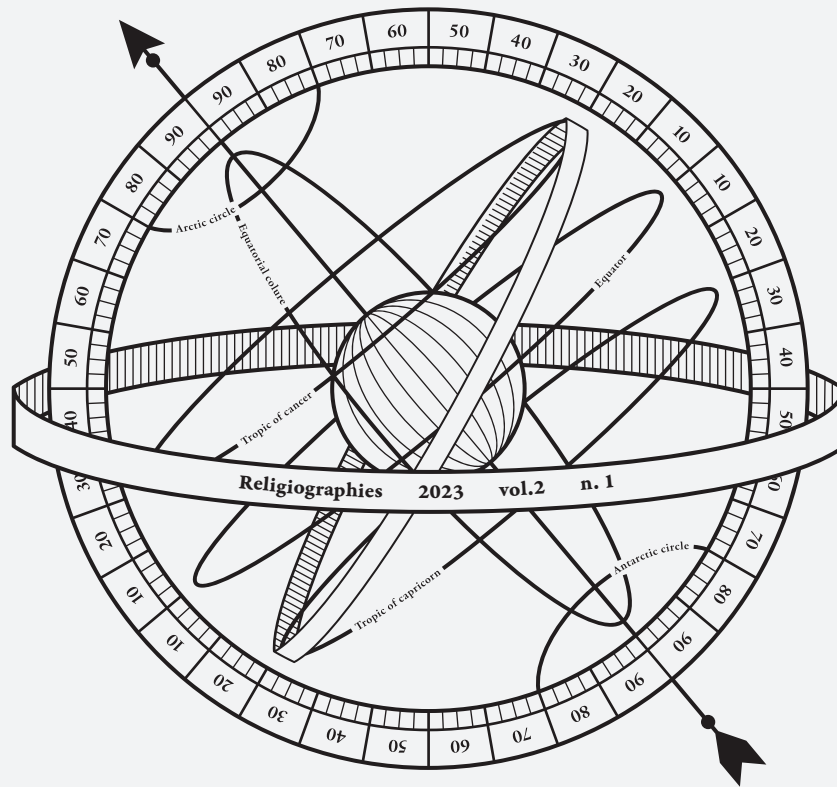


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Heterography 3:

On Making “Good Use” of Esotericism. Notes 2022¹

Wu Ming 1



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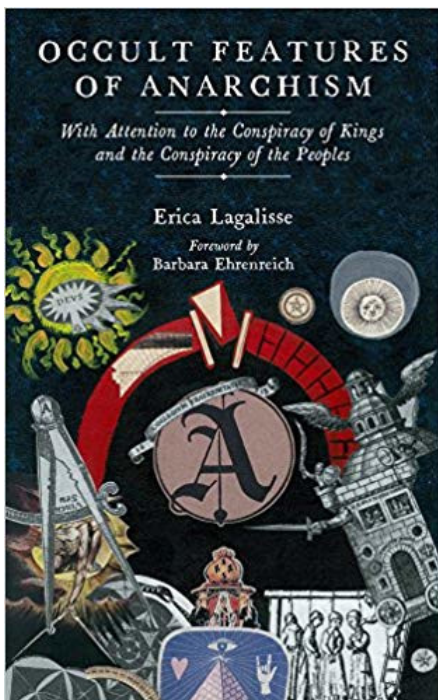
The term “notes” is intended to emphasise that the elaboration is in progress, the summaries are necessarily transitory and interlocutory. I’m “reasoning aloud.”

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.

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Erica Lagalisse, *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.²

2. *“Freemasonry is what social movements look like after the witch hunts”*³

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,⁴ 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.

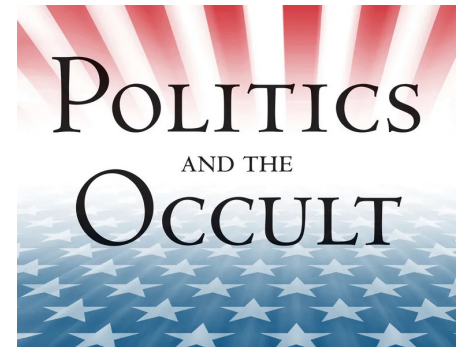
The “esoteric right” was the latest to arrive, but it found a free space, because in the meantime the left—in all its gradations: revolutionary, reformist, moderate—had largely detached itself from its “magical” and “mystery” origins.

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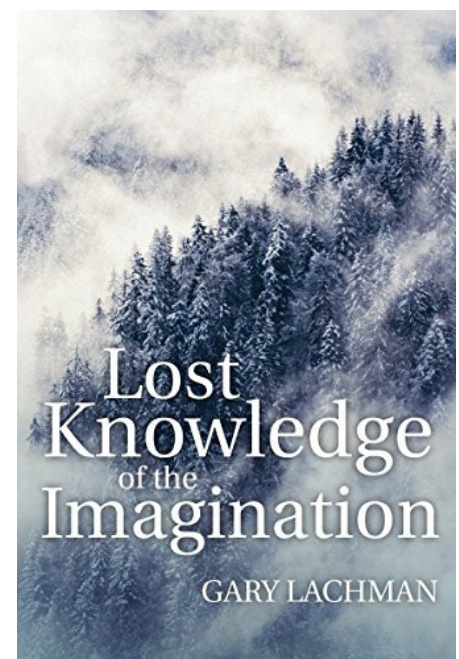
See, in particular, Gary Lachman, *Politics and the Occult: The Left, the Right and the Radically Unseen* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2008), and *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2018).



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”⁵ 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

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“*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.”⁶

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.⁷

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 1970s⁸—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.”

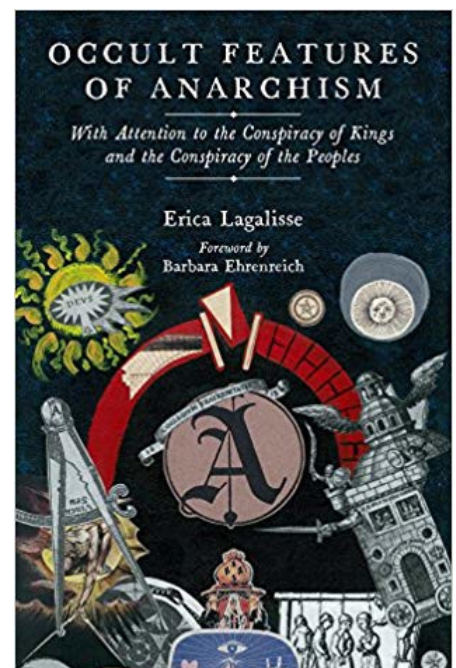
Effects of spiritual luxury are sought by flaunting a higher register than is needed, by flaunting linguistic and iconographic trinkets that are supposedly “elevated,” “noble,” “spiritual,” “mysterious,” or even “warrior-mystical.” There is a vast repertoire of rhetorical figures, tricks, and gimmicks.⁹

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

6
Lagalisce, *Occult Features of Anarchism*, 73–74.

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.

10

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

11

Ernst Jünger, *An der Zeitmauer*, 39.

12

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

13

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.”¹⁰

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.”¹¹ 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; [. . .]”¹²

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

Debunkers¹³ 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 *mys*, according to the “heretical” linguist Giovanni Semerano, derives from the Akkadian *mushu*, meaning “night.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵

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,¹⁶ 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

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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).