of Lobsang Rampa's *The Third Eye* and his discovery of Thorson Publishers. Driven by his early fascination with Eastern religions, Hakl began to practice Yoga in his teenage years. During a public yoga class, Hakl became acquainted with one of the leading Graz-based theosophists, who introduced him to his circle of friends. Through this group and its reading suggestions, Hakl gradually discovered which subjects truly interested him and which he found rather uninspiring. The first category encompassed, at that time, Yoga, Tibet, India, Eastern religions, and everything related to magic; the second category included theosophy, anthroposophy and what could generally be termed "New Age thought."

Hakl was an avid reader with wide interests from early in his life and was, thus, able to draw inspiration from a plethora of literary figures and influences, only some of which can be described here. Around the age of thirteen or fourteen, Hakl first encountered Friedrich Nietzsche and was struck by the poetic and powerful wording of *Also sprach Zarathustra*. He immediately attempted to write a work of similarly powerful diction, but came to the conclusion after several "miserably failed"<sup>16</sup> attempts that his goal was not attainable (consequently, he destroyed all the related manuscripts). Subsequent influential readings included Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose *The Brothers Karamazov*, and the part entitled *The Grand Inquisitor*, in particular, had a deep impact on Hakl's worldview; Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*), which Hakl would study repeatedly throughout his life; Hermann Hesse's work, which Hakl devoured whole-sale, with *Demian*, *The Glass Bead Game*, and *Siddharta* leaving the greatest

16

Personal communication (Graz, March 2021).

Othmar Spann (1878–1950), an influential conservative Austrian philosopher, sociologist and economist, was professor for national economy and social science (Nationalökonomie und Gesellschaftslehre) at the university of Vienna between 1919 and 1938. His work covers a wide range of topics, but he is today most well known for his support of the so-called “conservative revolution” and in particular his ‘universalist’ approach (universalistisch-idealistiche Gesellschaftslehre) which was decidedly anti-modernist, anti-liberalist, anti-democratic, anti-socialist, and anti-individualist (Maaß 2010); a member of the German Nazi party NSDAP from 1930 onwards, his ideas were hence influential in the authoritarian movement of “Austrofascism” (Jezussek 2009).

Ramana Maharshi, *Gespräche des Weisen vom Berge Arunachala: Gesamtausgabe*, aus dem Engl. übertr. und hrsg. von Erich Wilzbach (Interlaken: Ansata-Verlag, 1989); Ramana Maharshi, *Die Suche nach dem Selbst: ausgewählte Gespräche*, als Einführung ein Beitrag zum hundertsten Geburtstag von Sri Ramana Maharshi, hrsg. und eingel. von Lucy Cornelssen (Interlaken: Ansata-Verlag, 1995).

Mircea Eliade, *The myth of the eternal return*, trans. from the French by Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955).

Mircea Eliade, *Techniques du yoga* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948); Mircea Eliade, *Le Yoga : immortalité et liberté* (Paris: Payot, 1954); Mircea Eliade, *Putanjali et le Yoga* (Paris: Éd. du seuil, 1962).

Hans Thomas Hakl, *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos: unbekannte Begegnungen von Wissenschaft und Esoterik: eine alternative Geistesgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bretten: scientia nova, 2001), revised, expanded and renamed second edition: *Eranos. Nabel der Welt. Glied der goldenen Kette. Die alternative Geistesgeschichte*, 2. wesentlich erweiterte Auflage (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2015), trans. in English as *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013).

Hans Thomas Hakl, “‘I know Antaios and disapprove of it. What it cultivates is not religio but magic!’ A short history of the magazine ANTAIOS,” *Aries* 9/2 (2009): 195–232.

Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice* (Paris: Lecram Press, 1929), 1f.

Noam Chomsky, *Necessary illusions: thought control in democratic societies* (London: Pluto Press, 1989).

Even though Benoist’s political positions have been multi-faceted and malleable, he is often considered a spearhead of the French political movement of “Nouvelle Droite” (New Right).

impressions; Goethe’s *Faust* and Novalis’ *The Novices of Sais*, as well as the latter’s thoughts on magical idealism; Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who introduced Hakl to the philosophical movement of German idealism, and thereby also to the work of Othmar Spann, who, according to Hakl, had developed a new form of holistic economy and philosophy which captured his imagination.<sup>17</sup>

Hakl also read Sigmund Freud in his teenage years and was enthralled, partly because of Freud’s splendid parlance, but the more so because Freud satisfied Hakl’s great interest in the topic of sexuality. Inevitably, Carl G. Jung followed, and, even though Hakl initially understood little of what Jung had to say, a fascination with his concepts of *individuation* and *coincidentia oppositorum* remained throughout his life. This interest was later to manifest itself in a huge collection of works on psychology—with a particular focus on the works of Jung and his disciples—in the Octagon library. Hakl was also deeply touched by the writings of Ramana Maharshi, and Maharshi’s method of self-enquiry became a permanent companion throughout Hakl’s life (later, the Ansata Verlag would publish the collected works of Maharshi: Maharshi 1989 and 1995).<sup>18</sup> On the topic of religious literature, Hakl was also inspired by Shankara and the *Tao Te Ching*.

Another crucial author from early on was Mircea Eliade. While reading Eliade, Hakl was often not only intellectually inspired, but also spiritually touched, as if he were transported into a different world (e.g., while reading *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*).<sup>19</sup> Hakl often had the impression that he intuitively already knew what Eliade was writing about in the moment of reading it, particularly with regard to the notions of *Eternal Return* and *illud tempus / in illo tempore* (the latter concept also lay the ground for Hakl’s later works on Evola, René Guénon, and the Traditionalist School). With Eliade’s works, Hakl frequently felt as if he was reading religious literature rather than historical scholarship. In hindsight, Hakl distinguishes four “Eliade phases” in his life: the first phase pertains to his adolescent fascination with Yoga, through which he became acquainted with Eliade’s various works on the topic (e.g., Eliade 1948, 1954, 1962);<sup>20</sup> the second phase coincided with Hakl’s delving into the works of the Romanian historian Ioan Petru Culianu; the third phase occurred while working on the Eranos meetings and on his monograph *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos*;<sup>21</sup> the fourth and final phase was sparked by Hakl’s work on the journal *Antaios*, with Ernst Jünger and Mircea Eliade as nominal editors.<sup>22</sup>

Hakl had similar sensations of “reading mysticism” through his engagement with various other authors (on his *satori* experience while reading Alan Watts, see below, Part III), including those with rather questionable reputations, such as Aleister Crowley. In fact, Hakl was sometimes deeply touched by Crowley’s poetry, as, for instance, by his *Io Pan / Hymn to Pan*.<sup>23</sup> Through Crowley, Hakl was also introduced to Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*. This work evoked a different kind of “reading mysticism,” in that Hakl felt so deeply drawn into the poem that it was as if he embodied Don Juan himself.

Hakl considers Noam Chomsky and Alain de Benoist to be two other important thinkers who have inspired him, the first especially through his political work *Necessary Illusions*,<sup>24</sup> the second through his learnedness and literary productivity, especially in the realm of politics.<sup>25</sup> Hakl also recalls reading George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “systematically every five years.”<sup>26</sup> Yet among all these influences, the author who clearly had



the greatest impact on Hakl's thinking was Julius Evola. Hakl first read Evola in his late teenage years, but his fascination with the writer took off around the age of twenty, when he met the German magical practitioner Adolf Hemberger and began his journey into the world of magical groups and fraternities (see below, Part III). Around this time, he also read Henry Birven, who frequently points to Evola's work as a must-read for the magical practitioner.<sup>27</sup> The experience of reading Evola, especially the first volume of his *Introduction to magic (Introduzione alla magia)*, evoked a deep yearning for autarchy and independence in Hakl, characteristics that also reminded him of his father. Through Evola, Hakl realised that he was in search of something extraordinary, the transcending of the regular boundaries of the human condition, or even self-perfection, and that Evola seemed to provide unique insights into and practices for achieving such a goal. Eventually, Evola also led Hakl to studying further protagonists of Italian esotericism, such as Giuliano Kremmerz, Massimo Scaligero, Tommaso Palamidessi, and Arturo Reghini.<sup>28</sup> As a consequence of this interest, the Octagon library today hosts one of the most comprehensive collections of Italian esoteric literature in the world. The library also reflects Hakl's related and decade-long interest in the so-called "Traditionalist school," represented by thinkers such as René Guénon, Julius Evola, Titus Burckhardt, and others.<sup>29</sup> Due to these interests, and even though Hakl's intellectual biography is obviously multi-faceted, he would by some be considered a conservative or traditionalist thinker.

## 2 Hakl's "Taoist" world view

Before dealing with Hakl's publishing and writing activities in greater detail, it will be necessary to sketch out a basic world view that Hakl has held throughout his life, and which he would today call "Taoist."<sup>30</sup> For Hakl, final truths do not exist, nor can they be grasped by any means. Accordingly, there is no absolute benchmark or yardstick for deciding which perception is "right" and which one is "wrong," as any such judgment is dependent on its temporal, cultural, discursive, and personal context. If there is something that comes close to an absolute truth, it would for Hakl need to rely on a form of *coincidentia oppositorum*—a coincidence of opposites (Hakl derived this term from Carl G. Jung, who in turn adopted it from his reading of Nicholas of Cusa).<sup>31</sup>

As a consequence (and because of his legal studies), Hakl became a strong advocate of a saying drawn from ancient Roman law: *audiatur et altera pars*—"The other side, too, must be heard." Hakl believes in this necessity with regard to both esoteric and economic contexts. In particular during his time spent working in Far Eastern countries (see above, Part I), Hakl regularly found it necessary to take account of weird or otherwise surprising standpoints and beliefs held by his employees or business partners. Hakl thus made a habit of always including opposing perspectives in his considerations. Sooner or later, he knew, one pole would evoke the other, and if the one was too dominant for too long then the other would re-emerge with even greater force. Hakl considers this pattern to be at work in cultural history as well: Manichaeism or otherwise dualistic frameworks and worldviews which systematically exclude the opposite will not survive in the long term, he holds. Such views may be thought out brilliantly and they may even be culturally successful for a while, but they are not wise (that is, equilibrated) and thus they cannot be long-lasting. According to Hakl, such "Taoistic" thinking prevents the emergence of one-sided

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"Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

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"The works of Dr. Henri Birven were essential reading for me. His lucid writing style stood in stark contrast to his overbearing personality, at least according to those who knew him. At any rate, through him I became better acquainted with French occultism (Lévi, Papus, [Joanny Bricaud; amendment by H. T. Hakl, 2021], etc.), which Prof. Hemberger had already recommended to me. He also led me to Julius Evola, and thereby indirectly to other representatives of the "Italian esoteric school" (which remains for me one of the most interesting and profound esoteric schools worldwide) such as Giuliano Kremmerz, Arturo Reghini and Massimo Scaligero—and also to Tommaso Palamidessi." Hakl, "There once was a young man," 14.

28

Especially the latter, Arturo Reghini, belongs, like Othmar Spann (mentioned above) and Julius Evola, to pre-WWII right-wing intellectualist milieus which supported fascist ideas and movements; on Reghini see Lloyd 2006.

29

On this influential perennialist and anti-modernist current see Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

30

On the following, see also "Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

31

David Hendersen, "The Coincidence of Opposites: C. G. Jung's Reception of Nicholas of Cusa," *Studies in Spirituality* 20 (2010): 101–13.

"I too find much to reject in Evola. I could mention his numerous unambiguously racist outpourings, especially in the newspaper *La Vita Italiana*, which are clearly unacceptable. But there is also his distinctly Manichean way of thinking, which is what lies behind his sharp separation of tradition and modernity, north and south, man and woman, Ario-Roman and Semitic. Then there are his conspiracy theories and his anti-emotionalism. His occult view of world history, which he took partly from Theosophy and which he develops in the second part of *Revolt against the Modern World*, does not appeal to me any more than the similar cosmologies of Helena Blavatsky or Rudolf Steiner." "Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

"Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

"Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

For this reason, Hakl believes, Evola and his followers were instrumental in furthering J. R. R. Tolkien's success in Italy.

"Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

ideologies and is thus the opposite of linear thinking, which uniformly leads in one direction—until it eventually collapses.

For Hakl, one type of—typically Western—linear thinking is the assumption that man is actually able to fully understand and control his natural and cultural surroundings. This assumption apparently contradicts the way that nature actually works, which is specifically non-linear and rather wavelike or undulating, or, on closer examination, often also spiral-patterned. An example for Hakl is the way in which human life evolves from childhood through to old age, with its many changes, cycles, and reiterations. For Hakl, combining "Taoist" with "spiral" thinking is thus the ideal way to approach life, as such an approach always remains open to alternative vistas by enabling one to grasp with humility how often one has changed one's own perspectives through the course of one's life. This approach also facilitates human relations and dealing with potential conflicts. Of course, Hakl does not negate the enormous cultural significance of Aristotelian logic—*tertium non datur*: "a third option (apart from right or wrong) does not exist"—which may work perfectly in mathematics or in the realm of technology. Nevertheless, Hakl considers such a logic to be largely impractical when it comes to its application in the realm of human life.

A result of this view is that Hakl differentiates between *Wissenschaft* and *Menschenschaft*, both of which he considers to be necessary and, indeed, complementary. The key is to remain open to both options and to decide flexibly which one to apply when and in which context. Taking this approach leads to an understanding of truth which may appear to be inherently contradictory, as no truth claim will ever be unambiguous and unconditionally valid over time. For instance, from a philosophical perspective Hakl is deeply sceptical towards Christianity. In particular, the Christian concept of God appears to be peculiar and largely implausible to him, while he considers the devil to be a necessary and complementary part of God. Yet, as a cultural and historical motor, he appreciates many aspects of Christianity. Hakl does not consider himself to be a "pagan," but nevertheless feels that the world is deeply animistic. Hakl's "truths" are often collisions of contradictions. Thus he also criticises Evola on this basis for often arriving at Manichean or dualistic conclusions, in which opposites clash but find no equilibrium.<sup>32</sup>

Hakl's views on truth are the source of his general message—one might even say vocation—as an author, editor, publisher, and translator: "fight against one-dimensionality."<sup>33</sup> Hakl does occasionally enjoy provoking, yet it is not simply a matter of *épater le bourgeois* (shocking the bourgeois). Rather, his concern is with spreading food for thought and ultimately initiating processes of insights and change, which may or may not be painful. For Hakl, this falls in line with his "Taoist" approach that "controversial books have their place in the world—indeed even grossly erroneous books, because they show the ways that don't work. And frankly, I would also like to express my respect for the honest—I might even say honourable—losers in the clash of world views."<sup>34</sup> This motivation also underlay his decade-long work on Evola. Hakl was fascinated by Evola as soon as he had read (in the late 1960s) the first volume of his *Introduction to magic*, which imprinted completely novel ideas about magic in Hakl's mind. He was thrilled by Evola's "clear formulations, his sharpness of mind, his arresting images (Evola has been called the "master of myths")<sup>35</sup> and finally his eminently practical advice."<sup>36</sup> Hakl felt that, at least in the

realm of magic, Evola knew what he was talking about, and that he wrote without false pretences, exaggerations, mythologisations, or pomposity. Hakl never intended to defend Evola's fascist and totalitarian ideas, but he did strive for a comprehensive historical understanding of the Italian author, no matter how ambiguous and disputed he may have been. Hence, Hakl kept a keen eye on Evola scholarship as soon as he had advanced to become one of its leading experts (i.e., from the mid-1980s onwards), and he continued to publish on Evola in order to prevent the esoteric Evola from extinction through a one-dimensional or otherwise ideological focus on the political Evola alone.<sup>37</sup>

### 3 Hakl as a publisher: *Ansata*, *Gnostika*, *Octagon*

Hakl's parallel life as a publisher began around 1978, when he acquired shares in the esoteric publishing house Ansata Verlag, which had begun its publication activities in 1975 with a German translation of Papus' work on kabbalah. While Hakl's original goal was to preserve the Ansata Verlag from bankruptcy, he retained his shares until 1995 and thereby left an imprint on the German esoteric book market that spanned almost two decades. The Ansata Verlag published Hakl's works on Evola in the 1980s,<sup>38</sup> which led to recurrent polemical attacks against both the—at that time pseudonymous—author (Hakl aka H. T. H. or Hansen) and the publishing house.<sup>39</sup> What is more, Hakl's regular (monthly) meetings with the director of the Ansata Verlag, the bibliophile Paul A. Zemp (d. 1995), provided an enduring boost for his expanding library.<sup>40</sup> Through Zemp, Hakl became acquainted with a large number of publishers from Europe and overseas who regularly sent Hakl their new releases. After Zemp's sudden passing away in 1995, Hakl gave up his shares in the Ansata Verlag, which has since become part of Penguin Random House. Since the mid-1970s, the Ansata Verlag has published several hundred books on manifold esoteric topics.

Hakl remained in the publishing business after giving up his shares in the Ansata Verlag, turning his focus towards work on a journal instead. In 1996, Hakl founded, together with Wolfram and Hildegard Frietsch, the journal *Gnostika*, where he led the editorial team until 2009. Afterwards, he stayed as a consultant while the Frietschs took over the leadership. The goal of *Gnostika* was not only to systematically build bridges between insider and academic perceptions of a vast range of esoteric topics, but also to publish, often for the first time, rarities from the Octagon library. Between 1996 and 2020, the *Gnostika* team published 66 issues.<sup>41</sup>

In 1996, Hakl and Hildegard and Wolfram Frietsch also founded the *Archiv für altes Gedankengut und Wissen* (AAGW), a book series dedicated to rare and unusual texts (from the Octagon library). This project suffered somewhat from the simultaneous emergence of the World Wide Web,<sup>42</sup> leading to AAGW being embedded into the publishing structure of *Gnostika* (both projects today share a website: <https://www.aagw-gnostika.de/>). At present, some fifteen books on different esoteric topics and traditions have been published in the AAGW series. The same team is also responsible for the book series *epoché*, which has by now published nine works, including, recently, Henri Birven's *Gustav Meyrink als magisch-esoterischer Dichter*<sup>43</sup> and Julius Evola's *Der Yoga der Urkraft: Tantra, Kundalini und Unsterblichkeit*.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, between 2015 and 2018, Hakl edited a series of four major volumes that focus on the Octagon library. This series was published by Hildegard Frietsch's publishing house, *scientia nova*, through which Hakl

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"It was not a question of defending Evola's political ideas but rather presenting the historical facts and setting them in the context of their time. If this could not be done, then the 'esoteric' Evola would also be dead for the foreseeable future." "Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

38

Evola, *Revolt against the modern world*; Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, Band 1; Evola, *Die hermetische Tradition*.

39

"In an address at the Frankfurt Book Fair Umberto Eco complained in thunderous tones that in the Frankfurt bookshops, instead of books by (the Marxist) Georg Lukács, he had found Evola, Guénon and Gurdjieff. Probably hardly any of the journalists present knew who these three people were, but they knew immediately that one was supposed to be against them and very soon they also knew that Ansata-Verlag was exhibiting a book by Evola. I was approached by various journalists and had to explain things [...] Prompted by the statements of Eco and others, many booksellers suddenly ["without having read anything by Evola": amendment by H. T. Hakl 2021] accused Ansata of propagating Fascist ideas. Furthermore they threatened to stop all sales of Ansata books unless we took this wicked Evola out of our programme. This was a hefty threat for a small publishing house, especially as they demanded an immediate decision from us. But we did not want to give up so easily. So, after considering the situation carefully and assessing our powers of resistance and our bank balance, we decided to carry on." "Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

40

"My partner Paul A. Zemp—who unfortunately died far too young—initially also compiled occult mail-order catalogues; he had a comprehensive bibliographic knowledge from which I naturally profited. In addition he knew all the essential German, English, American, French and Italian publishers in the field of esotericism, who offered him their texts in the hope he would also bring them onto the German market." Hakl, "There once was a young man," 16.

41

Their table of contents can be found online, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.aagw-gnostika.de/gnostika/>. The jubilee number 50 of *Gnostika* was special in that it hosted a range of well-known academic authors such as Antoine Faivre, Wouter Hanegraaff, Joscelyn Godwin and Marco Pasi (who occasionally also wrote contributions in other issues).

42

"We envisaged beautifully bound and carefully produced, numbered editions to make the worth of



the books tangible as well. With the advent of the free accessibility of such texts on the internet and a simultaneous downturn in economic circumstances this model had to be relinquished. On the other hand, however, our aspirations for dissemination were served in the best conceivable way by the advent of the internet, even if it is human nature to place little value upon something that costs ‘nothing.’” Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 21.

43

Henri Birven, *Gustav Meyrink als magisch-esoterischer Dichter. Zur Einführung in die Probleme seiner Romane*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl (Gaggenau: H. Frietsch Verlag, 2020).

44

Julius Evola, *Der Yoga der Urkraft. Tantra, Kundalini und Unsterblichkeit*, Herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Hans Thomas Hakl, aus dem Italienischen von Ferdinand Leopold (Gaggenau: H. Frietsch Verlag, 2020), orig. title *Lo Yoga della potenza* (Torino: Bocca, 1949).

45

Hakl, *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos; Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 1, *Die Suche nach Vollkommenheit im Spiegel einer religionswissenschaftlichen, philosophischen und im besonderen Maße esoterischen Bibliothek* (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2015).

46

Hakl, *Octagon*, vol. 1; *Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 2, *The quest for wholeness: mirrored in a library dedicated to religious studies, philosophy and esotericism in particular: esoteric and religious studies research by academics authors* (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2016); *Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 3, *La ricerca della totalità: riflessa in una biblioteca dedicata alla Storia delle religioni, alla filosofia e, soprattutto, all'esoterismo: studi di esoterismo e religione, contributi di autori accademici* (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2017); *Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 4, *La recherche de perfection: dans une collection d'ouvrages dédiée, en particulier, aux travaux sur la religion, la philosophie et surtout l'ésotérisme* (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2018).

47

Personal communication (2021).

48

Jafe Arnold, review of *Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness, Mirrored in a Library Dedicated to Religious Studies, Philosophy, and Esotericism*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, *Gnostika* 66 (2020): 87–102, 89 (publ. first in French in *Politica Hermetica* 33 [2019]: 290–301).

49

The same introductory text is published in translation in all other volumes. Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 21.

50

Evola, *Revolte gegen die moderne Welt*.

51

See Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, Band 1; Julius Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, ed./trans. Hans Thomas Hakl – aka H. T. Hansen, Band 2, *Schritte zur Initiation: Theorie und Praxis des höheren Bewusstseins* (Bern: Ansata, 1997); and also his contribution to the English translation of

also published his monograph on the Eranos meetings.<sup>45</sup> Acknowledging Hakl’s multilingual approach, the four volumes (each of which addresses different topics) are each written in one of his four most frequently used languages: German, Italian, English, and French. The series was thus entitled *Octagon: Die Suche nach Vollkommenheit / The Quest for Wholeness / La ricerca della totalità / La recherche de perfection*.<sup>46</sup> The idea for this series emerged when Hakl had already begun to suffer as a result of his deteriorating physical condition (see above, Part I) and felt that the Octagon library needed to be made publicly available as a legacy for the future study of Western Esotericism (and the humanities more generally). The goal of the *Octagon* series was thus to grasp and reflect upon major aspects of the Octagon library. Accordingly, Hakl invited 91 contemporary academic scholars—many of them “dear friends”<sup>47</sup>—to write about selected texts or traditions that have formed part of the library over the decades. “The immense swathes and depths of biographical, historical and philosophical ground explored by several dozen authors across the nearly 2000 total pages of the *Octagon* series”<sup>48</sup> can be interpreted as an *hommage* to the breadth and depth of the Octagon library itself. As Hakl mentions in his introductory chapters,<sup>49</sup> a side-goal of the *Octagon* series was to find an institution that would be willing to take responsibility for the Octagon library and to make it publicly available after Hakl’s decease.

As the reader is most certainly aware, Hakl’s search for such an institution was successful. Hakl had already conducted negotiations with various universities regarding a potential endowment for his library, but for various reasons none these negotiations had arrived at a satisfactory solution. As a result, Marco Pasi initiated contact with the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, which was about to create a new research centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities (*Centro Studi di Civiltà e Spiritualità Comparative*) and was looking at the possibility of expanding its library. After several meetings with Francesco Piraino and Pasquale Gagliardi, and supported by various positive assessments of the Octagon library by leading experts, a formal contract was signed on October 3, 2019, that regulated the endowment of the Octagon library after Hakl’s decease. Despite the costs involved in the transport and maintenance of the books, and the necessary architectural adjustments required on the island of San Giorgio island to host such an extensive library, the Giorgio Cini foundation was more than willing to make it possible. Hakl is particularly grateful to Marco Pasi and Edi Minguzzi for their support in this process.

#### 4 Hakl as an author: Evola, Eranos, and other topics

As has already been mentioned (see above, Part I), Hakl began working as an author and translator from the early 1980s onwards, beginning with his German edition and translation of Julius Evola’s *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, published anonymously by the Ansata Verlag as *Julius Evola: Revolte gegen die moderne Welt*.<sup>50</sup> Hakl actually wanted to translate and publish Evola’s works on magic first (these were ultimately published from 1985 onwards).<sup>51</sup> However, as he was engaged full time running his thriving company, HHS, he did not have the capacity to take on such a time-consuming task in parallel, and thus decided to publish the “easier” work, *Revolt against the Modern World*, first (there was already a German translation from 1935 to provide a starting point for the new version).

While Hakl had already published a few articles in the early 1970s

(in the periodical of the German Ordo Templi Orientis), among them a small piece on the magical practices of Paschal Beverly Randolph,<sup>52</sup> his edition of Evola's *Revolte gegen die moderne Welt* was his first major publication. As the book was also quite successful from a commercial perspective (the recurring polemical attacks notwithstanding), he and Paul A. Zemp decided to publish additional works by Evola through the Ansata Verlag. In 1985, Hakl's German translation of Evola's *Introduzione alla Magia quale scienza dell'Io*<sup>53</sup> appeared, followed in 1989 by his German translation of Evola's monograph on the Hermetic tradition.<sup>54</sup> In 1997, Hakl published the second volume of Evola's *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*.<sup>55</sup> Hakl's work on Evola is the topic of a different article in this special issue (authored by Francesco Baroni), to which I refer the reader for further details on Hakl's views and interpretations of Julius Evola.

Hakl's work on the Eranos conferences took shape from the mid-1990s onwards, culminating in his acclaimed monograph *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos*, first published in German in 2001 (transl. into English in 2013 as *Eranos, An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*), with a revised and expanded (as well as renamed) second edition appearing in 2015. If he was not already considered so, this work marked the point at which it could not be denied that Hakl was a serious scholar credited as such in academic circles. Hakl had stumbled across the topic of the Eranos meetings rather coincidentally, as he realised through his on-going book purchases that many of his most esteemed authors (such as Rudolf Otto, Walter F. Otto, Karl Kerényi, Mircea Eliade, Carl G. Jung, Gershom Scholem, Joseph Campbell, and Henry Corbin) had participated in the conferences.<sup>56</sup> Hakl had, of course, purchased the Eranos yearbooks and, while wondering why there was so little secondary literature on Eranos, decided to write an article on the topic. This article gradually grew into the 468-page monograph that finally appeared in 2001 (the expanded 2015 version has 648 pages). Hakl thoroughly enjoyed the research he carried out for this monograph, as through it he got to know many interesting scholars personally, including Jan Assman, Moshe Idel, Annemarie Schimmel, Giovanni Casadio, Magda Kerényi, and Erik Hornung.

Beyond Evola and Eranos, and despite his parallel lives as an entrepreneur (see above, Part I), publisher, book collector, and spiritual seeker (see below, Part III), Hakl's written oeuvre is extensive and cannot be outlined in full detail here. Between the early 1970s and 2021, Hakl wrote and substantially revised one monograph,<sup>57</sup> translated four major works of Julius Evola,<sup>58</sup> edited, apart from the Octagon series, a special article collection on his 60th birthday (which includes a bibliography as well as an extensive analysis of soft healing measures against hypertension),<sup>59</sup> wrote several dozen articles on a vast range of esoteric currents, practices, groups, and practitioners (topics include the Fraternitas Saturni, the Gruppo di Ur, the Ordo Templi Orientis, sexual magic, occult Nazism, Adonism, neopaganism, Tantrism, alchemy, and practitioners such as Nicholas Flamel, Papus, Eliphas Levi, Hans Freimark, Aleister Crowley, Adolf Hemberger, Franz Sättler-Musallam, and Maria de Naglowska), numerous fore- and afterwords, encyclopaedia entries, and review articles, and also a large number of book reviews, interviews, notes, and commentaries published in *Gnostika*.<sup>60</sup> It is notable that Hakl changed his publishing strategy in the mid-1990s: whereas all of his previous publications (not just his works on Evola) had been published under his pen name H. T. Hansen (or H. T. H.)—a name he had chosen to “keep his peace” despite working on a disputed author

vol. 2 from Evola's *Introduction to Magic* (Hans Thomas Hakl, “Foreword,” in Julius Evola, *Introduction to Magic*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin, vol. 2, *The Path of Initiatic Wisdom* [New York: Inner Traditions International, 2019], XI–XXXIII). On the Gruppo di Ur, see further Hans Thomas Hakl, “Julius Evola and the UR Group,” in *Aries* 12/1 (2012): 53–90. All three volumes are now available in English translation: see Julius Evola, *Introduction to Magic*, trans. Guido Stucco, vol. 1, *Rituals and Practical Techniques for the Magus* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 2001); Evola, *Introduction to Magic*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin, vol. 2, *The Path of Initiatic Wisdom* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 2019); Julius Evola, *Introduction to Magic*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin, vol. 3, *Realizations of the Absolute Individual* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 2021). Hakl's planned German translation of the third volume of Evola's *Introduzione alla magia* has not yet materialised because of his poor health, however (see “Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl.”; personal communication [2021]).

52

Hans Thomas Hakl (aka H. T. H.), “Psychologie der astrologischen Deutung,” “Die wahre Magie ist ein Akt der Liebe,” “Wahre Magie trägt bei zum ‘Werde was Du bist,’ ” “P. B. Randolph und seine Arbeiten,” *Der Illuminat* (Frankfurt/Main, ca. 1970), unpaginated.

53

Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, Band I.

54

Evola, *Die hermetische Tradition*.

55

Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, Band 2.

56

Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 17.

57

Hakl, *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos*; Hakl, *Octagon*, vol. 1.

58

Evola, *Revolte gegen die moderne Welt*; Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, Band 1; Evola, *Die hermetische Tradition*; Julius Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, Band 2.

59

Hans Thomas Hakl, “Die wahre Magie ist ein Akt der Liebe” – 3 Aufsätze und Bibliographie von Hans Thomas Hakl zum 60. Geburtstag, AAGW Sonderausgabe 3, (Sinzheim: AAGW Archiv für Altes Gedankengut und Wissen, 2007).

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Hakl's complete bibliography can be found on his website: last access July 1, 2021, <https://www.hthakl-octagon.com/bibliografie/>.

"I used this pseudonym—which was quite transparent and never involved any secrecy—for a very simple reason: I wanted to be left in peace. I was an independent businessman and had good partners whom I didn't want to bother with my esoteric interests." "Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

"Prof. Antoine Faivre intervened. I had agreed to write a review of a book by Oskar Schlag for the journal *ARIES*, of which he was the co-editor. Then, when I said I wanted to write under the pseudonym of H.T. Hansen, he categorically refused. He insisted that *ARIES* was a scholarly journal and no pseudonyms were permitted. That was the turning point. From then on I began to write under my real name—even though I felt a bit naked at first and took a while to get used to it. This happened just in time for the launch in October 1996 of *Gnostika*, which carries my real name. Today I'm grateful that it turned out this way." "Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl." The review in question is Hans Thomas Hakl, "Rezension zu Oskar R. Schlag, Von alten und neuen Mysterien," in *Aries* 20 (1996): 94–98. Reprint in Peter R. König, *Noch mehr Materialien zum OTO* (München: ARW, 2000).

"Thus it came about that I was present at the founding of the Palladian Academy, whose aim was to bring together a circle of friends, consisting largely of "advanced" and academically trained scholars of esotericism from various different countries. We wanted to meet every year and have each participant give a talk on some esoteric theme [not barred by university boundaries; amendment by H. T. Hakl, 2021]." "Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

This first meeting was initiated by Joscelyn Godwin.

Hakl, "There once was a young man," 21.

"Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl"; Hakl, "There once was a young man"; Hakl, "Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness," 48–62.

In the early 1990s, shortly after Hakl sold his shares in HHS (see above, Part I), "the idea arose of assembling as many first editions of the fundamental works in this sector as I could." Hakl, "Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness," 48–62, 50. Another strategy was to "to buy 'all' the works of my favourite authors in order to 'completely' possess them." Hakl, "There once was a young man," 14.

"In order to become somewhat of an expert in this field it was of paramount importance to be multilingual, not infrequently demanding some knowledge of Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Hebrew. That is why Octagon contains so much literature in foreign languages." Hakl, "Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness," 48–62, 50.

Hakl, "There once was a young man," 16.

such as Evola, and thus also to protect his economic career<sup>61</sup>—in 1996 Hakl began to use his real name (with an intermediate period of some two years during which he used both his real name and his pen name). This shift in strategy was suggested by Antoine Faivre, who had animated Hakl to publish in the kind of "scholarly" volumes that would not usually accept authors using a pseudonym.<sup>62</sup>

### 5 Hakl's involvement in the emerging academic study of Western esotericism

The 1980s and especially the 1990s saw the gradual institutionalisation and proliferation of the academic study of Western esotericism. Hakl was involved in this process in various ways, including through his book-collecting endeavours, his activities as a publisher, his contribution of articles to novel scholarly journals such as *Aries* and *Política Hermética*, his personal networking, and, not least, his involvement in the so-called Palladian Academy. This grouping could be considered as both an implicit successor of the Eranos meetings as well as an implicit predecessor of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism. The Academy emerged in the mid-1990s as an attempt to create a network of mutually friendly scholars and experts working on esoteric currents<sup>63</sup> and included some of today's most well-known scholars of Western esotericism, including Antoine Faivre, Joscelyn Godwin, Wouter Hanegraaff, Jean-Pierre Brach, and Marco Pasi, among others. The idea was to meet once a year to discuss esoteric topics and exchange ideas in an informal manner. From 1997 onwards, Hakl organised and took part in various meetings of the Palladian Academy, the name of which was derived from the location of the first meeting in a villa built by the renowned architect Andrea Palladio in Northern Italy.<sup>64</sup> Later on, Rosalie Basten (who invested a substantial part of her personal wealth into founding the Institute for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, located in Amsterdam) would often host the group in her chateau in Southern France.

For some time, Hakl had also had the idea of founding or hosting a form of "Platonic Academy" as an affiliation to the Octagon library, much like the Medici family had fostered the Renaissance of esoteric traditions in early modern Florence.<sup>65</sup> However, this project never materialised, and Hakl continued to pour his energy into the Octagon library itself.

### 6 The Octagon library

Hakl has written about the emergence and structure of the Octagon library on several occasions,<sup>66</sup> so I will only add some personal information here that might be missing from the already-existing narratives. As may have become clear by now, the Octagon library more or less represents Hakl's mind, his textual inspirations and worldviews, his intellectual and scholarly interests, his collecting strategies (such as hunting first editions, striving for completeness, or the addition of rarities),<sup>67</sup> as well as his multi-language approach.<sup>68</sup> As a general principle, "the collection developed from my reading, for footnotes and bibliographies always exercised an immense fascination over me."<sup>69</sup> For instance, Hakl's decade-long work on Evola inevitably led to significant expansions of the library, as Evola tends to cite *en passant* large amounts of literature from a multiplicity of disciplines, yet often without precise references. Hence, Hakl "had" to buy and study all of Evola's references in order to get a thorough understanding of Evola's reasoning and inspirations (including further literature with diverging opinions and some fifty monographs published on Evola in various



languages). Through this process, the Octagon library gradually embedded entire sections on art (futurism and dadaism), philosophy (Plato, Pythagoras, Schelling, Fichte, Nietzsche, existentialism), ancient religions (especially Rome, Mithras, Gnosis), esoteric traditions (alchemy, freemasonry, spiritism, magic), Buddhism, Islam, Tantrism, sexuality, politics, fascism, and racial theories (Evola had written numerous books and articles on all of these diverse fields). Hakl estimates that, through his reading of Evola alone, some two to three thousand books had to be added to his collection.<sup>70</sup> A similar process took place in the late 1990s when Hakl was working on the Eranos meetings. Hence, Hakl admits, “some readers will also search in vain for the unity that underlies this collection. That unity does not exist, for if anything I am ‘polytheistically’ disposed, and the only coherence exists within my own person. And I am manifold.”<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, to quote from Julia Iwersen’s *Octagon* contribution, the “syncretistic” or “eclectic” “method underlying esoteric religiosity is the same as the principle of any book collection: just like a library, and almost always with the help of such, esotericism thereby seeks to trace truth by juxtaposing sundry truths.”<sup>72</sup>

Hakl has written on several occasions about his systematic collaboration with book hunters such as Nick Schors, Todd Pratum, Robert Gilbert, and Wolfgang Kistemann, who provided indispensable support for the creation and enlarging of his collection,<sup>73</sup> so this aspect need not be covered here in further detail. According to Hakl a “good” price for a specific book is never fixed but rather a matter of feeling, dependent on the current situation of the market. Over the past decades, the book market has changed considerably, with a major shift taking place around the turn of the millennium. As a result, Hakl’s most “‘bountiful’ period of book collecting as well as an especially intensive acquisition of periodicals came to a near end. Rare books had become too expensive, and I too had to be more economical with money (I didn’t wish to continue in business due to my esoteric studies). Hence I limited myself to filling any possible gaps in my holdings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century esoteric literature, as well as acquiring new publications.”<sup>74</sup> The internet has had advantages as well as disadvantages for Hakl’s book collecting endeavour. A significant number of booksellers and antiquarians have gone bankrupt since the late 1990s, due to the globalisation and increased competition induced by the internet. At the same time, rarities have become much more expensive due to increasing pressures on the demand side of the market. However, despite the changes it has wrought, Hakl has always appreciated the emergence of the internet, partly because it has granted easier access to catalogues and has facilitated the search for books more generally.

In hindsight, Hakl would argue that his “collecting mania” was, for the most part,<sup>75</sup> driven by his intellectual curiosity. Most books he wanted to read from early on were not available in public libraries, especially when it came to foreign-language books, and as his curiosity seemed almost infinite, he had no other choice but to buy them. However, rather sooner than later Hakl’s collecting strategies and habits underwent a process with its own internal dynamics, especially from the moment at which the volume of his collecting reached a pace at which he was increasingly unable to actually read the books he so urgently needed to acquire. “A somewhat vampiric desire for ‘completeness,’ which after all can never be fully satisfied, often comes along as well. Friends know my saying: ‘I don’t possess the library, the library possesses me.’”<sup>76</sup> In this regard, Hakl also interprets his collection from the viewpoint of the “law of attraction.” Despite

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Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 16.

71

Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 9.

72

“Ein Merkmal der Beliebtheit, die der Esoterik hier und da zum Vorwurf gemacht wird—ihres ‘Synkretismus’ oder ‘Eklektizismus’ oder auch zu ihrer Toleranz—ist, dass sie sich mit Büchern jeden Inhalts abgibt: etablierten heiligen Schriften neben modernen Offenbarungstexten, Erbauungstraktäthen, philosophischen Abhandlungen, Ratgebern für alle Lebenslagen, Weltliteratur, Trivalliteratur und Schund. Auch die esoterische Religiosität zu Grunde liegende Methode ist dieselbe wie das Prinzip einer jeden Büchersammlung: Ebenso wie die Bibliothek und fast immer mit ihrer Hilfe will die Esoterik der Wahrheit dadurch auf die Spur kommen, dass sie verschiedene Wahrheiten nebeneinander stellt.” Iwersen, Julia, “Bibliotheksgenie und verborgene Geister – Der Leser als Schamane,” in *Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 1, *Die Suche nach Vollkommenheit im Spiegel einer religionswissenschaftlichen, philosophischen und im besonderen Maße esoterischen Bibliothek: esoterische und religionswissenschaftliche Forschungen von akademischen Autorinnen und Autoren* (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2015), 26–49, 35; Arnold Jafe, review of *Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness, Mirrored in a Library Dedicated to Religious Studies, Philosophy, and Esotericism*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, *Gnostika* 66 (2020): 87–102, 91–92 (publ. first in French in *Politica Hermetica* 33 [2019]: 290–301).

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“In order to acquire truly rare and ancient books you must have personal contacts with booksellers who specialize in the so-called art of book hunting. They travel continuously around the world to visit auctions and bookshops, as well as their old clients, to find the treasures they are searching for. Because I owe them so much, I will name a couple of them, although most of them have gone out of business in this modern world of the Internet. The most renowned of them was probably Nick Schors of Amsterdam, who to a great extent is responsible for the richness of the libraries of the likes of Joseph Ritman, C. G. Jung, Antoine Faivre, and Gershom Scholem. These book-hunters had an enormous knowledge in their field and consequently I learnt a lot from them. Besides Nick I just name a few others out of pure gratitude. There was Todd Pratum from Oakland, USA, who found for me not only manuscripts from secret societies but also mimeographed lectures of C. G. Jung and first editions of Robert Fludd and Athanasius Kircher. In the UK I recall Robert Gilbert of Bristol (a specialist in Freemasonry and occult orders). In Germany there were Wolfgang Kistemann (Gold- and Rosicrucianism and Alchemy) and Volker Lechler. In France one must name Dervy Livres, La Table d’Éméraude and Alain Marchiset, and in Italy both Bruno Bertozzi of Genoa and Laszlo Toth of Milan.” Hakl, “Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness,” 48–62. See also Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 14f.

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Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 19.

“But why on earth does somebody amass so many books? Because they wish to err on the side of caution and have everything verified? Because they are under the impression they own the knowledge accumulated therein, although at the very most one can only claim to own printed paper bound in parchment? Because it is socially acceptable to do so? In other words: due to insecurity? There’s surely more than a mere grain of truth to that.” Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 20.

Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 20–21.

Hans Blüher, *Werke und Tage: Geschichte eines Denkers* (München: List, 1953), 217.

“Here the Latin aphorism Nietzsche so beautifully elucidated comes to mind: ‘aut libri aut liberi’ (‘either books or children’). That doesn’t necessarily imply chastity, but certainly renunciation of the nurturing instinct so disrespectfully described by Nietzsche as ‘lay eggs, cackle, brood’—a source of joy on the one hand, but highly energy-consuming on the other. As I was not destined to have children, so only books were left to me.” Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 20.

“Besides all the splendour and joy, there are also pensive or even melancholy points when one devotes oneself to collecting books: life passes by still more quickly. But one first realises this only in old age, when it is already (almost) too late. The time expenditure for collecting is so massive (reading catalogues and offerings, ordering, making payments, compiling book lists, classifying) that one hardly finds the time for sociability or conversations with family and friends in the course of the year. And precisely because I collected so many books, only a little time remained for reading, and I was completely unable to pursue many of my interests. The classic paradox of the collector.” Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 22.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “‘Ad loca secretiora’: Rejected Knowledge and the Future of Libraries,” in *Octagon*, vol. 2 (Gaggenau: scientia nova Verlag Neue Wissenschaft, 2016), 25–34, 33.

Hakl, “Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness,” 48–62, 51–52.

Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 21.

Hakl, “Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness,” 48–62, 52.

eventually feeling impelled or possessed by his library, he has never really clung to his books. Rather, they seemed instead to come to and cling to him; Hakl alludes to Hans Blüher’s concept of “bibliomagic” (see, e.g., Blüher)<sup>77</sup> for his ability to almost “magnetically” attract the books that needed to be conjoined in his library. Against the backdrop of the Latin aphorism *aut libri aut liberi* (“either books or children”), Hakl also considers his childlessness as a factor that has impacted the development of the Octagon library.<sup>78</sup>

Yet, book collecting comes at a price. The time investment is enormous (not to speak of the monetary commitment) and takes a significant amount of life energy away from many other things, such as spending time with one’s family or friends, or the pursuit of other, non-literary, interests (in Hakl’s case, one example is his pronounced love for classical music and literature).<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, for Hakl books represent something that is much bigger than oneself, and with regard to the Octagon library—which is, in Wouter Hanegraaff’s words, a “massive memory bank of rejected knowledge, with many materials that are simply impossible to find anywhere else”<sup>80</sup>—Hakl felt the urgent need to “preserve the sort of wisdom I regard as important in our modern world, where technology and materialism reign supreme and which needs a compensatory balance of humanity and spiritual knowledge.”<sup>81</sup> At the time of writing (July 2021), the Octagon library comprises almost 50,000 books and some 200 running metres of journals (ca. 14,000), correspondence, autographs, and other materials. Hakl concedes that, “although I am surely not a ‘knower’ myself, nor a ‘scholarly’ writer in my chosen field (I studied law), I nevertheless wish to pass on the ‘torch’ by preserving valuable foundations of this knowledge beyond my death.”<sup>82</sup> His enduring hope is that “the collection will take a life on its own.”<sup>83</sup>

### Part III | Spiritual and magical biography

#### Praeludium

In contrast to the first and second parts of Hakl’s biography published here, which focused on the personal and economic dimensions of his life (Part I) and on his intellectual and scholarly activities (Part II), this third part is of a somewhat different nature, and it is also more intimate. Hakl’s library cannot be understood from the perspective of his economic and intellectual background alone. Rather, one also needs to take into account his spiritual development, his involvement in esoteric practices and groups, and, ultimately, his fascination with magic. These topics form the subject matter of this third part of Hakl’s biography.

#### 1 Adolescent experiences

In hindsight, Hakl considers his adolescent years as “those happy days” during which he still managed—that is, he actually had and took the time—to read every book he acquired. And if there were practical exercises described in these books, he would often try them out. Apart from his early yoga practice (see above, Part I), one of Hakl’s first systematic exercises was drawn from self-help books that teach the acquisition of wealth through imagination techniques. From his early teenage years, Hakl had felt a strong urge to acquire wealth, partly driven by the desire to buy as many books as possible and to



have enough time to study them (a side motivation was, he admits, to heighten his ability to attract interesting women). He therefore began to read biographies of successful and wealthy people and families—such as the Rothschilds—and, inspired by mid-20th century self-help authors such as Napoleon Hill, Dale Carnegie, and the economist Peter F. Drucker, attempted to follow in their footsteps.<sup>84</sup> Over the course of roughly two to three years during his late teenage period, Hakl engaged in daily imagination practices that focused on the acquisition of wealth. In hindsight, one might argue that, in Hakl's case, the effects claimed for these practices have at least not been falsified.

Hakl continues to believe in a particular “law” when it comes to the acquisition of wealth. For Hakl, the fundamental necessity for becoming wealthy is to remain completely free from greed. As soon as one is greedy (as manifested through, for example, saving too much or exploiting other people), one becomes dependent and anxious, and one thus remains trapped in emotional—that is, unfree—considerations and decisions. For Hakl, dependency is the precondition for achieving nothing at all, be it in the realms of wealth, friendship, success, or women. Hakl claims that it was through reading Julius Evola's works that this point became decisively clear to him: Evola's recurring advice for achieving success in any given realm is to remain neutral, and the more so when it comes to power. Power only comes to those who remain completely indifferent to it, that is, to those who will not actually use it.<sup>85</sup>

One of Hakl's most intense spiritual experiences happened early in his life. Hakl was, unsurprisingly, fascinated by Buddhism and he even voluntarily left the church at the age of 18 (Hakl had been baptised as a Catholic) after his reading of Georg Grimm's pioneering German works on Buddhism. At that time, Hakl considered Hinayana Buddhism to be the ideal religion. One day—his mother's “laundry day,” Hakl recalls—he read Alan Watts' bestseller *The Way of Zen*<sup>86</sup> and suddenly underwent something that in that very book would have been classified as a *satori* experience: “Before the experience I had the ordinary perception that every meadow was green and that the sky was blue. After the experience, the meadows were indeed still green and the sky was still blue, but with a special intensity. As it were, I had ‘completely’ understood why this was so and could not be different in any other way.”<sup>87</sup> This intense experience lasted for two to three days, and it changed Hakl's life quite fundamentally. Apart from the fact that he suddenly felt completely detached from the quarrels with his mother (who was particularly stressed on that day due to her laundry work), Hakl, from that moment on, understood Eastern and esoteric literature in a much deeper and much more intuitive manner without any intellectual effort. All mysteries felt as if they had been resolved.

## 2 *Magical groups*

During his teenage years, Hakl had also begun to read books on magic and, out of curiosity, practised some of the exercises he found in those books, such as the lesser pentagram ritual. One of his initiatory readings was Herbert Döhren's (aka H. E. Douval's) *Bücher der praktischen Magie*<sup>88</sup> which gave him a first impression of the practicability of magic. A few years later, Hakl was particularly “inspired by William Gray and his book *Magical Ritual Methods*. Here I found a down-to-earth explanation of magic, which one could apply without feeling ridiculous.”<sup>89</sup> Hakl's journey into the world of magical groupings and fraternities began in 1967, when Dr. Klingsor's (aka Adolf Hemberger's) book

84

Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 12.

85

Hakl asked me to cite Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* for passages that clarify his own standpoint towards wealth:

“I am without possessions,” said Siddhartha, “if this is what you mean. Surely, I am without possessions. But I am so voluntarily, and therefore I am not destitute.” “But what are you planning to live of, being without possessions?”

“I haven't thought of this yet, sir. For more than three years, I have been without possessions, and have never thought about of what I should live.”

“So you've lived of the possessions of others.”

“Presumably this is how it is. After all, a merchant also lives of what other people own.”

“Well said. But he wouldn't take anything from another person for nothing; he would give his merchandise in return.”

“So it seems to be indeed. Everyone takes, everyone gives, such is life.”

“But if you don't mind me asking: being without possessions, what would you like to give?”

“Everyone gives what he has. The warrior gives strength, the merchant gives merchandise, the teacher teachings, the farmer rice, the fisher fish.”

“Yes indeed. And what is it now what you've got to give? What is it that you've learned, what you're able to do?”

“I can think. I can wait. I can fast.”

“That's everything?”

“I believe, that's everything!”

“And what's the use of that? For example, the fasting - what is it good for?”

“It is very good, sir. When a person has nothing to eat, fasting is the smartest thing he could do. When, for example, Siddhartha hadn't learned to fast, he would have to accept any kind of service before this day is up, whether it may be with you or wherever, because hunger would force him to do so. But like this, Siddhartha can wait calmly, he knows no impatience, he knows no emergency, for a long time he can allow hunger to besiege him and can laugh about it. This, sir, is what fasting is good for.”

Kamaswami conducted his business with care and often with passion, but Siddhartha looked upon all of this as if it was a game, the rules of which he tried hard to learn precisely, but the contents of which did not touch his heart. He soon saw that Siddhartha knew little about rice and wool, shipping and trade, but that he acted in a fortunate manner, and that Siddhartha surpassed him, the merchant, in calmness and equanimity, and in the art of listening and deeply understanding previously unknown people. “This Brahman,” he said to a friend, “is no proper merchant and will never be one, there is never any passion in his soul when he conducts our business. But he has that mysterious quality of those people to whom success comes all by itself, whether this may be a good star of his birth, magic, or something he has learned among Samanas. He always seems to be merely playing with out business affairs, they never fully become a part of him, they never rule over him, he is never afraid of failure, he is never upset by a loss.” (Hesse 1922 ed. Pullen [ebook], 67–71).

86

Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon,

1957).

87

Personal communication by Hans T. Hakl (Graz, March 2021). My translation.

88

H. E. Douval, *Bücher der praktischen Magie*, 12 vols. (Freiburg i. Br.: H. Bauer, 1954–1956).

89

“Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl”; William G. Gray, *Magical Ritual Methods* (Cheltenham: Helios Book 1969).

90

Dr. Klingsor, *Experimental-Magie. Ein Leitfadens magischer Praktiken u. Beschwörungsrituale* (Freiburg im Br.: Bauer, 1967).

91

Adolf Hemberger, *Documenta et Ritualia Fraternitas Saturni*, 17 vols. (Gießen: author's edition, 1970); Stephen Flowers, *Fener & Eis : die magischen Lehren des deutschen Geheimordens Fraternitas Saturni* (Wien: Edition Ananael, 1993).

92

No scholarly research has yet been carried out on Hemberger, apart from a brief note published by Hakl in *Gnostika* (Hakl 1998), some notes by Peter König (König 1998) and Marco Frenschkowski (Frenschkowski 2007, 175f.), and an unpublished paper given by Hakl at one of the meetings of the Palladian Academy.

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Hakl, “Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness,” 48–62, 50. See further “Still today I have in my safe-keeping his handwritten diaries with numerous alchemical experiments. Without doubt, Worel decisively influenced me. He was already around eighty years old when I first met him; I was impressed not only by his precious books, but still more by the fact people constantly visited him. Their purpose was to speak with him concerning his studies, and in so doing hold one or another rare book in their hands. [...] I could only visit him once a week, for perhaps two hours at a time. He simply had too much to do and too many visitors. He surely didn't suffer from the slightest trace of loneliness in his old age, nor from a shortage of significant younger (and hence invigorating) acquaintances. Moreover, because he readily wrote to well-known authors and collectors as well as magical orders in the German-speaking lands, he had a lively exchange with such people. Back then it was already clear to me: to own an important library is to possess an antidote to the frustrations of aging.” Worel's library was auctioned in Munich after his death. Hakl oversaw the process at the behest of Worel's widow. Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 12–13.

94

On Schlag, see Antoine Faivre, “Schlag, Oskar Rudolf,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 1040–42.

95

Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 13.

*Experimentalmagie* appeared.<sup>90</sup> Despite the book being a rather unsystematic and conjuration-focused hodgepodge of many different practices and rituals, Hakl was fascinated by its sigils, glyphs, and symbols, and also by its frequent allusions to existing magical groups (Hemberger would later publish 17 volumes of—partially contested—material from the Fraternitas Saturni, thereby creating media attention and controversies;<sup>91</sup> Hemberger also published privately printed books on other magical orders in the form of hectographs). Hakl immediately wrote to the publisher and asked whether they would connect him with this mysterious “Dr. Klingsor” (a pseudonym Hemberger had taken from Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*).

Hemberger was an interesting figure in the history of German occultism in his own right.<sup>92</sup> From 1972 to 1990, he was full Professor of Theory of Science at the University of Gießen, and lectured on, among many other topics, economics, politics, psychology (especially psychosomatics), freemasonry (including student's fraternities), and hypnosis. He was also one the first academics to systematically collect the documents and rituals of magical orders, many of which would have been lost without him. Hemberger functioned as Hakl's door opener to the illustrious world of magical groups. Shortly after Hakl's initial letter, Hemberger visited Hakl in Graz and introduced him to Karl Worel, who, according to Hemberger, was the “last” practising alchemist and also the owner of an extensive esoteric library of some five thousand books and magazines. From Worel, whom Hakl frequently visited, he learned “that you will never be lonely if you possess an important library. Interesting people continue to visit you, if only to hold one or another rare book in their hands.”<sup>93</sup> When Hakl subsequently visited Hemberger in Germany, Hemberger introduced him to Guido Wolther (Frater Daniel), who was the grandmaster of the Fraternitas Saturni at that time, as well as to Walter Englert, head of the German Order of Illuminati. In both cases, Hakl was allowed to explore their respective libraries and to attend various invocation and evocation rituals (these did not, however, impress Hakl much). Later, Wolther would sell original material from the Fraternitas Saturni to Hakl, which now forms part of the Octagon library. Through Hemberger, Hakl also became acquainted with Ellic Howe, who was at that time one of the leading specialists of esoteric traditions, especially that of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and with William G. Gray, one of the most famous British ritual magicians of the mid-20th century. Gray suggested that Hakl should follow Gray's spiritual teacher, a man from Austria, but Hakl was neither interested in pursuing a magical career nor had the time to do so due to his busy schedule running HHS. As a result, Hakl's connection with Gray was friendly but (unfortunately, in Hakl's view) short.

Hemberger also introduced Hakl to Oskar Schlag from Zurich, head of the Hermetische Gesellschaft in Switzerland at the time. Schlag was a well-known figure in German-speaking esoteric milieus due to his extensive library and his skills as a medium and psychotherapist.<sup>94</sup> Hakl developed a long-standing connection to Schlag (“For over twenty years I met him regularly in his house for conversations about books; I learnt a great deal from him.”<sup>95</sup> Both lived in Zurich and Hakl frequently bought items from Schlag's extensive collection of esoteric books (whose 22,000 volumes are today situated in the university library of Zurich).<sup>96</sup> Eventually, Hakl was invited to Oskar Schlag's (nameless) magical order and its temple, where he also got to know Rüdiger Dahlke and Thorwald Dethlefsen, two well-known protagonists of German-speaking discourses on

alternative healing, reincarnation therapy, and channelling.<sup>97</sup>

Hemberger also connected Haki with Joseph Grasser, who led a branch of the Martinist order in Paris (Les Stephanios) and for whom Haki eventually translated various medieval Latin texts in exchange for photocopies of some rare works of Aleister Crowley (Crowley's sexual writings, in particular, were not publicly available at that time). Through Hemberger, Haki also became acquainted with a branch of the Ordo Templi Orientis in Stein, Appenzell, and with its leader, Joseph Metzger. Haki was allowed to inspect and study in the group's extensive private library,<sup>98</sup> and he also partook in a Gnostic mass, although he found this rather unimpressive. Hemberger also had a magical group of his own to which he had given the name C72. Without ever having undergone any formal initiation, Haki was appointed by Hemberger as O.H.O. (Outer Head of the Order). Haki occasionally partook in some of its rituals and evocations, of both demons and good genii. However, as Haki continued to pursue other magical interests at the same time, Hemberger eventually decided to ritually dismiss him from the order—an event which some of Haki's friends still today consider to be related to his physical maladies (Haki does not share this belief). Yet, Hemberger and Haki never engaged in direct conflict or strife, and Hemberger later introduced Haki to a Swiss branch of the Martinist order. Hemberger also continued to assist Haki in his book-collecting endeavour "by naming acquaintances from the most diverse magical orders who were willing to sell to me."<sup>99</sup> However, according to Haki, Hemberger's life ultimately came to a sad end, as he became increasingly frightened and alcohol-driven due to a combination of debt and his on-going demonic evocations.<sup>100</sup>

This period of his life—which lasted from the late 1960s to the late 1970s—was remarkable in several respects. During this time, Haki was directly introduced to the leading figures and circles of important groups (the Fraternitas Saturni in Germany, the German Order of Illuminati, the Ordo Templi Orientis in Switzerland, the Martinist order in Paris and Switzerland, Oskar Schlag's group, and Hemberger's C72), either by Hemberger himself or by other contacts. Even though Haki never underwent any formal initiation into any of these groups (apart from a brief initiation ritual for Oskar Schlag's group), he was embraced by their leaders or leading circles, granted access to their temples and libraries, and allowed to partake in some of their group rituals. While this would surely have been the height of fantasy for many practitioners of the time, Haki was generally unimpressed by both the leaders of these groups as well as their exuberant ceremonies. He found friends in these groups and willingly learned about their ideas and practices, but he never had any extraordinary experiences in any of the rituals he attended, never felt that the groups' leaders were particularly spiritually advanced (even though he might have felt a general sympathy for them), and never found anything in these groups that convinced him to become a formal member and pursue a magical career. On the contrary, he usually found their rituals to be contrived and histrionic, and he was neither afraid of nor did he actually believe in their effects. Perhaps the most important consequence for Haki of knowing these groups and practitioners was that he gained access to their libraries and thus to a huge volume of rare or even unique documents. As, ironically (according to Haki), practitioners of magic are notoriously often short of funds, during this period Haki made many good deals for the expansion of his book collection.<sup>101</sup>

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Haki later published a critical statement on Oskar Schlag in *Aries* 20 (see Haki, "Rezension zu Oskar R. Schlag, Von alten und neuen Mysterien," 94–98) in which he points to Schlag's ambivalent character and employs Jung's notion of *Pseudologia Fantastica* in order to explain why Schlag had narrated at least three very different versions of his own biography.

97

On Dahle and Dethlefsen, see various contributions in Haki 2015.

98

"I was able to inspect another bounteous esoteric library at the Swiss O.T.O. in Stein/Appenzell. There it was Frau Borgert, Frau Aeschbach and also Hermann Metzger himself who allowed me to delve into and peruse the order's large collection." Haki, "There once was a young man," 13.

This library is now part of the *Collectio Magica et Occulta* of the Kantonsbibliothek Appenzell Ausserrhoden in Trogen: see Haki 2021, 50.

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Haki, "There once was a young man," 12.

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More details are provided in Haki's unpublished paper presentation at the Palladian Academy.

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Haki, "Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness," 48–62, 50.



Personal communication (“Kasperletheater”: Graz, March 2021). This also relates to Hakl’s personal experiences with ritual magic, which were in total rather disappointing, and Hakl recalls that he was usually too impatient to await its potential effects. His general impression was thus that he could not find in Western ritual magic what he was looking for.

“The reason for that lay partly in my sceptical attitude towards esoteric leaders and movements, and partly it had to do with chance happenings in my life. Precisely because I knew so many esotericists, I saw how relative their knowledge was. During my ‘hippy’ time in England, drifting through the London parks, I consorted with several different groups—the Children of God, the Hare Krishna people, and various others. Every time I consorted with one of these groups I learnt a great deal and made friends, but I was never really satisfied. I was always looking for some over-arching knowledge that would transcend and subsume all of these individual paths.” “Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl.”

Werner Zurfluh, *Quellen der Nacht. Luzides Träumen und Reisen außerhalb des Körpers. Neue Dimensionen der Selbsterfahrung* (Interlaken: Ansata, 1983).

Hakl was certainly a charismatic man at the time, but he would generally ascribe his mysterious “success” in these groups to his good reputation (especially as conveyed by Hemberger), to his apparent business success, and also to his relative “disinterest” in their teachings and practices (recall that Hakl was an aficionado of Evola from his early twenties, and he thus tended to consider the type of ritual magic that he encountered in these groups to be a form of “puppet theatre”).<sup>102</sup> Due to his knowledge of a wide range of literature, magical groups, and practitioners, Hakl had also developed a deeply relativistic perspective on spiritual truth(s) (see above, Part II), a perspective that made him notoriously sceptical towards unverifiable claims, and that would have made it difficult for him to become entrenched in any particular magical path. What Hakl was looking for throughout his life—this also functioned as a guiding principle in the compilation of his book collection—was a superior knowledge that would encompass and transcend the truth claims of individual spiritual paths.<sup>103</sup> In this regard, Hakl’s search remains inevitably unfulfilled, but at least with regard to the issue of magic, Hakl’s reading of Julius Evola apparently “relativised” most of the practical approaches that he encountered throughout this life.

Around 1980, Hakl’s interest and involvement in magical groups ceased. Apart from a brief episode in a newly founded “hermetic” group in Zurich in the late 1980s, Hakl did not engage in further magical activities from the early 1980s onwards (even though Hakl continues to meet and communicate with practitioners down to today). The episode in the late 1980s involved a “secret” group founded by Oskar Schlag, which Schlag had urged Hakl to join in previous years. Hakl finally agreed to participate, as many well-known practitioners were said to be involved, and he attended a few of its meetings over the course of roughly one year. However, he was again neither interested in nor impressed by the group’s ceremonies, robes, and other rigmarole. After the sale of his shares in his Zurich-based company HHS (see above, Part I), Hakl decided to leave the group and to focus on his library and scholarly endeavours instead.

### 3 *Lucid dreaming and further practices*

A quite distinct chapter in Hakl’s spiritual biography pertains to his experimentation with lucid dreaming. Hakl had come across lucid dreaming techniques in the mid-1970s, through his contact with Paul A. Zemp (Ansata Verlag) and, through Zemp, with Werner Zurfluh. Zurfluh’s vivid descriptions of his nightly lucid dreaming experiences, which he would later publish with the Ansata Verlag,<sup>104</sup> made a great impression on Hakl, who began to experiment with the technique in his late 30s. For roughly one year, between 1975 and 1976, Hakl systematically practised lucid dreaming and thereby achieved a certain degree of control over his dreams—that is, he managed to consciously shape their contents. However, after many positive experiences, Hakl dreamed that he had died, suddenly confronting him with an existential fear of death. The dream faded slowly, but the fear remained.

The repercussions of this episode were quite severe. Even though Hakl soon refrained from his lucid dreaming practices, he could not shake off the necrophobia that had arisen through his lucid dreaming. As a consequence, he suffered from significant sleep disturbances in the years that followed. Interpreting this episode in hindsight as a potential doorway towards an experience of ego-lessness (sparked by a preceding existential fear of death), Hakl presumes that he unfortunately failed to stride

through the door that opened to him. Instead, he had to learn to live with the fear, which became a steady companion for at least a decade. He attempted to do so primarily through extensive hiking from the early 1980s onwards, driven by the belief that nature is the greatest healer. He also ascribes the emergence of a profound midlife crisis in his late 40s to the fact that he never actually managed to overcome this fear. Hakl was never willing to accept or have faith in a personal spiritual teacher, who might have been able to help him, and had in fact rejected various offers from such potential teachers over the years.

Even though Hakl delved deeply into the history of Tantrism through his work on Evola (see above, Part II), he had never actively engaged in Tantric practices. Another of Hakl's life-long interests (which also manifested itself in his library) relates to sexuality, and to sexual magic in particular. Hakl has collected material on sexual magic for over thirty years, and, if not for his health, would have attempted to write an extensive work on the topic.<sup>105</sup> Yet from a practical perspective he neither had impressive experiences of or evidence for the practice of sexual magic, despite his occasional experimentation with it during the 1970s. In the late 1990s, Hakl began to practise Qi Gong with a teacher in Graz,<sup>106</sup> which he enjoyed very much as it also reflected his Taoist perspective (see above, Part II). Unfortunately, his polyneuropathy has also put an end to this practice in recent years.

In sum, Hakl's life has been characterised by a pronounced spiritual striving, but when it came to his occasional dabbling in esoteric practices, he was only seldom touched by, let alone satisfied with, their effects or results. Even though Hakl had some profound spiritual experiences—foremost, his *satori* experience at the age of eighteen, but also his lucid dreaming experiences in his late 30s—he never had the sense that he had found what he was searching for in any particular spiritual group or school, apart from a certain attitude to or awareness of life that he derived from his reading of Evola and other admired authors such as Ramana Maharshi (one might say that Hakl was mostly a “reading-mystic”: see above, Part II). In contrast, from early on in his life, Hakl had everything he ever needed from a material perspective: he jetted around the world on first-class tickets, he was economically extremely successful, he was now and then accompanied by a lovely wife who facilitated his various careers with her full support, and he managed to pursue his life-dream—the building up of a huge library of esoteric (and other) books—with great success. Hakl's life-long search for some “ultimate” spiritual truth may remain unfulfilled,<sup>107</sup> but future visitors to his collection will benefit from the fact that Hakl successfully managed to channel this search into his library—thus creating a profound legacy that will fertilise the study of Western esotericism for decades to come.

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“Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl”; Hans Thomas Hakl, “The Theory and Practice of Sexual Magic, Exemplified by Four Magical Groups in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

106

“Interview mit Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl.”

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As he ironically admits in the title of an autobiographical sketch in 2016b: “There once was a young man who left home in order to buy lots of books, and even as an old man he hadn't got any wiser and still diligently kept buying them . . . ?”



*The Philosophical Gold of  
Perennialism. Hans Thomas  
Hakl, Julius Evola and the  
Italian Esoteric Milieus*  
Francesco Baroni



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE

*fondazione* ONLUS  
GIORGIO CINI

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*Abstract*

This article examines the relationship between the Austrian entrepreneur and scholar Hans Thomas Hakl (born 1947) and the esotericist Julius Evola (1898–1974), the most influential Italian representative of the so-called “Traditionalist School.” Best known as a far-right ideologue, Evola was frequently blacklisted from academia, and received scarce scholarly attention until the 1980s. After translating Evola's main books into German, Hakl has established himself as one of the most reliable specialists of Evola, thus contributing to his international resonance, as well as to his recognition as a legitimate object of academic research. As Hakl has shown in his publications, Evola has been a significant personality in 20th-century cultural history. His groundbreaking contributions on Eastern spiritualities and hermeticism, for instance, have interacted with mainstream culture more than many were willing to admit, which is confirmed by Evola's lasting relationships with famous scholars of religion such as Mircea Eliade and Giuseppe Tucci. Later on, in the context of globalization, Evola's idea of Tradition was seen as a tool for negotiating alternative worldviews, as well as for a radical reshaping of cultural identities. Our research took place mainly in Graz, where Hakl's archives are located. Access to these facilities proved invaluable, enabling the identification and study of unpublished documents.

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His mastery of the language, dating back to his adolescent years, played a decisive role in his first work experiences as a young man, then in the phase of entrepreneurial success with the company HHS (Hakl, Hausheer, Schöbi). The time he spent in Milan during the 1970s (1973–1976) undoubtedly underpinned this connection. See Bernd-Christian Otto, “Hans Thomas Hakl: Three Lives in One,” *Religiographies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 16–38.

Despite his wide-ranging interest in esotericism, it is no mystery that Hans Thomas Hakl has a preferential bond with Italian esoteric culture, which has proved particularly intense and fruitful over time.<sup>1</sup> Most of his publications deal with Julius Evola (1898–1974), whom Hakl met personally in Rome and to whom he has dedicated a huge amount of translations and essays, published in various languages. Over time, however, Hakl's work has come to encompass many other Italian authors and groups who—especially after World War II—have developed two themes crucial to Evola: the striving for magical self-realisation, and a traditionalist and anti-modern understanding of history. All these writers and intellectuals were to configure, in late 20th-century Italy, a new and autonomous discursive field, which constituted among other things a response to an accelerated phase of modernisation processes.

In the following pages, the relationship between Evola and Hakl will be assessed. We will mainly focus on the role played by the latter in the process through which Evola recently gained new popularity outside of Italy, as well as some amount of academic recognition. We will not neglect, however, to point out Hakl's most significant contributions to our historical knowledge of other Italian authors and currents.

The metaphor in the title hints at the throughline we will follow in our analysis. Hakl's endeavours can be likened to an alchemical *opus*: freeing the spiritual core of Evola's thought from its ideological dross. By extracting what he would perceive as the “philosophical gold” of Evolian traditionalism, Hakl intends to show how Evola expressed some deep cultural needs of his time. He also tries to highlight certain lines of thought that have been marginalised or dismissed by the intellectual establishment. This attempt should be seen as part of Hakl's “fight against one-dimensionality” which—as he himself declared—underlies all his scholarly and intellectual work.

Hakl had already read Evola in his late teenage years, but without feeling overwhelmingly fascinated. At the end of the 1960s he was delving deep into occultism, in which he sought tools for personal growth, driven by the desire to “become an extraordinary person,” as well as to achieve financial success.<sup>2</sup> At that time, his interest in Evola was sparked anew by reading the German esotericist Henri Birven (1883–1969), who had a major impact on him. “Through him,” writes Hakl, “I became better acquainted with French occultism (Lévi, Papus, etc.) [. . .]. He also led me to Julius Evola, and thereby indirectly to other representatives of the ‘Italian esoteric school’ (which remains for me one of the most interesting and profound esoteric schools worldwide), such as Giuliano Kremmerz, Arturo Reghini, and Massimo Scaligero—and also Tommaso Palamidessi.”<sup>3</sup> Birven, Hakl goes on, “wrote so enthusiastically about Evola, and especially about the Group of Ur and its collection of experience-based essays under the title *Introduction to Magic as the Science of the Self*, that I did everything I could to get my hands on this material, which at that time was long out of print.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the difficulties, Hakl managed to get hold of the volumes and was quickly won over. As Otto notes, “the experience of reading Evola’s work, especially the first volume of his *Introduction to Magic*, evoked a deep yearning for autarchy and independence in Hakl [. . .]. Through Evola, Hakl realised that he was in search of something extraordinary, the transcending of the regular boundaries of the human condition, or even self-perfection, and that Evola seemed to provide unique insights into and practices for achieving such a goal.”<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, however, “autarchy” and “independence” were also prerequisites to obtaining success in more mundane realms, such as wealth, friendship, and women. Hakl explicitly recognised his debt to Evola on this point, valuing his recurrent advice to remain neutral in order to be successful in any given domain, avoiding the pitfalls of greed, dependency, and anxiety.<sup>6</sup>

What struck Hakl the most, however, was the direct and extremely matter-of-fact attitude of Evola’s writings toward magic, which he perceived as stemming from a form of honest empiricism. “Evola gave me a completely new understanding of magic with his clear formulations, his sharpness of mind, his arresting images (Evola has been called the ‘master of myths’) and finally his eminently practical advice. One perceived and sensed that here was someone who was genuinely speaking from experience and who was pointing the way to a clear and sensible spiritual path. No foolish circumlocution, no false mystery-mongering, no ‘I may not’ or ‘you have to wait,’ no self-importance, no ‘I am the Master,’ but rather: here are the facts, test them, act accordingly and you will see for yourself.”<sup>7</sup>

This first, bookish encounter turned out to be decisive in Hakl’s intellectual itinerary. Evola—as Otto remarks—is the author who would have the greatest impact on Hakl’s thinking. Inspired by this reading, Hakl soon decided to get in touch with Evola himself and managed to obtain his address through Walter Heinrich (1902–1984), then professor at the College for International Trade (*Hochschule für Welthandel*) in Vienna.<sup>8</sup>

Hakl wrote to Evola three times between 1970 and 1971, receiving two replies. In his first letter, written on the 18th of July, 1970, he expressed his intention to translate “a few passages of [Evola’s] books to make them also accessible to German-speaking readers.” He showed particular interest in the *Introduction to Magic*, envisaging “for the moment a more or less internal publication in a bulletin of the German Illuminati.” In addition, he asked for information about the activities of the Ur

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“I devoured self-help books with [. . .] much gusto, particularly those which allowed me to dream of affluence.” Hans Thomas Hakl, “‘There once was a young man who left home in order to buy lots of books, and even as an old man he hadn’t got any wiser and still diligently kept buying them [. . .].’ The History of a Library and the Personal Reflections of a Collector,” in *Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 2, *The quest for wholeness: mirrored in a library dedicated to religious studies, philosophy and esotericism in particular* (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2016), 1–23, 12.

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Hakl, “There once was a young man,” 14.

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“Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl,” accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.hthakl-octagon.com/interview/interview-englisch>.

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Otto, “Hans Thomas Hakl: Three Lives in One,” 26.

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“Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl.”

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“Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl.”

8

On Heinrich’s relations with Evola, see Hans Thomas Hakl, “Walter Heinrich. Una breve biografia,” in Walter Heinrich, *Sul metodo tradizionale: Vico, Bachofen, Guenon, Evola*, ed. Stefano Arcella (Rome: Fondazione Julius Evola, 2017), 33–49. The correspondence between Evola and Heinrich, preserved in Hakl’s own archives, consists of a set of nineteen letters from Evola to Heinrich written between 1948 and 1958, which were found in 2012 in the archives of the “Gesellschaft für Ganzheitsforschung.” Evola asked Heinrich, among other things, to intercede so he could obtain civil invalid status.

Julius Evola, *Lettere 1955–1974*, ed. Renato Del Ponte (Finale Emilia: La Terra degli Avi, n.d. [1995]), 157–58.

On Palamidessi, see Francesco Baroni, *Tommaso Palamidessi e l'Archeosofia. Vita e opere di un esoterista cristiano* (Foggia: Bastogi, 2011) and Baroni, “Occultism and Christianity in twentieth-century Italy: Tommaso Palamidessi’s Christian Magic,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (London: Routledge, 2015), 101–20. Palamidessi wrote a letter to Hakl on the 2nd of April, 1971 (Hakl’s archives).

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As Evola had already pointed out in his first letter to Hakl. This however, as Del Ponte notes, was not exact (Evola, *Lettere*, 159, note 3 and 163, note 2).

In a letter sent to Evola on the 29th of October, 1949, Guénon wrote: “This Palamidessi of whom you have inserted some excerpts in your letter is evidently yet another charlatan of the type of those who abound at this time on all sides; but what is more surprising is that he appropriates ideas found in your books and others, to use them in a way that cannot but discredit them; in such conditions, the works that he publishes must not cost him much effort in writing them!” René Guénon, *Lettere a Julius Evola 1930–1950*, trans. Renato del Ponte (Carmagnola: Edizioni Arktos, 2005), 109.

Evola, *Lettere*, 162. Evola’s resentment against Palamidessi was undoubtedly due in part to the fact that the latter had plagiarised Evola in his youthful works (see Guénon’s excerpt in previous note). On the relationship between them, see Francesco Baroni, “Julius Evola e Tommaso Palamidessi. Con una lettera inedita di Julius Evola,” 2007, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://www.fondazionejulius-evola.com/contributi/saggi-su-julius-evola/julius-evola-e-tommaso-palamidessi-con-una-lettera-inedita-di-julius-evola/>; and Baroni, *Tommaso Palamidessi*, 77–79.

Evola, *Lettere*, 162.

“Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl.”

Group, founded by Evola and other Italian esotericists at the end of the 1920s, to study—and practice—rituals gleaned from Western and Eastern occult traditions, with the aim of attaining transcendent states of consciousness and obtaining supernormal powers. From 1927 to 1929, the Ur Group issued the journals *Ur* and *Krur*, the essays of which were later gathered together by Evola in *Introduction to Magic*. Evola replied on the 3rd of August, authorising Hakl to translate his works, but recommending “caution” in making *Introduction to Magic* known to the German public.<sup>9</sup>

A year later, on the 4th of July, 1971, Hakl wrote to Evola with a further project: the publication of a monograph on the “modern esoteric orders of wisdom.” In his letter, he mentioned the Ur Group as well as “Miriam,” the organisation founded by Giuliano Kremmerz (born as Ciro Formisano, 1861–1930)—but also the occultist and astrologer Tommaso Palamidessi (1915–1983), who in 1968 had given birth to an esoteric-Christian school called “Archeosofica,” and with whom Hakl was already in touch.<sup>10</sup> He asked Evola if he had any useful material for this purpose. “Evola,” writes Hakl, “sent me a friendly reply but without addressing my questions in any detail.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, Evola’s response about the Italian “cultic milieu” was rather a disenchanted one. In sum, the operative existence of the Ur Group was already over by the end of the 1920s, and its members were all dead;<sup>12</sup> as for “Miriam,” nothing serious was fundamentally left of it. A worse fate was to befall Palamidessi. In the wake of a similar appraisal by René Guénon (1886–1951),<sup>13</sup> Evola depicted him as “nothing but a swindler (a *Schwindler*) lacking any qualification, except a generic astrology that he professionally exploits for profit.”<sup>14</sup> Evola discouragingly concluded, “I cannot name, unfortunately, any groups or Orders in present-day Italy that are serious and have a tradition.”<sup>15</sup>

Hakl, however, was not the slightest bit disheartened by such a sobering response. As soon as the opportunity arose, he visited Evola in his small flat in Rome, at Corso Vittorio Emanuele 197. The encounter took place in 1972.<sup>16</sup>

This is how Hakl recalls the meeting with Evola:

“Later I had to go to Rome in connection with the export business dealing in electrical goods, for which I was working. I telephoned him in advance and he immediately agreed to a meeting [. . .]. I was received by his housekeeper, who escorted me to him. I can no longer remember whether he was in bed or in a wheelchair, but at any rate he looked wretched—sick, exhausted and embittered. But mentally he was fully alert. I told him about my high-flown plans to publish the monographs of the Group of Ur in German as soon as my circumstances would permit, and this obviously pleased him. He seemed happy to have the opportunity to speak German again, which we did at his request. Evola complained particularly that, apart from a very few young people, no one wanted to hear or read what he had to say. And even those young people didn’t really engage with his thought on a deep level. Instead they wanted to go out immediately and revolutionize the world without first becoming clear in their minds about their own spiritual orientation. When I asked him which authors I should study, apart from Kremmerz, Guénon and Evola himself, he came out quick as a flash with the name Gustav Meyrink. Meyrink, he said, had possessed a profound grasp of true esotericism. In



response to my further question whether there were any initiatory groups in the present day, he merely shook his head. He knew of none. After perhaps an hour and a half the conversation was over. Evola wanted and needed to rest. It was only much later, remembering the meeting and talking to other people about it, that I realised why Evola had been so well disposed towards me. It was not only because I came from Austria, where he had spent so much time, but also because our conversation was confined to esoteric themes. Politics had ceased to interest him. Weighed down by so much suffering, he wanted at least to preserve some of his metaphysical thought beyond his death. As for politics, he had simply given up any expectations that he might have had in that domain.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to providing us with a vivid portrait of Evola in his later years, these lines offer us at least two valuable pieces of information. The first is that, already in 1972, when he was only twenty-five years old, Hakl had clearly in mind what can be defined as his specific cultural mission: translating Evola into German. Secondly, this encounter corroborated Hakl’s feeling that Evola’s real legacy did not dwell in his political theorisations, but rather in his metaphysics and in his doctrine of self-realisation. This conviction would allow him to move with greater fluidity in his work of “cultural mediation,” avoiding as much as possible the pitfalls of political struggles and bringing the esoteric and spiritual dimension to the fore.

#### *Nigredo, or decontaminating Julius Evola*

As Otto recalls, “Hakl’s parallel life as a publisher began around 1978, when he acquired a share in the esoteric publishing house Ansata Verlag.”<sup>18</sup> Based in Switzerland and directed by the bibliophile Paul A. Zemp, Ansata was at that time one of the leading esoteric publishers in the German-speaking world. It was within this broader scope that Hakl undertook his new mission as a translator, dedicating to this activity his evenings and weekends.<sup>19</sup> The main focus of his activity was, of course, translating Evola’s major writings into German.

Hakl was not the first, however, to devote himself to such a task. During the 1930s—the period in which Evola travelled throughout Germany to meet the representatives of the “German conservative revolution”—the volumes *Pagan Imperialism* (1933) and *Revolt against the Modern World* (1935) were translated. Later on, the German editions of *The Mystery of the Grail* (1955) and *Metaphysics of Sex* (1962) came to light.<sup>20</sup> However, it would be improper to think, as Hakl himself notes, that these first editions of Evola’s works met with real “success.”<sup>21</sup> Only two reviews of the German *Rivolta* are known.<sup>22</sup> *Pagan Imperialism*, for its part, was monitored with some attention by Himmler’s staff, but it had only one edition, and the print run was low, judging by the copies that can be found on the market.<sup>23</sup> Incidentally, this volume had a specific political intent. Evola tried to convey his own “Ghibelline” ideas, based on the emancipation of political authority from the Church, and on the autonomy of the Empire as “immanent spiritual reality,” ideas that could be applied to both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Neither of these two regimes, however, was particularly keen to adopt Evola’s agenda. Evola was viewed by the *Abnenerbe* (the SS appendage devoted to the task of promoting racial doctrines) as a “Roman reactionary,” whose theories could only “provoke ideological

“While Hakl’s original goal was to save the Ansata Verlag from bankruptcy, he retained his share until 1995 and thereby left an imprint on the German esoteric book market that spanned almost two decades.” Otto, “Hans Thomas Hakl: Three Lives in One,” 28.

Otto, “Hans Thomas Hakl: Three Lives in One,” 22.

Julius Evola, *Heidnischer Imperialismus*, trans. Friedrich Bauer (Leipzig: Armanen-Verl, 1933); Evola, *Erhebung wider die moderne Welt*, trans. Friedrich Bauer (Stuttgart-Berlin: Deutsche Verl. Anst., 1935); Evola, *Das Mysterium des Grals*, unknown translator (Munich: Barth, 1955); Evola, *Metaphysik des Sexus*, trans. Maria Schon and Hermann Maier (Stuttgart: Klett, 1962).

Hans Thomas Hakl, “Evola in Germania: fu vera gloria?”, in *Il Maestro della Tradizione: Dialoghi su Julius Evola*, ed. Marco Iacona (Naples: Controcorrente, 2008), 223–34. See also *Studi evoliani 2016. Evola e la cultura tedesca*, ed. Gianfranco De Turreis, Damiano Gianandrea and Giovanni Sessa (Turin: Arktos, 2017).

One, enthusiastic, by Gottfried Benn; the other, negative, by the philosopher Hermann Graf Keyserling, to which should be added a further critique by Herman Hesse (see Hakl, “Evola in Germania”).



This seems to clash with the author's own perception. Evola, in *The Path of Cinnabar* (1963), considered this translation to be a clear sign of a different destiny of his work in German-speaking countries (*The Path of Cinnabar: an Intellectual Autobiography*, trans. Sergio Knipe [London: Integral Tradition, 2009], 86–87).

Gianfranco de Turreis and Bruno Zoratto, eds., *Julius Evola nei rapporti delle SS* (Rome: Fondazione Evola, 2000), 43.

*La crisi italiana e la Destra internazionale*, 1974; quoted in Furio Jesi, *Cultura di destra. Con tre inediti e un'intervista* (Milan: Nottetempo, 2011; first edition 1979), 145.

Francesco Baroni, "Riviste italiane e perennialismo (1970–1990): permanenze, evoluzioni e contaminazioni," in *Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 3, *La ricerca della totalità riflessa in una biblioteca dedicata alla storia delle religioni, alla filosofia e, soprattutto, all'esoterismo* (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2017), 407–28.

See, in particular, Jesi, *Cultura di destra*.

Julius Evola, *Revolte gegen die moderne Welt*, trans. H. T. Hansen (Interlaken: Ansata, 1982); Evola, *Die Hermetische Tradition: von der alchemistischen Umwandlung der Metalle und des Menschen in Gold; Entschlüsselung einer verborgenen Symbolsprache*, trans. H. T. Hansen (Interlaken: Ansata, 1989).

Julius Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, trans. H. T. Hansen, Band 1, *Praktische Grundlegung der Initiation* (Interlaken: Ansata, 1985); Julius Evola, Gruppe von Ur, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, trans. H. T. Hansen, Band 2, *Schritte zur Initiation: Theorie und Praxis des höheren Bewusstseins* (Bern: Ansata, 1997).

As Otto points out, "Hakl actually wanted to translate and publish Evola's works on magic first," but "as he was engaged full time running his thriving company, HHS, he did not have the capacity to take on such a time-consuming task in parallel, and thus decided to publish the 'easier' work, *Revolt against the Modern World* (there was already a German translation from 1935 to provide a starting point for the new version)." Otto, "Hans Thomas Hakl: Three Lives in One," 29–30. In Hakl's words: "Despite Paul Zemp's many contacts and our diligent search for translators, no one could be found who was even remotely qualified to translate Evola. After all these failed efforts I finally decided to undertake the translation myself on top of my work with Ansata and my responsibilities as part-owner of an international firm that was rapidly expanding into thirteen countries worldwide. However, I soon realized that the translation of *Magie* required too much time, energy and research, and was simply not feasible in view of my continual travelling. Therefore I decided to postpone *Magie* and instead tackle something by Evola that would be easier to translate. *Revolt against the Modern World* offered itself as a viable option, as there was already a German translation from 1935.

confusion."<sup>24</sup> As for Mussolini, the 1929 Lateran Pacts had already sanctioned the strategic realignment of the Fascist regime with the Catholic Church.

Meanwhile, however, the cultural background had changed drastically. In the second half of the 1970s, Evola's thought was sparking new interest in Italy. This was a time of ideological contestation and political turmoil. Many, both from the left and the right, harshly rejected the value system of contemporary bourgeois democracies, and in particular the domination of the capitalist economy. Those who criticised all this from the right looked to the Evola of *Men Among the Ruins* (1953) as a mentor. This should come as no surprise. Evola's reference to higher metaphysical—and "traditional"—values was very appealing at a time when bourgeois materialism was being criticised. Moreover, Evola was one of the very few Italian intellectuals to anchor an aristocratic and anti-democratic stance in an organic philosophical framework, embracing a metaphysics, a "morphology of civilisations," as well as a philosophy of history, endowed with a wide-ranging vision of the trajectories of Western culture. In 1974, political scientist Giorgio Galli (1928–2020) defined him as "one of the most qualified representatives [of right-wing culture] in this century."<sup>25</sup> In those years, throughout Italy—especially in the South—numerous traditionalist magazines flourished, of different quality and impact, which referred explicitly to Evola's ideas.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, many started criticising Evola for his connections with the contemporary forms of the radical right, claiming that he had a moral responsibility for supporting its violent manifestations.<sup>27</sup>

The cultural climate, then, was a heated one when Hakl resolved to bring new attention to Evola's works in Germany. Hakl's translation of *Revolt against the Modern World*, which is commonly viewed as Evola's main work, was published in 1982, followed by *The Hermetic Tradition* in 1989.<sup>28</sup> Between these two works, Hakl managed to publish the first volume of the Ur Group trilogy, *Introduction to Magic as the Science of the Self* (1985), the second part of which would not come out until 1997.<sup>29</sup> These books were commercially successful and prompted a new, albeit limited, dissemination of Evola's thought in the German-speaking world.

The choice of the works to be translated shows a clear direction.<sup>30</sup> In the wake of his own interests, Hakl had selected three texts that placed esotericism, rather than politics, in the foreground. Despite this, his operation came up against cultural resistance, perhaps not unpredictably. Hakl writes: "In 1982 [*Revolt against the Modern World*] was published and immediately sold surprisingly well, but there were repercussions—albeit somewhat delayed—that Paul Zemp and I had not expected. In an address at the Frankfurt Book Fair Umberto Eco complained in thunderous tones that in the Frankfurt bookshops, instead of books by (the Marxist) Georg Lukács, he had found Evola, Guénon and Gurdjieff. Probably hardly any of the journalists present knew who these three people were, but they knew immediately that one was supposed to be against them and very soon they also knew that Ansata-Verlag was exhibiting a book by Evola. I was approached by various journalists and had to explain things. Interestingly, most of these conversations were not unpleasant at all, as soon as I had given them some clarification and preferably also a copy of *Revolt against the Modern World* for them to study."<sup>31</sup>

Umberto Eco (1932–2016), then, thundered against Evola. It would not be the last time. In 1987, in the columns of *L'Espresso*, the semiologist

commented on Evola's preface to the 1937 Italian edition of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, imbued with a blatantly conspiratorial anti-Semitism. Here Eco labelled Evola as "a sad and senseless figure that in recent years the New Right has re-purposed as a thinker of rank," the exponent of an "operetta occultism of which the magician Otelma [a popular Italian TV personality] would be ashamed."<sup>32</sup> In a lecture held at Columbia University on the 24th of April, 1995, as part of the celebrations for the Liberation of Europe from Nazi-Fascism, Evola was again mentioned by Eco in relation to the latter's idea of "eternal fascism" (which Eco also defined, with some interesting semantic resonance given the context, "Ur-Fascism"). Significantly enough, for Eco the first element of Ur-Fascism is the "cult of tradition," and the second "the rejection of modernism," both typically Evolian traits. "The fascist game can be played in many forms," writes Eco. "Fascism became an all-purpose term because one can eliminate from a fascist regime one or more features, and it will still be recognizable as fascist. [ . . . ]. Add a cult of Celtic mythology and the Grail mysticism (completely alien to official fascism) and you have one of the most respected fascist gurus, Julius Evola."<sup>33</sup>

Eco's reaction at the Frankfurt Fair is therefore symptomatic of an intrinsic difficulty in even naming Evola, branded with the seal of anti-Semitism, racism, and fascism, shortly after the era of right-wing subversion and neo-fascist terrorism. Evola was commonly associated with these phenomena (not only by Italian authors) as a "bad teacher" or even as a "moral culprit."<sup>34</sup>

Faced with this unexpected pushback, Hakl's projects faltered. "Perhaps on account of my one-sided and rather limited understanding of political matters," he explained, "I was totally unprepared for the subsequent reactions. Prompted by the statements of Eco and others, many booksellers suddenly accused Ansata of propagating Fascist ideas. Furthermore they threatened to stop all sales of Ansata books unless we took this wicked Evola out of our programme. This was a hefty threat for a small publishing house, especially as they demanded an immediate decision from us. But we did not want to give up so easily. So, after considering the situation carefully and assessing our powers of resistance and our bank balance, we decided to carry on. In 1989 there appeared one of Evola's best books—again translated by me—namely *The Hermetic Tradition*, which had impressed both C. G. Jung and Mircea Eliade."<sup>35</sup>

However, the strong tensions raised by these publications, related to Evola's sulphurous reputation as a political thinker, showed that things needed to change course. To prevent Evola's name from being blacklisted, and to promote a better appreciation of his magical and esoteric *corpus*, his political ideas needed to be overtly and objectively studied, presented as facts, set in the context of their time. In short, they had to be *historicised*, and withdrawn from the discursive battlefield where Evola's apologists and enemies used to clash so heatedly. "If this could not be done," says Hakl, "then the 'esoteric' Evola would also be dead for the foreseeable future."<sup>36</sup>

The long preface that Hakl appended to the first German edition of *Men Among the Ruins*, published in 1991 by the extreme right-wing publisher Hohenrain,<sup>37</sup> acquires crucial importance from this point of view.<sup>38</sup> Translated in English in 2002,<sup>39</sup> then in Russian in 2009,<sup>40</sup> this text "has become highly influential and is considered a definitive introduction to Evola's thinking."<sup>41</sup> Here we find explicitly formulated the assumption that would guide Hakl's work in the years to come: Evola above all bears

However, that version could not simply be used as it was, since Evola had twice revised the book extensively, and furthermore the language of the translation was much too turgid. But at least it made the task easier." "Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

31

"Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

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Umberto Eco, "La bustina di Minerva," *L'Espresso*, April 12, 1987 (quoted in Filippo Ceccarelli, *Il potere in Italia da De Gasperi a questi qua* [Milan: Feltrinelli, 2018], chap. 7, Kindle).

33

Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *The New York Review*, June 22, 1995, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism>.

34

As an example, see Franco Ferraresi, "Da Evola a Freda. Le dottrine della Destra Radicale fino al 1977," in *La Destra Radicale*, ed. Franco Ferraresi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1984), 13–53 (Ferraresi also published in English: "Julius Evola: Tradition, Reaction, and the Radical Right," *European Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 1, May [1987]: 107–51). In the Anglo-Saxon world of the 1980s see the following studies: Thomas Sheehan, "Myth and Violence: The Fascism of Julius Evola and Alain de Benoist," *Social Research* 48, no. 1 (1981): 45–73, and Sheehan, "Diventare Dio: Julius Evola and the Metaphysics of Fascism," *Stanford Italian Review* 6, nos. 1–2 (1986): 279–92; Robert Griffin, "Revolts against the Modern World: The Blend of Literary and Historical Fantasy in the Italian New Right," *Literature and History* 11 (Spring 1985): 101–23; Richard H. Drake, "Julius Evola and the Ideological Origins of the Radical Right in Contemporary Italy," in *Political Violence and Terror: Motifs and Motivations*, ed. Peter H. Merkl (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 61–89.

35

"Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

36

"The continuing attacks forced me to engage more clearly with Evola's political thought, which until then had only interested me peripherally. I realised that ultimately I had to defend not only myself but also the good name of the publishing house. It was not a question of defending Evola's political ideas but rather presenting the historical facts and setting them in the context of their time. If this could not be done then the 'esoteric' Evola would also be dead for the foreseeable future." "Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

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"The Hohenrain publishing house that printed the book belongs to the Tübingen Grabert-Verlag, a leading right wing publisher in Germany particularly proficient in Holocaust denial. Its founder Herbert Grabert was a member of the German Faith Movement and pupil of Jakob Wilhelm Hauer. After the death of his father, Grabert's son Wigbert continued publishing books pointing to a spiritual alternative to the Judeo-Christian model" (Horst Junginger, "From Buddha To Adolf Hitler: Walther Wüst And

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H. T. Hansen, "Evola's politisches Wirken," preface to Julius Evola, *Menschen inmitten von Ruinen* (Tübingen: Hohenrain, 1991), 7–132. "Then I heard of a plan to publish Evola's political treatise *Men Among the Ruins* in Germany. At first I was greatly alarmed and thought this meant the end of our adventure with Evola. The book in question argued for a state or empire based on distinctly hierarchical, anti-democratic principles. I feared that its publication would inevitably and understandably mobilize our enemies and cause the booksellers to intensify their boycott. True, Evola's esoteric works were not directly political, but who would be discerning enough to recognize the difference? Then I realized that I had no alternative but to take the bull by the horns. So I contacted the publisher, whom I knew from the Frankfurt Book Fair, and offered to write an explanatory foreword to the book. My intention was to give as exact an account as possible of Evola's development as a thinker, and to point out how his political ideas flowed from his spiritual perspective, which in turn was influenced by Meister Eckhart, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Tao Te Ching*. All of this I wanted to show from his early writings. In this way the reader would be able to form his or her own judgement about Evola's political views on the basis of the assembled facts. I knew from my own studies that it was too simple to write Evola off as a 'Fascist' and a 'racist' on account of his antisemitic and racist judgements, without taking into account his artistic, philosophical and esoteric activities." "Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl."

39

H. T. Hansen, "Julius Evola's Political Endeavours," in Julius Evola, *Men among the ruins. Postwar reflections of a radical traditionalist*, trans. Guido Stucco, ed. Michael Moynihan (Rochester: Inner traditions, 2002), 1–104.

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X. T. Хансен, *Политические устремления Юлиуса Эволы* (Voronezh–Moscow: Terra Foliata, 2009).

41

Junginger, "From Buddha to Adolf Hitler," 168. "Julius Evola's Political Endeavours" thus expands on, and completes, Hakl's previous essay "A Short Introduction to Julius Evola," *Theosophical History* 5 (January 1995): 11–22 (reprinted as an introduction to Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, trans. Guido Stucco [Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1995]).

42

"To Evola, the centre of all things is not man but rather the Transcendent. Regardless of the question that concerns him, he is always searching for the direct relationship to the Absolute—that is, that domain which lies beyond the merely human, because human affairs are one way today but tomorrow may be quite different. According to the view of Tradition, on the contrary, the principles that form the foundation of our world remain forever the same. He is not interested in what is bound to time, but instead in that which is above time, the 'eternal.' Therefore, one cannot expect from Evola the now prevalent Western "humanist" values, but must reckon with a

witness to a metaphysical approach to life, rooted in a Tradition incompatible with modernity, and his political reflections represent tangential aspects of his convictions about the world and humankind.<sup>42</sup>

Having established these general premises, Hakl examines in detail the main influences Evola underwent in the formative phase of his philosophical-political thought—focusing, in particular, on Otto Weininger (1880–1903), Otto Braun (1897–1918), and Carlo Michelstaedter (1887–1910). He also examines the importance of his artistic background, his move towards esotericism, and the development of the concept of "pagan imperialism." Then he assesses his critical relations with Fascism and National Socialism, his notion of "spiritual racism" as well as his attitude towards the Jews. Towards the end of the text, Hakl tackles the thorny issue of Evola's current political relevance and his connection with the Italian post-war far right. That was an inevitable topic, since *Men among the Ruins* is, as Hakl notes, "the only 'practical' handbook for a truly traditional right wing."<sup>43</sup> Despite Evola's political past, Hakl argues, the centrality of the esoteric and spiritual theme, and his reference to a spiritual Tradition far removed from the world of current affairs and incompatible with modernity, detract from the possible political applications of his thought. Ultimately, Evola's doctrine is in no way transferable to today's world in political terms: "The abyss between the world of facts and the world of Tradition is too great."<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, Hakl recalls the paradoxical definition by Marco Tarchi (1952–), the ideologist of the Italian New Right, of Evolian thought as a "politically disabling myth" (*mito incapacitante*): "Indeed, reading Evola has kept many young people from pursuing political activities, because he speaks of a past that is too remote and of which nothing is left, as well as of ideals that are too lofty."<sup>45</sup>

The fascist, racist, and antisemitic Evola is thus "sterilised," circumscribed to a well-defined and distant historical period: the 1930s and 1940s. The image that one gets from these pages—stemming from Evola's self-depiction—is that of the survivor from another world, from another universe of values, paradoxically useless for contemporary right-wing circles and, in the final analysis, politically untranslatable in the broadest sense. From today's perspective, this is clearly a somewhat partial portrait. Hakl himself some years later admitted, "My foreword brought much more objectivity into the whole debate surrounding Evola [. . .]. Having said that, I would now formulate certain parts rather differently. In the meantime so much new literature about Evola has appeared in Italy—most of it well-formulated criticism—that I have changed my position on certain issues."<sup>46</sup> It is not difficult to guess which ones. His article did not describe, for example, Evola's deep involvement in the Italian neofascist magazines of the 1960s, nor his enduring racist theorisations of the same period. This time Evola's racism did not only target the traditional Jewish enemy—seen as a symbol of material greed and rapacious individualism—but extended to peoples of colour and racial mixing, threatening the prestige of the white European race (Hakl later explicitly rejected Evola's "numerous unambiguously racist outpourings"<sup>47</sup>). Also unexamined are Evola's references to a "traditionalist path to violence," rooted in a "metaphysics of warrior heroism," whose contiguity with certain subversive movements of the 1970s, if only as a possible theoretical premise, cannot be minimised.<sup>48</sup> It was, perhaps, the price to be paid to let the other Evola come through: the Master denouncing the distortions of materialist modernity, and peering into its reversals and unspoken aspects; the prophet who, from a decentralised position, indicated the other world—which perhaps can



only be glimpsed through the myths and symbols of the sacred. Evola thus embodied his own myth: the traditional and “differentiated” man, heroic, contemptuous of ordinary humanity and turned towards the transhuman, standing upright, stoically, in a “world of ruins.”

*Albedo, or connecting the dots: Julius Evola as a European intellectual*

Translating the esoteric Evola into German and historicising his political thought—to neutralise what Haki perceived as merely ideological and ill-informed criticism—represent, therefore, the first steps of Haki’s work in the 1980s, up to the beginning of the 1990s. In a second phase, Haki would broaden his scope, aiming to stress the connections between Evola and 20th-century cultural history, and to highlight his role as a “European intellectual.” One of the key aspects of this operation was to show how Evola’s comparative inquiry into Eastern and Western traditions, as well as his reflection on the decadence of the modern world, became intertwined with the thought of important representatives of mainstream culture, forming a thematic basin from which the religious studies of the second half of the century would draw.

Two main publications reflect this new phase. The first is a study that Haki dedicated, in 1998, to Evola’s relations with the circles of the German “Conservative Revolution,” until then poorly studied.<sup>49</sup> But far more relevant in this sense is an essay, also published in 1998 in German, on Evola’s relationship with Mircea Eliade (1907–1986).<sup>50</sup> The two had been in touch since the late 1920s, when Eliade was in Calcutta. There, the Romanian scholar had received the collections of the journals *Ur* and *Krur* from Evola himself. Subsequently, he was greatly impressed by *The Hermetic Tradition*—which turned out to be an indispensable source for his own works on alchemy—and by *Revolt against the Modern World*. In 1935, he described Evola as “one of the most interesting minds of the war generation,” even declaring that he had undertaken “a study of his magical philosophy that remained at the manuscript stage.”<sup>51</sup> Evola even appears as a character in several of Mircea Eliade’s novels and short stories.<sup>52</sup> In the post-war period, Evola translated *Le chamanisme* (1951) into Italian under the pseudonym of Carlo d’Altavilla and reviewed Eliade’s most significant publications.<sup>53</sup>

The connection between Evola and Eliade has been under investigation since the end of the 1980s, first within traditionalist circles,<sup>54</sup> then in academic milieus.<sup>55</sup> The results of these studies soon began to appear in the international scholarly literature on Eliade. In a seminal book on Tantra published in 2003, for instance, Hugh Urban (1968–), a student of Eliade’s former colleagues and disciples at the University of Chicago, pointed out, in a rather alarmed tone, the possibility that Eliade had suffered a regrettable Evolian contagion in his works about Indian religions.<sup>56</sup> As for Mark Sedgwick (1960–), in his 2004 key monograph on the Traditionalist movement—a book in which, incidentally, Haki’s studies are extensively cited—he clearly stated that “Romanian Traditionalism derived not from Paris or Cairo [*scilicet* from Guénon] but from Rome,” since “the earliest identifiable Romanian Traditionalist, Mircea Eliade, was a distant follower of Evola’s [. . .] Ur Group.”<sup>57</sup> Here Sedgwick defined Eliade’s as a “soft traditionalism,” reaching the conclusion—perhaps oversimplified—that “Eliade’s general model of human religiosity is in effect the Perennial Philosophy dressed in secular clothes.”<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, while Eliade never was a Traditionalist *stricto sensu*, it is rather

total inversion of the standpoints that one is used to.” Hansen, “Julius Evola’s Political Endeavours,” 2.

43

Hansen, “Julius Evola’s Political Endeavours,” 89.

44

Hansen, “Julius Evola’s Political Endeavours,” 94. “But if one wants to speak of Evola’s actual political influence, one must keep this in mind: Evola’s traditionalism cannot be used by modern political movements. Even Evola himself saw this: his teachings are too aristocratic, too demanding, and too much directed against progress and modernity. It is unimaginable how these thought patterns could be successful in the industrialized democracies of the West.” Hansen, “Julius Evola’s Political Endeavours,” 93.

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Hansen, “Julius Evola’s Political Endeavours,” 93.

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“Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Haki.”

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“Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Haki.”

48

Francesco Cassata, *A destra del fascismo: profilo politico di Julius Evola* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), see in particular the chapter “Il lungo razzismo,” 432–89. On Evola’s racism, see also Francesco Germinario, *Razza del Sangue, razza dello Spirito: Julius Evola, l’antisemitismo e il nazional-socialismo (1930–43)* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001).

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[H. T. Hansen], “Julius Evola und die deutsche konservative Revolution,” *Criticón* 158 (April–June 1998): 16–32 (Italian trans. “Julius Evola e la ‘Rivoluzione Conservatrice’ Tedesca,” in *Studi Evoliani 1998*: 144–80; French trans. *Julius Evola et la ‘Révolution conservatrice’ allemande* [Montreuil: Les Deux Étendards, 2002], with a preface by Philippe Baillet and a bibliography of Evola’s German writings by Alain de Benoist).

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H. T. Hansen, “Mircea Eliade, Julius Evola und die Integrale Tradition,” in Julius Evola, *Über das Initiatische* (Sinzheim: H. Prietsch, 1998), 9–50.

51

Mircea Eliade, review of *Rivoluzione contro il mondo moderno*, by J. Evola, *Vremea* 8, no. 382 (March 31, 1935): 6. See Paola Pisi, “I ‘tradizionalisti’ e la formazione del pensiero di Eliade,” in *Confronto con Mircea Eliade. Archetipi mitici e identità storica*, ed. Luciano Arcella, Paola Pisi and Roberto Scagno (Milan: Jaca Book, 1998), 43–133, 45.

52

Marcello De Martino, *Mircea Eliade esoterico. Ioan Petru Culianu e i “non detti”* (Rome: Settimo Sigillo, 2008), 235–316; Claudio Mutti, “Evola-Eliade. Un bilancio culturale,” introduction to Julius Evola, *Lettere a Mircea Eliade 1930–1954*, ed. Claudio Mutti (Naples: Controcorrente, 2011; new edition *Sacro, mito, religione. Lettere a Mircea Eliade 1930–1962* [Rome: Pagine, 2018]), 21–34,



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See Evola, *Lettere a Mircea Eliade*.

54

See Philippe Baillet, “Julius Evola et Mircea Eliade (1927–1974): Une amitié manquée, avec des extraits de deux lettres d’Evola à Eliade,” *Les deux étendards* 1 (September–December 1988): 45–55; Claudio Mutti, *Mircea Eliade e la guardia di ferro* (Parma: Edizioni all’insegna del Veltro, n.d. [1989]), esp. 38–55; Gianfranco De Turris, “L’‘iniziato’ e il Professore. I rapporti ‘sommersi’ tra Julius Evola e Mircea Eliade,” in *Delle rovine ed oltre. Saggi su Julius Evola*, ed. Mario Bernardi Guardì and Marco Rossi (Rome: Antonio Pellicani Editore, 1995), 219–49.

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Pisi, “I ‘tradizionalisti’”; Pisi, “Evola, Eliade e l’alchimia,” *Studi evoliani* 1999, 62–92; Natale Spineto, “Mircea Eliade and traditionalism,” *Aries* 1 (2001): 63–87. Cf. also Liviu Bordaș, “The difficult encounter in Rome. Mircea Eliade’s post-war relation with Julius Evola – new letters and data,” *International Journal on Humanistic Ideology* 4, no. 2 (Autumn–Winter 2011): 125–58; Giovanni Casadio, “Eliade contro Evola,” preface to Evola, *Lettere a Mircea Eliade*, 7–19; Enrico Montanari, “Eliade ed Evola: aspetti di un rapporto ‘sommerso,’” in *Mircea Eliade. Le forme della Tradizione e del Sacro*, ed. Giovanni Casadio and Pietro Mander (Rome: Mediterranee, 2012), 93–111 (also in Enrico Montanari, *Storia e tradizione. Orientamenti storico-religiosi e concezioni del mondo* [Rome: Lithos Editrice, 2016], 119–44).

56

“In any discussion of Eliade’s view of Tantra,” Urban wrote, “we must face the difficult and troubling question of whether Eliade’s vision was a kind of crypto-fascism, tainted with the same sorts of repugnant right-wing political interests as Evola’s [ . . . ]. As Wasserstrom, Strenski, and others have argued, Eliade’s reactionary, antimodernist ideals were in many ways carried over into his later scholarship as a troubling shadow that haunts his entire oeuvre. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Eliade’s conception of Tantra, which inherits both Zimmer’s romantic vision of Tantric sensuality and Evola’s fascist notion of Tantric violence.” Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religions* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 186.

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Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 109.

58

Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 112.

59

Pisi, “Evola, Eliade e l’alchimia.”

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Spineto, “Mircea Eliade and traditionalism,” 68.

61

Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 112.

safe to state that the Romanian scholar’s discourse incorporated, since the beginning, some crucial notions found in Evola’s (and Guénon’s) publications. Not only was Eliade inspired by Evola’s works on yoga, not only did he adopt his idea of alchemy as both a cosmological and spiritual discipline;<sup>59</sup> he also borrowed, and reassembled, other fundamental hermeneutic insights of the Traditionalist School about the “archaic worldview,” insights that were to shape the theoretical framework of his famous 1948 *Treatise*. Among these, Spineto mentions “the concepts of anthropo-cosmic correspondence, of the symbol, of the sacred center, of the ‘cyclical’ quality of traditional time, of human construction as a repetition of cosmogony, of sacrifice as a reintegration, and of the archetype.”<sup>60</sup> More broadly speaking, it is true that Eliade’s project of constructing “a general model of human religiosity, as expressed in universally valid myth and symbol”<sup>61</sup> is inextricably linked to the doctrines of the leading theorists of the “Tradition,” namely Guénon, Evola, and Coomaraswamy—who were trying, as Eliade wrote in 1937, “to stabilise the unity of the traditions and symbols” of the various civilisations.<sup>62</sup> Yet it is to be noted that this model, according to Eliade, might aid human self-understanding and so “provide the means for cultural renewal.”<sup>63</sup> This testifies to an utterly different conception not only of the modern world and of its destiny, but also of the salvific epistemic potential of *modern* religious studies.<sup>64</sup>

Hakl makes some original contributions to this topic. The 1998 article on Eliade is, in fact, an introduction to the volume *Über das Initiatische*, where Hakl had collected five essays previously published by Evola in the German journal *Antaios*. This was a bimonthly cultural magazine issued from 1959 to 1971 by publisher Ernst Klett (1911–1998) and edited by novelist and philosopher Ernst Jünger (1895–1998) together with Eliade. As Hakl’s ground-breaking research on the subject has shown,<sup>65</sup> the history of the magazine is as follows. In the 1940s, Klett and Jünger decided to found a conservative cultural journal, which was to include names as prestigious as physician Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976), writer Friedrich Georg Jünger (1898–1977), and philosophers Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). The project initially foundered. It was then resumed in 1957, when Jünger offered Eliade the role of co-director, as the journal’s fields of investigation were to be myth, symbolism, and archetypes, against the materialism and rationalism then prevailing. Eliade accepted the proposal and Philipp Wolff-Windegg (1919–1991), Klett’s nephew, became the editor-in-chief of the periodical.<sup>66</sup> The journal had a circulation of 2000–3000 copies. It ceased publication in 1971 at the behest of the publisher.

In his works about *Antaios*, Hakl’s particular contribution is, again, his ability to grasp Evola’s little-known relations with the German cultural world. Hakl, in effect, restores five “submerged” Evolian texts, published in *Antaios* between 1960 and 1970.<sup>67</sup> But more generally, he succeeds in showing the existence of a hidden gap in 20th-century intellectual history. Having acquired an important part of the correspondence between Wolff and the contributors to the journal, Hakl was able to offer an authoritative inside view of this original publishing venture, in which leading intellectuals like Eliade and Jünger collaborated with explicitly perennialist authors such as Evola, Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), as well as with renowned academics such as Henry Corbin (1903–1978), Pio Filippini-Ronconi (1920–2010), Gherardo Gnoli (1937–2012), and Elémire Zolla (1926–2002). Clearly, it is from a similar line of inquiry that, in 2001, Hakl’s monograph on Eranos had originated.<sup>68</sup> As Siniscalco

notes, this cultural journal embodied “a counter-philosophical perspective that is at the same time intrinsic to Western speculation [. . .]. I refer here to mythical-symbolic thought [. . .]. This tradition sees reality as a specific kind of totality that allows human perception to take place through the structures of myth and symbols.”<sup>69</sup> *Antaios*, then, indeed looks like a minor but interesting chapter of an “alternative intellectual history of the twentieth century.”

With regard to Evola's participation in *Antaios*, Hakl's private collection provides us with some interesting details. From a 1958 letter conserved in his archives, for instance, it appears that it was Mariano Imperiali (1905–1994) who indicated Evola to Wolff as a possible contributor to the journal. At the time, Imperiali was Secretary General of IsMEO (Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East), the public body founded in 1933 by Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944), former minister of education under the Fascist regime, and the noted orientalist Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984), to strengthen the political and cultural ties between Italy and Asia. In a previous letter Wolff, who had tried to solicit Tucci's participation in *Antaios*, asked Imperiali if he knew “any other contributors in Italy who would fit the general pattern of our venture.”<sup>70</sup> In his reply, on the 20th of November, 1958, Imperiali mentioned Evola within a list of “outstanding Italian scholars, specialised in the field of history of religion,” including the names (and addresses), in addition to Evola's, of Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959), Alessandro Bausani (1921–1988), Raniero Gnoli (1930–), and Massimo Scaligero (1906–1980).<sup>71</sup> However, Eliade himself, as Hakl deduces from the correspondence in his possession, was in no hurry to publish Evola's essays in *Antaios*. He was worried that the journal would take on too reactionary a profile, fearing possible repercussions for his academic career in the United States. In that regard, he was certainly not reassured by the racist and antisemitic tropes of Evola's discourse.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, their personal relations had become increasingly tense in the 1950s, to the point that Eliade stopped writing to Evola in 1955, and definitively broke off the relationship in 1964.<sup>73</sup> Yet, on the 5th of September, 1964, in a diary note, Eliade wrote, “Out of all the modern occultist authors whom I have read, only R. Guénon and J. Evola are worthy of being taken into consideration. I'm not discussing here to what extent their assertions are ‘true.’ But what they write makes sense.”<sup>74</sup>

It may be surprising that Imperiali, secretary of IsMEO, considered Evola as an “outstanding scholar” in the field of religious studies. In fact, this recommendation is easy to explain if we bear in mind Evola's collaboration with the periodical *East and West*, the journal of Oriental studies of Giuseppe Tucci and IsMEO. Once again, it was Hakl who brought the attention of the international public, with a series of articles in French, to the enduring relationship between Evola and Tucci, setting it in the context of Evola's orientalist activity.<sup>75</sup> The latter's publications on Tantra, Taoism, and Buddhism were indisputably pioneering in the Italian cultural panorama of the first half of the 20th century. This explains the contact between Evola and the main Italian religious scholars, from Raffaele Pettazzoni to Angelo Brelich (1913–1977). As for Tucci, Evola first met him in 1925 at the Independent Theosophical League in Rome (Tucci's first wife, Countess Nuvoloni, was a theosophist), whose leader, Decio Calvari (1863–1937), acquainted Evola with Tantrism. In 1950, Tucci founded *East and West*. Evola collaborated with this journal from the first issue until 1960, despite the fact that he was not looked upon favourably because of his political past. Moreover, Evola understood Buddhism not only as a

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Mircea Eliade, “Folclorul ca instrument de cunoaștere,” *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* 4, no. 4 (1937): 137–52, reprinted in Mircea Eliade, *Insula lui Euthanasius* (Bucharest: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, București, 1943). Quoted in Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 112.

63

Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (London: Routledge, 1998), 295.

64

Pisi, “I ‘tradizionalisti,’” 72.

65

Hans Thomas Hakl, “‘L'effetto, pur non esteso, è stato profondo come quello d'una sonda.’ Breve storia della rivista ‘Antaios,’ curata da Mircea Eliade ed Ernst Jünger (1959–1971),” in *Cenacoli, circoli e gruppi letterari, artistici, spirituali*, ed. Francesco Zambon (Milan: Medusa, 2007), 247–70; Hakl, “‘Den Antaios kenne und missbillige ich. Was er pflegt, ist nicht Religio, sondern Magie!’ Kurze Geschichte der Zeitschrift ANTAIOS,” *Aries* 9, no. 2 (2009): 195–232; Hakl, “Julius Evola e Antaios,” *Studi Evoliani* 2011, 79–89; Hakl, “Presentazione: Julius Evola e ‘Antaios.’ Una storia editoriale,” in Julius Evola, *Antaios (1960–1970)*, ed. Luca Siniscalco (Rome: Fondazione Evola-Pagine, 2019), 7–17.

66

He was the real *deus ex machina* of the publication—an “autarch,” as Hakl calls him—since, for different reasons, both Jünger and Eliade took no interest in the realisation of the magazine, reserving the right to publish in it their own contributions on a regular basis.

67

Julius Evola, “Das Symbol, der Mythos und der irrationalistische Irrweg,” *Antaios* 1 (1960): 447–58; Evola, “Geistige Männlichkeit und erotische Symbolik,” *Antaios* 3 (1961): 283–97; Evola, “Über das Initiatische,” *Antaios* 6 (1964): 184–209; Evola, “Zeitlichkeit und Freiheit,” *Antaios* 9 (1967): 86–100; Evola, “Vom Abendland-Mythos,” *Antaios* 11 (1970): 30–47. These texts have recently been collected in an Italian edition (see above, footnote 65).

68

Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013); or the German version: *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos. Unbekannte Begegnungen von Wissenschaft und Esoterik. Eine alternative Geistesgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* [Bretten: scientia nova, 2001].

69

Siniscalco, “Antaios,” 123.

70

Letter from Philipp Wolff to Mariano Imperiali, November 8, 1958 (Hakl's archives).

71

Letter from Mariano Imperiali to Philipp Wolff, November 20, 1958 (Hakl's archives).

72

Hakl, “Presentazione: Julius Evola e ‘Antaios,’” 15–16.

This happened after the publication of Evola's autobiography *The Path of Cinnabar* (1963), mentioning Eliade's past sympathy for the Iron Guard, the revolutionary fascist movement created by Corneliu Codreanu in 1927.

Quoted in Bordaș, "The difficult encounter," 138.

Hans Thomas Hakl, "Giuseppe Tucci entre études orientales, ésotérisme et Fascisme (1894–1984)," *Politica Hermetica* 18 (2004): 119–36 (expanded version in *Archæus* 10, nos. 1–2 [2006]: 231–50); Hakl, "Julius Evola et l'histoire comparée des religions," in *Études d'histoire de l'ésotérisme*, ed. Jean-Pierre Brach and Jérôme Rousse-Lacordaire (Paris: Cerf, 2007), 83–96 (Italian trans. "Julius Evola e la storia comparata delle religioni," *Arthos* 16 [2008]: 30–43). In "Julius Evola et l'histoire comparée des religions," Hakl observes that outside Italy, Evola is known first of all "as an esotericist of perennialist orientation, then as a leading representative of Dadaism in Italy, and finally, above all, as the author of political treatises of fascist and racist tendency (*sui generis*)" (83), noting: "Less well known, however, is his contribution to the comparative history of religions. Although he was not a specialist in this field, and never considered himself as such, Evola was linked to numerous famous representatives of this field, of whom he studied the then available literature, both primary and secondary, and contributed with his books and articles to a knowledge, albeit one-sided, of Asian religions and worldviews" (83). In support of these assertions, Hakl recalls Evola's early study on the *Tao-te-ching* (1923); *The Man as Power* (1925), the first book on Tantric yoga published in Italian; the references to Hindu and Islamic themes present in *Revolt against the Modern World* (1934); and, finally, Evola's description of Buddhism in *The Doctrine of Awakening* (1943), defined by Anagarika Govinda (born Ernst Lothar Hoffmann; 1898–1985), the first European to receive the honorary title of lama, as "the most intrinsically true book on this subject" (quoted in Sandro Consolato, *Julius Evola e il buddismo* [Borzano: SeAR, 1995], 217).

Hakl, "Julius Evola et l'histoire comparée des religions," 92.

Quoted in *Eliade e l'Italia*, ed. Marin Mincu and Roberto Scagno (Milan: Jaca Book, 1987), 253.

Mircea Eliade, *Jurnal*, December 20, 1964. Quoted in Bordaș, "The difficult encounter," 139.

Bordaș, "The difficult encounter," 139.

The proceedings of the conference were published in the first volume of the journal *Politica Hermetica* (1987).

metaphysical and initiatory path, but as a truly "aristocratic" and "warrior" doctrine. These views did not match Tucci's opinions at all.<sup>76</sup>

### *Rubedo, or the alchemical success: Evola in academia*

In spite of his enduring connection with the aforementioned scholars, Evola never had a particularly peaceful relationship with academia, and always complained of unpleasant ostracism from the institutions. From his standpoint, universities represented the epistemic embodiment of the modern world, and thus by their very nature were impervious to traditional methods and truths. At best, one could hope to allow some pale metaphysical glow to penetrate their opaque halls. Thus, in a famous letter sent to Eliade in 1950, Evola applauds the idea of "introducing some Trojan horse into the university citadel," convinced that his interlocutor's intention was to bring the founding ideas of perennialism into academic discourse, after suitably clothing them in scholarly terms.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, Evola did not receive much academic recognition during his lifetime. The reasons for this are effectively described by Eliade himself in a diary note written in 1964: "Abroad, poor J. Evola is viewed as an ultra-fascist."<sup>78</sup> Eliade goes on to provide a detail, as anecdotal as it is revealing: "The copy of the English translation of his book on Buddhism in Swift Library is disfigured with polemical annotations (written in indelible lead!): they say (even on the cover) that Evola is a fascist and a 'racist,' that his theories about 'Aryans' were borrowed from A. Rosenberg," "Evola," concludes Eliade, "tries to appear indifferent to such criticisms, although he prefers them to the 'conspiracy of silence' of which he claims he has suffered all his life."<sup>79</sup>

Yet this alleged "conspiracy of silence" that so irritated Evola was destined to end after his death. Already in 1986, an important conference took place at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, which had hosted since 1979 a chair of "History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe," held by Antoine Faivre (1934–2021). The title of the conference was "Métaphysique et politique: R. Guénon et J. Evola."<sup>80</sup> This event also included presentations by critical scholars, such as sociologist Franco Ferraresi (1940–1998), and stands out as a first important example of a "secular" and historically-oriented examination of Evola's thought. Later on, the interest for Evola would grow. In this process of disclosure, Hakl's publications indeed played a significant role. With his translations in the 1980s, but above all with his subsequent articles in German, English, and French, Hakl had contributed to presenting Evola to an international readership in a different light. In spite of his inescapable political "distortions," Evola had clearly been a significant personality in 20th-century intellectual history. His theoretical contributions—those concerning Eastern spiritualities and hermeticism in particular—had interacted with mainstream culture more than many were willing to admit. This was confirmed by his intense and lasting relationships with personalities such as Eliade and Tucci, and by his contributions to journals like *East and West* and *Antaios*.

Obviously, this enterprise was not destined to convince everyone. Broadly speaking, however, Hakl largely succeeded where Evola's Italian apologists had failed. The fact is that he had chosen a different approach. Instead of trying to blur, or to minimise, Evola's relations with the far right, or (conversely) to show the intrinsic topicality of his political



thought, Haki had trodden a more pragmatic path. On the one hand, he had presented Evola non-apologetically; he had identified with greater precision the sources of his thought, and retraced meticulously its formative process. On the other, he had skilfully captured the resonances between his discourse and that of some sectors of 20th-century humanities, bringing to light previously unknown information. By this factual approach, enhancing Evola's *relational* and *contextual* importance (in fields other than the recent far-right Italian politics), Haki had managed to draw a more complete, objective, and scholarly profile of Evola and to show his relevance within the cultural history of the 20th century. Of course, publishing in languages other than Italian helped Haki's strategy in no small measure. In addition, a more general ideological and cultural shift that took place during the 1990s and the 2000s (see below) also played a role. Yet, no matter how successful it might have been, this strategy suffered some further (and inevitable) setbacks and reactions.

A significant moment in this process occurred in 2005. That year Haki wrote two important encyclopaedic entries on Evola, both in English. The first was published in Brill's *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (DGWE), whose programmatic value cannot be overestimated.<sup>81</sup> Edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1961–), professor of “History of Hermetic Philosophy” at the University of Amsterdam, then President of the newly created European Association for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), together with Antoine Faivre, Jean-Pierre Brach, and Roelof van den Broek, the DGWE was the first scholarly attempt to organise, in a coherent encyclopedic form, knowledge about Western esotericism from antiquity to the present day. This volume thus represented a perfect calling card for a new academic field: the history of Western esoteric currents. The second publication is in some ways even more striking. Here Evola is placed in a wider context: the monumental *Encyclopedia of Religion* in fifteen volumes, published by Macmillan as the second edition of Mircea Eliade's classic *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987).<sup>82</sup>

While the first article focuses on Evola as an esotericist, the second retraces Evola's entire intellectual itinerary. Once again, Haki emphasises Evola's ties with the cultural networks we have already mentioned and, in particular, with Mircea Eliade, then assesses his orientalist writings. After mentioning Evola's “efforts in popularizing Asian religion,” Haki correctly points out that “his work in comparative religion was more about revealing paths that could extract modern humans from rampant materialism and lead them to spiritual freedom.”<sup>83</sup> Consequently, “Evola's religious-historical works examine only selected aspects corresponding to this quest, and they are unsuitable as surveys.”<sup>84</sup> Haki does not omit Evola's closeness to the fascist establishment, nor his sympathy for Nazism and the SS. Such a sobering and matter-of-fact biographical and intellectual sketch, however, did not fail to provoke fierce reactions. In the collective volume *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism* (2008), German scholar Horst Junginger (1959–), a specialist in anti-Semitism, subjected both Haki and the editors of the *Encyclopedia* to a violent indictment for having given space to Evola, defined—quite generously, in a sense—“today's most important right wing intellectual in Europe” and “the most influential post-war fascist.”<sup>85</sup> Junginger criticises, among other things, Haki's strategy, consisting in artfully “connecting [Evola] with prominent historians of religions such as Raffaele Pettazzoni, Karl Kerényi, Angelo Brelich, Giuseppe Tucci, Franz Altheim, and, above all, Mircea Eliade.”<sup>86</sup>

81

Hans Thomas Haki, “Evola, Giulio Cesare,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, in collaboration with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 345–50.

82

Hans Thomas Haki, “Julius Evola,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 2005), 2904–7.

83

Haki, “Julius Evola,” 2906.

84

Haki, “Julius Evola,” 2906.

85

Junginger, “From Buddha to Adolf Hitler,” 169. “What calls more attention,” writes Junginger, “are the reasons compelling the editors to include such an article. It remains unclear on the basis of which sort of accomplishments (religious, scientific, or political) they decided to reserve six columns for today's most important right wing intellectual in Europe [. . .]. Since Evola had nothing produced in terms of ordinary scholarship, Haki's aim must be to connect him with prominent historians of religions such as Raffaele Pettazzoni, Karl Kerényi, Angelo Brelich, Giuseppe Tucci, Franz Altheim, and, above all, Mircea Eliade. Even if the editors had no knowledge of the real identity of the author it is scandalous to honour one of Europe's most influential postwar fascist, someone who has written the preface of the heinous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, with an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Having achieved such an excellent opportunity of advertising Evolian thoughts, Haki correctly refers to this sort of self-fulfilling prophecy in writing: ‘Academic circles have become increasingly interested in Evola.’ ” Junginger, “From Buddha to Adolf Hitler,” 169.

86

Junginger, “From Buddha to Adolf Hitler,” 169.



On this point, see for instance Eliade's own remarks in *La prova del labirinto. Intervista con Claude-Henri Rocquet*, trans. Massimo Giacometti (Milan: Jaca Book, 1990), 99–100.

David M. Wulff, review of *Encyclopedia of Religion*, by Lindsay Jones, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 1 (March 2007): 133–5, 133.

Urban, *Tantra*, 173. The italics are mine.

Hans Thomas Hakl, review of *Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola*, by Paul Furlong, *Politica Hermetica* 28 (2014): 185–95, 185.

Stéphane Oppes, “Julius Evola,” in *Nuovo Dizionario di Mistica*, ed. Luigi Borriello, Edmondo Caruana, Maria Rosaria Del Genio and Raffaele di Muro (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), 778–80. On this topic, see *Studi Evoliani* 2016.

These arguments, however, seem to utterly miss the point. The connections between Evola and the scholars cited above, though not all of the same nature and relevance, constitute a real and significant historical fact, not an arbitrary whim of Hakl, who helped provide information on such matters for the English-speaking audience. All this casts a good amount of light, in particular, on the occult origins of a scholarly paradigm—Eliade's phenomenology—that represented a pivotal point in contemporary religious studies, especially in the United States.<sup>87</sup> On another level, we can also note that the *Encyclopedia* contains entries on Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), Annie Besant (1847–1933), and René Guénon, belonging to the same cultural galaxy from which Evola's thought sprang. The presence of these entries, dedicated to some of the leading figures of 20th-century esotericism, gives rise to a further observation. Evola can undoubtedly be considered as a *producer* of historical-religious discourse—albeit mostly incompatible with current academic approaches—but also, in turn, as a historical-religious *object*. There is nothing anomalous, then, about the fact that such a “mega-encyclopedia, which stands at the pinnacle of complexity and comprehensiveness,”<sup>88</sup> devotes space to some relevant manifestations of 20th-century alternative spirituality, such as the so-called “Traditionalist School” or the New Age. In view of all this, one can seriously doubt that Evola's political orientations, although understandably disturbing for many, can alone constitute a reason for censorship.

#### *Alchemia denudata, or the philosophical gold*

Despite the resistance, the breach was now open: Evola had become, for all intents and purposes, an object of academic study. In 2008, Hugh Urban made a momentous statement: “To this day, Evola remains *one of the most enigmatic, poorly understood, and yet influential figures in the scholarship and politics of modern Europe*. Not only has he been described as ‘arguably the most important thinker of the right radical Neo-Fascist revisionists,’ and even the ‘guru of the counterculture right,’ but he has also been very influential in the development of the history of religions.”<sup>89</sup> There is no doubt that Urban had in mind Eliade here. Three years later, this assessment was confirmed by the publication of *Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola* (2011) by Paul Furlong of the University of Cardiff. Published by Routledge, this was, according to Hakl, “the first book in English by a political scientist devoted entirely to Evola.”<sup>90</sup> Furlong's analysis does not linger on the esoteric dimension, but definitively sanctions the international recognition of Evola's relevance in the reactionary political universe of the 20th century. On a smaller scale, in 2016 an entry devoted to Evola appeared—quite surprisingly—in the *New Dictionary of Mysticism* by Libreria Editrice Vaticana, a publisher whose fundamental aim is to issue official documents of the Roman Catholic Church. This event was promptly hailed by Italian Evolian followers as the sign of a more positive appraisal of Evola among the ecclesiastic milieus.<sup>91</sup>

We will not follow in the wake of Evola's late and controversial “fortunes” in academia over the last ten years. Instead, we will focus on the further evolution of Hakl's scholarly path in this same period (2010–2020), the third phase of his trajectory. Here, Hakl could finally dwell on what for him, according to all the evidence, is Evola's main legacy: his endeavour to elaborate a “traditional” spiritual discipline, based on a comparative re-reading of Eastern and Western philosophical, religious, and occult traditions. Having contributed to a better understanding of his thought

outside of Italy, and to his international academic recognition, Hakl could now tackle the esoteric Evola head-on.

We can ascribe to this phase several essays published in academic journals, or in prestigious collective volumes, between 2010 and 2020.<sup>92</sup> In order not to disperse the focus, we will immediately point out the work which—according to the author himself<sup>93</sup>—is the most important of his contributions of this period: the essay “Deification as a Core Theme in Julius Evola’s Esoteric Works” (2018). Here one has the feeling that Hakl finally goes to the heart of the matter by enucleating what he deems to be the fundamental theme of the esoteric Evola: the tension towards a lived self-transcendence. Such a tension does not only take the form of a theoretical reflection on the notion of the “absolute individual,” inspired by philosophical idealism and subsequently by Indian doctrines, but equally aims to provide the practical means to achieve liberation. These means, explains Hakl in his text, are “practically always the same: purification; identification with higher states of consciousness (i.e., with the various gods, and spheres = liberation from the material world); and finally identification with the highest principle, which entails absolute freedom and spiritual immortality, that is, salvation.”<sup>94</sup>

At the heart of Evola’s esoteric thought, therefore, Hakl sees the attempt not only at describing abstractly, but at recognising in *history*, an experiential path toward liberation. This path rests on the one hand on a precise self-transformative tension and attitude, based on will; on the other, on the knowledge (transmitted by a tradition) of the occult constitution of man, and of his relations with the cosmic powers that innervate his spiritual physiology. Active posture and esoteric knowledge are both traits that Evola, especially in his early works, polemically contrasts with passive Christian spirituality, lacking, in his opinion, a truly initiatory backbone. Inversely, these traits constitute the core of a spiritual science which can be found in all authentically “traditional” doctrines: Tantra, spiritual alchemy, and Buddhism as described in *The Doctrine of Awakening*, which is “a detailed and long-time proven system to achieve initiation into higher realms of being through asceticism and spiritual exercises.”<sup>95</sup>

Moved by a radical disdain for modernity, Evola thus possesses the ability to peer into ancient Eastern and Western traditions—Hakl also points to his studies of the Mithraic mysteries—and to intuit within them a procedural structure for the attainment of higher and transpersonal states of consciousness, the unalterable pattern of an experiential transcendental psychology. Evola’s approach, as depicted by Hakl, can then be seen as a *pragmatic religious comparativism*, light years away from academic methods, which by delving into the past and by weaving meaningful connections among different traditions, aims to theorise a universal praxis of self-transcendence.

#### *Beyond Evola: Hakl and the Italian esoteric milieus*

While Hakl has mainly focused on Evola in his writings, it should not be forgotten that over time he devoted studies to other exponents, currents, and traditions of Italian esotericism. The first author to be mentioned is Giuliano Kremmerz, founder of the Therapeutic Brotherhood “Miriam.” Being in close contact with Kremmerzian circles, Hakl was probably the first to publish on the subject in German and English, with a particular interest in Kremmerzian practices of sexual magic.<sup>96</sup>

92

Hans Thomas Hakl, “Julius Evola and the UR Group,” *Aries* 12 (2012): 53–90 (German version: “Julius Evola und die Gruppe von UR,” *Gnostika* 46, [December 2010]: 51–65 and *Gnostika* 47 [April 2011]: 41–59); Hakl, “The Symbology of Hermeticism in the Work of Julius Evola,” in *Lux in Tenebris: The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism*, ed. Peter J. Forshaw (Leiden: Brill 2016), 334–62 (German version: “Die Hermetische Symbolik bei Julius Evola,” *Gnostika* 52 [May 2013]: 31–55); Hakl, “Deification as a Core Theme in Julius Evola’s Esoteric Works,” *Correspondences* 6, no. 2 (2018): 145–71.

93

Personal communication.

94

Hakl, “Deification,” 154.

95

Hakl, “Deification,” 164.

96

In a review, Hakl wrote: “Kremmerz [. . .] is very little known in German-speaking (but also English-speaking) countries, and the little information available in either language was mainly provided by me. I wanted this interesting magician, who despite his limited influence beyond the borders of Italy I consider a more important spiritual master than e.g. Aleister Crowley, Éliphas Lévi or Papus, not to fall into total oblivion.”

Hans Thomas Hakl, review of *La Pietra Angolare Miriamica*, by Anna Maria Piscitelli, part of “Bücher-Blick über die Sprachgrenzen hinweg,” *Gnostika* 57 (December 2015): 28–33, 28. To our knowledge, the first scholarly research about Kremmerz is to be found in the texts by Massimo Introvigne *Il Cappello del mago* (Carnago: SugarCo, 1990), 298–308; “De l’hypertrophie de la filiation: le milieu kremmerzien en Italie,” in *Ariès-Association pour la Recherche et l’Information sur l’Ésotérisme, Symboles et Mythes dans les mouvements initiatiques et ésotériques XVIIe et XXe siècles: Filiations et emprunts*, (Paris: Archè-La Table d’Emeraude, 1999), 148–56, available online at [https://www.cesnur.org/2001/archive/mi\\_kremmerz.htm](https://www.cesnur.org/2001/archive/mi_kremmerz.htm), accessed January 30, 2022. As for Hakl, see his article “The theory and practice of sexual magic, exemplified by four magical groups in the early twentieth century,” in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff and Jeffrey Kripal (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 445–78, as well as the review mentioned above (Hakl, “Bücher-Blick”).

97

See for instance Donald Sewell Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 132.

98

On the relations between Filippini-Ronconi and Tucci, see Enrica Garzilli, *L’esploratore del Duce. L’avventura di Giuseppe Tucci e la politica italiana in Oriente da Mussolini a Andreotti. Con il carteggio di Giulio Andreotti* (Milan: Memori-Asiatica Association, 2012), 1:100–108.

99

“In all probability, it was precisely the energy released by Evola’s laborious *opus* that enabled me to find my true path, which was revealed to me by someone who had acted in the Ur environment.” Pio Filippini-Ronconi, “Julius Evola: un destino,” in *Testimonianze su Evola*, ed. Gianfranco de Turris (Rome: Mediterranee, 1985), 120.

100

The magazine, founded by Gaspare Cannizzo (1938–2006), was conceived as a vehicle for a cultured traditionalism, directly inspired by the thought of the “incomparable Master” Julius Evola, whose contributions were published regularly in the review until his death in 1974. As for Filippini-Ronconi, he was often entrusted with the task of opening the magazine with an essay on his favourite topics, that is, Indo-Iranian cultures and spiritualities, or with general reflections on philosophical and epistemological issues from a perennialist perspective.

101

On the ITAS, see Nuccio D’Anna, “Aure,” and Fabrizio Frigerio, “Un ricordo degli anni dell’Istituto Ticinese di Alti Studi (1970–1973),” both in *Viator. Annuario del G.E.R.* (monographic issue entitled *Elémire Zolla. From Death to life*, ed. by Grazia Marchianò) 9, no. 1 (2005–2006): 158–63 and 164–65; Riccardo Bernardini, “Figure della trascendenza nelle culture dell’immanenza (III): Zolla all’Istituto Ticinese di Alti Studi,” *Hiram, rivista del Grande Oriente d’Italia* 1 (2015): 65–87. See also [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istituto\\_ticinese\\_di\\_alti\\_studi](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istituto_ticinese_di_alti_studi), accessed January 30, 2022.

His most relevant contributions, however, deal with the academic ramifications of Italian perennialism. In 2004, for example, he devoted an important article in French to Giuseppe Tucci, a major figure in Italian orientalism (and beyond: Tucci is often viewed as the greatest 20<sup>th</sup>-century Tibetologist<sup>97</sup>). Hakl describes Tucci’s complex and gifted personality, combining an insatiable curiosity and erudition with an interest in experiential mysticism and, in particular, Buddhism (he was convinced he had been Tibetan in a previous life). Hakl notes that Tucci did not disdain to include esoteric intellectuals such as Scaligero or Evola among his close collaborators. In the same vein, Hakl was interested in Pio Filippini-Ronconi (1920–2010). First a student and then assistant of Tucci himself, Filippini-Ronconi was eventually appointed full professor, holding the chair of Indian Religions and Philosophies at the University of Naples.<sup>98</sup> After seeing in Evola his first spiritual teacher in his youth,<sup>99</sup> he had been very close to the Italian anthroposophical circles in the 1930s, and then enlisted as *Obersturmführer* (“superior assault commander”) in the Italian Waffen SS, in which he recognised “a vein of esoteric teaching.” Later he collaborated with the traditionalist Evolian journal *Vie della Tradizione*, founded in 1971.<sup>100</sup> In addition, he was among the contributors, between 1970 and 1973, to the conferences of the Istituto Ticinese di Alti Studi (ITAS) of Lugano, founded by the philosopher Elémire Zolla (1926–2002), the Egyptologist Boris de Rachewiltz (born as Luciano Baratti, 1926–1997), and the Swiss-Italian theologian Romano Amerio (1905–1997). The Swiss city was where Zolla’s journal *Conoscenza religiosa* was launched.<sup>101</sup> Hakl rightly points out that Eranos provided an obvious “prototype” for this initiative.<sup>102</sup> As for Zolla, Hakl defined his *Conoscenza religiosa* as “one of the most interesting journals in the field of religion and esotericism in all of Europe.”<sup>103</sup> Filippini-Ronconi and Zolla are interesting as exponents of a “transitional perennialism,” acting as a link between the ideological core of Evolian traditionalism and university circles.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, Hakl devoted numerous essays to some minor but significant strands of Italian esotericism, all directly or indirectly connected to Evola. In 2012, in particular, he dedicated a crucial article—in English—to the Ur Group.<sup>105</sup> This is the first text, to our knowledge, to bring this important esoteric experience to the attention of the international public. Moreover, Hakl wrote articles on Ercole Quadrelli (1879–1948), a little-known Kremmerzian member of the Ur Group, and on the Traditional Roman Movement.<sup>106</sup> Still in the wake of this interest in Evola’s legacy, Hakl devoted a short but interesting article to the “Group of Dioscuri,” until recently shrouded in relative secrecy.<sup>107</sup> This initiatory organisation, founded in 1969 within the traditionalist Roman circles of Ordine Nuovo, had inherited themes and operative practices already in use in the Ur Group. Hakl, who claims to know some of its members personally, reconstructs the aims and methodologies of the group, which is probably still active.<sup>108</sup>

We cannot conclude this overview about Hakl, the Italian milieu and their interest for esotericism without sharing one final anecdote, which seems to possess a revealing value. We have already mentioned Umberto Eco’s polemical reactions to Evola’s first translations into German during the 1980s. Now, as anyone who has read *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988) knows, Eco was far from being immune to a fascination towards esotericism, although in his writings he would not easily depart from his habitual critical, ironic, and disenchanted stance. Moreover, he was a notorious bibliophile and was married to a German—his wife, Renata Ramge, was born in Frankfurt—which explains his particular affection for the Frankfurt Book



Fair. Given the circumstances, it appeared inevitable that he would meet Hakl again in the future. Indeed, as Hakl himself reports in his “Contradictory Obituary” published after Eco’s death, another “encounter” took place in the 1990s.

“Since I also collect old books,” writes Hakl, “[Eco and I] used to shop at the same antique dealers, because there are not many specialists in the esoteric field. At the Leipzig antiques fair in 1995, one of the best-known specialists, Wolfgang Kistemann from Berlin, was present. Eco came by and wanted to buy a beautiful antique anthology of the Rosicrucian Sincerus Renatus with early prints. Unfortunately, I had already bought that volume and paid for it, and since I was (am) Mr. Kistemann’s friend, I had gladly allowed him to exhibit it at the fair. This did not interest in the slightest Mr. Eco, who insisted on buying this book, which Mr. Kistemann, despite the author’s fame, could not do for understandable reasons. At that point Eco left the stand and declared that he would never buy anything from Kistemann again. He wanted to return the next day to get a positive response. He came back the next day, but how could Mr. Kistemann sell a book that had already been sold? Umberto Eco was angry and had to leave the fair without the book. Mr Eco’s agitation was so great that it led to an article entitled ‘Rosicrucians already taken’ in the special edition of the local newspaper published especially for the book fair.”<sup>109</sup>

The book that sparked Eco’s interest, and which is now part of Hakl’s library, is a volume collecting Johann Erhard Neithold’s *Alchymia denudata* (1723) together with three treatises by Sincerus Renatus (*alias* Samuel Richter; † about 1722). Renatus was a Silesian Pietist pastor who in 1710 revived Rosicrucianism in Central Europe by founding the secret order of the Golden Rosicrucians (Gold- und Rosenkreuzer).<sup>110</sup> After this incident, Hakl wrote to Eco, asking if he would be interested in receiving photocopies of some sections of the book, but received no reply. Interestingly enough, the name “Sincerus Renatus” had explicitly appeared in Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*, whose main character, Causabon, worked for a publishing house located in “Via Sincero Renato.” Later on, Eco admitted (could we possibly doubt it?) that the reference to the Rosicrucian author was anything but accidental.<sup>111</sup>

### Concluding remarks

“What the eyes perceive in herbs or stones or trees is not yet a remedy; the eyes see only the dross. But inside, under the dross, there the remedy lies hidden. First it must be cleansed from the dross, then it is there. This is alchemy, and this is the office of Vulcan; he is the apothecary and chemist of the medicine.”

Paracelsus

Over time, Hakl has undeniably emerged as one of the leading experts on Evola. His publications have certainly played a role in fostering a renewed interest in Evolian thought in the last three decades (1990–2020), especially outside of Italy. Through this process, many cultural taboos have been lifted. Within the academic community, it has become possible to assess Evola’s relevance in contemporary culture, as well as to gain a better understanding of how his works interfered and resonated with the surrounding field of religious studies, especially in the decades that followed the Second World War. Evola’s

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Hakl, *Eranos*, 275–77. In addition to this, see Hakl’s double review: “Omaggio a Pio Filippini-Ronconi, *La Cittadella* X/40,” *Politica Hermetica* 31 (2017): 154–8.

103

Grazia Marchianò, *Elémire Zolla: il conoscitore di segreti. Una biografia intellettuale* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006; then Venice: Marsilio, 2012), reviewed in *Politica Hermetica* 30 (2016): 199–203.

104

See Baroni, “Riviste italiane e perennialismo.”

105

Hakl, “Julius Evola and the UR Group.”

106

Hans Thomas Hakl, “Das Neuheidentum der römisch-italienischen Tradition: von der Antike in die Gegenwart,” in *Der andere Glaube. Europäische Alternativreligionen zwischen heidnischer Spiritualität und christlicher Leitkultur*, ed. René Gründer, Michael Schetsche and Ina Schmied-Knittel (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2009), 57–75; Hakl, “Italianische Esoteriker: Ercole Quadrelli,” *Gnostika* 63 (December 2018): 40–46 and *Gnostika* 64 (May 2019): 43–48.

107

Hans Thomas Hakl, “I Dioscuri,” *Gnostika* 66 (October 2020): 54–59.

108

The group was founded in Rome under the auspices of Evola, but soon formed independent offshoots in Naples and Messina—the latter was a locality whose traditionalist milieu gave rise to important developments. As we can read in Hakl’s paper, the purpose of the Dioscuri was to perpetuate “eternal Rome,” i.e., the heroic spirit of the ancient spiritual world with its deities, including the patron gods of home and family (Lares and Penates), by performing the prescribed rites on a regular basis. A temple was founded for this purpose from the beginnings. The methods of the group included breathing exercises, “magic chains,” the use of elemental symbolisms (earth, water, air, fire, and ether), and operations aimed, among other things, at opening individual chakras (Hakl, “I Dioscuri”).

109

Hans Thomas Hakl, “Ein zwiespältiger Nachruf auf Umberto Eco (1932–2016),” *Gnostika* 58 (April 2016): 49–55, 51–52.

110

On the Golden Rosicrucians, see Susanna Åkerman, *Rose Cross Over the Baltic: The Spread of Rosicrucianism in Northern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 242; Christopher McIntosh, *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 30–33; Renko Geffarth, *Religion und arkane Hierarchie. Der Orden der Gold- und Rosenkreuzer als Geheime Kirche im 18. Jahrhundert* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007); Hereward Tilton, “The Urim and Thummim and the Origins of the Gold-und Rosenkreuz,” in Hakl, *Octagon*, 2:35–70.

111

“Via Marchese Gualdi, where the Manunzio publishing house is located, takes its name from an adventurer of the same name, a figure similar to Cagliostro; and



Via Sincero Renato refers to a German clergyman of the 18th century who played an important role in the reorganisation of the Rosicrucians.” Thomas Stauder, *Gespräche mit Umberto Eco aus drei Jahrzehnten* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 50.

112

“Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl.”

113

As said above, a chair devoted to Western esotericism, held by Antoine Faivre, already existed in Paris in 1979. But a major step was the publication of a seminal book by the same Faivre, *L'ésotérisme* (Paris: PUF, 1992), offering the first historically-based definition of “esotericism” as an academic construct. Undoubtedly, *L'ésotérisme* played a major role in promoting the international recognition of this field of research. Another breakthrough event was the creation in 1999, at the University of Amsterdam, of the Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (HHP), which is today the world's leading institute for academic research in this field. See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 355–67; Marco Pasi, “Esotericism Emergent: The Beginning of the Study of Esotericism in the Academy,” in *Religion: Secret Religion*, ed. April D. DeConick (Farmington Hills: Macmillan, 2016), 143–54.

114

“Hakl was involved in this process in various ways, including through his book-collecting endeavours, his activities as a publisher, his contributions of articles to novel scholarly journals such as *Aries* and *Politica Hermetica*, his personal networking, and, not least, his involvement in the so-called Palladian Academy.” Otto, “Hans Thomas Hakl: Three Lives in One,” 31.

115

Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

116

Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 6.

117

Hans Thomas Hakl, “Julius Evola and Tradition,” in *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (Oxford: OUP, 2019), 54–69, 66.

118

“Interview with Dr. Hans Thomas Hakl.”

119

Eliade, *Journal*, November 11, 1966; quoted in Bordaş, “The difficult encounter,” 144.

wider recognition, thus, began posthumously in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as Hakl himself notes.<sup>112</sup>

It is fair to say, however, that Hakl's efforts were helped by a few circumstantial factors. The first is of course the rise, throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, of “Western esotericism” as a new domain of scholarly research in the humanities.<sup>113</sup> This field provided a specific academic framework for studying movements and authors—including Evola—that were previously simply relegated to the ghetto of irrationalism, heresy or religious extravagance. Hakl had been in touch with the academic milieus working in the field since the early 1990s, and—as Otto points out—actively took part in this process, which helped the recognition of esotericism as a crucial dimension of modernity.<sup>114</sup>

The second factor—contributing particularly to Evola's fortune among the “general public”—is a broader cultural shift that took place after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, with the end of the Cold War and the accentuation of globalisation processes. One of the consequences of this change was the rising feeling that ingrained within globalisation were profoundly threatening aspects—cultural homogenisation, loss of traditions, capitalist economy as the only global overarching narrative—and, by contrast, a yearning for deeper values and cultural roots, on which to found more solid identities. This search often took the shape of what Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) would call political—and spiritual—“retrotopias.”<sup>115</sup> “Retrotopia,” Bauman argues, is the outcome of a dramatic U-turn in the public imagination: “From investing public hopes of improvement in the uncertain and ever-too-obviously un-trustworthy future, to re-investing them in the vaguely remembered past, valued for its assumed stability and so trustworthiness.”<sup>116</sup> While the dominant climate of the “utopian” spirituality of the 1970s and 1980s, shaped by the optimistic expectation of a New Age to come, did not resonate very much with the fundamental aspects of Evola's thought, with the advent of this new, “retrotopic” phase, his traditionalism quickly gained the attention of an international audience. His books were composed, says Hakl, in an “almost ‘magical’ writing style, which is on the one hand precise and logical, and on the other hand able to evoke ‘eternal’ myths.”<sup>117</sup> Based on a sophisticated and polemical counter-narrative, Evola's idea of “Tradition” could serve as an ideological anchor in today's chaotic transformations, and as a matrix for new identity constructions.

Talking about “myths,” in an interview we have often quoted, Hakl made a very insightful remark about Evola's appeal. “Merely confronting his work,” he said, “has the effect of setting off certain powerful thought processes,” since he “knows how to speak to unconscious levels in his readers.”<sup>118</sup> If this is the case, then Evola's work *as a whole* should probably be looked at, more than as a doctrine, as an artistic attempt—or as a “mythological creation,” as Eliade suggested as early as in 1966 in a significant diary note. “What Guénon and the other ‘hermeticists’ say about ‘Tradition,’ ” Eliade wrote, “must not be understood on the plane of *historical* reality (as they claim). These speculations constitute a universe of systematically articulated meanings; they are to be compared with a great poem or novel [. . .]. All these global and systematic interpretations constitute, in fact, *mythological creations*, very useful for understanding the World; but they are not, as their authors believe, ‘scientific explanations.’ ”<sup>119</sup>

The *mythological dimension* of Evola's work may explain its success in a time like ours, characterised on the one hand by a lack of coherent and

meaningful narratives,<sup>120</sup> and on the other (as we have said above) by a widespread longing for a distant, idealised past, seen as a remedy to the unintelligible turbulence of the present. Yet there is another aspect to consider. Deeply-seated in Evola's discourse, there is also what Paul Ricœur (1913–2005) calls a “hermeneutics.” Since modern rationality has severed links with the sacred, says Ricœur, interpretation is the only instrument through which today's individuals, incapable of believing, can retrieve some of the spiritual power of the symbols of old: “We can believe only by interpreting. It is the ‘modern’ mode of belief in symbols, an expression of the distress of modernity and a remedy for that distress.”<sup>121</sup> By delving into the lore of ancient religious and esoteric traditions, Evola was able to give new meaning to a rich array of symbolic contents—cogently woven together within the overarching texture of his mythology—thus offering an original *hermeneutics* to those who experience the “distress of modernity.” If, as Ricœur puts it, “hermeneutics, as an acquisition of ‘modernity,’ is one of the modes by which that ‘modernity’ transcends itself, insofar as it is forgetfulness of the sacred,”<sup>122</sup> we can say that in spite of all appearances Evola *did* fulfil his original mission: transcending modernity.

However, as most readers of this paper know, Evola's legacy is far from being all sunshine and rainbows. Still today, this author can be said to be subject to three distinct types of stigma. The first stigma is an *epistemic* one, and feeds on the dichotomy between rationalism and irrationalism. For many readers Evola's thought is undermined by too many fallacies to be seriously taken into account—and is thus rejected *en bloc* without further investigation. The second stigma is—obviously—*political*. According to this perspective, Evola should simply be banned from public discourse because of his political agenda, resting on a reactionary mindset and tending to legitimate—although from a highly idiosyncratic point of view—some of the most dreadful experiences of 20th-century political history, such as Fascism, Nazism, racism, and antisemitism. The third stigma is of a *religious* nature. Even within many esoteric milieus, Evola is sometimes regarded as a sort of dangerous heresiarch, because of his relentless emphasis on individual affirmation and of his misogynistic and reactionary stances (not to mention his radical disdain for Christianity, which is not made to please all those who feel, in one way or another, still connected to the Christian tradition). Despite the relative success that Evola has recently enjoyed, therefore, a certain mistrust persists—underpinned as it is by sound historical and moral reasons.

As historians, we can consider both the success of Evola's discourse, and the strong reactions to it (going hand in hand with different marginalisation and exclusion strategies), as the markers of a *cultural novelty* to which society reacts ambivalently. This set of polemical and apologetic reactions allows us to glimpse the perimeter of a new discursive field—we can call it “esoteric traditionalism”—formally distinct from those already existing in early 20th century Italy; a field whose emergence was to disrupt the existing cultural patterns. While presenting themselves as “traditional,” their representatives steered away not only from the typical discursive regimes of modernity (for instance, those of “official” philosophy and science), but also from those of *premodern* ones (those defended by the Churches, as a device for regulating beliefs on an authoritarian basis). The new space was forged by bringing together ancient materials (comparative mythology, symbolic hermeneutics, narratives of civilisational decline) within a new epistemic and discursive framework, made available by early 20th century

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According to sociologist Hervieu-Léger, for instance, modern societies are “amnesiac,” that is, characterised “by a growing inability to sustain a meaningful collective memory” (Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement* [Paris, Flammarion, 1999], 68). On the mythological nature of perennialist discourse, see also Francesco Baroni, “Mito ed esoterismo: il perennialismo in Guénon e Evola,” *Philosophy Kitchen. Rivista di filosofia contemporanea* 3, no. extra Mito. Mitologie e mitopoiesi nel contemporaneo (2016): 77–86.

121

Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 352.

122

Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 352.

European occultism and operating on its own principles. Through these dynamics, alternative worldviews as well as a radical reshaping of collective memory were negotiated. This unprecedented attempt, in Italy as elsewhere, was destined to leave its mark on contemporary societies, and has not yet finished generating cultural alternatives.

By presenting Evola outside the habitual dualistic and polarising frameworks (for/against, apologetic/polemic), Hakl helped us focus on the general needs that underlie this cultural novelty: the yearning for new myths (whose function, to quote Ricœur again, is to “embrace mankind as a whole in one ideal history”<sup>123</sup>); the experience of symbolism as a specific cognitive tool; and the urge of self-transcendence as a fundamental unspoken aspect of modernity. Becoming aware of these needs *per se* sets us on the path of a richer, or to employ Hakl’s phrasing, less “one-dimensional,” understanding of life.

# *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*

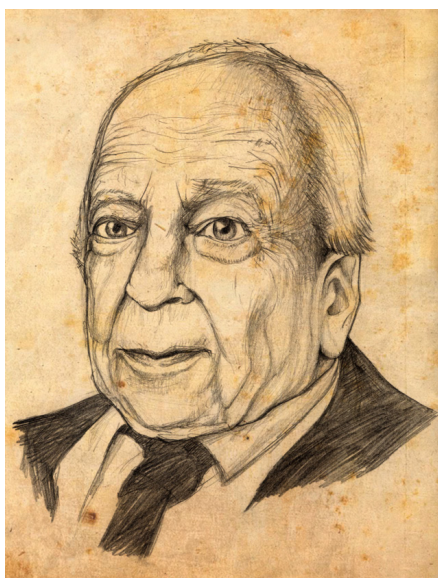
Le souci moderne pour les symboles exprime un nouveau désir d’être interpellé, par delà le silence et l’oubli que font proliférer la manipulation des signes vides et la construction des langages formalisés.<sup>1</sup>

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 book<sup>2</sup>—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.<sup>3</sup> *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.”<sup>4</sup>

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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> The importance of *Ergriffenheit* to Eranos has been noted by many scholars, including Gershom Scholem, Hans Thomas Hakl, Steven Wasserstrom, and Helmut Zander.<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur (who collaborated closely with Corbin and Eliade but never made it to Eranos<sup>8</sup>) 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 [*interpelle*]? 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.”<sup>9</sup>

Ricoeur described this explicitly theological perspective, with its obvious reference to the Christian Logos, as the “hermeneutics of faith” (*la foi*).<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> The “first naïvety” of archaic culture meant living in a world of symbols and myths without interrogating their actual *truth*.<sup>12</sup> 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 du 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> In *De l'interprétation* (1965), published in 1970 as *Freud and Philosophy*, a style of “interpretation as recollection of meaning” (associated, again, with Erasmian 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).<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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 1980s<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup>

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?"<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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;<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup>

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."<sup>25</sup>

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'imagi 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”).<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.

#### *Audiatur 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 *audiatur 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.”<sup>30</sup>

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”<sup>31</sup> 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”).<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

This strong congeniality notwithstanding, it would go too far to describe Haki’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;<sup>34</sup> and admittedly, it is not without certain weaknesses and limitations. Haki’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.<sup>35</sup> 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 Haki 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.”<sup>36</sup>

Haki 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,<sup>37</sup> 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 Haki’s desire to share with his readers as much as humanly possible from all the priceless treasures in his famous Octagon Library.<sup>38</sup> 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 Haki’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*:<sup>39</sup>

“. . . 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.”<sup>40</sup>

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

Haki, *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 Haki’s perspective, see Baroni, “Philosophical Gold” (in this issue): “his ‘fight against one-dimensionality’ . . . —as he has himself declared—underlies all Haki’s scholarly and intellectual work.” Same point in Otto, “Hans Thomas Haki” (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. Hekl 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 Asprems critique (Egil Asprems, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered: Some Methodological Notes on Esotericism and Marginality,” in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprems 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*” (Asprems adjective “inflated” being clearly pejorative and therefore unsuitable for a scholarly debate). I hope to return to this point in a separate publication.

34

Hekl, *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

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

36

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

37

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

38

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

39

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

40

Hekl, *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

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

43

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

Hekl 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.<sup>41</sup> As Hekl 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.”<sup>42</sup>

We have seen that Hekl 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.<sup>43</sup> 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 Hekl 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 *audiat et altera pars* is applied deliberately and systematically into both directions.<sup>44</sup> In technical terms, Hekl applies what is known as the principle of charity,<sup>45</sup> 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, Hekl 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 Hekl’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).<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup>



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, Vysheslavitzeff, 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, Przyluski, Reinhardt, Schneider, Smith, Suzuki, Ziegler 3: Chang, Daniélou, Hulin, Jacobsohn, van der Leeuw, Nagel, Puech, Radin, Rousselle, Rowe, Stamm, Virolleaud, Whyte, Zahan 4: Armstrong, Heyer, Holton, Jaffé, Knoll, Lauf, Proffoff, Rhys Davids, Schmidt, Ueda, Wili, 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 Hakl, *Eranos*, 463–86.

For these calculations I rely on the overview of lectures on the official Eranos website [http://www.eranosfoundation.org/page.php?page=12&page\\_name=lectures](http://www.eranosfoundation.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 Carrell, Arthur S. Eddington, Walter Y. Evans-Wentz, and T.S. Eliot (Hakl, *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 or Dangerous? The Eranos Conferences in the 1930s from the Perspective of National Socialist Germany," *Archaeus* 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 Hakl, *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.<sup>50</sup> Hakl'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).<sup>51</sup>

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 Hakl'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.<sup>52</sup> In some cases, this may have to do with Hakl's attitude of discretion towards scholars who are still alive: "Ich rühre einfach nicht gerne am Lebendigen. Es zuckt zusammen und verkrampft sich."<sup>53</sup> 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"<sup>54</sup> 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 Hakl'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,<sup>55</sup> and the relevance to such domains as art and literature;<sup>56</sup> 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"<sup>57</sup>; 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.<sup>58</sup> 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?<sup>59</sup>

### *Genius ignotus*

This brings me to what I believe to be Hakl'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.<sup>60</sup> Hakl 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).<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup> 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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Hakl, *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 Hakl's personal experiences in this respect, see *ibid.*, 463 [242].

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Hakl, *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.

56

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

57

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.

58

See the italicized names in my overview. Interestingly, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn herself seems to have been the strongest opponent of female scholars at Eranos (Hakl, *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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Hakl, *Eranos*, 25–26 [7], referring to Mircea Eliade,



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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: Redescribing 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.<sup>63</sup> 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*.<sup>64</sup>

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.<sup>65</sup> 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.”<sup>66</sup> 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.”<sup>67</sup> 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.”<sup>68</sup>

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.<sup>69</sup> While its critics and enemies have often described Eranos as “anti-modern” or (with somewhat greater accuracy) as reflecting an “anti-modern modernism,”<sup>70</sup> 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?”<sup>71</sup>

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.<sup>72</sup>

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.”<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup> 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*],”<sup>75</sup> and such images and mythical stories were no human inventions but came (in her own words) from a wholly “esoteric” source.<sup>76</sup> 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]).

66

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](http://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.

74

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’image 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* [“*Der 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.”<sup>77</sup>

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,”<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> A very similar pattern of preferences can be observed in most of the key representatives of Eranos, such as Jung, Eliade, Scholem, and Corbin.<sup>80</sup> 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.”<sup>81</sup> 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.”<sup>82</sup>

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 . . .”<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup>

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.<sup>85</sup> 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.’”<sup>86</sup> 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.”<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> 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 though 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 “*L’imago 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 Suhrawardi 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).

90

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 potentially 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.<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup>

### 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.”<sup>91</sup>

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."<sup>92</sup> 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.

# Heterography 1:

*Hans Thomas Hakl: Personal  
Reminiscences*

Joscelyn Godwin



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE

*fondazione*  
GIORGIO CINI ONLUS

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My first encounter with Thomas Hakl was through the book trade, and since this figures so largely in his life, I must mention the relevant episode in my own. From 1988 until 1992 I ran a small mail-order business for second-hand books on esoteric topics. The object was to overhaul my own library—always a working, rather than a bibliophile's collection—and to exhaust my passion for antiquarian bookshops. Some friends gave me their mailing lists; a local printer made up my typed catalogues. Inspired by those titans of the trade, Todd Pratum and Robert A. Gilbert, I wrote descriptions and comments on each book, while promoting my own works on the back covers.

Thomas ordered 28 books from my second catalogue, of which unfortunately all but six were already sold. Undeterred, he became one of my best customers, while our correspondence widened into topics on which I was writing, such as Schwaller de Lubicz, Julius Evola, and the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor. He had insights to offer on all of these, and our commerce soon became an exchange of ideas. I was eager to meet such a knowledgeable and agreeable person, but my opportunities for crossing the Atlantic were limited. However, 1992 found me on sabbatical leave in England, and invited to participate in a conference on 6–8 April in Lyon. I suggested to Thomas that he attend, and although academic conferences were not his usual habitat, he agreed. This one was called *Le Défi magique*, organized by Massimo Introvigne, the founder of CESNUR (Center for the Study of New Religions).<sup>1</sup> We found much of common interest and amusement, in a conference room decorated with posters from the Belle Époque, all featuring devils. It also proved an epochal event for the academic study of Western Esotericism, for it brought together the Sorbonne contingent of Professor Antoine Faivre, the *chargé de conférences* Jean-Pierre Laurant, and Faivre's eventual successor Jean-Pierre Brach, with the young Wouter Hanegraaff, future Professor of the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam.

The next year, 1993, saw the creation of the Octagon Library as an annex to Thomas and Franziska's fine patrician house in the outskirts of Graz. Comparisons naturally came to mind with the few other esoteric libraries accessible to qualified researchers, such as Joseph Ritman's Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica in Amsterdam, which I had known of since 1984, and Oskar R. Schlag's at the Zentralbibliothek of Zürich. I was impatient to see Thomas's collection and its unique setting, but my travels took me elsewhere. Our next meeting was in August 1994, when the Amsterdam Summer University held a series of lectures on "Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times."<sup>2</sup> We were able to reconnect with Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff, meet Joost Ritman, and see the serious study of esotericism making inroads in the academic world, and even beyond. In the same year, Thomas published "A Short Introduction to Julius Evola" in *Theosophical History*, a journal with which I had long been associated.<sup>3</sup> For over a decade he had been translating Evola's writings, collecting relevant materials, co-founding a publishing house (Ansata), and becoming the best-informed authority outside Italy on this controversial philosopher, with whom (as with the Theosophists) he shares a sympathy with the spiritual worlds of the East.

From 8–14 September 1995 Thomas attended another type of international event: the first of many "Esoteric Quests" organized by Ralph White for the New York Open Center, a holistic and broadly "New Age" institution in Manhattan. The location was the then little-known town of Český Krumlov in southern Bohemia, home of the Rosenberg family and rich in associations with late Renaissance alchemy and magic. The title of the

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Proceedings published in two volumes: Jean-Baptiste Martin and François Laplantine, eds., *Le défi magique: ésotérisme, occultisme, spiritisme*, and Jean-Baptiste Martin and Massimo Introvigne, eds., *Le défi magique: satanisme, sorcellerie* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1994).

2

Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, eds., *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

3

H. T. Hansen [pseudonym], "A Short Introduction to Julius Evola," trans. E. E. Rehmus, *Theosophical History*, V/1 (1994): 11–22.



conference, “The Rosicrucian Enlightenment Revisited,” and the subsequent volume of papers<sup>4</sup> honored the pioneering research of Frances A. Yates, of London’s Warburg Institute.<sup>5</sup> Thomas was now able to meet some of my British friends, already known to him through their publications: Adam McLean, founder of the *Hermetic Journal* and publisher of the Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks (a collection of alchemical texts), Christopher McIntosh, authority on the Rosicrucian movements, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, authority on esoteric movements in the Germanic world, and John Michell, contrarian philosopher, antiquarian, and geometrician. The auditors were mostly Americans, paying for an experience that combined lectures and workshops with immersion in the *genius loci*. In this convivial atmosphere Thomas’s circle of contacts became ever wider, and our correspondence afterwards ever more fascinating, at least to me. I wanted to capitalize on the growing excitement over these studies and on the international network of which we were a part.

In his book on Eranos, Thomas records the next event, a “winter house party” from 3–10 January 1997, and names the ten participants who gathered there from six different countries. Thanks to an English charity, the Landmark Trust, I was able to hire the Villa Saraceno, a Palladian villa near Vicenza that is under their care.<sup>6</sup> It was another magical setting, especially in winter with the log fire blazing in the frescoed salone. The purpose was to share our current interests and enjoy the informal conversations and good cheer of which public conferences never offer quite enough. A chef provided our lunches, and for the other meals we depended on our own skills, in some cases admirable. Another object was to mix established scholars with younger ones, and academics with independent scholars. I have already mentioned Antoine Faivre, Jean-Pierre Brach, Wouter Hanegraaff, and Christopher McIntosh. The others were Deborah Forman (then working with the State University of New York Press, unique in having a series in Western Esoteric Traditions), David Fideler (founder of the Phanes Press and of the journal *Alexandria*), Mark Stavish (future author of many books on

4

Some presentations published as: Ralph White, ed., *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment Revisited* (Hudson: Lindisfarne Press, 1999).

5

Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

6

See the website [https://www.landmarktrust.org.uk/landmark-italia/italia\\_villa\\_saraceno/](https://www.landmarktrust.org.uk/landmark-italia/italia_villa_saraceno/).



The “Palladian Academy” at Villa Saraceno, January 9, 1997. From left to right: David Fideler, Christopher McIntosh, Mark Stavish, Thomas Hakl, Deborah Forman, Jean-Pierre Brach, Wouter Hanegraaff, Joscelyn Godwin. Photograph © Antoine Faivre. Collection of Joscelyn Godwin.

Proceedings published as: Gianfranco de Turrís, ed., *Studi Evoliani 1998* (Rome: Fondazione Julius Evola and Europa Libreria Editrice, 1999). Includes Alessandro Grossato, “H. T. Hansen studioso di Evola,” 139–43, and H. T. Hansen, “J. Evola e la Rivoluzione Conservatrice tedesca,” 144–80.

Julius Evola, Gruppe von UR, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, ed./trans. Hans Thomas Hakl - aka H. T. Hansen, Band 1, *Praktische Grundlegung der Initiation* (Interlaken: Ansata-Verlag, 1985); Julius Evola, Gruppe von UR, *Magie als Wissenschaft vom Ich*, ed./trans. Hans Thomas Hakl - aka H. T. Hansen, Band 2, *Schritte zur Initiation: Theorie und Praxis des höheren Bewusstseins* (Bern: Ansata-Verlag, 1997); Julius Evola and the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic*, trans. Guido Stucco, ed. Michael Moynihan, vol. 1, *Rituals and Practical Techniques for the Magus* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2001); Julius Evola, Gruppe von UR, *Introduction to Magic*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin, foreword by Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 2, *The Path of Initiatic Wisdom* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2019); Julius Evola, Gruppe von UR, *Introduction to Magic*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin, vol. 3, *Realizations of the Absolute Individual* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions 2021); vol. 3 in German forthcoming.

Richard Caron, Joscelyn Godwin, Wouter J. Hane-graaff and Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, eds., *Ésotérisme, gnosés & imaginaire symbolique: mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001). Includes Hans Thomas Hakl, “Die Magie bei Julius Evola und ihre philosophischen Voraussetzungen,” 415–36.

Hans Thomas Hakl, *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos. Unbekannte Begegnungen von Wissenschaft und Esoterik. Eine alternative Geistesgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bretten: scientia nova Verlag Neue Wissenschaft, 2001); Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh with the collaboration of Hereward Tilton (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013); Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: Nabel der Welt, Glied der goldenen Kette. Die alternative Geistesgeschichte. Zweite und wesentlich erweiterte Auflage* (Gaggenau: H. Frietsch Verlag—scientia nova Verlag Neue Wissenschaft, 2015).

experiential esotericism), and Marco Pasi, then starting a career in esoteric studies which would lead to directing the program at the University of Amsterdam. Thomas gave an encyclopedic talk about the history of secret and occult movements in Italy, from Raimondo di Sangro to Piero Fenili, and his connections brought us a visit from Vittorio Fincati, another expert in that field. Mark Stavish directed a closing ritual, Ficino style, with the Orphic Hymn to Jupiter, who we felt had been the presiding deity over an extraordinary week.

Mentioning so many names has been inevitable to give even a slight impression of Thomas’s own network; and who knows how that extends through his business contacts from Switzerland to China, and through the magical schools of Italy? I was to get a glimpse of the latter during the centenary commemorations of Julius Evola’s birth. These included a conference sponsored by the Cultural Department of the Region of Lombardy, held in Milan on 27–28 November 1998, at which we both gave papers.<sup>7</sup> Here I saw Thomas at ease in yet another environment, and benefited from his introductions to Italian scholars and potential publishers. Soon afterwards I would become involved with the translation of the papers of the Gruppo di Ur, a project completed over two decades later with the English edition of the third and final volume, simultaneously with Thomas’s translation of the same into German.<sup>8</sup>

In all this time I had never been on Thomas’s home ground. It was only in July 1999, during a European tour with my son, that I was able at last to meet his wife Franziska, see the Octagon, and walk with Thomas and Ari (the hound) on their beloved mountains. I was almost overwhelmed by the wealth of sources in the library, which greatly aided my current project: an essay for the Festschrift to be presented to Antoine Faivre in September 2001 on his retirement from the Sorbonne chair.<sup>9</sup>

David Fideler had humorously christened the Villa Saraceno gathering the “Palladian Academy,” but it was not clear whether it had any future until Thomas took the initiative. He reconvened it from 13–17 June 2000 at a quiet retreat in the wine country of Styria, near the Austrian-Slovenian border. Jean-Pierre Laurant and Claire Fanger joined this party, as did Nicholas and Clare Goodrick-Clarke. A third European chair in esoteric studies (after Paris and Amsterdam) would later be founded for Nicholas at the University of Exeter. One highlight was a bus-trip to the Octagon Library, which surpassed all expectations from those who had only heard about it. Another was a surprise feast served after a steep walk in a remote alpine meadow.

The Palladian Academy took on fresh energy when Rosalie Basten appeared, like a good fairy waving her wand. She offered it the hospitality of her Templar castle, the Domaine de Taurenne, near Aups in the south of France. This brought a higher level of luxury to the sessions, with sumptuous meals and a private concert by a string quartet in the castle yard. A newcomer at the session of 23–29 June 2002 was Arthur Versluis of Michigan State University, who had just founded the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) and was planning to hold regular academic conferences. His example sparked intense discussions among the European members, who in this and subsequent meetings laid the foundations for what would become the ESSWE (European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism).

Thomas, always self-effacing in these gatherings, had meanwhile published *Der verborgene Geist von Eranos*.<sup>10</sup> This was a major scholarly work

about a more famous “academy,” the Eranos conferences and their participants, which Christopher McIntosh translated into English. In October 1996 Thomas had also launched the thrice-yearly periodical *Gnostika*<sup>11</sup> which continues to this day, unique in the German-speaking world. After the demise in 1999 of *Gnosis Magazine*, there was no rival in any language for *Gnostika*’s coverage of the whole esoteric landscape, historical and contemporary. Thomas’s regular survey of current events and recent publications in several languages is always the first place to turn, while every issue reveals some unknown document or arcane work from his library.

My later opportunities to meet Thomas were at the Taurenne symposium from 28 June–2 July 2004, the first ESSWE conference in Tübingen (19–22 July 2007),<sup>12</sup> and a conference at the Cini Foundation in Venice, organized by Alessandro Grossato (“Forme e correnti dell’esoterismo occidentale,” 29–30 October 2007).<sup>13</sup> At the latter two, which were academic events with large audiences, Thomas gave papers on aspects of modern Italian esotericism, again based on his own ever-growing archives, and he returned to speak at the third ESSWE conference in Szeged (6–10 July 2011).<sup>14</sup> With the launch of ESSWE in Europe and ASE in the United States, and the publication by E. J. Brill of the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter Hanegraaff with the collaboration of Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, and Jean-Pierre Brach (and contributions by Thomas and myself),<sup>15</sup> our field took its rightful place as an interdisciplinary area of investigation, largely but not exclusively within the Humanities. I last saw Thomas at the ESSWE conferences in Erfurt (1–3 June 2017) and Amsterdam (2–4 July 2019), by which time the discipline had fulfilled our dreams of thirty years earlier, and the torch had been taken up by a younger generation.

Many of these younger scholars and friends contributed to an astounding production of Thomas’s recent years: the four-volume set *Octagon*, one volume in each of German,<sup>16</sup> English,<sup>17</sup> Italian,<sup>18</sup> and French.<sup>19</sup> Partially inspired by the trilingual Festschrift for Antoine Faivre, this is a tribute to the influence of Thomas’s library by 94 contributors who have benefited from or admired it; and perhaps even more, a tribute to his own personality and generosity of spirit. For while Thomas has done so much to further research and impartial scholarship, he is part of the esoteric tradition itself. As such, he joins an august company of bibliophilic scholar-initiates, stretching from the fifteenth-century Neoplatonist Nicholas of Cusa, whose books are still at the Sankt-Nikolaus Hospital in Kues, Germany, to the Shaivite musicologist Alain Daniélou, whose collection is already at the Cini Foundation in Venice; to be joined—hopefully many years hence—by Thomas’s own.

11

Dr. Wolfram Frietsch unter Mitarbeit von Dr. H. T. Hakl, eds., *Gnostika: Zeitschrift für Symbolsysteme* (AAGW Archiv für Altes Gedankengut und Wissen, 1996-present).

12

Included Hans Thomas Hakl, “Die Römische Tradition,” contribution to panel on Neopaganism.

13

Proceedings published as: Alessandro Grossato, ed., *Forme e correnti dell’esoterismo occidentale* (Milan: Edizioni Medusa, 2008). Includes Hans Thomas Hakl, “Adonismo – l’adorazione di Adone e Didone. La storia intrigante di un culto magico-pagano del XX secolo in Austria, Germania e Cecoslovacchia,” 191–204.

14

Hans Thomas Hakl, “The Hermetic Symbolism of Julius Evola.”

15

Hans Thomas Hakl contributed articles on Dürckheim; Evola; Fraternitas Saturni; Heindel.

16

*Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, Band 1, *Die Suche nach Vollkommenheit, im Spiegel einer religionswissenschaftlichen, philosophischen und im besonderen Maße esoterischen Bibliothek* (Gaggenau: scientia nova Verlag Neue Wissenschaft, 2015).

17

*Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 2, *The Quest for Wholeness, mirrored in a library dedicated to religious studies philosophy and esotericism in particular* (Gaggenau: scientia nova Verlag Neue Wissenschaft, 2016).

18

*Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 3, *La ricerca della totalità, riflessa in una biblioteca dedicata alla Storia delle religioni, alla filosofia et, soprattutto, all’esoterismo* (Gaggenau: scientia nova Verlag Neue Wissenschaft, 2017).

19

*Octagon*, ed. Hans Thomas Hakl, vol. 4, *La recherche de perfection, dans une collection d’ouvrages dédiée, en particulier, aux travaux sur la religion, la philosophie et surtout l’esotérisme* (Gaggenau: scientia nova Verlag Neue Wissenschaft, 2018).



# Heterography 2:

*Libraries*

David B.



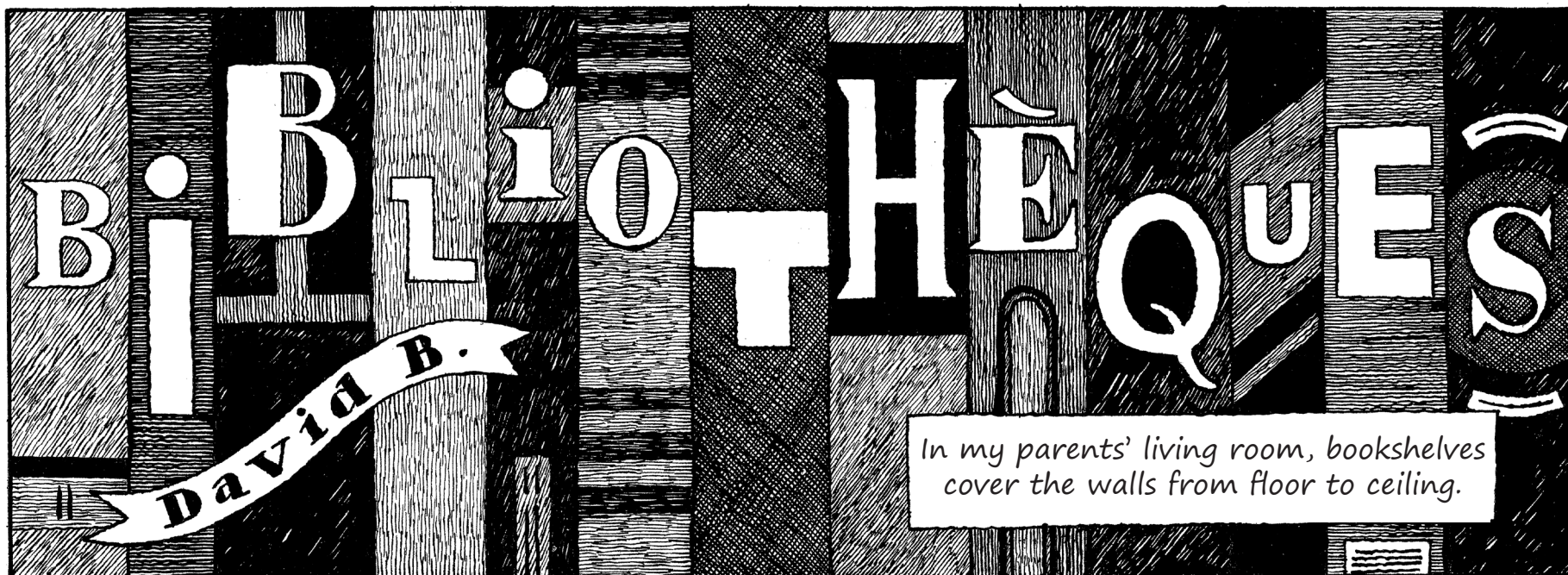
CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE

*fondazione* ONLUS  
GIORGIO CINI

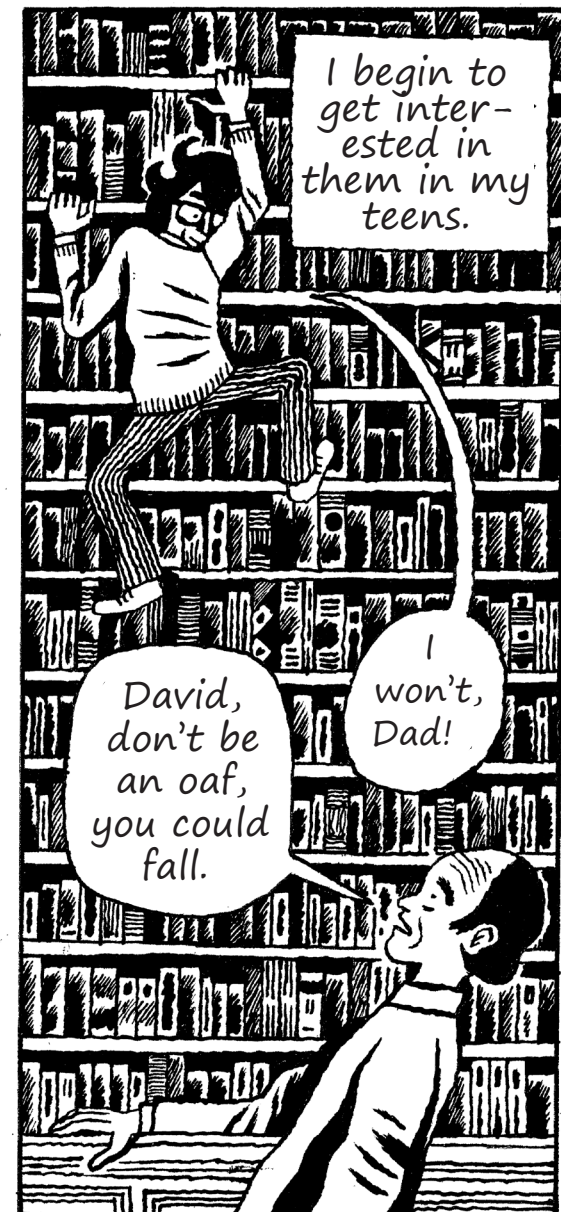
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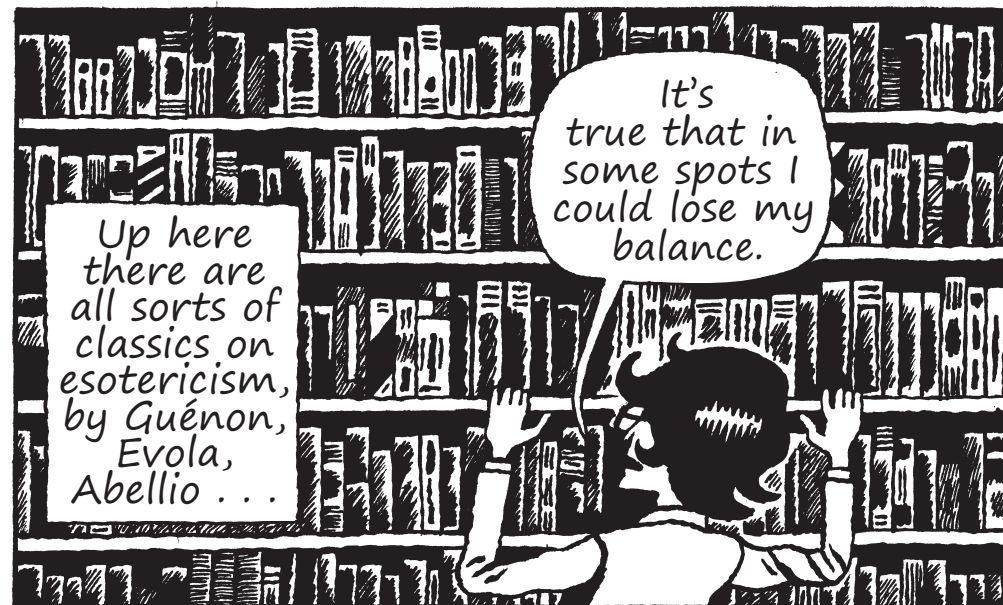
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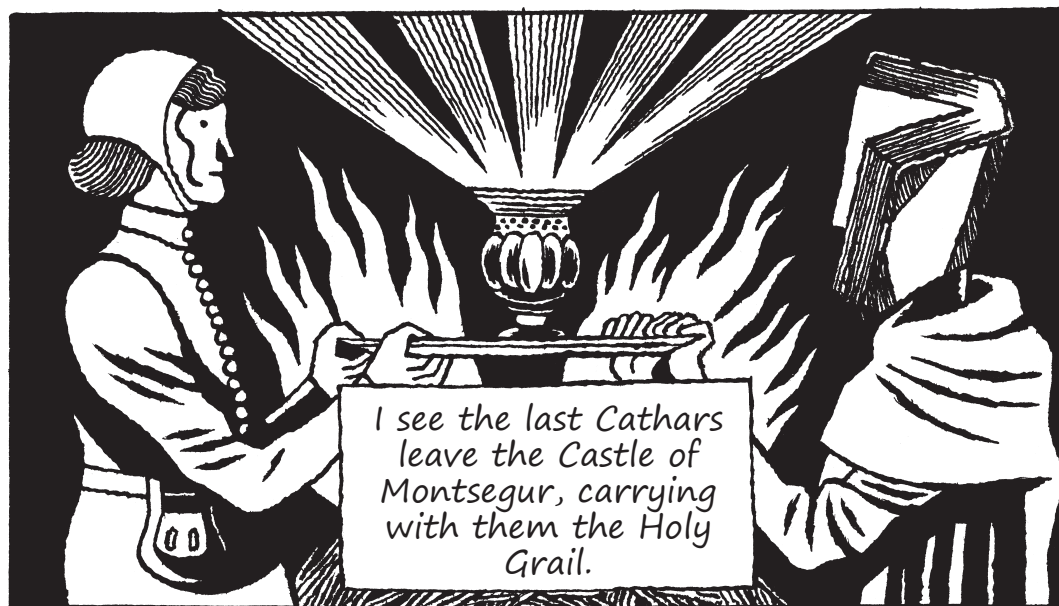
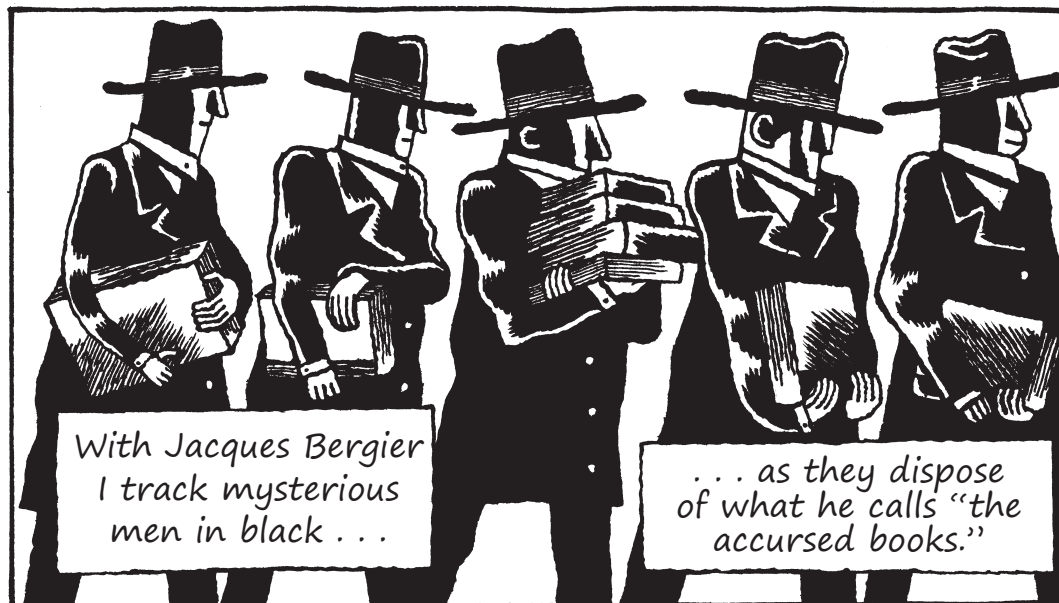




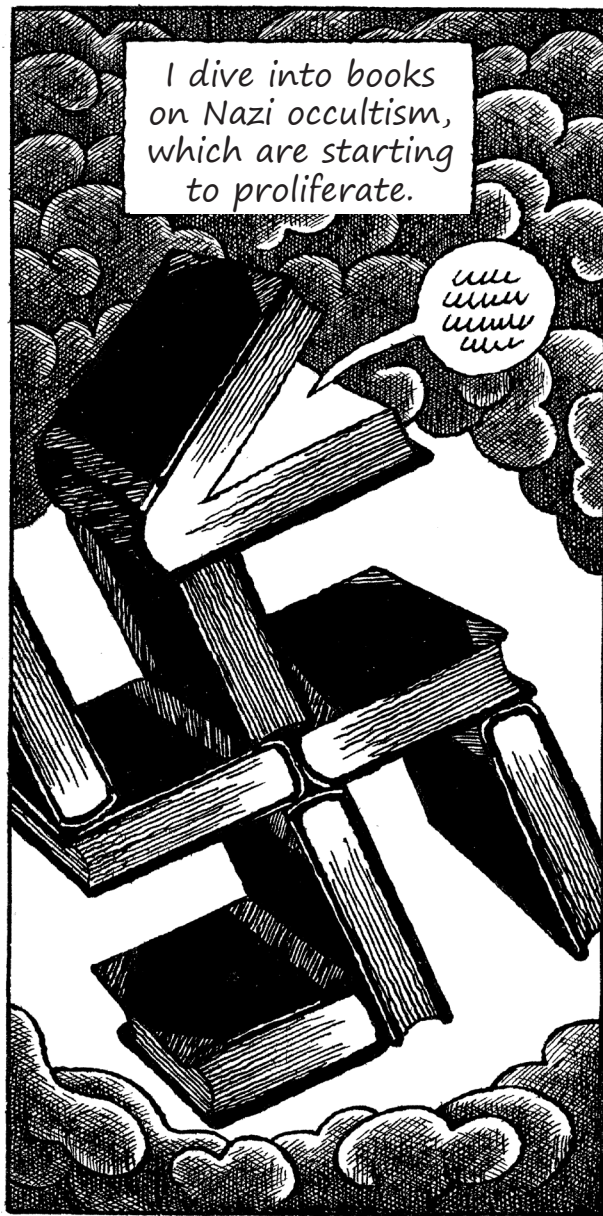
Of all these books on esotericism, the ones I like are on occult history.





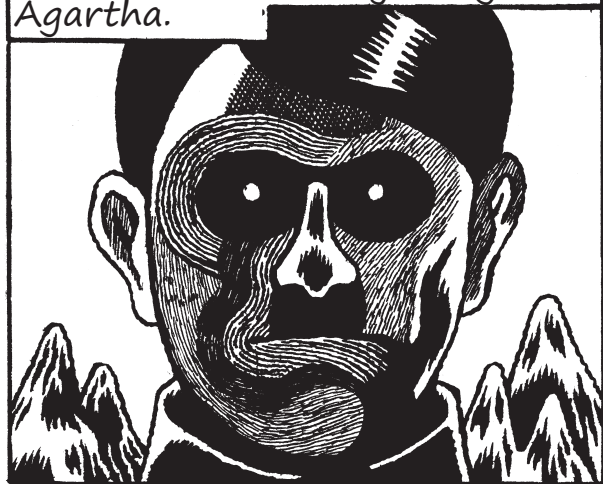








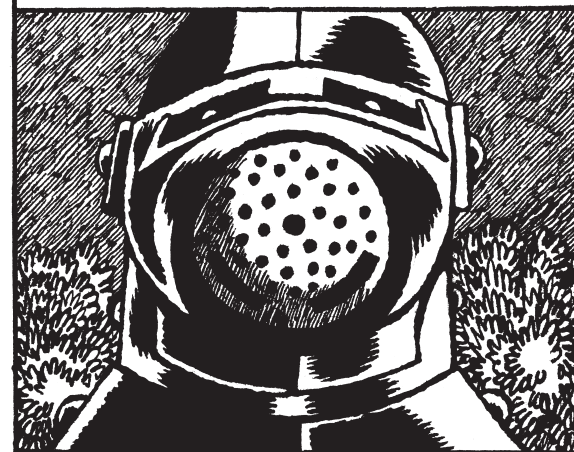
Adolf Hitler manipulated from deep within the underground realms of Tibet by mages of Agartha.



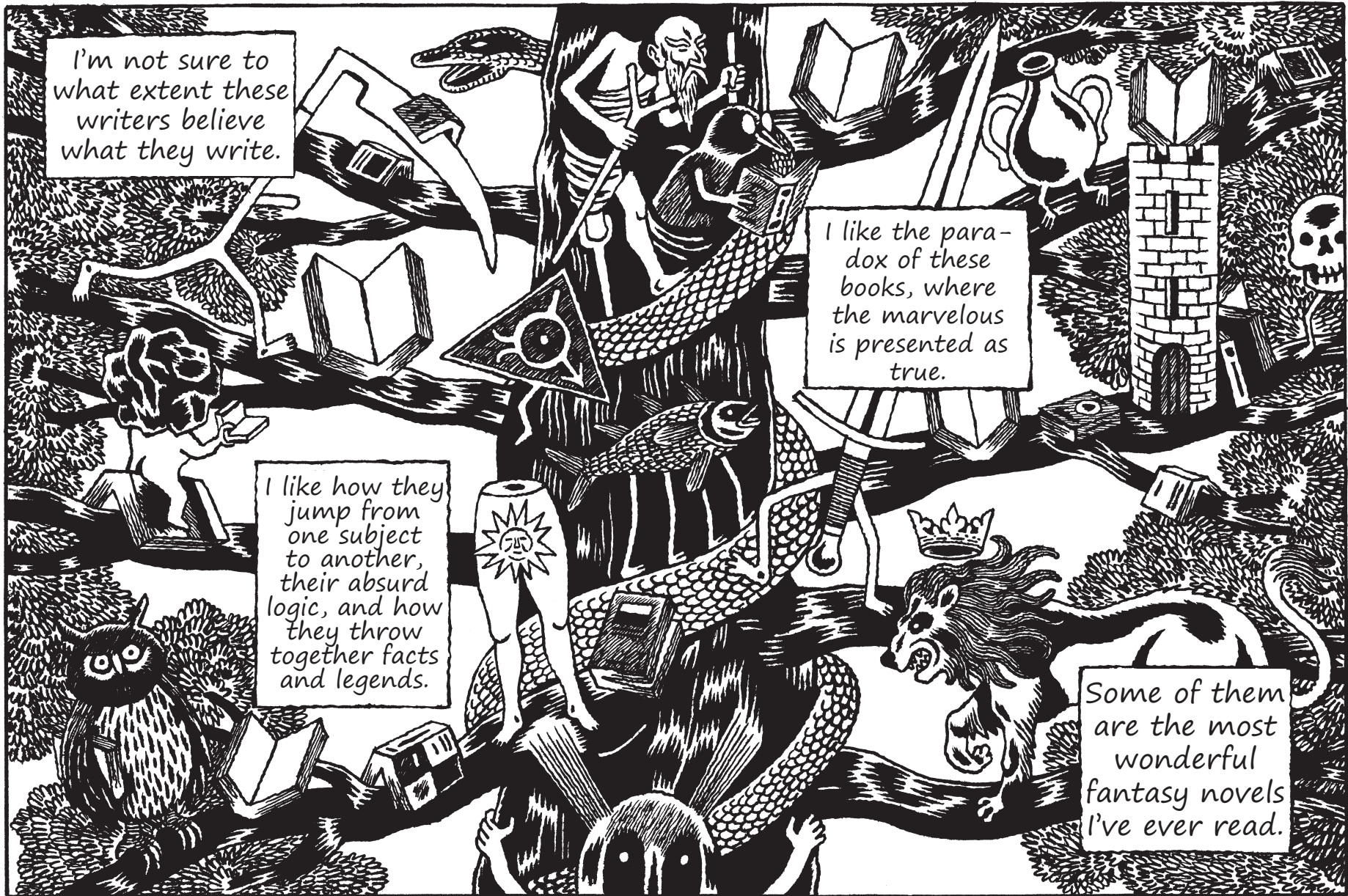
The head of Baphomet taken from the Knights Templar by the Mongols during the Battle of Legnica in Poland.



Or Joan of Arc escaping from being burned at the stake and leading another life under the name Jeanne des Armoises.











And I continue  
to peruse the  
library and find  
new books.

One of them  
intrigues  
me. It's a  
slim volume  
on the  
history of  
Catharism.

It was  
published  
by a Gnos-  
tic church  
I know  
my dad  
belonged  
to for a  
while.

This library  
is not just  
books.







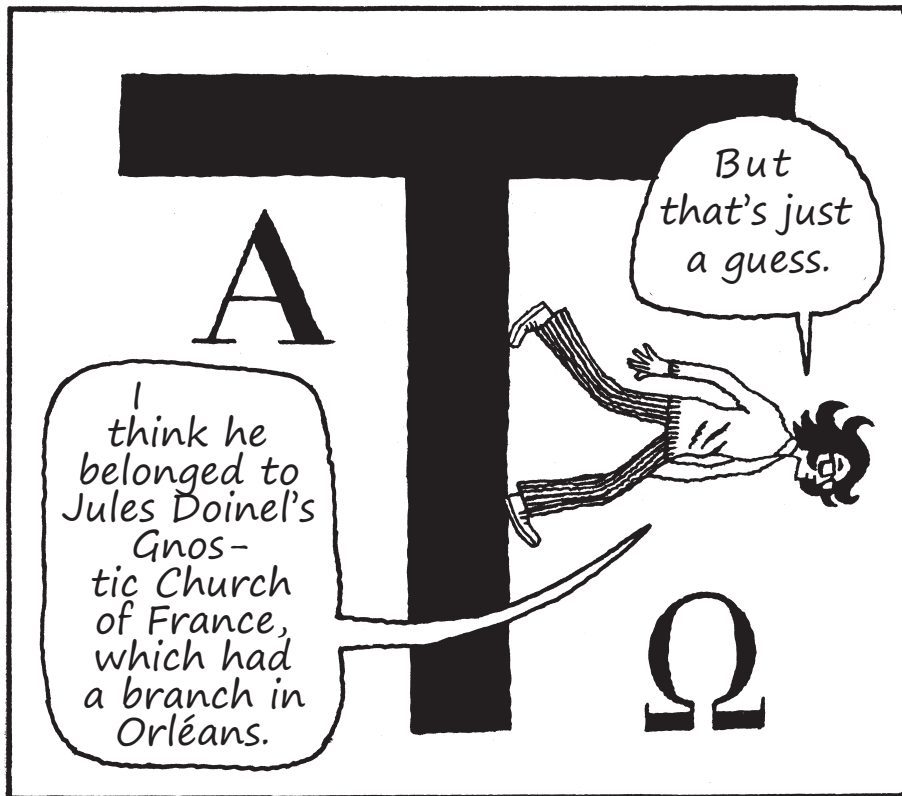




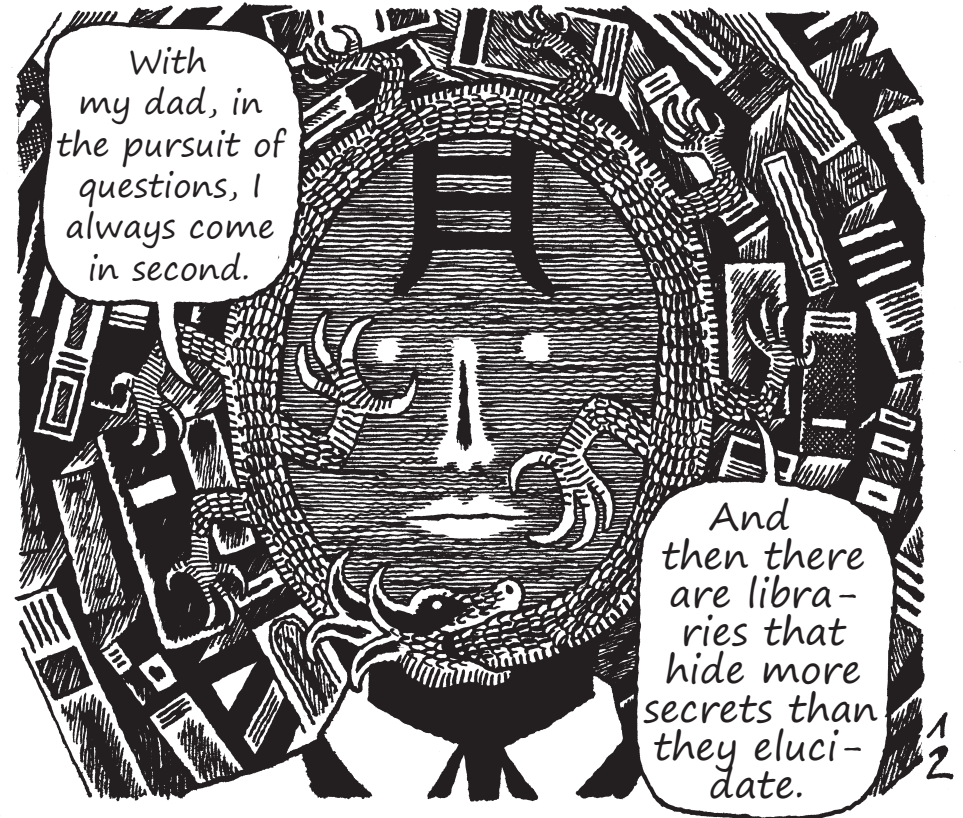
No, that's just it, I don't know.



It's an abandoned temple.



But that's just a guess.



And then there are libraries that hide more secrets than they elucidate.

David B. was born on February 9, 1959, in Nîmes. He creates art as well as scripts for comic books.

After studying applied arts at the Duperré School in Paris, in 1986 he published his first book, *Le timbre maudit* (Bayard). It was also at this time that David B. began to work regularly with the magazines *Okapi*, *Chic*, and *Tintin Reporter*. A story with five episodes, *Zèbre*, was published in *A suivre* between 1985 and 1990.

In 1990, he founded L'Association with J-C. Menu, Stanislas, Mattt Konture, Killoffer, and Lewis Trondheim. In 1991, *La bombe familiale* was published by L'Association in the Patte de Mouche collection.

In 1992, *Le cheval blême*—a collection of dreams recorded by the author over some ten years and transposed into comics—was the first book of the Ciboulette collection. It was nominated for the “Favorites” Alph'Art category at the 1993 Angoulême Festival. That same year, *Le cercueil de course* was published in the Patte de Mouche collection. David B.'s work was regularly published in *Lapin*, the magazine of L'Association.

From May 1993 to October 1994, Cornélius published a quarterly comic book by David B., *Le nain jaune*, of which there were five issues. In 1994, the publisher Automne 67 released a limited edition of a collection of drawings, *Le livre somnambule*. At the same time, Autrement published a narrative some twenty pages long, *Le Messie discret*, part of the collective *Le retour de Dieu* in the Histoires graphiques collection.

*Les quatre savants no.1* was released in 1996 by Cornélius.

*Les incidents de la nuit*, first released in Amok's magazine *Le cheval sans tête*, was published by L'Association between 1999 and 2002.

Between 1996 and 2004, David B. created his masterpiece, *L'ascension du Haut Mal* (Epileptic in the English translation). In six volumes, he recounted his childhood with his epileptic brother (“haut-mal” refers to epilepsy in French). This powerful work centers on remembering his family life. It is often considered one of the greatest masterpieces of modern comics, as attested by its multiple nominations at the Angoulême Festival. In 2000, volume 4 received the Alph'art for the best script, and in 1998 and 2004, volumes 2 and 6 were nominated for the Best Comic Book Award.

Since 1997, David B. has worked with publishers other than L'Association and has worked with other authors such as Joann Sfar, Christophe Blain, and Emmanuel Guibert.

In 2005, *L'ascension du Haut Mal* was translated by Pantheon Books, publisher of the mythic *Maus* by Spiegelman.

*La bombe familiale*, Patte de Mouche Collection, L'Association, 1991.

*Le cheval blême*, L'Association, 1992.

*Le cercueil de course*, Patte de Mouche Collection, L'Association, 1993.

*Le nain jaune*, 5 issues, Cornélius, 1993–94.

*Le livre somnambule*, Automne 67, 1994  
“Le Messie discret,” in *Le retour de Dieu*, Autrement, 1994.

*Les quatre savants*, 3 vols., Cornélius, 1996–98.

*L'ascension du Haut Mal* (epileptic), 6 vols., L'Association, 1996–2003.

*Le tengû carré*, Dargaud, 1997.

*La révolte d'Hop-Frog*, With Christophe Blain, Dargaud, 1997.

“Siwa,” in *L'Association en Égypte*, L'Association, 1998.

*Les incidents de la nuit*, 3 vols., Mimiote Collection, L'Association, 1999–2002.

*Le capitaine écarlate*, with Emmanuel Guibert, Dupuis, 2000.

*Les ogres*, with Christophe Blain, Dargaud, 2000.

*Le tengû carré*, L'Association, 2002.

*Les chercheurs de trésor*, 2 vols., Dargaud, 2003–2004.

*Babel*, Coconino Press—Vertige Graphic, 2004.

*Léonora*, With Pauline Martin, Denoël Graphic, 2004.

*Zèbre*, Tartamudo, 2005.

*Les complots nocturnes*, Futuropolis, 2005.

# Heterography 2:

*Bibliothèques*  
David B.



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE

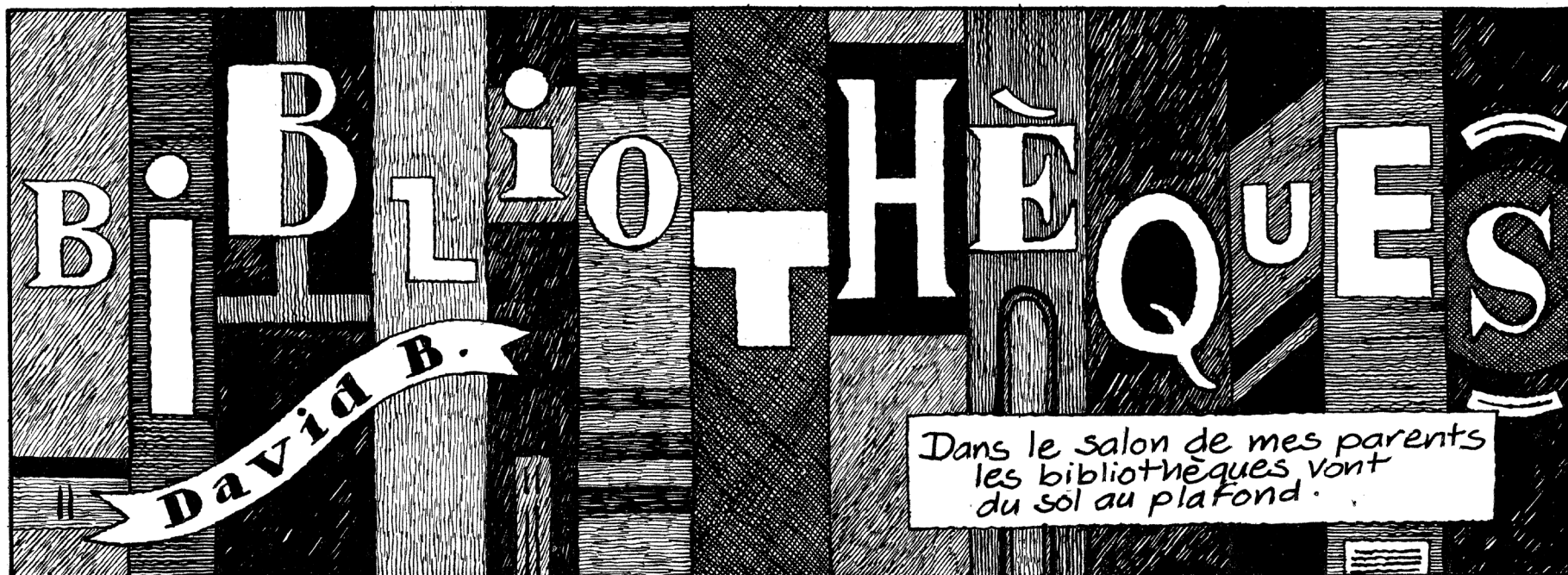
*fondazione*  
**GIORGIO CINI** ONLUS

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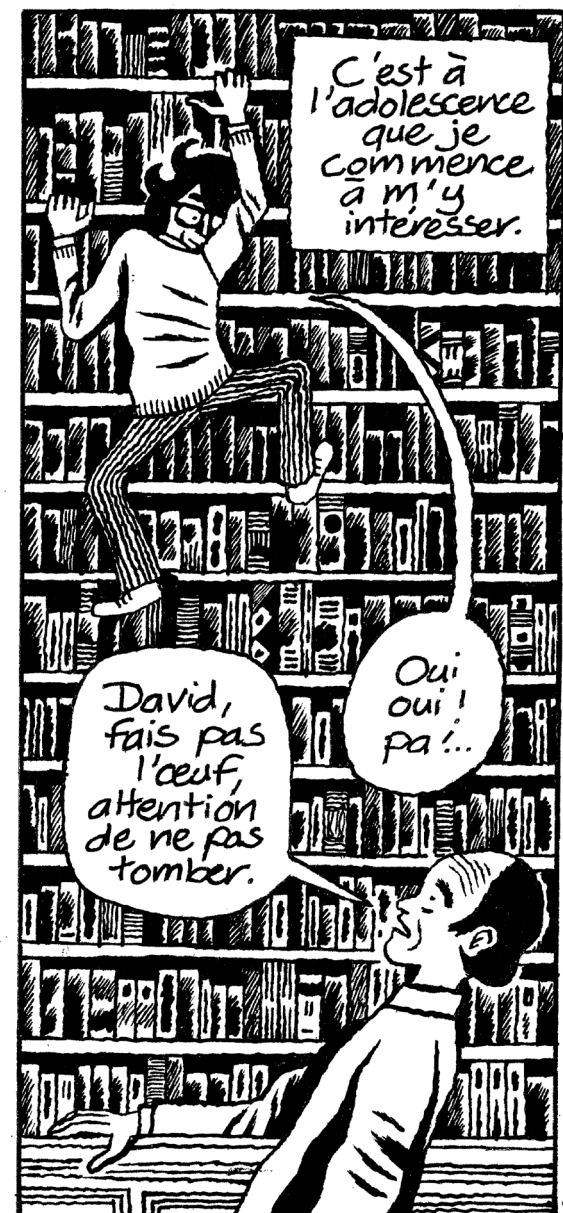
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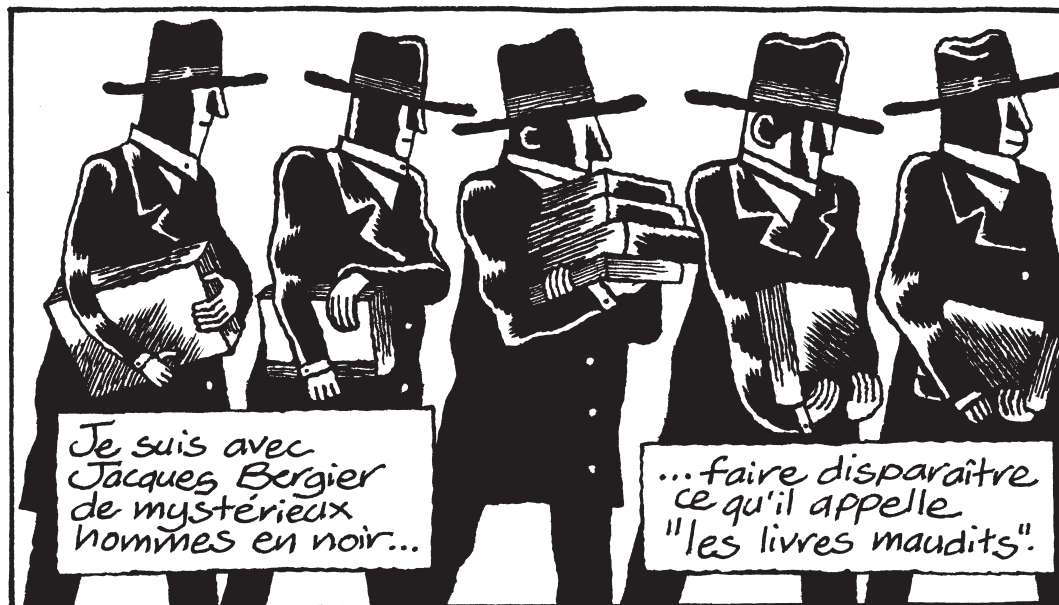




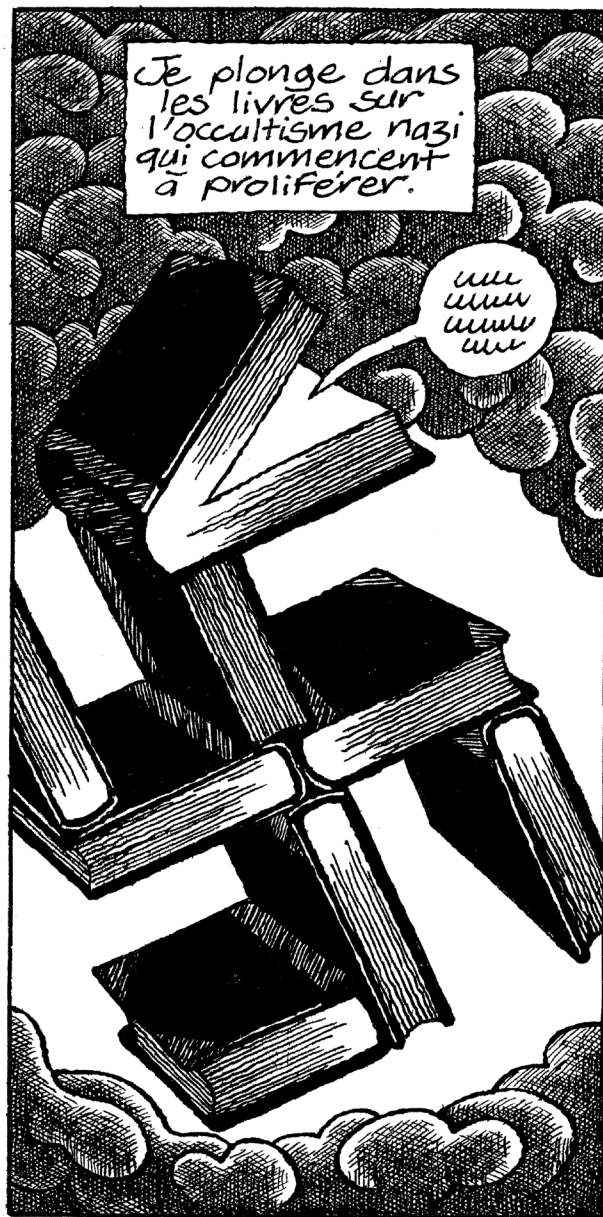




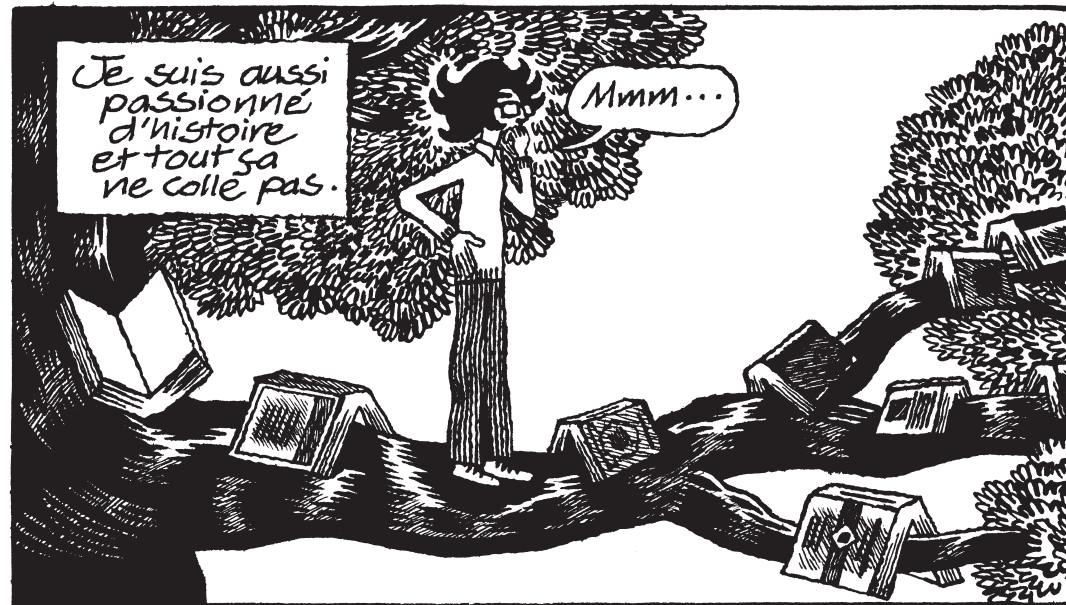


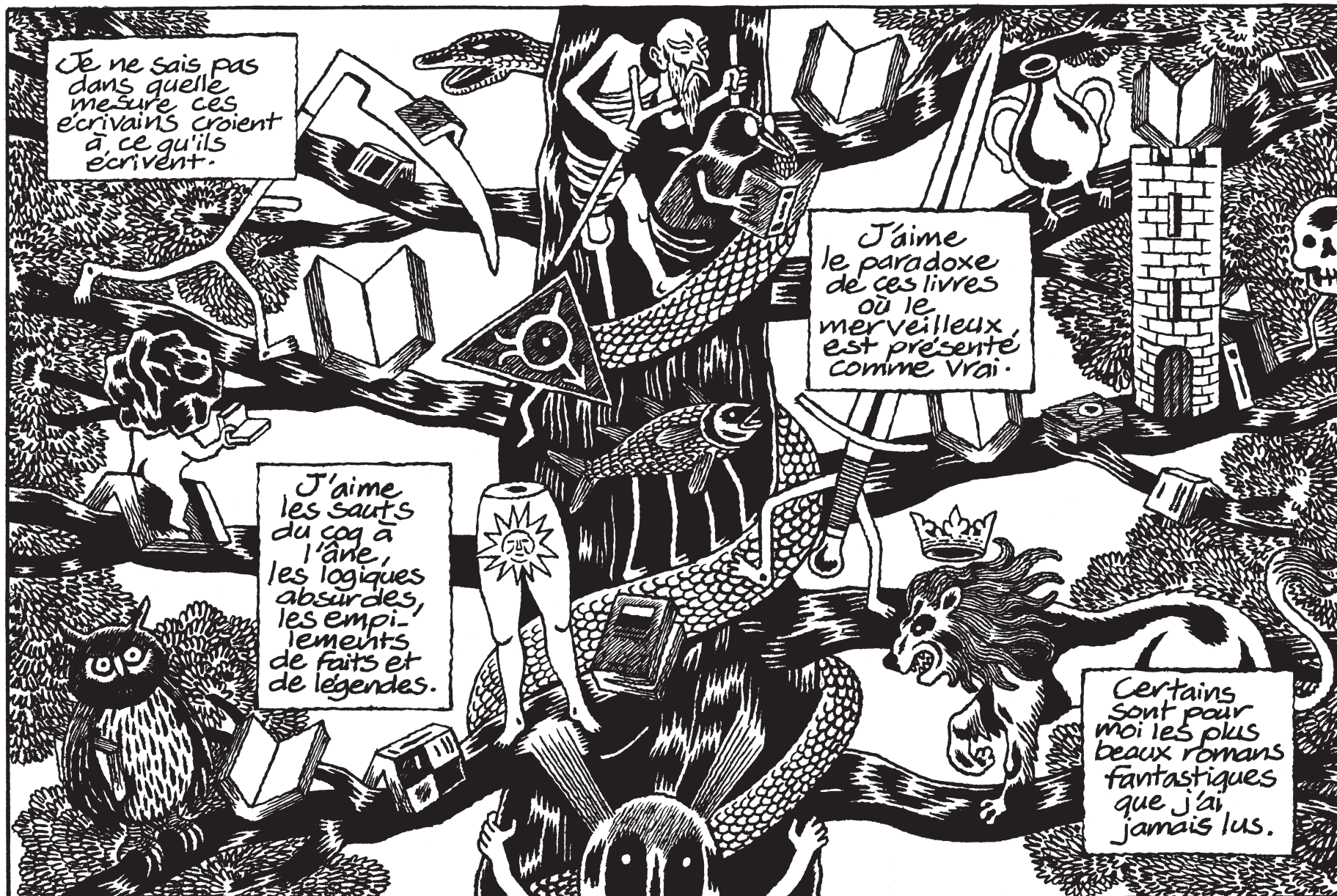












Je ne sais pas dans quelle mesure ces écrivains croient à ce qu'ils écrivent.

J'aime le paradoxe de ces livres où le merveilleux est présenté comme vrai.

J'aime les sauts du coq à l'âne, les logiques absurdes, les empilements de faits et de légendes.

Certains sont pour moi les plus beaux romans fantastiques que j'ai jamais lus.





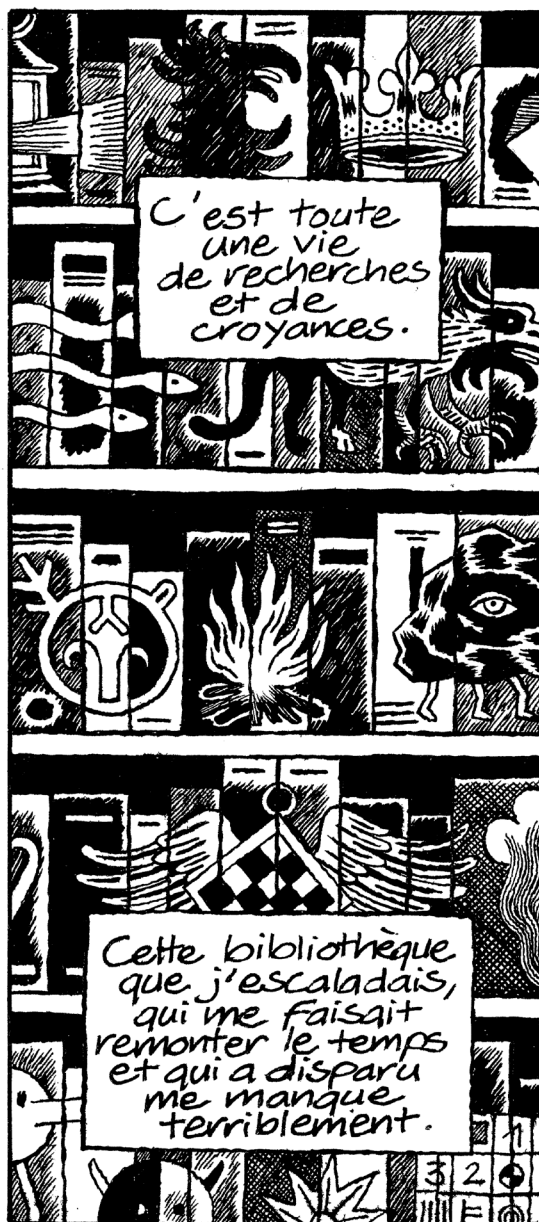
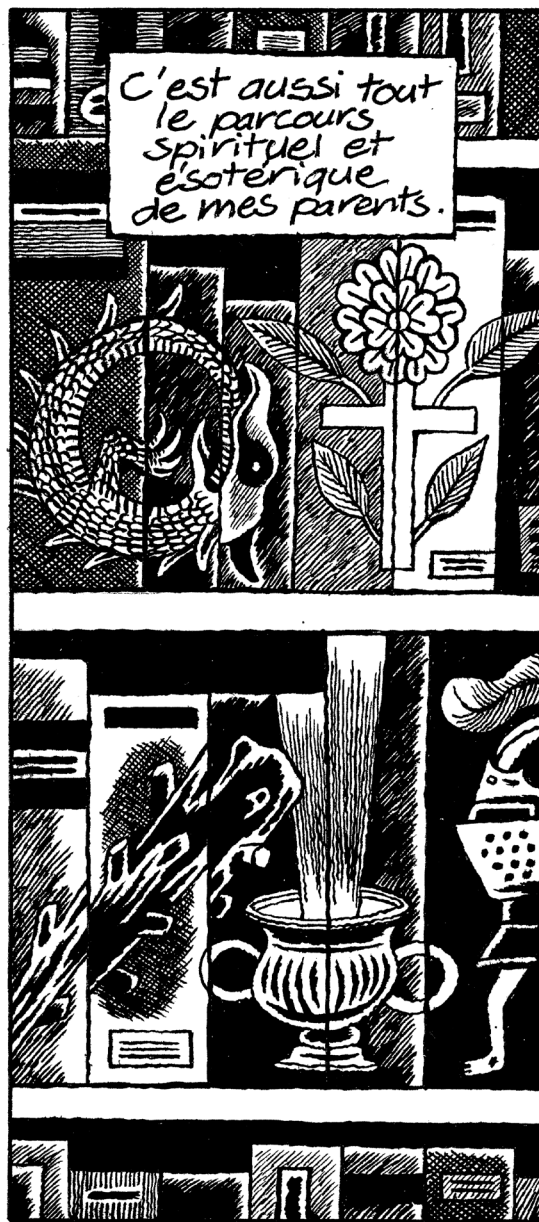
Et je continue  
à parcourir  
la bibliothèque  
et à découvrir  
de nouveaux  
livres.

L'un  
d'eux  
m'intrigue,  
c'est un  
petit livre  
sur  
l'histoire  
du  
Catharisme.

Il a été  
publié par  
une église  
gnostique  
dont je sais  
que mon  
père a été  
membre  
pendant  
quelque  
temps.

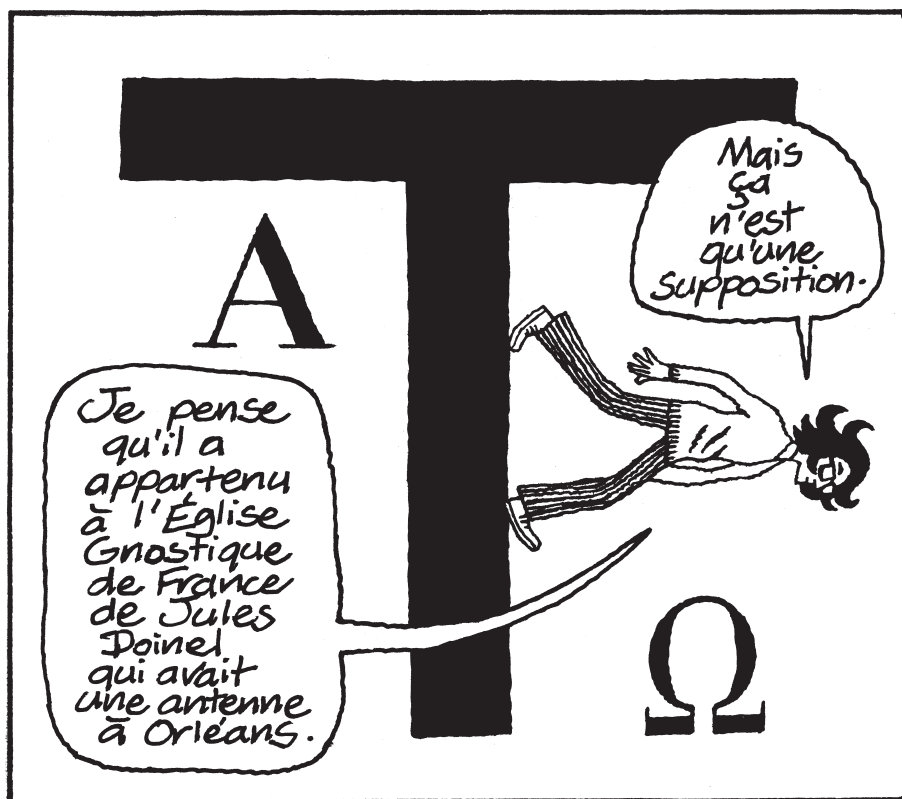
Cette  
bibliothèque  
ce n'est pas  
que des  
livres.













David B. est né le 9 février 1959 à Nîmes. Il est à la fois dessinateur et scénariste de bande dessinée. Après avoir suivi les Arts Appliqués à Duperré, il publie en 1986 son premier album, *Le timbre maudit*, chez Bayard. C'est aussi à cette époque que David B. commence à travailler régulièrement pour les revues *Okapi*, *Chic* et *Tintin Reporter*. Une histoire en cinq épisodes, *Zèbre*, est également publiée dans *À suivre* entre 1985 et 1990. En 1990, il fonde L'Association avec J-C. Menu, Stanislas, Mattt Konture, Killoffer et Lewis Trondheim. En 1991, *La bombe familiale* y est publié dans la collection Patte de Mouche. En 1992, *Le cheval blême*—recueil de rêves notés par l'auteur durant une dizaine d'années et transposés en bandes dessinées—est le premier livre de la collection Ciboulette. Il est nommé pour l'Alph'Art "Coup de coeur" au festival d'Angoulême 1993. Cette même année paraît également *Le cercueil de course* dans la collection Patte de Mouche. Ses travaux sont régulièrement publiés dans *Lapin*, la revue de L'Association. De mai 1993 à octobre 1994, David B. publie chez Cornélius un comic trimestriel, *Le nain jaune*, dont il existe cinq numéros. Automne 67 édite en 1994 un tirage limité d'un recueil de dessins, *Le livre somnambule*, tandis que paraît chez Autrement un récit d'une vingtaine de pages, *Le Messie discret*, dans le collectif *Le retour de Dieu* de la collection Histoires graphiques. *Les quatre savants n.1* sort en janvier 1996 chez Cornélius. *Les incidents de la nuit*, d'abord publiés dans la revue *Le cheval sans tête* des éditions Amok, sont édités par L'Association entre 1999 et 2002. C'est entre 1996 et 2004 que David B. crée son oeuvre maîtresse, *L'ascension du Haut Mal*. Il y raconte en six volumes son enfance aux côtés de son frère épileptique (le "haut mal" désignant l'épileptie en vieux français) et met en place un véritable travail de mémoire sur sa famille. Cette bande dessinée est souvent considérée comme l'un des plus grands chef-d'oeuvres de la bande dessinée moderne, comme le prouvent ses multiples nominations au Festival d'Angoulême: en 2000, le tome 4 reçu l'Alph'art du meilleur scénario et en 1998 et 2004, les tomes 2 et 6 furent nommés pour le Prix du meilleur album. Depuis 1997, il publie chez d'autres éditeurs que L'Association et travaille avec d'autres auteurs comme Joann Sfar, Christophe Blain ou Emmanuel Guibert. C'est en 2005 que *L'ascension du Haut Mal* est traduit par Panthéon Books, la maison d'édition du mythique *Maus* de Spiegelman.

- La bombe familiale*, Collection Patte de Mouche, L'Association, 1991.  
*Le cheval blême*, L'Association, 1992.  
*Le cercueil de course*, Collection Patte de Mouche, L'Association, 1993.  
*Le nain jaune*, 5 numéros, Cornélius, 1993-94.  
*Le livre somnambule*, Automne 67, 1994.  
 "Le Messie discret," in *Le retour de Dieu*, Autrement, 1994.  
*Les quatre savants*, 3 vols., Cornélius, 1996-98.  
*L'ascension du Haut Mal*, 6 vols., L'Association, 1996-2003.  
*Le tengû carré*, Dargaud, 1997.  
*La révolte d'Hop-Frog*, Avec Christophe Blain, Dargaud, 1997.  
 "Siwa," in *L'Association en Égypte*, L'Association, 1998.  
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*Léonora*, Avec Pauline Martin, Denoël Graphic, 2004.  
*Zèbre*, Tartamudo, 2005.  
*Les complots nocturnes*, Futuropolis, 2005.

# Heterography 3:

## *On Making “Good Use” of Esotericism. Notes 2022<sup>1</sup>*

Wu Ming 1



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE

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Keywords:

Esotericism, occultism, conspiracy fantasies, right-wing culture, mythology, re-enchantment

To cite this:

Wu Ming 1. “Heterography 3: On Making ‘Good Use’ of Esotericism. Notes 2022.” *Religiographies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2023): 109–117.

1

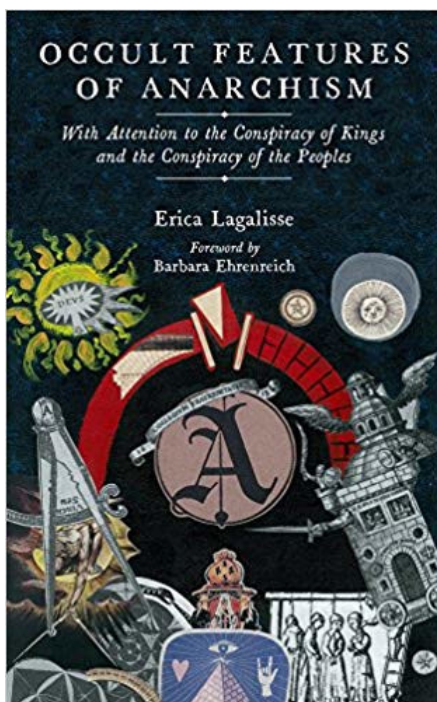
The term “notes” is intended to emphasise that the elaboration is in progress, the summaries are necessarily transitory and interlocutory. I’m “reasoning aloud.”

2

Unlike Kerényi and the early Furio Jesi, I use “technicised” in an evaluative way, i.e., not as opposed to a “genuine” myth, entirely spontaneous in its manifestations and authentically experienced by pre-modern human beings. Too often “technicised” has become synonymous with “instrumental” in the sense of dishonest, insincere. Every mythological narrative is the result of the use of techniques. Aoidoi, rhapsodists, griots, minstrels, and storytellers were all technicalisers. Of course, *est modus in rebus*, not all technicalisations are equal, as I’m going to explain.

3

Erica Lagalisie, *Occult Features of Anarchism: with Attention to the Conspiracy of Kings and the Conspiracy of the Peoples* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), 36–37.



### 1. *The Origin Myth of esotericism vs. its Actual History*

The main problem in approaching esotericism—the one that most prevents a better understanding of its history and dynamics—is its *technicised myth*, that is, the narrative it makes of its ancestry, traditions, and trajectories. I am going to provide a summary of it, inevitably simplifying and merging variants.

There are very ancient wisdoms, wisdoms guarded and handed down drop by holy drop by a humanity of the best, by elites of initiates. Wisdoms of a higher order, which can be accessed by elevating oneself, along the stages of an ascension that gradually detaches us from the vulgar world, from that crowd floundering in ignorance of themselves and of the true principles of the spirit and the cosmos.

I wrote, using an impersonal formula, that *one* can access that higher order. In reality, in the most widespread version, not *anyone* can do it. Only those who are already up to it can undertake the ascent. There must be a *vocation*, in the literal sense: one must hear a call, which reveals a kind of predestination to being initiated. The subject of such initiation is defined in many ways. Julius Evola, for example, calls it “differentiated man.”

At first glance, it would appear to be a mythologeme, an archetypal model basically similar to Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey.” But mythologemes arise anonymously from below, from popular cultures, from the word-of-mouth of multitudes, while the narrative about the “journey of the differentiated man” is the result of a path—largely traceable backwards—of conscious *invention of tradition*, of voluntary manipulations, rewritings, recombinations of certain mythological materials by certain intellectuals, pamphleteers, and “free thinkers.” It is therefore more correct, taking up another concept by Károly Kerényi, to speak of *technicised myth*, in the sense of *techné*, of the art needed to lathe a myth, refine it, and make it captivating.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. *“Freemasonry is what social movements look like after the witch hunts”*<sup>3</sup>

It is not by gender-blind oversight if, writing in Italian, I declined the words to the masculine, nor is it by chance that it is a *man* who can be said to be “differentiated.” Historical esotericism is masculine and patriarchal. It established itself in Europe at the end of the witch hunts of the 15th and 16th centuries, which extirpated the traditional knowledge of women, the magic practised by women, the mystery traditions guarded by women. After the wave of persecutions and burnings, the “ancient knowledge”—which in the meantime had been labelled as “hermeticism,” “alchemy,” “occult sciences” etc.—remained the prerogative of men-only clubs: secret societies, initiatory circles, brotherhoods.

Outside those male-dominated places, women were left to practise only versions of magic that were considered degrading, sub-standard, undifferentiated. The man was *magus*, alchemist, scientist, and if he was socially clever—think of the Count of St. Germain—he could attend royal courts and high salons. Even when he came to a bad end, like Cagliostro, he had previously been admired and revered. The woman, on the other hand, was a “sorceress,” she received in a hovel, she wandered about in barrooms and fairs. She did not enter courts, if anything, courtyards. This patriarchal logic would not be broken until the second half of the 19th century, thanks to Madame Blavatsky.



### 3. Esotericism is a modern phenomenon and was born “on the left”

The cultural movement that we call esotericism established itself between the late Renaissance and early modernity, but to do so it had to invent its own origins in ancient Egypt or ancient Persia, antedating pre-existing texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, or it had to write “ancient” texts for this purpose, complete with spurious symbols and whatnot.

They were manipulations, but they had an incredibly inspiring, fertile function. They forced the cages of permissible thought, they broadened views, they pushed for the foundation of new political and scientific theories. Esotericism was not only born with modernity but was from the outset the full expression of modernity. Indeed, it lies at the foundation of the modern mentality. There is no clear distinction between the beginnings of the “scientific method” and the beginnings of “occult sciences.” It has long been a tiresome cliché to recall that Isaac Newton was a scientist and at the same time an alchemist and magician. What would today’s champions of the crusade against “pseudosciences” make of him? And of Descartes, who was fascinated by the Rosicrucians?

In the 16th century, the primitive accumulation of capital paved the way for a change in the mode of production, and the bourgeoisie began to imagine itself as the ruling class. Within the framework of the social relations that were being established, esotericism was born, to simplify greatly, “on the left.” Its origins are no different from those of the Enlightenment. Many pioneers of both the left and social emancipation movements were at the same time pioneers of esotericism. Recently, this story has undergone various reconstructions and revisitations, and from many angles. The undersigned has narrated it in the second part of *La Q di Qomplotto*, Erika Lagalisie in her *Occult Features of Anarchism*, Gary Lachman in several books of his copious production,<sup>4</sup> etc.

### 4. Enter the esoteric right

Reactionary, right-wing currents founded their own esoteric movements and circles much later, between the end of the 19th century and the 1930s.

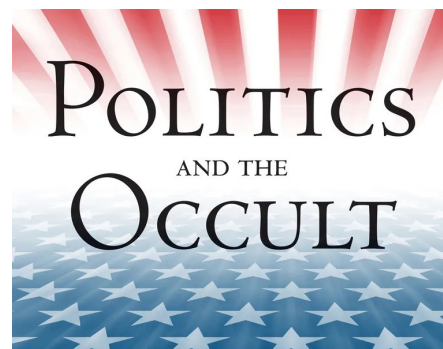
The “esoteric right” was the latest to arrive, but it found a free space, because in the meantime the left—in all its gradations: revolutionary, reformist, moderate—had largely detached itself from its “magical” and “mystery” origins.

Mythopoeists, such as René Guénon, Julius Evola, and others, appropriated the myth of ancient knowledge and further technicised it: they thickened the concept of Tradition, perfected a tale of the cyclical “fall” from cosmic heights of the spirit and affirmed a conception of modernity as Kali Yuga, a dark age of spiritual decadence, disbandment, and bewilderment. They conjured up a lost purity and an ultra-hierarchical, caste-like, and—in Evola’s case—highly *racialised* social ideal. The elite of the best became a superior race. Spirit and race coincided, spiritual decadence was racial decadence and vice versa.

The esoteric right does not entirely match fascism and Nazism. Guénon, a contemplative mystic, shunned activism, stayed away from the black shirts, and had already been living in Cairo for three years when Hitler took power. Nevertheless, fascism and Nazism were strongly influenced by the esoteric right and had their own occultist currents. It is known that Evola’s attempts to become the SS’s leading thinker were unsuccessful, but it was because the SS did not need him. They already had their occult

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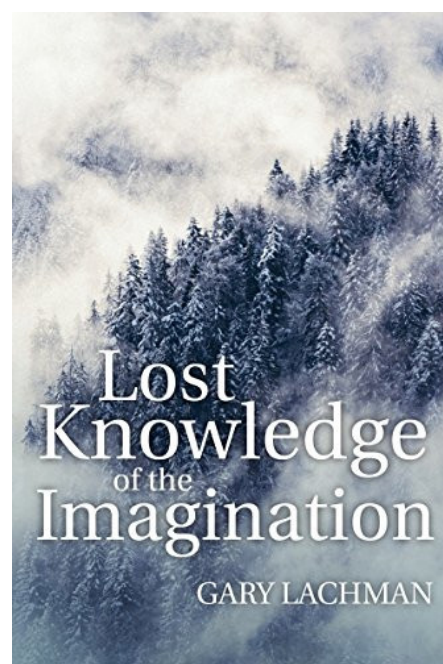
See, in particular, Gary Lachman, *Politics and the Occult: The Left, the Right and the Radically Unseen* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2008), and *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2018).



**The Left, the Right, and  
the Radically Unseen**



**GARY LACHMAN**



scientists and their myths, they had the Ahnenerbe, etc.

### 5. Esotericism and conspiracy fantasies

The reactionary “capture” introduced new, transmuted conspiracy fantasies into esotericism.

Conspiracy fantasies had also been cultivated by the “esoteric left.” However, and from the earliest manifestations of the Rosicrucians, these were conspiracies to come and to be acted upon. They were to be carried out, not foiled. The esoteric left fantasised *its own* conspiracies, not those of the other side, ergo they were not seen as evil conspiracies, but benign ones which would overthrow, or at least reform, the social order.

On the contrary, the esoteric right fantasises an *adverse* conspiracy, and fantasises it as having already taken place and been carried out. Its outcome is nothing less than the whole of surrounding reality, i.e., modernity. The fact that the latter coincides with the Kali Yuga, ergo it could not fail to assert itself because it is part of a *metahistorical* and inexorable cyclical trend, does not exclude the fact that on the sub-level of history it is also the fruit of a conspiracy, a gigantic machination. The perpetrators? Most often the Jews, but not only.

The esoteric right that was closest to fascism appropriated Catholic counterrevolutionary conspiratorialism—whose progenitor was Father Augustin Barruel—and its black beast, the “esoteric left”: the Illuminati of Bavaria, the Freemasons, etc. The conspiracies Barruel and others fantasised about were taken for granted and described as already unfolding.

### 6. The esoteric right and left between captures and “singularities”

Even after this reactionary “capture” there continued to be “left-wing currents of esotericism,” i.e., egalitarian and libertarian interpretations, which challenged white supremacism and patriarchal monopoly, and pointed to less exclusionary, more “democratic” initiatory paths, not reserved for the predestined.

The “counterculture” of the 1960s and 1970s and the coeval feminist wave that rediscovered the figure of the “witch” revived embers that had long been under the ashes, inhibited by the fact that esotericism and magic had been appropriated by fascists and the like.

The new “capture,” however, was of a commercial kind: in the 1970s the counterculture was smoothed of its edges and commodified. It became a fundamental ingredient of the New Age soup. A kaleidoscopic soup, full of colourings. With the New Age, in some ways, a form of “predestination” returned: those with the most purchasing power can best take the path.

In the 2010s, the situation became very tangled. There were alarming transmutations and field transitions, the “conspiratorial singularity”<sup>5</sup> triggered by the QAnon phenomenon moved individuals, groups, and entire currents from the “left” to the “right.” But this is not a sealed fate. As Lagalisse writes:

“The ideas offered within occult philosophy do not necessarily lead to revolutionary politics, yet they do not necessarily lead away from them either. When regarding the relationship of “magic” to anti-systemic movements, perhaps any deterministic formula is bound to fail. When approached by privileged personas with

5

“*Conspiratorial Singularity*. A very rapid convergence and hybridisation of all the conspiracy fantasies circulating in a given era, with cultural and political consequences on a scale as vast as it is unpredictable, in any case disproportionate to the micro-event that caused a certain threshold of complexity to be crossed, triggering the process [...]” Wu Ming 1, *La Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni: come le fantasie di complotto difendono il sistema* (Roma: Alegre, 2021), 84.

a lust for power, “magic” can serve to justify and advance elite aspirations. But without the influx of so much material charged as “ancient magical wisdom” that helped triangulate popular religion, modern materialism, and social discontent in new ways, we may never have seen the rise of “anarchism” as we know it.”<sup>6</sup>

6

Lagalis, *Occult Features of Anarchism*, 73–74.

### 7. *The society dreamt of by the esoteric right is . . . the one we live in*

It is true that there can be no deterministic formula about the relationship between esotericism (generally understood) and ideological-political praxis. It is equally true, however, that the technicised myths of the Esoteric and Tradition—to simplify, the “Evolian” version of esotericism—continue to secrete authoritarianism and racism, reactionary “utopias” of “organic” and “Spartan” societies. Societies that for the elite of “Spartiates,” of “differentiated men,” would be *loci amoeni*, looking a little like “fields of honour” and a lot like golf courses, while for the majority of “hilots” they would be akin to prisons, because everyone would be detained for life in their own box and social function, described as their “natural” place. Obviously, those who imagine such scenarios always see themselves as spartiates, never as hilots.

Such vagaries are fully compatible with the capitalist mode of production, with the inequality-based society in which we already live. They are reflections of it in a slightly deforming mirror. It is no coincidence that the two most famous contemporary “Evolians,” Steve Bannon and Aleksandr Dugin, have become technocrats well embedded in the US and Russian establishment, advisers to heads of state, billionaires, and oligarchs.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the connection between the vaunted “Tradition” and the narrow capitalist present is not clear to all. It is because of bullshit, or to be precise, of the *spiritual luxury* that, shining with fool’s gold, clouds the gaze, hiding the banality of such visions.

### 8. *Spiritual luxury*

Like material luxury, spiritual luxury—a concept proposed by Furio Jesi in the 1970s<sup>8</sup>—is a matter of measure, of style, and is based on *ostentation*. Luxury is “an indulgence in something that provides pleasure, satisfaction, or ease” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). But even more precise is the definition of “Lusso” in the Treccani Dictionary of the Italian Language:

“Display of wealth, ostentation, magnificence; tendency (also habitual, as a standard of living) to superfluous, uncontrolled expenditure on the purchase and use of objects which, either because of quality or ornamentation, have no utility corresponding to their price, and are intended to satisfy ambition and vanity rather than a real need.”

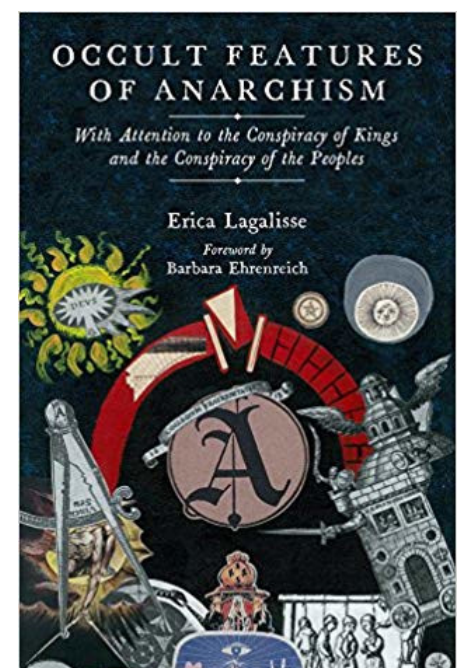
Effects of spiritual luxury are sought by flaunting a higher register than is needed, by flaunting linguistic and iconographic trinkets that are supposedly “elevated,” “noble,” “spiritual,” “mysterious,” or even “warrior-mystical.” There is a vast repertoire of rhetorical figures, tricks, and gimmicks.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the time, only kitsch is achieved, and this happens as much on the “right” as on the “left.”

It is, however, in the midst of such kitsch that one must make one’s way, in order to arrive at the kernels of truth of esotericism, at its reasons

7

See B. Teitelbaum, *War For Eternity: Inside Bannon’s Far-Right Circle of Global Power Brokers* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2020), and D. Friedman, “A Fugitive Chinese Tycoon Met Steve Bannon. Misinformation Mayhem Ensued,” *Mother Jones* (March–April 2022). Who knows if Evola would have condemned their manoeuvres as “frenzied activism,” or if he would have considered them a way of “riding the tiger.”



8

See Furio Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, new augmented edition (Roma: Nottetempo, 2011), 1st ed. 1979.

9

Italy expressed one of the most formidable codifiers of such a repertoire, Gabriele D’Annunzio.



Ernst Jünger, *An der Zeitmauer* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1959), 30. English translation by Wu Ming.

Ernst Jünger, *An der Zeitmauer*, 39.

René Guénon, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 102–3. English translation by Wu Ming.

In *La Q di Qomplotto*, to show the misery and harmfulness of debunking, I made extensive use of very recent sources, research, and reflections conducted over the last twenty years. I found this book particularly useful: Emma E. Jane and Chris Fleming, *Modern Conspiracies: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).



for being. Reasons which we can find—however perverted—even in the most boisterous versions of esotericism.

### 9. Kernels of truth against the reign of quantity

In his *An der Zeitmauer* (1959), Ernst Jünger lines up very acute observations on astrology that, mutatis mutandis, can also be applied to the attraction of the esoteric and the occult.

It is inane to debate the veracity or otherwise of horoscopes, Jünger points out. The content of the predictions is of no importance whatsoever. Instead, it is a question of recognising in the enduring success of astrology a necessity: that of exercising thought in another way.

“The same need prevails in life in general. To hear that one’s deeds, works and encounters mean something else than is generally assumed, that great powers are reflected in them and endow them with meaning, in short, that one has a destiny—to hear this is obviously an ineradicable concern for man. The more turnover and activity increase, the more life becomes metropolitan, technical and abstract, the more this concern must come to the fore.”<sup>10</sup>

Astrology “appears to us like an erratic block as a remnant of ancient times, as a testimony not only to a different style of thinking but to a different spirituality.”<sup>11</sup> Its fascination lies in its coming from *elsewhere*, elsewhere than the capitalist dictatorship of numbers, than a world that perpetuates and reproduces itself thanks to the measurability and quantification of everything. The astrological conception of time is not just quantitative, it is not just measurement of hours and minutes. Time has different *qualities* depending on my date and time of birth, my presumed position of the stars at a given moment in life, the relationship between my zodiac sign and that of other people, etc.

A calculable and measurable destiny would no longer be a destiny, points out Jünger. He couldn’t yet know about the predictive algorithms—based on the relentless drilling of human lives to extract big data—that govern hyper-connected “virtual” life in the 21st century, and yet he seems to grasp their logic in advance, as Guénon seems to grasp it when describing the “realm of quantity”:

“[. . .] this need for simplification necessarily accompanies and reinforces the tendency to reduce everything to the quantitative for, obviously, there can be nothing simpler than quantity; if one were to succeed in stripping a being or a thing entirely of its own qualities, the “residue” one would obtain would certainly present the maximum of simplicity; and, in the end, this extreme simplicity would be that which can only belong to pure quantity, that is to say, that of the “units,” all similar to each other, which constitute the numerical multiplicity; [. . .]”<sup>12</sup>

The message that astrology continues to send us, expressed in its own peculiar way, is that our life cannot be just quantity.

Debunkers<sup>13</sup> and worshippers of scientism wage war on astrology because they measure it with their instruments and believe they have caught it at fault. In reality, they do not understand it, which is why their

attacks achieve nothing, and astrology continues to console and orientate, to soothe the small pains of everyday life, and often to arouse wonder, enchantment.

#### 10. *Totality, mystery, and being cum sidera*

By “kernel of truth of esotericism” I mean the set of sensible, relevant questions rooted in the human condition to which esotericism provides answers. The truth concerns the drives which esotericism seeks to satisfy, the needs which it seeks to interpret, the demands which it seeks to represent. It is not so much about the content of the answers as it is about the reality of the experience which generates the questions.

A kernel is a central or essential part of something, a nucleus, the first element around which the others surrounding it are organised and constitute a more complex organism.

Esoteric culture is formed around mystery, this is its kernel of truth. There will always be mystery, a word whose root *mýs*, according to the “heretical” linguist Giovanni Semerano, derives from the Akkadian *mushu*, meaning “night.”<sup>14</sup> Whether this is true or not, it is night that we are talking about, in the night we will always be watching and perhaps groping around. Reality in all its immense dimension, in all its infinitude, is not only unknowable but unthinkable and inexpressible. No radiant tomorrow of science awaits us in which we will have explained everything there is to explain. No discourse, no theory, no rational, discursive knowledge will ever be able to grasp and say this “everything” into which we are thrown at birth.

This is where “metaphysics,” as Guénon means it, can come into play: an intuitive and immediate knowledge that allows one to “consider all things simultaneously.”<sup>15</sup>

The verb *consider* originally means “to stay out in the company of stars,” *cum sidera*. It does not mean to understand or explain everything. It means to open up, to place oneself in such a way as to feel that the whole is there and that we are part of it.

Finding oneself *cum sidera* will always be followed by the tension to touch the mystery, to find that Mount Analogue of which René Daumal narrated in his unfinished allegorical novel, and to attempt its ascent.

#### 11. *Brushing esotericism against the grain*

The “truth” of esotericism is more about questions than answers, but even certain answers have value; why else would we be talking about esotericism and not more mainstream philosophies or theologies?

As already mentioned for astrology, the answers given by esotericism are all the more successful—that is, they arouse all the more enchantment—the greater the “coefficient of friction” between them and the status quo, the more they summon someplace other than the numerocratic misery of the capitalist routine.

Where and when does esoteric thinking produce friction? One can understand by brushing it against the grain, as Walter Benjamin once suggested doing,<sup>16</sup> that is, reading it without being pushed by the author as far as they want to go, choosing where to put our feet, deciding every now and then to discard, deviate, take other paths between the lines. Obviously, one must overcome the effects of spiritual luxury and ignore the

14

Cf. Giovanni Semerano, *Le origini della cultura europea*, vol. 2, tomo 2, *Dizionario della lingua greca* (Firenze: Olschki, 1994).

15

Cf. René Guénon, *La métaphysique orientale*, a lecture given at the Sorbonne in 1925.



16

Walter Benjamin urged the “historical materialist” never to forget that the cultural heritage—the entire cultural heritage, we would thus add esotericism—owes its existence “not only to the toil of the great geniuses, who created it, but also to the nameless drudgery of its contemporaries. There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another. The historical materialist thus moves as far away from this as measurably possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain. [*Geschichte gegen den Strich bürsten*].” W. Benjamin, *On The Concept of History*, 1940. English translation by Dennis Redmond.

more blatant technicisations.

Furio Jesi's analyses and reflections remain useful, if we let go of what is outdated, because it was the transient result of contingencies or because it could not be sufficiently elaborated. It must be borne in mind that Jesi's research was tragically interrupted when he died young. Concepts such as "mythological materials," "mythological machine," "mythological temperature," and "spiritual luxury" should be kept in our toolboxes. There is no proper Myth, there are only mythological materials that we all incessantly recombine.

Jesi—also in the wake of Benjamin—tried to give "operative" indications, primarily the "ironic," Brechtianly estranged use of mythological materials in order to lower their temperature. He exhorted us to work without ever passing ourselves off as exegetes of the Authentic and the Primeval. They were right but insufficient indications; they refer to practices that are potentially already co-opted in capitalist communication, for example in memetics, which drowns us in irony. But this is also where we Wu Ming started from to define and field our poetics of "showing the suture."

### 12. *Showing the suture*

Stories have an enchanting power, and we who have made this our profession must be aware of that. We must use that power, as our books must be beautiful, seductive, and fascinating, but at the same time we must warn those who read them. Showing the suture, to put it simply, means writing books that also tell the story of how they were written. The metaphor is surgical and refers to the sutures clearly evident on the face and neck of Frankenstein's creature. Also in *La Q di Qomplotto* I continually explained what tools I was using, what choices I had made, etc.

Even showing the suture is technicisation, an instrumental use of mythological materials. The difference lies in the manner and the end. By showing the suture, technicisation is declared. On the contrary, in the narratives of the esoteric right, every suture is hidden, nothing must seem manipulated, everything must seem ancient. It is no coincidence that Evola and Guénon continually repeat that they are nothing more than disseminators, that they only develop issues and theirs are not original elaborations. The challenge is to combine and bring together critical—and self-critical—thinking and enchantment.

Often the American illusionist duo Penn & Teller perform a magic number after which they show the trick, but in such a way that the demonstration itself looks magical, marvellous. We have been trying to achieve this for years.

Such an approach can offer a method for dealing with conspiracy fantasies, reactionary technicised myths, and toxic esotericism. To those who are fascinated by those narratives, we must offer more beautiful and powerful ones, but at the same time provide critical tools to understand how we have constructed them. This is a dangerous and difficult terrain, but if we give ourselves to the task collectively, it is possible to achieve important results. But we will not achieve anything if we do not also know how to read esotericism against the grain, going beyond its appearances and smokescreens, tracing its kernels of truth.

Bologna, November-December 2022



### *Short biography*

Throughout the second half of the 1990s, the author whose nom de plume is now “Wu Ming 1” actively participated in the Luther Blissett Project, a political-artistic experience now studied worldwide, which lasted from summer 1994 to 31 December 1999. As part of this project, together with three co-authors, he wrote the historical novel *Q*, which was published under the name “Luther Blissett” in 1999. The novel was translated into eighteen languages and published in thirty countries. Since 2018, it has been the subject of speculation as to whether or not it was the inspiration for the fictitious “Q,” the author of the mysterious messages that gave rise to the QAnon conspiracy movement. In 2000, after the end of the Luther Blissett Project, the authors of *Q* founded the Wu Ming collective, which is mainly dedicated to literature. Each member of the collective has a pen name, formed from the group’s name plus a cardinal number, following the alphabetical order of the surnames. Wu Ming has written many novels, essays, and short story collections. Their best-known titles are *54* (2002), *Manituana* (2007), *Altai* (2009), *L’Armata dei Sonnambuli* (2014), *Proletkult* (2018), and *UFO 78* (2022). As a “soloist,” Wu Ming 1 is the author of novels and various works of non-fiction such as investigations, narrative reportages, biographies, and travel reports. His most recent title is *La Q di Qomplotto. Qanon e dintorni: come le fantasie di complotto difendono il sistema* [The Q of Qonspiracy. QAnon and its surroundings: how conspiracy fantasies defend the system] (2021).

# Heterography 3:

*Sul fare “buon uso” dell’esoterismo.*  
*Appunti 2022<sup>1</sup>*  
Wu Ming 1



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE

*fondazione* ONLUS  
GIORGIO CINI

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#### Keywords:

Esoterismo, occultismo, teorie complottiste, cultura di destra, mitologia, reincanto

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1

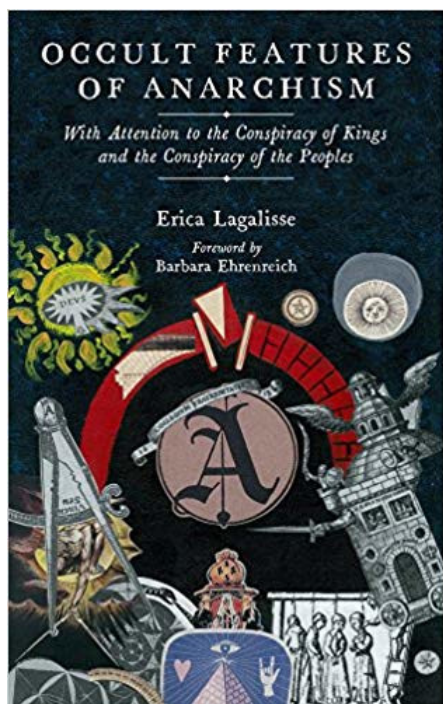
Il termine "Appunti" intende rimarcare che l'elaborazione è *in fieri*, le sintesi sono giocoforza transitorie e interlocutorie. È un "ragionare ad alta voce."

2

A differenza di Kerényi e del primo Furio Jesi, uso l'espressione "tecnicizzato" in modo avalutativo, ovvero non in contrapposizione a un mito "genuino," interamente spontaneo nelle sue manifestazioni e autenticamente esperito dagli esseri umani premoderni. Troppo spesso "tecnicizzato" è diventato sinonimo di "strumentale" nel senso di *disonesto*, insincero. Ogni narrazione mitologica è il risultato del ricorso a *tecniche*. Aedi, rapsodi, griot, menestrelli e cantastorie furono tutti *tecnicizzatori*. Certo, *est modus in rebus*, non tutte le tecnicizzazioni sono uguali, su questo cf. il paragrafo 12 del presente scritto.

3

Erica Lagalisie, *Occult Features Of Anarchism: with Attention to the Conspiracy of Kings and the Conspiracy of the Peoples* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), 36–37.



### 1. Mito delle origini vs. nascita storica dell'esoterismo

Il principale problema nell'approcciarsi all'esoterismo—quello che più impedisce una migliore comprensione della sua storia e delle sue dinamiche—è il suo *mito tecnicizzato*, ovvero la narrazione che fa delle proprie ascendenze, tradizioni e traiettorie. Vado a fornirne una sintesi, giocoforza unendo varianti e tagliando con l'accetta.

Esistono sapienze antichissime, sapienze custodite e tramandate con sacri contagocce da un'umanità di *migliori*, da élites di iniziati; consapevolezze di ordine superiore, a cui si può accedere *elevandosi*, lungo le tappe di un'ascensione che gradualmente ci distacca dal volgo, quel volgo che annaspa nell'ignoranza di sé e dei veri principi dello spirito e del cosmo.

Ho scritto, ricorrendo a una formula impersonale, che *si può* accedere a quell'ordine superiore. In realtà, nella versione più diffusa, non può farlo chiunque. Può intraprendere l'ascesa solo chi ne è già all'altezza. Dev'esserci una *vocazione*, nel senso letterale: si deve udire una chiamata, che rivela una sorta di predestinazione all'essere iniziati. Il soggetto di tale iniziazione è definito in molti modi. Julius Evola, ad esempio, lo chiama "uomo differenziato."

A prima vista sembrerebbe un *mitologema*, un modello archetipo in fondo simile al "viaggio dell'eroe" di campbelliana memoria. Ma i mitologemi sorgono anonimi dal basso, dalle culture popolari, dal passaparola di moltitudini, mentre la narrazione sul «viaggio dell'uomo differenziato» è il risultato di un percorso—in gran parte percorribile a ritroso—di cosciente *invenzione della tradizione*, di volontarie manipolazioni, riscritture, ricombinazioni di determinati materiali mitologici da parte di determinati intellettuali, libellisti e "liberi pensatori." È dunque più corretto, riprendendo un altro concetto di Károly Kerényi, parlare di mito tecnicizzato, nel senso della *technè*, dell'arte necessaria a tornirlo, rifinirlo e renderlo ammaliante.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. «Freemasonry is what social movements look like after the witch hunts»<sup>3</sup>

Non è per svista *gender-blind* se, scrivendo in italiano, declino i vocaboli al maschile, né è un caso che sia un *uomo* a poter dirsi "differenziato." L'esoterismo storico è maschile e patriarcale. Si afferma in Europa sul finire delle cacce alle streghe del XV e XVI secolo, che estirpano i saperi tradizionali *delle donne*, la magia praticata *dalle donne*, le tradizioni misteriche custodite *da donne*. Dopo l'ondata di persecuzioni e roghi, le "sapienze antiche"—nel frattempo divenute "ermetismo," "alchimia," "scienze occulte"—restano appannaggio di club per soli uomini: società segrete, circoli iniziatici, confraternite.

Fuori da quei luoghi per maschi, alle donne si lasciano praticare versioni della magia ritenute deteriori, sub-standard, *indifferenziate*. L'uomo è *magus*, alchimista, scienziato, e se sa muoversi bene—si pensi al Conte di San Germano—gira per le corti e nei salotti altolocati. Anche quando fa una brutta fine, come Cagliostro, prima è stato ammirato e riverito. La donna è invece "fattucchiera," riceve in un tugurio, gira per baracconi e fiere. Non entra nelle corti, semmai nei cortili. Per spezzare questa logica patriarcale toccherà attendere la seconda metà del XIX secolo, dovrà arrivare Madame Blavatsky.

### 3. L'esoterismo è un fenomeno moderno e nasce "a sinistra"

Il movimento culturale che chiamiamo esoterismo si afferma tra tardo Rinascimento e prima modernità, ma per farlo deve inventarsi origini nell'antico



Egitto o nell'antica Persia, antedatando testi preesistenti come il *Corpus Hermeticum* o scrivendo testi "antichi" all'uopo, corredati da simboli spurii e quant'altro.

Si tratta di manipolazioni, ma hanno una funzione incredibilmente ispirante, *fecondante*. Forzano le gabbie del pensiero consentito, allargano le vedute, spingono a fondare nuove teorie politiche e scientifiche. L'esoterismo non solo nasce con la modernità, ma ne è fin da subito piena espressione. Anzi, sta a *fondamento* della mentalità moderna. Gli albori del "metodo scientifico" non si distinguono dagli albori delle "scienze occulte." È da tempo un cliché persino frusto ricordare che Isaac Newton fu scienziato e al tempo stesso alchimista e mago. Che farebbero di lui gli odierni paladini della crociata contro le "pseudoscienze"? E di Cartesio, che era affascinato dai Rosacroce?

Nel XVI secolo l'accumulazione primitiva di capitale prepara il cambio di modo di produzione, e la borghesia comincia a immaginarsi classe dominante. Nel quadro dei rapporti sociali che si vanno affermando l'esoterismo nasce, semplificando di molto, "a sinistra."<sup>4</sup> Le sue origini non si distinguono da quelle dell'illuminismo. Non pochi pionieri della sinistra e dei movimenti di emancipazione sociale sono al contempo pionieri dell'esoterismo. Di recente, questa storia ha conosciuto varie ricostruzioni e rivisitazioni, e da plurime angolature. Il sottoscritto l'ha narrata nella seconda parte de *La Q di Qomplotto*, Lagalisse nel suo *Occult Features of Anarchism*, Gary Lachman in più libri della sua copiosa produzione,<sup>5</sup> ecc.

#### 4. Arriva la destra esoterica

Il pensiero reazionario e la destra fondano le proprie correnti e i propri circoli esoterici *molto più tardi*, tra la fine del XIX secolo e gli anni Trenta del XX.

La «destra esoterica» è l'ultima arrivata, ma trova campo libero, perché nel frattempo la sinistra—in ogni sua gradazione: rivoluzionaria, riformista, moderata—si è in larga parte staccata dalle proprie origini "magiche" e "misteriche."

Mitopoietici come René Guénon, Julius Evola e altri si appropriano del mito dei saperi antichi e lo tecnicizzano ulteriormente: inspessiscono il concetto di Tradizione, perfezionano un racconto della ciclica "caduta" rispetto a cosmiche altitudini dello spirito e affermano una concezione della modernità come *Kali Yuga*, era oscura di decadenza spirituale, sbandamento, smarrimento. Vagheggiano una purezza perduta e un idealtipo sociale ultragerarchico, castale e—nel caso di Evola—fortemente *razzializzato*. L'élite di migliori diviene *razza* superiore. Spirito e razza coincidono, la decadenza spirituale è decadenza razziale e viceversa.

La destra esoterica non combacia *in toto* con fascismo e nazismo. Guénon, mistico contemplativo, rifugge l'attivismo, resta lontano dalle camicie nere e vive al Cairo già da tre anni quando Hitler prende il potere. Nondimeno, fascismo e nazismo subiscono forte l'influsso della destra esoterica, e hanno le loro correnti occultiste. Si sa che i tentativi di Evola di diventare pensatore di riferimento delle SS non andarono a buon fine, ma fu perché le SS non avevano bisogno di lui. Avevano già i loro scienziati occulti e i loro miti, avevano l'*Abnenerbe* ecc.

#### 5. Esoterismo e fantasie di complotto

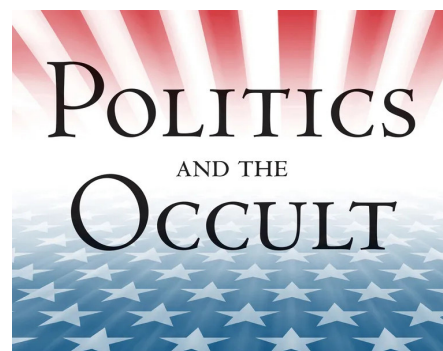
La "cattura" reazionaria introduce nell'esoterismo fantasie di complotto nuove e mutate di segno. Fantasie di complotto ne coltivava anche la "sinistra

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Ovviamente, "a sinistra" in un mondo che relega le donne ai margini, come si è detto sopra.

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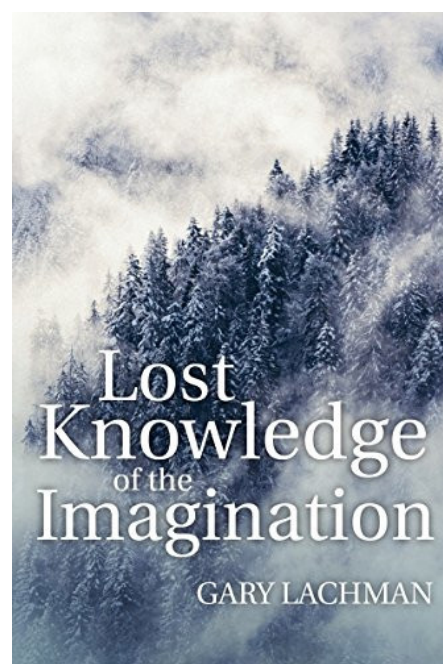
Cf. in particolare Gary Lachman, *Politics And The Occult: The Left, the Right and the Radically Unseen* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2008) e *Lost Knowledge Of The Imagination* (Edinburgo: Floris Books, 2018).



The Left, the Right, and  
the Radically Unseen



GARY LACHMAN



esoterica.” Tuttavia, e fin dalle prime sortite dei Rosacroce, si trattava di complotti *agili*, non subiti; da *portare avanti*, non da sventare. La sinistra esoterica fantasticava il *proprio* complotto, non quelli della parte avversa, ergo era un complotto *benigno* non maligno, ed era un complotto *a venire*, che avrebbe rovesciato, o almeno riformato, l'ordine sociale.

Al contrario, la destra esoterica fantastica un complotto *avverso*, e lo fantastica già *avvenuto* e portato a termine. Il suo esito è nientemeno che *l'intera realtà circostante*, ovvero la modernità. Il fatto che questa coincida col *Kali Yuga*, ergo non potesse non affermarsi perché parte di un andamento ciclico *metastorico* e inesorabile, non esclude che sul piano della *storia* sia anche il frutto di una cospirazione, una gigantesca macchinazione. I responsabili? Il più delle volte i Giudei, ma non solo.

La destra esoterica più vicina ai fascismi fa proprio il cospirazionismo di stampo cattolico—il cui capostipite fu Augustin Barruel—che ha come bestia nera la “sinistra esoterica”: gli Illuminati di Baviera, i massoni ecc. I complotti da ordire di cui fantasticavano questi ultimi sono presi alla lettera e descritti come già orditi.

#### 6. Destra e sinistra esoterica tra catture e «singolarità»

Anche dopo la “cattura” reazionaria continuano a esistere “correnti di sinistra dell'esoterismo,” ovvero interpretazioni egualitarie e libertarie, che contestano il suprematismo bianco e il monopolio patriarcale, e indicano percorsi iniziatici meno escludenti, più “democratici,” non riservati a chi è già predestinato.

La “controcultura” degli anni Sessanta e Settanta e la coeva ondata femminista che recupera la figura della “strega” ravvivano braci che stavano sotto la cenere, inibite dal fatto che di esoterismo e magia si erano appropriati fascisti e affini.

La nuova “cattura” è commerciale: negli anni Settanta la controcultura, smussata dei suoi spigoli e mercificata, diviene ingrediente fondamentale del minestrone New Age. Minestrone pieno di coloranti, caleidoscopico. Con la New Age, per certi versi torna una “predestinazione”: può intraprendere meglio il cammino chi ha più potere d'acquisto.

Negli anni Dieci del XXI secolo la situazione si ingarbuglia parecchio. Si registrano allarmanti transumanze e passaggi di campo, la “singolarità cospirazionista”<sup>6</sup> innescata dal fenomeno QAnon sposta “a destra” singoli, gruppi e intere correnti che stavano “a sinistra.” Ma non è un destino segnato. Come scrive Lagalisse:

“The ideas offered within occult philosophy do not necessarily lead to revolutionary politics, yet they do not necessarily lead away from them either. When regarding the relationship of “magic” to anti-systemic movements, perhaps any deterministic formula is bound to fail. When approached by privileged personas with a lust for power, “magic” can serve to justify and advance elite aspirations. But without the influx of so much material charged as “ancient magical wisdom” that helped triangulate popular religion, modern materialism, and social discontent in new ways, we may never have seen the rise of “anarchism” as we know it.”<sup>7</sup>

#### 7. La società sognata dalla destra esoterica è... la nostra

È vero che non può darsi alcuna formula deterministica sui rapporti tra

6

“Singolarità cospirazionista. Rapidissima convergenza e ibridazione di tutte le fantasie di complotto circolanti in una data epoca, con conseguenze culturali e politiche su una scala tanto vasta quanto imprevedibile, in ogni caso sproporzionata rispetto allo ‘scatto,’ al microevento che ha fatto superare una certa soglia di complessità, scatenando il processo [...]” Wu Ming 1, *La Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni: come le fantasie di complotto difendono il sistema* (Roma: Alegre, 2021), 84.

7

Lagalisse, *Occult Features Of Anarchism*, 73–74.

esoterismo (generalmente inteso) e prassi ideologico-politica. È altrettanto vero, però, che il mito tecnicizzato dell'Esoterico e della Tradizione—per semplificare, la versione “evoliana” dell'esoterismo—continua a secernere autoritarismi e razzismi, “utopie” reazionarie di società “organiche” e “spartane.” Società che per l'élite di “spartati,” di “uomini differenziati,” sarebbero *loci amoeni*, un po' “campi dell'onore” e un po' campi da golf, mentre per la maggioranza di “iloti” sarebbero simili a carceri, perché ognuno sarebbe detenuto a vita nella propria casella e funzione sociale, data per “naturale.” Ovviamente chi immagina simili scenari si vede sempre come spartiate, mai come ilota.

Tali vagheggiamenti sono pienamente compatibili con il modo di produzione capitalistico, con la società fondata su disuguaglianze in cui già viviamo. Ne sono i riflessi in uno specchio di poco deformante. Non a caso i due più celebri “evoliani” contemporanei, Steve Bannon e Aleksandr Dugin, sono divenuti tecnocrati ben inseriti nell'establishment di USA e Russia, consiglieri di capi di stato, miliardari e oligarchi.<sup>8</sup>

Eppure il nesso tra la vagheggiata “Tradizione” e l'angusto presente capitalistico non risulta chiaro a tutti. È per via della *fuffa*, o per essere precisi, del *lusso spirituale* che, brillando di oro degli sciocchi, offusca lo sguardo, nascondendo la banalità di tali visioni.

#### 8. Lusso spirituale

Come il lusso materiale, il lusso spirituale—concetto proposto da Furio Jesi negli anni Settanta<sup>9</sup>—è questione di misura, di stile, e si basa sull'*ostentazione*.

“Lusso. Sfoggio di ricchezza, di sfarzo, di magnificenza; tendenza (anche abituale, come tenore di vita) a spese superflue, incontrollate, per l'acquisto e l'uso di oggetti che, o per la qualità, o per l'ornamentazione, non hanno una utilità corrispondente al loro prezzo, e sono volti a soddisfare l'ambizione e la vanità più che un reale bisogno.”<sup>10</sup>

Si cercano effetti di lusso spirituale ostentando un registro più alto di quanto serva, sfoggiando bigiotteria linguistica e iconografica presuntamente “elevata,” “nobile,” “spirituale,” “misteriosa” o anche “mistico-guerriera.” Esiste un ampio repertorio di figure retoriche, di trucchi e trucchetti.<sup>11</sup> Il più delle volte si consegue solo il kitsch, e ciò avviene tanto a “destra” quanto a “sinistra.”

È comunque in mezzo a tale kitsch che bisogna farsi strada, per giungere ai *nuclei di verità* dell'esoterismo, alle sue ragioni d'essere. Ragioni che ritroviamo—per quanto pervertite—finanche nelle versioni dell'esoterismo più sguaiate.

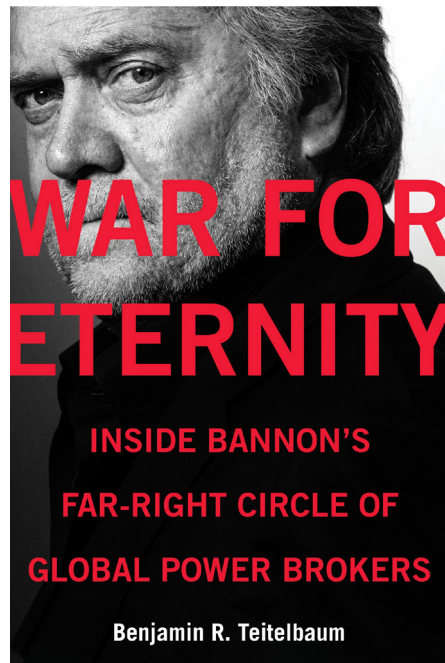
#### 9. Nuclei di verità contro il regno della quantità

Nel suo *An der Zeitmauer* (1959)<sup>12</sup> Ernst Jünger mette in fila osservazioni molto acute sull'astrologia che, mutatis mutandis, si possono applicare anche all'attrazione per l'esoterico e l'occulto.

È inane dibattere della veridicità o meno degli oroscopi, fa notare Jünger. Il contenuto delle previsioni non ha la minima importanza. Si tratta invece di rinvenire nel successo perdurante dell'astrologia una necessità: quella di esercitare il pensiero in un altro modo.

8

Cf. Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *War For Eternity: Inside Bannon's Far-Right Circle of Global Power Brokers* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2020) e Dan Friedman, “A Fugitive Chinese Tycoon Met Steve Bannon. Misinformation Mayhem Ensued,” *Mother Jones* (marzo-aprile 2022). Chissà se Evola avrebbe condannato le loro manovre in quanto “attivismo forsennato,” o se le avrebbe ritenute un modo di “cavalcare la tigre.”



9

Cf. in particolare Furio Jesi, *Cultura di destra* (Milano: Nottetempo, 2011), 1. ed. 1979.

10

Voce “Lusso” dell'enciclopedia Treccani.

11

L'Italia ha espresso uno dei più formidabili codificatori di tale repertorio, Gabriele D'Annunzio.

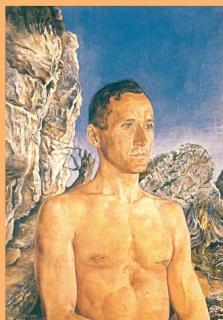
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Le citazioni che seguono sono tratte dall'edizione italiana: Ernst Jünger, *Al muro del tempo* (Milano: Adelphi, 2000).



Ernst Jünger

## AL MURO DEL TEMPO



13

Jünger, *Al muro del tempo*, 29.

14

Jünger, *Al muro del tempo*, 37.

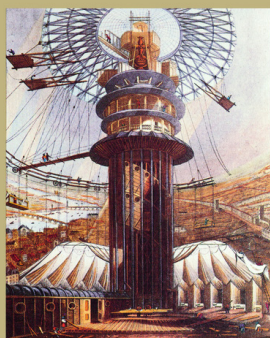
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René Guénon, *Il regno della quantità e i segni dei tempi*, 5. ed. (Milano: Adelphi, 1982), 75, 1. ed. 1945.

16

Ne *La Q di Qomplotto*, per mostrare la miseria e dannosità del debunking, ho fatto ampio uso di fonti molto recenti, di ricerche e riflessioni condotte negli ultimi vent'anni. Mi è stato particolarmente utile il libro di Emma E. Jane e Chris Fleming, *Modern Conspiracies: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (Londra: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

René Guénon

Il Regno della Quantità  
e i Segni dei Tempi

Adelphi

“Sentirsi dire che le proprie azioni, le opere, gli incontri significano anche qualcosa d’altro rispetto a quanto comunemente si suppone; che in essi grandi forze si riflettono provvedendoli di senso; in breve, sapere che si possiede un destino—sentirsi dire tutto ciò è evidentemente un desiderio inestirpabile dell’uomo. Quanto più aumenta il giro d’affari, quanto più cresce l’attività, quanto più la vita assume un carattere metropolitano, tecnico-astratto, tanto più prepotente si manifesta tale desiderio.”<sup>13</sup>

L’astrologia “si erge come un masso erratico giungendo fino a noi quale residuo di tempi antichi, quale testimonianza non solo di un diverso stile di pensiero, ma anche di una diversa spiritualità.”<sup>14</sup> Il suo fascino risiede nel suo provenire da un *altrove*, altrove rispetto alla dittatura capitalistica dei numeri, a un mondo che si perpetua e riproduce grazie alla misurabilità e alla quantificazione di ogni cosa. La concezione astrologica del tempo non è solo quantitativa, non è solo una misura, tot ore, tot minuti. Il suo tempo ha *qualità* diverse a seconda della mia data e ora di nascita, della mia presunta posizione degli astri in un dato momento della vita, del rapporto tra il mio segno zodiacale e quello di altre persone, ecc.

Un destino calcolabile e misurabile non sarebbe più un destino, fa notare Jünger, il quale non può ancora conoscere gli algoritmi predittivi—basati sull’incessante trivellazione delle vite umane per estrarne *big data*—che nel XXI secolo regoleranno la vita “virtuale” iperconnessa, ma sembra coglierne in anticipo la logica, come sembra coglierla Guénon quando descrive il “regno della quantità”:

[. . .] il bisogno di semplificare accompagna necessariamente la tendenza a tutto ridurre al quantitativo, e per di più la rinforza, poiché evidentemente nulla può esistere di più semplice della quantità. Se si riuscisse a spogliare interamente un essere o una cosa delle sue qualità proprie, il “residuo” ottenuto presenterebbe sicuramente il massimo di semplicità e, al limite, tale estrema semplicità sarebbe quella che non può appartenere se non alla quantità pura, cioè a quelle “unità,” tutte simili tra loro, che costituiscono la molteplicità numerica; [. . .]”<sup>15</sup>

Il messaggio che l’astrologia continua a inviarci, espresso nel suo modo peculiare, è che la nostra vita non può essere solo quantità.

Lo scienziata e il debunker<sup>16</sup> fanno la guerra all’astrologia perché la misurano coi loro strumenti e credono di averla colta in fallo. In realtà non la comprendono, ed è per questo che i loro attacchi non ottengono alcun risultato, e l’astrologia continua a consolare e orientare, a lenire i piccoli dolori del quotidiano, e spesso a suscitare meraviglia, incanto.

## 10. Totalità, mistero, stare cum sidera

Per *nucleo di verità* dell’esoterismo intendo l’insieme di domande sensate, pertinenti e radicate nella condizione umana a cui l’esoterismo dà risposte. La *verità* riguarda le pulsioni che l’esoterismo cerca di soddisfare, i bisogni che cerca di interpretare, le istanze che cerca di rappresentare. Non riguarda tanto il contenuto delle risposte quanto la realtà del vissuto che genera le domande.

Un nucleo è:

“La parte più interna o centrale di qcs., che si distingue da ciò che è disposto intorno per aspetto, struttura, qualità, ecc. o che costituisce il primo elemento intorno a cui si sono organizzati gli altri che lo circondano e che costituiscono un organismo più complesso.”<sup>17</sup>

La cultura esoterica si forma intorno al *mistero*, è questo il suo nucleo di verità. Ci sarà sempre *del mistero*, parola la cui radice *mýs*, secondo il linguista “eretico” Giovanni Semerano, deriva dall'accadico *mushu*, che significa “notte.”<sup>18</sup> Che sia vero o meno, è notte quella di cui parliamo, nella notte sempre veglieremo e magari brancoleremo. La realtà in tutta la sua immane dimensione, in tutta la sua infinitezza, non è soltanto inconoscibile ma è impensabile e inesprimibile. Non ci attende alcun radioso domani della scienza in cui avremo spiegato tutto quel che c'è da spiegare. Nessun discorso, nessuna teoria, nessuna conoscenza razionale e discorsiva potrà mai afferrare e dire questo *tutto* in cui siamo gettati alla nascita.

È qui che può entrare in gioco la “metafisica” come la intende Guénon: una conoscenza intuitiva e immediata che permette di “considerare tutte le cose in modo simultaneo.”<sup>19</sup>

Il verbo *considerare* deriva da uno “star fuori in compagnia degli astri,” *cum sidera*. Non significa comprendere né spiegare tutto. Significa aprirsi, porsi in modo da sentire che il tutto c'è e ne siamo parte.

Al ritrovarsi *cum sidera* seguirà sempre la tensione a toccare il mistero, a trovare quel Monte Analogo di cui narrò René Daumal nel suo romanzo allegorico rimasto incompiuto, e a tentarne la scalata.

### 11. Spazzolare l'esoterismo contropelo

La “verità” dell'esoterismo riguarda più le domande che le risposte, ma anche certe risposte hanno un valore; altrimenti perché staremmo parlando proprio di esoterismo e non di filosofie o teologie più *mainstream*?

Come già accennato per l'astrologia, le risposte che dà l'esoterismo hanno tanto più successo—suscitano tanto più incanto—quanto maggiore è il “coefficiente d'attrito” tra loro e l'esistente, quanto più richiamano un altrove rispetto alla miseria *numerocratica* del tran tran capitalistico.

Dove e quando il pensiero esoterico fa attrito? Si può capire solamente—e benjaminianamente—*spazzolandolo contropelo*,<sup>20</sup> ovvero leggendo senza farsi spingere dall'autore fin dove vuole andare a parare, scegliendo dove puntare i piedi, decidendo ogni tanto di scartare, deviare, prendere altre vie tra le righe. Ovviamente, bisogna andare oltre gli effetti di lusso spirituale e ignorare le tecnicizzazioni più smaccate.

Rimangono utili le analisi e riflessioni di Furio Jesi, se di esse si lascia andare quanto è superato e caduco perché frutto di contingenze o perché non sufficientemente elaborato. Va tenuto conto che la ricerca di Jesi fu tragicamente interrotta, e che egli morì giovane. Concetti quali “materiali mitologici,” “macchina mitologica,” “temperatura mitologica” e “lusso spirituale” vanno tenuti nelle nostre cassette degli attrezzi.

Non c'è Mito, esistono solo *materiali mitologici* che tutte e tutti noi ricombiniamo incessantemente.

Jesi—anche sulla scorta di Benjamin—provò a dare indicazioni “operative,” in primis l'uso “ironico,” brechtianamente *straniato*, di materiali mitologici al fine di *abbassarne la temperatura*. Lavorare senza mai spacciarsi per esegeti dell'Autentico e del Primevo. Indicazioni giuste ma

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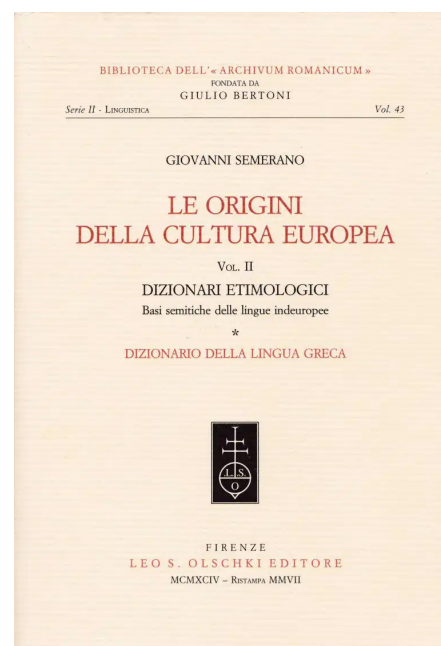
Voce “Nucleo” nel *Nuovo De Mauro*, dizionario online della lingua italiana.

18

Cf. Giovanni Semerano, *Le origini della cultura europea*, vol. 2, tomo 2, *Dizionario della lingua greca* (Firenze: Olschki, 1994).

19

Cf. René Guénon, *La metafisica orientale* (Milano: Adelphi, 2022), testo della conferenza tenuta nel 1925 alla Sorbona.



20

Walter Benjamin invitò il “materialista storico” a non dimenticare mai che il “patrimonio culturale”—l'intero patrimonio culturale, dunque, aggiungiamo noi, anche l'esoterismo—“deve la sua esistenza non soltanto alla fatica dei grandi geni che l'hanno creato, ma anche all'anonima servitù dei loro contemporanei. Non è mai un documento della cultura senza essere insieme un documento della barbarie. Nella misura del possibile il materialista storico, quindi, ne prende le distanze. Considera suo compito spazzolare la storia contropelo [*Geschichte gegen den Strich bürsten*].” W. Benjamin, “Sul concetto di storia,” in W. Benjamin, *Opere complete*, vol. 7, *Scritti 1938–1940* (Torino: Einaudi, 2006), 486.

insufficienti: rimandano a prassi potenzialmente già cooptate nella comunicazione capitalistica, nella *memetica*, che nell'ironia ci annega. Ma anche da qui noi Wu Ming siamo partiti per definire e mettere in campo la nostra poetica del “mostrare la sutura.”

## 12. Mostrare la sutura

Le storie hanno un potere incantatorio, e noi che ne abbiamo fatto il nostro mestiere dobbiamo esserne consapevoli. Dobbiamo usare quel potere—i nostri libri devono essere belli, seducenti, affascinanti—ma allo stesso tempo dobbiamo mettere in guardia chi li legge. Mostrare la sutura, all'osso, significa scrivere libri che raccontino anche come sono stati scritti. La metafora è chirurgica e rimanda alle suture ben evidenti sul volto e nel collo della creatura di Frankenstein. Anche ne *La Q di Qomplotto* ho mostrato continuamente quali strumenti stavo utilizzando, quali scelte avevo fatto ecc.

Anche mostrare la sutura è tecnicizzazione, utilizzo strumentale di materiali mitologici. La differenza sta nel modo e nel fine. Mostrando la sutura, la tecnicizzazione è dichiarata. Nella narrazione della destra esoterica ogni sutura è nascosta, niente deve sembrare manipolato e tutto antichissimo. Non a caso Evola e Guénon ripetono continuamente di essere nulla più che divulgatori, di scrivere solo “messe a punto” e non elaborazioni originali.

La sfida è congiungere e far convivere pensiero critico—e autocritico—e incanto.

Sovente il duo di illusionisti americani Penn & Teller esegue un numero di magia dopodiché *mostra il trucco*, ma in modo che la dimostrazione stessa risulti *magica*, meravigliosa. Sono anni che cerchiamo di ottenere questo.

Tale approccio può offrire un metodo per affrontare le fantasie di complotto, i miti tecnicizzati reazionari, l'esoterismo tossico. A chi subisce il fascino di quelle narrazioni dobbiamo offrirne di più belle e potenti, ma allo stesso tempo fornire strumenti critici per comprendere come le abbiamo costruite. È un terreno pericoloso e difficile, ma se ci impegniamo collettivamente, è possibile ottenere risultati importanti. Ma non otterremo nulla se non sapremo anche leggere *contropelo* l'esoterismo, andando oltre le sue parvenze e cortine fumogene, rintracciando i suoi nuclei di verità.

Bologna, novembre-dicembre 2022

## Breve biografia

Per tutta la seconda metà degli anni Novanta, l'autore che oggi si firma «Wu Ming 1» partecipò attivamente al Luther Blissett Project, esperienza politico-artistica oggi studiata in tutto il mondo, durata dall'estate 1994 al 31 dicembre 1999. Nell'ambito di tale progetto, insieme a tre coautori, scrisse il romanzo storico *Q*, uscito a firma “Luther Blissett” nel 1999. Il romanzo fu tradotto in diciotto lingue e pubblicato in trenta paesi. A partire dal 2018 è stato oggetto di speculazioni sul suo essere stato o meno fonte d'ispirazione per il fantomatico “Q,” l'autore dei misteriosi messaggi che hanno dato vita al movimento cospirazionista QAnon. Nel 2000, dopo la fine del Luther Blissett Project, gli autori di *Q* fondarono il collettivo Wu Ming, principalmente dedicato alla letteratura. Ogni membro del collettivo ha un nome d'arte, formato dal nome del gruppo più un numero cardinale, seguendo l'ordine alfabetico dei cognomi. Wu Ming ha all'attivo numerosi romanzi, saggi e raccolte di racconti. I titoli



più conosciuti sono *54* (2002), *Manituana* (2007), *Altai* (2009), *L'Armata dei Sonnambuli* (2014), *Proletkult* (2018) e *Ufo 78* (2022). Come “solista,” Wu Ming 1 è autore di romanzi e varie opere di non-fiction come inchieste, reportages narrativi, biografie, resoconti di viaggi. Il titolo più recente è *La Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni: come le fantasie di complotto difendono il sistema* (2021).

# Book review by Massimo Introvigne

Wu Ming 1. *La Q di Qomplotto. QAnon e dintorni. Come le fantasie di complotto difendono il Sistema*. Rome: Alegre, 2021, pp. 592. Paperback € 20.00, ISBN 9788832067415



CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
COMPARATE

*fondazione*  
GIORGIO CINI ONLUS

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The website of CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, which I co-founded in 1988, was created by a nationally well-known web designer, Nicoletta Ferrari (1965–018). She also created a tradition: every year, on April 1, she celebrated April's Fool Day by posting a false story. In 2001, her April 1 story was that PierLuigi Zoccatelli, an Italian scholar of esotericism and the deputy director of CESNUR, had purchased both the ruins of the Abbey of Thelema, rented in Cefalù, Sicily, in the early 1920s by the sulphureous British magus Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), and the Catholic publishing house LDC, which had published some of CESNUR's books. The article explained that Zoccatelli would keep the acronym LDC (which stands for “Libreria Dottrina Cristiana,” “Library of Christian Doctrine”), which after all had existed for more than a hundred years, but would change the meaning in “Libreria di Crowley,” and make publishing Italian editions of Crowley's works the main task of the publishing house.

Ferrari's April 1, 2001 story remained on CESNUR's web site for that day only, and it was so obviously false that we did not expect anybody to believe it. Yet, to this very day, you can still read on the web that Zoccatelli and CESNUR are really part of a Crowleyan occult society in disguise, and the owners of both the Sicilian Abbey of Thelema and LDC. Some of these websites are part of the network commonly referred to as QAnon, which brings us to the book *La Q di Qomplotto* by Wu Ming 1, a member of the group internationally famous for their brilliant books and even more entertaining pranks perpetrated under the name “Luther Blissett,” taken from a famously inept AC Milan soccer player.

In fact, Ferrari's April 1 joke is a perfect confirmation of one of the book's main theories, which is presented with such elegance and persuasiveness that it deserves to become a new law of sociology. We can perhaps call it the “Law of Wu Ming.” It can be stated as “Never invent a fake conspiracy as a joke. Some conspiracy theorists will take it seriously. It will take a life of its own, and you will never be able to stop it.”

I was also involved in a more far-reaching incident where the Law of Wu Ming was at work, and one part of a main theme of Wu Ming 1's book, Satanic panics. You can read in thousands of books, articles, and websites in all languages, including Japanese, that there were once 40,000 Satanists in Turin, Italy, and they had made alliances with co-religionists abroad creating two “magical triangles,” one with London and San Francisco and one with Prague and Lyon. The story came from a false “report” written in 1969 by Gianluigi Marianini (1918–2009), a local eccentric who had become famous as the winner of a TV quiz show and was also an inveterate prankster. The “report's conclusions” were published in a local daily newspaper by his friend and accomplice, journalist Vittorio Messori, who was then a secular humanist but later converted to Catholicism and became famous as the interviewer of two Popes. Both of them were my friends, I knew the real story, and after I blew the whistle without naming names, they both publicly confessed. To no avail. It seems that the story of the magic circles and of the 40,000 Satanists in Turin is now beyond any possible denial, and will remain with us forever.

The title of Wu Ming 1's book refers to QAnon, but there is much more in the text. As the author explains, there is nothing really mysterious in QAnon. We more or less know who was behind the messages signed “Q,” minor right-wing American extremists whose main aim was to make some easy money. The story of how QAnon kept being expelled from reputable social media and platforms and had to migrate to increasingly disreputable ones is also known. And of course we all know how Donald



Trump both hailed QAnon and used it for his own purposes, including in the fateful day when the Capitol was assaulted, January 6, 2021.

When QAnon surfaced in 2017, the name “Q” allegedly identified an American agent with a “Q clearance,” i.e., with a U.S. Department of Energy authorization to access secret information about nuclear weapons. The clearance was falsely presented as one making the holder privy to classified files about pretty much everything, including the supposed pedophile-Satanic rituals in which Democrat politicians such as Bill and Hillary Clinton were said to be involved. However, one possibility is that whoever started QAnon was inspired by the allegorical and faux conspirationist novel “Q” by “Luther Blissett,” the predecessor of Wu Ming, which had been published in Italian in 1999 and translated into English in 2003. Although the novel was set in 16th-century Europe, this would be the quintessential evidence for the Law of Wu Ming. A satirical novel signed under a false name about false conspiracies generated the largest real-life conspirationist movement of the 21st century.

Wu Ming 1’s main argument is that nothing is new in QAnon, except some bizarre theories—including the one that goes under the name #ItalyDidIt and claims that former Italian Prime Ministers Romano Prodi and Matteo Renzi were able to change the results of the American presidential elections of 2020 through mysterious machines—the endorsement by a U.S. President, and the skilled use of dark web technologies. On the other hand, as Wu Ming 1 demonstrates, all the false theories circulated through QAnon were already there. Some created or risked to create fatal violence. One was the Pizzagate, the conspiracy theory claiming that in the cellars of a Washington DC pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong (which, by the way, has no cellars) leaders of the Democrat Party raped children and officiated in Satanic rituals. The Pizzagate mythology emerged at least three years before QAnon. In 2016, it persuaded a man from North Carolina to travel to Washington DC, assault the pizzeria, and start shooting with a rifle, miraculously with no casualties.

However, another dark myth that existed before QAnon but was popularized by it, the so-called Kalergi Plan, did lead to homicides. The Kalergi Plan is a non-existing plot allegedly conceived by Austrian-Japanese diplomat Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi (1894–1972) to destroy the white race in the West by overwhelming the Western countries with African and Asian immigrants. True believers in the Kalergi Plan decided to act against it by killing immigrants in various countries.

Wu Ming 1’s book actually goes much further, by arguing that QAnon conspiracy theories would not exist without a long prehistory that dates back to the French Revolution and the idea that it had been organized through a great plan involving Freemasons, Satanists, and Jews. As Wu Ming 1 rightly argues, this international scare had its roots in earlier anti-Semitism. In turn, it was the matrix of all subsequent conspiracy theories, from the 19th century return of blood libel accusations against the Jews to the 20th century Satanic panics. I told this story myself in my *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), and Umberto Eco (1932–2016), a constant reference in Wu Ming 1’s text, popularized it through his novels *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *The Prague Cemetery*. What *La Q di Qomplotto* has to add is the author’s personal recollection of the Luther Blissett group’s defense of Marco Dimitri (1963–2021), who operated in Bologna a movement of “rationalist Satanism” (i.e., referring to Satan mostly as a symbol of human freedom and higher potential), and spent years in jails for crimes courts finally acknowledged he had never committed.

In 1997, a previously unknown organization reportedly devoted to fighting “Satanic cults,” called “Cosamo,” started issuing press releases claiming that they had the best evidence of Dimitri’s crimes, including a video where “Satanists” molested a young girl. Eventually, this generated a national interest, and one of the main Italian TV networks stated it would be prepared to broadcast the full video, if Cosamo would provide it. Finally, the mysterious Cosamo disclosed the video, where masked “Satanists” surrounded a young girl, ostensibly ready to molest her or worse. When the audience was prepared for the worst, however, the girl rose and started dancing a jig with the “Satanists.” There was no Cosamo. It was all a prank organized by the Luther Blissett group.

The Cosamo prank worked, in the sense that the Italian media had to recognize they had been fooled and to promise they would be more cautious in the future when confronted with sensational accusations against “Satanists” and “cults.” Parenthetically, the book notes that even “experts” and scholars were fooled by false accusations against Dimitri, with the exception of the author of this review, who was perhaps the proverbial anomaly confirming the rule. In another sense, in fact, the prank did not succeed, because after a few years the media started repeating again unbelievable and false stories about Satanist pedophiles operating in both Catholic and secular kindergartens and “cults,” a label Wu Ming 1 rightly suggests to handle with care (I would recommend to avoid it altogether).

Why are both the media discussing these subjects and conspiracy theorists incorrigible? Trying to answer this question may well be the most important part of the book. Wu Ming 1 dismisses the idea that only right-wing extremists embrace conspiracy theories. Leftists do too. The author then offers a deep reflection on the limits of debunking. Inspired by Arthur Schopenhauer’s (1788–1860) famous 1831 small book *The Art of Being Right*, Wu Ming 1 explains how difficult it is to deny a conspiracy theory. Seasoned reporters have an old saying, that publishing a denial is just publishing the same news twice. If Hillary Clinton claims in a press release “I do not abuse children,” Wu Ming 1 assures us that the effect in the public opinion would mostly be to reinforce the idea that Clinton has something to do with the abuse of children. This is why debunkers of conspiracy theories and pseudo-scientific arguments mostly preach to the converted, and rarely persuade followers of QAnon, anti-vaccine activists, and other conspiracy buffs.

Schopenhauerian laws of rhetoric can help, but Wu Ming 1 tackles the subject more deeply. The debunkers normally do not succeed because they start from the premise that they occupy a higher moral ground. “We” are right and “they” are wrong. “We” represent Science and Rationality, “they” root for Ignorance and Superstition. This, Wu Ming 1 argues, is the attitude of the old uncle who goes to a birthday party, regards the balloons as silly, and bursts all of them with a pin. The only result he achieves is to be regarded as obnoxious and unpolite.

Ultimately, Wu Ming 1 dares to utter a heresy in typical “Luther Blissett” style. He argues that broad, universal conspiracy theories are false while small, local conspiracies may really happen: Watergate, for example, was one. However, in the lived experience of those who believe in grand conspiracy narratives there are kernels of truth and the expression of genuine needs. It is false that Bill Gates manipulates anti-COVID-19 vaccines to install microchips under our skin. However, it is true that not all that glitters in the philanthropic foundations created by tycoons such as Gates is gold, and that large software

companies have been found guilty of unethical practices by courts of law. In this sense, the most bizarre conspiracy theories, Wu Ming 1 concludes, are the best friends of “the system” or “the big powers” they claim they are opposing. Once conspiracy theories against them so preposterous that no sensible person would believe them have been created, it becomes easier to liquidate even valid criticism as a product of the same paranoid “conspiracist” mindset. Or perhaps this is just another conspiracy theory about conspiracy theories. The Luther Blissett/Wu Ming game continues.