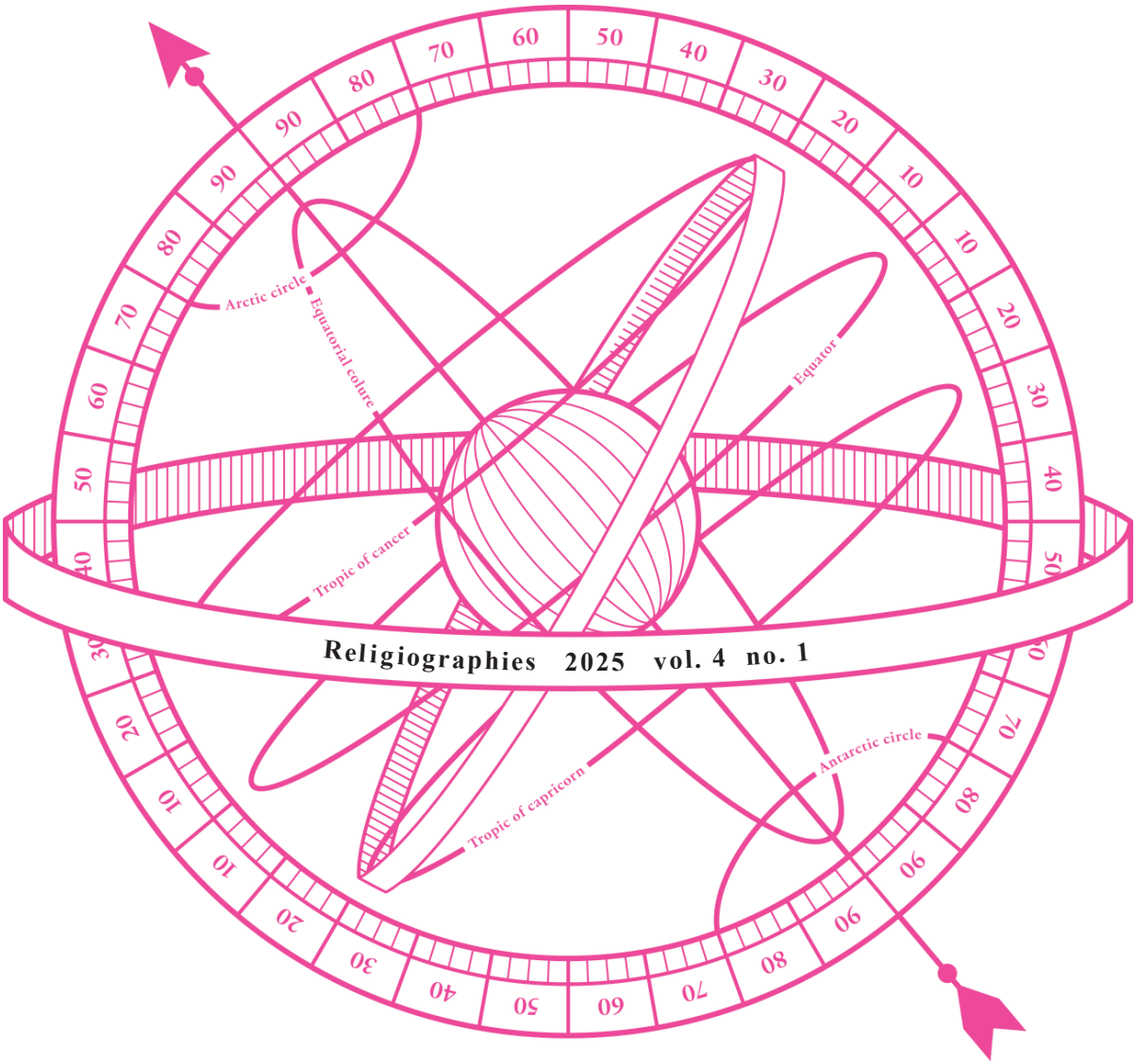
Religiographies



Special Issue
"The Eranos Experience: Spirituality and the Arts
in a Comparative Perspective"
edited by
Wouter J. Hanegraaff

Fondazione Giorgio Cini 2025 - vol.4 no.1 ISSN 2974-6469

Reminiscences of Eranos in Naja Marie Aidt's Novel *When Death Takes Something from You Give It Back: Carl's Book*

GÍSLI MAGNÚSSON

Author
Gísli Magnússon
University of Iceland
gislim@hi.is

Keywords
Danish literature, Eranos, Jung, Shamanism, Re-enchantment

To cite this
Magnússon, Gísli. "Reminiscences of Eranos in Naja Marie Aidt's novel *When Death Takes Something from You Give It Back: Carl's Book*." *Religiographies* 4, no. 1 (2025): 104–116. https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2025.v4.n1.104-116

DOI: https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2025.v4.n1.104-116

Abstract
Danish author Naja Marie Aidt tragically lost her 25-year-old son Carl in 2015. Her book *When Death Takes Something from You Give It Back: Carl's Book* (2017) is a powerful example of trauma literature. But it is also a spiritual exploration of loss of meaning and language and the process of creating new meaning. On the cover of *Carl's Book* is a meditative drawing by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, *The Central Spiritual Sun.* Aidt thanks the Fondazione Eranos, Ascona for the permission to reproduce the drawing, but otherwise does not mention Eranos in the book. Nevertheless, this paper argues that Eranos provides a key to understanding Aidt's criticism of New Age metaphysics and strategies of re-enchantment. Apart from the obvious reference to Eranos on the cover, the paper explores the following four themes connected to Eranos: "Antiquity and Myth," "Jungian Dreams and the Romantic Unconscious," "The Vision in the Rothko-Chapel (Perennialism, Synchronicity)," and "Shamanism."

Centro Studi di Civiltà e Spiritualità Comparate
fondazione Giorgio Cini onlus

Naja Marie Aidt (b. 1963) is one of the most acclaimed living Danish authors. In 2008, she received the Nordic Council Literature Prize for the collection of short stories *Baboon* (*Bavian,* 2006), and in 2022 she received the Swedish Academy's Nordic Prize (the so-called "little Nobel Prize"). In 2017, Aidt published the autobiographical book *When Death Takes Something from You Give It Back: Carl's Book* about the tragic death of her 25-year-old son, Carl Emil. The book appeared in an English translation by Denise Newman in 2019 and was longlisted for the National Book Award the same year. Aidt portrays both Carl and her relationship with him and the experience of devastating grief following his death in March 2015, but *Carl's Book* is also a meta-poetic novel about the loss of language in the face of trauma and the tentative and fragmented process towards being able to write again. The novel is a mosaic of different genres combining diary pages, poems, prose, dictionary entries, dreams, messages, recollections, and Carl's notes. Graphically, the book is experimental since it uses a wide variety of different fonts and layouts.

Fig. 1. Naja Marie Aidt and Carl twenty-years-old. Private photo of the author.

There are, however, narrative elements that create progression in the seemingly shattered pieces. Firstly, there is a chronological progression in Aidt's motherly recollections of her son, from the uterine stage until his death at the age of twenty-five and thereafter. (Although the book is not strictly chronological.) The primary progressive element, however, is the description of the primal trauma of receiving the message of Carl's death. In the first half of the book, the description of this specific dreadful evening is set in italics and is repeated again and again, each time adding more text. This structure mimics the process of grief itself where flashbacks of the primal trauma haunt the victim repeatedly.[1] In the second half of the book, the events following the evening of the message are narrated (graphically indicated by the continuous use of italics).

Carl's Book is characterized by an ambivalence concerning the

*

The page's numbers in parentheses after citations refer to: Naja Marie Aidt, *When Death Takes Something from You Give It Back: Carl's Book*, trans. Denise Newman (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2019).

1

Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir, "Tavshed og skrift(emål): Ar og lidelsens gentagelse i Auður Avas værker," *Nordica* 35 (2018): 23–35.

spiritual or mythical as such (which is positively connotated) and spiritual *explanations* or *justifications* (which are negatively connotated). In a book about grief, this is understandable. The loss implies a radical sense of meaninglessness and disenchantment. The emotional response to the loss is grief, depression, and anger. And Aidt's anger is directed at soothing frameworks of meaning of *any* kind, which is the reason why she graphically "screams" her anti-religious creed in capital letters:

> I BELIEVE IN NOTHING, NOT IN HEAVEN, HELL, GOD, HEALING, PAST LIVES, I SPIT ON ALL FOOLISH NOTIONS, I DON'T BELIEVE IN HADES, THE LAW OF KARMA, AFTERLIFE, TRANSMIGRATION, I SPIT ON ALL OF IT, I RAGE WITH THE DEEPEST CONTEMPT, I DON'T BELIEVE IN FATE, ASTROLOGY, CONTACT WITH THE DEAD, GHOSTS, ANGELS, I VOMIT OVER ALL OF IT, I SCREAM FULL OF THE DEEPEST CONTEMPT, I SAY FUCK THAT SHIT, THERE'S ONLY LIFE AND DEATH, LIFE AND DEATH, I ONLY BELIEVE IN GENTLENESS, WHEN WE CARE FOR THE DEAD BODY, WHEN WE ARE FORCED TO PART WITH IT; THE COMMUNITY.

This stylistically and orthographically raw passage is an example of what Aidt calls "shock-language"—it is a consequence of her grief sentiment: "Nothing is real. Language is emptied of meaning" (72). Aidt's anti-creed can be interpreted as a criticism of New Age metaphysics, but not of all spirituality. It is an outburst of anger comparable to another passage—also in uppercase—where Aidt writes:

> "I AM FURIOUS OVER BEING ISOLATED IN MY SORROW I HATE ART I HATE EVERYTHING I'VE WRITTEN ABOUT DEATH IN THE PAST OFTEN I STAY IN THE APARTMENT THE WHOLE DAY I SIT IN THE DARK I SIT IN THE DARK I DON'T READ I DON'T WRITE I DON'T LISTEN TO MUSIC" (28).

Here, Aidt describes how she—in her sorrow—hates art, literature, and reading. Just as the anti-creed, this passage must be taken *cum grano salis*. Aidt rejects inauthentic art, spirituality, and even her own earlier writings on death. Nevertheless, in a situation of unbearable loss, Aidt finds a path back to meaning and writing through spiritual and "re-enchanting" literature. In this paper, I will look at Aidt's strategies of re-enchantment. My thesis is that Eranos might provide a key to understanding these strategies.

The connection with Eranos stems from the cover of *Carl's Book,* a drawing by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn. On the copyright page, Aidt credits the Fondazione Eranos, Ascona for granting permission to reproduce the painting. Most readers will hardly notice this reference, but "the spirit of Eranos" might help us understand the spirituality of the novel.[2] The founder of Eranos was Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962) who was born to Dutch parents but lived most of her life in Ascona in Switzerland on the shores of Lago Maggiore. From 1933 onwards, she

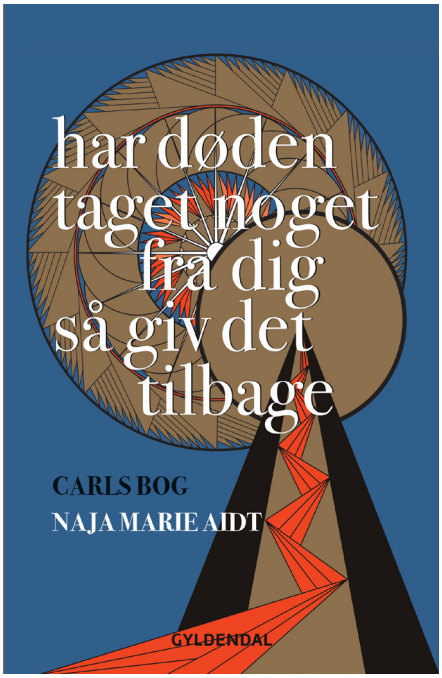


Fig. 2. Cover of *Har døden taget noget fra dig så giv det tilbage: Carls bog*, Naja Marie Aidt, 2017.

2 Eranos was, of course, not entirely homogenous. However, a spiritual understanding of the psyche and an openness to mystical experiences (also in an East-West perspective), along with a critique of materialist reductionism and rationalism, seem to have been generally accepted premises.

held yearly gatherings in her stately villa in which many of the most prominent scholars of religion took part. The most important figure until the end of World War II was the Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung. After World War II, famous scholars such as Joseph Campbell, Gershom Scholem, Henry Corbin, and Mircea Eliade attended the yearly meetings. From 1933 to 1937, the Eranos meetings were dedicated to a comparatist East-West perspective. From 1938 to 1944, the theme was "Gnosis and the Mysteries." In 1945 to 1946, the theme was "Spirit and its Relation to Nature." From 1947 to 1962, the year of Fröbe Kapteyn's death, the theme was "The Human Being."[3]

Fröbe-Kapteyn, Jung, and the other scholars of Eranos shared a vision of cultural and spiritual renewal. They combined "the widespread nostalgia for an enchanted worldview with strong emphasis on an 'inner' spiritual dimension as a means of escape from [in Eliade's words] 'the terror of history.' "[4] Eranos could help us understand Aidt's aversion towards New Age metaphysics. According to Wouter Hanegraaff, "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."[5] This ideal of "becoming an adept and attain a state of perfectly enlightened consciousness in which ultimately no question will remain unanswered" differs from the "spirit of Eranos," which 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*."[6] Throughout *Carl's Book*, Aidt's spirituality is in accordance with the attitude of Eranos. She never *explains* spiritual events, maintaining an open, probing, inquiring approach and remaining always willing to put any model of reality into question.

The following five elements are tied together through thematical proximity to the spiritual project of Eranos:

a) The Fröbe-Kapteyn-Cover of the Book (*The Central Spiritual Sun*)
b) Antiquity and Myth
c) Jungian Dreams and the Romantic Unconscious
d) Rothko Chapel (Perennialism)
e) Shamanism

All these five elements constitute an attempt at re-enchantment, of returning to writing, of creating new meaning.

Fröbe-Kapteyn's Cover of the Book (*The Central Spiritual Sun*)

The cover of *Carl's Book* is a "meditative drawing" by Fröbe-Kapteyn, *The Central Spiritual Sun*.[7] The painting stems from Fröbe-Kapteyn's theosophical phase where she collaborated with Alice Ann Bailey, who produced theosophical books channeled by the so-called Tibetan—a non-physical master—and which have been influential in theosophical and, later, new age movements.[8] The paintings Fröbe-Kapteyn

3
According to Hanegraaff, the themes were less homogenous from 1963 to 1988. Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Generous Hermeneutics: Hans Thomas Hakl and Eranos," *Religiographies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 72.

4
Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 67.

5
Hanegraaff, "Generous Hermeneutics," 73.

6
Hanegraaff, 73.

7
The drawing was used in the call for papers and posters for the conference: "The Eranos Experience: Spirituality and the Arts from a Comparative Perspective," November 17–19, 2022, at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore) in Venice. The conference was organized jointly by Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Francesco Piraino) and the Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (Marco Pasi) in collaboration with the Chair for Literature and Cultural Studies at the ETH (Andreas Kilcher), Zürich.

8
On the connection between Bailey's Theosophy and New Age, cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 95, 157.

produced between 1926 and 1943 seem to combine two-dimensional geometrical forms with esoteric symbolism—reminiscent of Hilma af Klint, whose style was also characterized by the cultural code of esotericism, especially Theosophy, geometrical shapes, and an artistic process involving mediumship or at least, in the case of Fröbe-Kapteyn, meditation.[9] In a broader context, Fröbe-Kapteyn belongs to the well-documented nexus of modern art and esotericism, which was the theme of the two great pioneering exhibitions: *The Spiritual in Art*[10] at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986, and *Okkultismus und Avantgarde* in Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt am Main in 1995.[11] As in the case of Vassily Kandinsky, the role of the artist was comparable to a seer or clairvoyant conquering new frontiers in the vast totality of the universe. This worldview—where the limit between the seen and the unseen, the visible and invisible—is not fixed. For it was conceived by the spiritual modernists as a holistic alternative to scientific materialism and to the radical dualism between immanence and transcendence in traditional monotheism and institutionalized religion.[12]

The title of Fröbe-Kapteyn's meditative painting, *The Central Spiritual Sun*, is closely connected with the theosophist Bailey and her reception of Madame Blavatsky. In the appendix of *Esoteric Astrology* from 1936, Bailey quotes passages about the "central spiritual sun" from *The Secret Doctrine* by Blavatsky. Blavatsky's ideas about the sun sound like a kind of esoteric Platonism: the physical Sun is regarded as "only a reflection of *the Central Spiritual Sun*,"[13] and "the dwelling or the vehicle of a god, and a host of gods."[14] The physical sun is also called *shadow*—a rather obvious reference to Plato's allegory of the cave. Only here, Plato's divine metaphor, the sun itself, is split into a "central spiritual" version and an earthly "shadow" version. It would, however, be simplistic to reduce the Theosophic cosmogony to its dualistic Platonic aspect. Most spiritual worldviews from the nineteenth century until New Age and modern spiritualities have been monistic—not in the sense of monistic scientific "materialism," but in the sense of a Duo-Unity comprised of a sensuous and a supersensuous half where the limit of perception is not fixed once and for all.

Fröbe-Kapteyn's meditative drawing does, indeed, refer to Blavatsky's cosmology in the sense that it depicts two versions of the sun: one modest circle and, behind it, a more luminous and visually complex circular form, the so-called "central spiritual sun." Striving towards the earthly sun, there is, in the foreground, a volcanic symbol where, in the middle of the triangular shape, red magma is zigzagging upwards.

Choosing this image as the front page of her book is a spiritual signal. However, the theosophical background should not be overstressed. Rather, the drawing should be seen as a spiritual artwork in a more general way. Hence, the "central spiritual sun" could be interpreted as the divine essence of Aidt's son Carl. This is further accentuated by the butterfly on the title page (which is even promoted to the front page in the American edition). In the book itself, Aidt explains: "The Greek word for butterfly is psyche, which also means soul. And so when Socrates speaks about the soul, the butterfly follows along. A beautiful shadow fluttering inside the word soul. / *Metamorphosis* /

9
Hilma af Klint's works were widely unknown to the public—I am, therefore, not talking about influence. It is, however, no coincidence that the two female artists have been exhibited together as pioneers of abstraction in art, e.g., at the ambitious exhibition "Women in Abstraction" at the Centre Pompidou in 2021.

10
Tuchman Maurice et al., eds., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986).

11
Veit Loers, ed., *Okkultismus und Avantgarde: Von Munch bis Mondrian, 1900–1915* (Ostfildern: Edition Tertium, 1995). Exhibition catalog, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, June 3–August 20 1995.

12
Cf. Gísli Magnússon, "Visionary Mimesis and Occult Modernism in Literature and Art Around 1900," in *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema*, ed. Tessel M. Baduin and Henrik Johnsson, Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 49–66.

13
H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, *Cosmogenesis* (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1988), 100.

14
H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 1:479.

Transformation" (37); whereby the central spiritual sun and the butterfly seem thematically connected in as far as they both point to the transition from the physical to the immaterial or spiritual. And this ancient Greek theme leads us to the next chapter.

Myth and Antiquity

The second element connecting Aidt with Eranos is her interest in myth and antiquity. To Jung, Eliade, Campbell, and Kerényi—and the circle of Eranos as such—myth was no mere relic of the past nor an expression of dangerous irrationality. Rather, they considered the revival of myth "a kind of 'therapeutic' necessity for modern man"—as Wouter Hanegraaff formulates it.[15] The need for this therapy arose from the utterly depressing wasteland of positivism, the strong belief that anything but disenchanted scientific truth could be reduced to superstition and wishful thinking.

15
Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 305.

Fig. 3. Naja Marie Aidt and Carl one-year-old. Private photo of the author.

Having lost her son in a terrible way, Aidt is confronted with the question of her culture's ability to deal with death and grief. If Aidt had been satisfied with the existing Christian rites or scientific lack of rites, she would hardly have started her ambivalent spiritual search. Aidt does not polemize against the mechanical rites of Christianity nor the meaninglessness of disenchanted modern reality. Her criticism of culture expresses itself in another way: she sets out on a search for authentic spirituality and finds it in spiritual poetry, art, dreams, myths, and ancient philosophy. She explores Socrates's notion of the soul and what survives death. She seeks solace in the ancient Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh*. The deep significance of this earliest literature about grief for Aidt is unquestionable—it is one of the most elaborate accounts of reading in her novel. She writes: "Gilgamesh has immense power. The text has traveled through thousands of years, and it's hard to fathom how it still carries so much clarity and strength. It's blazed through time like a literary fireball, full of passion and desperation, bearing

witness to the fact that as far back as four thousand years, people considered the pain of loss and death the hardest, most significant experience in a person's life" (67). We find a similar appraisal of the power of myth for modern man in Joseph Campbell's *Myths to Live By*: "Our outward-oriented consciousness, addressed to the demands of the day, may lose touch with these inward forces; and the myths, states Jung, when correctly read, are the means to bring us back in touch. They are telling us in picture language of powers of the psyche to be recognized and integrated in our lives, powers that have been common to the human."[16]

The family mythology seems to be ancient Greek rather than Christian. At the funeral, Aidt's eldest son, Frederik Heurlin Aidt, used the description of the tragic hero from the *Poetics* of Aristotle to characterize Carl: "The tragic element begins when the hero commits *hamartia*, a fatal flaw or a fatal miscalculation . . . When Carl purchased and grew his own hallucinogenic mushrooms, it was not his intention to take his life or do any harm. Carl had taken mushrooms before with positive effects. Now he wanted to go one step further and grow completely organic ones, to obtain a true and natural high. But the miscalculation in the tragedy is the triggering factor for *peripeteia*—a reversal of fortune . . . Carl's reversal of fortune occurred when his homegrown organic mushrooms triggered a drug-induced psychosis. During his psychosis, he undressed, opened the window, took a running start, and jumped out into the night. A seemingly harmless action started a cascade of events that ended in his death" (73–74). Carl's elder brother interprets Carl's life as a tragic hero's journey and thereby evokes the classical tragic feelings of "pity" and "terror," the prerequisite of catharsis. This framing endows the otherwise meaningless with tragic meaning, which in this context is an alternative to the state mythology of Denmark: Lutheran Christianity.

Greek mythology appears frequently in *Carl's Book.* Aidt apostrophizes Carl to tell him about the Greek goddess Mnemosyne, Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, and Hades, the realm of death. She commends him not to drink from Lethe, for he would then have to be reborn, but to rest and enjoy Elysium's green fields of eternity. Aidt's family gave Carl a coin for the ferryman, but Aidt adds that they do not believe anything ("and yet we gave you a coin," 101). Aidt continues her apostrophe, telling Carl about the Orphic gold tablet found in Hipponion, Calabria, where the text guides the dead to drink from Mnemosyne's pool. Aidt even takes the Greek notion of reincarnation and applies it to the modern world, which is described in a pessimistic Schopenhauerian or Buddhist way as a "noisy stage, this aimless place of desire and greed, meaninglessness and repression, violence, and the endless repetition of folly and stupidity, naiveté, and gruesomeness. Generation after generation. May you not be reborn, may you not have to start over with empty shining eyes, learning everything all over, only to die again" (103). But again, she adds that she does not believe in anything. This is the Romantic/postromantic interpretation of myth: it is not a belief system but rather a symbolic way of transcending rational knowledge. And this was the way the Eranos scholars Jung, Campbell, Eliade, and Kerényi conceived of myth as well.

16 Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live by* (New York: Penguin Compass, 1993), 14.

Jungian Dreams and the Romantic Unconscious

Despite her skepticism and ambivalence towards many forms of spirituality (especially New Age metaphysics), Aidt does perceive literature and dreams as ways of reaching knowledge beyond the limits of the rational intellect and the scientific paradigm of natural science. This line of tradition originated in antiquity with the idea of the *poeta vates*, the poet-seer or prophetic poet. During the era of Romanticism and later in Symbolism, the *poeta vates* became an important figure. One could mention William Blake, Novalis, Nerval and symbolist poets such as William Butler Yeats, Stefan George, and Rainer Maria Rilke.[17] And there is no doubt that this interpretation of the poet lived on in the Eranos circle. In the Eranos Yearbook from 1951, the psychologist and Jung student Erich Neumann quoted a passage from the mytho-poetical *Duino Elegies* by Rainer Maria Rilke about the earth "re-arising" invisibly in us: "The need of his times works inside the artist without his wanting it, seeing it, or understanding its true significance. In this sense he is close to the seer, the prophet, the mystic. And it is precisely when he does not represent the existing canon but transforms and overturns it that his function rises to the level of the sacral, for he then gives utterance to the authentic and direct revelation of the numinosum."[18] Aidt aligns directly with the *poeta vates* tradition when she chooses a central passage from Rilke's *Tenth Duino Elegy* about the "Land of Lament" (the realm of the dead) for the motto of *Carl's Book*.[19]

Where should we situate Aidt's perception of the unconscious in the spectrum of psychological theories? Micha Brumlik summarizes the differences between the "Enlightenment" theories and "Romantic" theories as follows:

- Whereas the Enlightenment theories of depth psychology claim a sharp border between the conscious and the unconscious, the Romantic theories assume gradual transitions.

- Whereas the Enlightenment theories assume that a subjectivity worthy of its name is based on conscious . . . self-transparency, the Romantic theories build on a physical-mental-spiritual unity whose components can, of course, temporarily separate, but are in principle controlled by a *single* law of development.

- Whereas the Enlightenment theories primarily consider the unconscious a threat and a force that restricts autonomy, the Romantic theories perceive it as a motivational background that enables and guides conscious action.

- Finally, the Romantic theories see an enriching potential for expression in the unconscious, whereas the Enlightenment theories examine its expression more as a corrupt text.[20]

If we juxtapose the Freudian and Jungian traditions, it should be easy to discern that it is Jung's Romantic unconscious rather Freud's understanding of the unconscious as repressed instincts which leads to Naja Marie Aidt's accounts of prophetic poems and precognitive dreams.

17
On this specific line of tradition, see Martina Kind, *Pilger und Prophet: Heilige Autorschaft bei Rainer Maria Rilke* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 77–83.

18
Joseph Campbell, ed, *Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, vol. 3, *Man and Time* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 13.

19
The constellations of the Land of Laments can be perceived as a link between the realm of the living and the dead. One of the constellations is "The Mothers"—an archetype which is highly symbolic for Carl's Book. Thus, important themes of the book are inherent in the motto: Grief and its transformation to poetry (constellations), and the contact between the living and the dead: "And higher, the stars. The new stars of the land of grief. / Slowly the Lament names them:—Look, there: / the *Rider*, the *Staff*, and the larger constellation / called *Garland of Fruit*. Then, farther up toward the Pole: / *Cradle*; *Path*; *The Burning Book*; *Puppet*; *Window*. / But there, in the southern sky, pure as the lines / on the palm of a blessed hand, the clear sparkling *M* / that stands for Mothers . . . —" Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 209.

20
Micha Brumlik, *C. G. Jung zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2004), 32–33. My translation from German.

On her prophetic poetry, Aidt writes: "I read the two poems out loud at your funeral. I realized that as early as when you were one year old, I received a sign in my dream that you would vanish from me. As early as when you were sixteen years old, I saw you hiding in death's dark hood. That I had already predicted the eternity that would replace your life, the eternity I now live with, and which you are absorbed by. Just as I dreamed that you fell and hurt yourself shortly before you fell to your death from the fifth floor" (113). Aidt adds: "But images and signs cannot be interpreted before they're played out in concrete events. You only understand them in retrospect. That's why omens can only be expressed. As language, as poetry. It becomes an experience that belongs to the future, which can express, though it is not yet experienced in reality. That's what poetry does sometimes. And it's one of its most beautiful qualities. It's also what makes poetry dangerous and portentous. The feeling of knowing something that you can't understand yet or connect to anything in reality. As if poetry makes it possible to move freely in time, as if linear time is suspended while you write and a corner of the future becomes visible in a brief and mystical moment" (113–14). Jung expresses a similar perspective when he characterizes dreams in the following way: "That the prospective function of dreams is sometimes greatly superior to the combinations we can consciously foresee is not surprising, since a dream results from the fusion of subliminal elements and is thus a combination of all the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings which consciousness has not registered because of their feeble accentuation . . . With regard to prognosis, therefore, dreams are often in a much more favorable position than consciousness."[21] Clearly, Aidt does not subscribe to the enlightenment theories that primarily consider the unconscious a threat and a power that restricts autonomy; rather, she subscribes to the Romantic theories that consider the unconscious to be a motivational background that enables and guides conscious action.[22]

21
Carl Gustav Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 8, *Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 255.

22
Cf. Gísli Magnússon, "Spirituelle Psychologie," in *Dichtung als Erfahrungsmetaphysik: Esoterische und okkultistische Modernität bei R. M. Rilke* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 238–53.

Rothko Chapel and Perennialism

It is structurally significant that Aidt, right after the anti-spiritual creed in capital letters, where she denies all spiritual attempts of making sense of Carl's death, writes an account of a visit to Mark Rothko's Chapel in Houston, Texas. Aidt writes that the "trip took place many months before I began to write a single word" (50). The experience is in other words a prerequisite for being able to be an author again—after the trauma robbed her of literary language altogether. *The Central Spiritual Sun* by Fröbe-Kapteyn likely served a similar purpose. Here, the connection to Eranos is at least obvious. Aidt describes the chapel as the artist's *opus magnum*. The fourteen paintings of the chapel were finished from 1964 to 1967. The chapel was finished in 1971, a year after Rothko's suicide. As are Rothko's paintings in general, they are monochrome and, therefore, well suited for meditation. Aidt writes: "As the light changes during the course of the day, the appearance of the paintings keeps shifting" (51).

Aidt describes the chapel as a perennialistic space: "The chapel is exceptional because it isn't associated with any specific religion. It's for everyone, believers and nonbelievers, Christians, Muslims, Jews,

Buddhists, atheists, Hindus, and so on—it's for all people on earth. There's nothing in the chapel except Rothko's paintings and a few wooden benches placed around the room. In a side entrance, the sacred texts of different religions are set out on a table. Rothko was not religious. People come here to meditate, pray, grieve, relax. And they come to see Rothko's work" (51). Perennialism is the idea that there is a common spiritual core behind the exoteric veil of the different religious traditions. Undoubtedly, the specific Rothkoian perennialism is indebted to Romanticism during which art for the first time took the place of religion, a re-enchantment that has been available to artists ever since.[23] According to Aaron Rose in the art magazine *Apollo*, Rothko "hoped his works would spark significant spiritual encounters in the manner of the great religious masterpieces of the past."[24] Aidt describes the contemplation of the Rothko paintings as a journey into the visionary realm of imagination: "I sat down on a bench and looked at the paintings. I sat there for two hours. After the first glance, shapes gradually began to emerge. I saw birds, the sea, fish. I saw skulls and faces. I saw trees and clouds. A long row of people bent over. And then I saw Carl. Half-turned away, his long hair down his back. I wanted to crawl into the painting to him. Then he disappeared, and I saw the moonlight, deer, and turtles. Giant flowers, their whiteness vibrating in the similarly vibrating darkness . . . I was thinking maybe the figures that emerged from Rothko's paintings reminded me of how one sees while hallucinating" (51). In a meditative state, staring at a painting, she established a kind of visionary contact with Carl; she could "see" him. Here, the cultural context of Eranos provides a framework that can help us understand what Aidt means when she writes about "seeing while hallucinating." The visionary technique of Aidt can be related to Carl Gustav Jung whose active imagination is a means of accessing subconscious contents of the psyche. Images and artworks can trigger active imagination—as the Rothko paintings do in Aidt's case. Active imagination has been described as akin to the hypnagogic state between waking and sleeping: "Although reflective self-consciousness, the ability to exert effort, logical thinking, and reality-testing are always suspended as advanced hypnagogic states blend into sleep, active imagination reverses the process of relaxation by initiating conscious interaction with the unconscious manifestations. Active imagination may be considered a lucid hypnagogic state, whose relation to ordinary hypnagogia compares with the relation of lucid dreams to ordinary dreams."[25] According to Jung's autobiography, this technique also allowed him to communicate with a non-physical being, Philemon, a guru-like figure he experienced as a separate intelligence whom he was able to communicate with and receive guidance from.[26]

Another way of interpreting the art-induced vision can be found in the works of the Eranos scholar Henri Corbin. Based on his knowledge of Sufi spirituality, he coined the term *mundus imaginalis*, an "imaginal" world that mediates between the sensory and divine realms. The latter can be accessed through active imagination, which needs images (e.g., mandalas and symbols). Rothko's abstract spiritual artworks are also well suited for this purpose. The *mundus imaginalis* is the realm where a vision of the deceased can occur without being dismissed as mere phantasy. The *mundus imaginalis* has been linked

23
In early ("Jena") romanticism, religion was detached from church and dogma and aestheticized. This also meant that artists and artworks were perceived in a new way. Instead of being subordinate to the rite and religious teaching, the artwork spiritually became an end in itself. Spiritual art was taken out of church and out of the marketplace and placed in a temple devoted to the religion of art. Art is, thus, not a means to a religious end, but the object of worship itself. When Wackenroder writes that the artworks should not be brought back into the churches, but should receive their own temples, he designates a line of tradition that leads to Rothko's "art chapel" in Houston. This postconfessional worship of art and music in museums and concert halls is not alien to many museum guests and concertgoers today. Cf. Stefan Matuschek, *Der gedichtete Himmel: Eine Geschichte der Romantik* (München: C. H. Beck, 2021), 145–63.

24
Aaron Rosen, "Leap of faith—how Mark Rothko reimagined religious art for the modern age." https://www.apollo-magazine.com/rothko-chapel-houston-modernism-religion/.

25
Dan Merkur, *Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993).

26
Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989): Jung describes how "Philemon" arose from the unconscious: "Philemon was a pagan and brought with him an Egypto-Hellenistic atmosphere with a Gnostic coloration" (182). It was important to Jung that Philemon was not just his own fiction: "Philemon and other figures of my fantasies brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life. Philemon represented a force which was not myself. In my fantasies I held conversations with him, and he said things which I had not consciously thought" (183).

to Aidt's self-proclaimed "family religion": shamanism. Within this interpretative framework, spirits are regarded as an intrinsic part of reality. In a trance state, shamans are thought to be able to perceive and interact with spirits.[27] In the words of Richard Noll, "[t]hose beings are not imaginary in the sense of not being real, pure phantasy, or artificially made up. They are *imaginal*, existing in a realm of experience in which they inhabit a reality of their own, a *mundus imaginalis* or 'imaginal world,' as Henri Corbin (1972)[28] deems it, which is co-existent with the mundane experiential world of our ordinary state of waking consciousness."[29] The vision of Aidt could—and this is emphasized by her strong emotional reaction to the vision—be interpreted as an encounter taking place in the mesocosmos, the *mundus imaginalis*.

The Jungian analyst and scholar Marie Louise von Franz made an interesting observation about the phenomenology of active imagination: "There is a chance that markedly synchronistic events will occur."[30] This means that practice of active imagination makes it more likely for meaningful coincidences to happen.[31] And Aidt describes a synchronistic event occurring right after the vision of Carl: "I could not stop crying. But it was a welcomed crying after many weeks of suppression. It had been necessary to suppress my tears to do the book tour. I needed to cry. I got up and went out and started looking at the books that were set out. I picked up *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* and opened it to a page at random and read the section, 'The helplessness as you observe your living family.' It is about how the dead are unable to make contact with the living. I went out into the sunshine, out in the Texan heat, walking across the lawns, I cried and cried" (51). *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* was written by Sogyal Rinpoche in 1992 and presents core ideas from *Tibetan Book of the Dead* or *Bardo Thödol* in a modern way.[32] Aidt owns a copy of the same book in her residence in New York: "When I got home, I saw that Carl had dog-eared that exact passage in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* when he plowed through it while staying with us in New York. 'The helplessness as you observe your living family.' I was thinking that it's we who are helpless, because we cannot hear our dead. I read, according to the book of death, you become part of the wind, after going through several stages of becoming a soul. // *Are you part of the wind*?"[33] (52). The artworks of Rothko mediate contact with Carl that is accentuated by the "meaningful coincidence" of mother and son "communicating" through the same passage from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Aidt could not have known beforehand that Carl had dog-eared the exact same passage in her own copy of the book. Accordingly, Aidt seems to indicate a framework of interpretation resembling the Jungian notion of *synchronicity*, acausal connectedness.[34] The whole concept of synchronicity is aimed at the rational worldview, which relies on causality and natural laws. It is part of Jung's criticism of spiritual culture.[35] Jung presented the concept at the 1951 Eranos conference—a cultural setting where he would be certain to be received positively. In an interview with Mircea Eliade, who as a scholar of religion was also closely connected to Eranos, Jung described the phenomenon in the following way: "Religious experience is numinous, as Rudolf Otto calls it, and for me, as a psychologist, this experience differs from all others in the way it transcends the

27
Cf. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (London: Arkana, 1989), 88.

28
Henri Corbin, "Mundus imaginalis, or The imaginary and the imaginal," *Spring: An annual of archetypal psychology and Jungian thought* (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 1972), 1–19.

29
Richard Noll, "The Presence of Spirits in Magic and Madness," in *Shamanism: An Expanded View of Reality*, ed. Shirley Nicholson (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1987), 52.

30
Marie-Louise von Franz, "On Active Imagination," in *Methods of Treatment in Analytical Psychology*, ed. Ian F. Baker (Fellbach: Verlag Adolf Bonz, 1980), 80. Quoted from Merkur, *Gnosis*, 43.

31
In the words of Dan Merkur: "[T]he practice of active imagination increases the likelihood that random coincidences will be found personally meaningful and regarded as providential miracles." Merkur, Gnosis, 43–44.

32
Bardo Thödol means "Liberation in the Intermediate State Through Hearing" in Tibetan.

33
The probing way in which Aidt asks if Carl "is the wind" testifies to her non-dogmatic attitude towards religious belief systems.

34
In a collaboration with the quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli, Jung developed a theory about "acausal connectedness": "Jung did provide some paradigmatic clinical experiences about synchronicity. His most famous example was of a young woman whose analysis was in a bit of impasse based on her resistance to the notion of unconscious process until she had a dream that included a golden scarab (as a piece of jewelry). In discussing the dream, Jung was alerted to a tapping sound at his window, which he opened. He caught a rose chafer, a Scarabaeid beetle, that he gave to the woman, apparently breaking through her resistance." Joseph Cambray, *Synchronicity*: *Nature and Psyche in an Interconnected Universe* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 7.

35
Roderick Main highlights the cultural critical aspect of synchronicity: "[S]ynchronicity suggests that there are uncaused events, that matter has a psychic aspect, that the psyche can relativise time and space, and that there may be a dimension of objective meaning accessible to but not created by humans. The implications of all or any of this are far-reaching. If there are uncaused events, particularly at the level of ordinary human experience, this means that our familiar forms of explanation in terms of later events being caused by earlier ones will have to be supplemented. If matter has an

ordinary categories of space, time, and causality. Recently I have put a great deal of study into synchronicity (briefly, the 'rupture of time'), and I have established that it closely resembles numinous experiences where space, time, and causality are abolished."[36] Here, Jung establishes a connection between synchronicity and numinous experience that sheds light on Aidt's epiphany and subsequent synchronicity. Aidt's cathartic response bears witness to the deep emotional and spiritual impact of the vision.

Shamanism

One of the most obvious correspondences between Eranos and *Carl's Book* is shamanism. Shamanism entered the spiritual context of Eranos through the work of Mircea Eliade. His monograph *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* exerted an enormous influence that endures to this day.[37] In a conversation with Eliade at the Eranos Conference in 1952, Jung said that the "modern world is desacralized, that is why it is in a crisis. Modern man must rediscover a deeper source of his own spiritual life."[38] By synthesizing different traditions of shamanism, Eliade anticipates the *neoshamanism* that would flourish from the 1960s onwards. Since Aidt does not define a specific shamanistic tradition, she is aligned with this modernized version of shamanism.

Since Aidt is a poet, it is also interesting that the poet has been interpreted as a kind of shaman—a role not so different from the *poeta vates*. One prominent example is the *Glas Bead Game* from 1943 for which Hesse received the Nobel Prize in literature. Here, he lets his *magister ludi* (bead game master) remember or imagine an earlier existence as a shaman.[39] Without a doubt, Hesse sought to outline similarities between the shaman, the bead game master, and the poet.

In *Carl's Book*, Aidt narrates how for three generations, there has been a shamanic tradition in her family—especially on the paternal side: "A week before you died you went on your first shamanic journey, your first dream journey. Your grandfather guided you. Since I was a teenager, we have traveled in this way in my family, because my father was into it in the 1980s. Shamanism can be used for a lot of things. We used it especially for healing, both mental and physical. Once, when your older brother was still a boy, he had a huge cluster of warts on his hand. My father helped him find the animal that could remove the warts. It was a rat. During a dream journey, your older brother saw a rat biting off the warts. The next morning all the warts fell off in the sink as he washed his hands" (31). Aidt also describes a shamanic dream of a friend of Carl who had trained as a shaman. During this dream journey, as Aidt calls it, the friend sees Carl walking "*in the green forest with a tiger*" (31). Aidt writes: "When I was pregnant with you I saw that you were a baby tiger. A week before you died you went on your first shamanic journey. You saw that your totem animal was a tiger" (32). Aidt narrates this in a matter-of-fact way, which might surprise the reader in light of the anti-creed. The reason is the *experiential* character of shamanistic spirituality. It is clear from the rat dream that shamanistic dreams are healing people in the real world. It is not about *explanatory* metaphysics.

The primary examples of Aidt's own shamanism are related to sig-

inalienable psychic aspect, then scientific descriptions of the world that aspire towards completeness can no longer be framed solely in material terms but will have to take account of psychic properties of meaning and value. If the psyche can relativise time and space, then it becomes possible for temporally and spatially distant events somehow to involve themselves in the here and now without any normal channel of causal transmission. If there is a dimension of objective meaning, this implies that the meaning we experience is not always or entirely our subjective creation, individually or as a species, but that we may be woven into an order of meaning that transcends our human perspective." Roderick Main, *The Rupture of Time Synchronicity and Jungs Critique of Modern Western Culture* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 2.

36
From Mircea Eliade's 1952 interview with C. G. Jung in 1952. Cf. W. McGuire and R. F. C. Hull, *C. G. Jung Speaking: Interviews and Encounters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 230.

37
Mircea Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (Paris: Payo, 1951), english translation: *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1964). Eliade's scholarly methods have been criticized by later scholars of religion: "Eliade's method is to uncritically utilize an enormous amount of published ethnographic material of varying quality that is slotted into a series of categories. He treats shamanism as the ur-religion of the distant past, and it seems unlikely that he ever met a functioning shaman. Eliade's work, in English translation, led to the popularity of his romanticized depiction of shamans among intellectuals in North America." Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 38.

38
McGuire and Hull, *C. G. Jung Speaking*, 230.

39
Hesse wrote the story "The Rainmaker" in 1934, i.e., in the early phase of the work on the novel.

nificant and symbolic dreams. We have heard about the precognitive dreams and prophetic poetry, but the shamanic dreams serve another purpose in *Carl's Book*: they are a means of contact with the dead, with Carl—just as Aidt's vision of Carl in Rothko's Chapel. As Aidt describes shamanism, it is a means of crossing the border between the physical and spiritual dimensions. Here, dream journeys play an important role. The shamanistic dreams occur with regular intervals from Carl's death on March 14, 2015, until May 16, 2016. The dreams range from somber to consoling moments of intimacy. Aidt started writing the first fragments since Carl's death on November 9. She was "rewarded" with a shamanistic or symbolic dream on November 10: "Carl is very much alive, very close to me. He is like a wheat field. The stalks blowing in the wind. Golden, strong, and ripe" (33). As if to emphasize the shamanistic element, Aidt—in a diary entry from December 9—adds: "It's his spirit I feel now. He is like a huge bird or no—his presence is heavy and strong. And also light and springy. Yes, springy. He is standing behind me, he puts his arms around me, his long hair and bare chest" (34).

The Eranos scholar Joseph Campbell described the shamanic ritual as a "spontaneously precipitated rupture with the world of common day, revealed in symptoms analogous to those of a serious breakdown: visions of dismemberment, fosterage in the world of the spirits, and restitution."[40] In the case of Aidt, the rupture leading to "a serious breakdown" was Carl's death. The British poet laureate Ted Hughes described "shamanistic suffering as a painful stage on the way to regeneration, which can be called psychic equilibrium of the shaman's community."[41] Maybe his account of the poet-shaman T. S. Eliot can be applied to Naja Marie Aidt. Ted Hughes talks about the "shaman's crucial initiatory experience of visionary dismemberment," and only "after that 'death' (and after being reassembled by divine beings) the conventional shaman can begin to turn his abnormal powers and susceptibilities to account and launch out on his poetic, dramatic, visionary, healing-trance enterprise for the benefit of his people." Carl's death was a personal disaster for Aidt and a "tribal" disaster for the close family. By writing her book, Aidt shows "the creative, redemptive activity of poetry"—as Ted Hughes calls it.[42]

40
Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God*, vol. 1, *Primitive Mythology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 265.

41
Ewa Panecka, "Ted Hughes: The Poet Laureate as a Shaman," in *Annales Academiae Paedagogicae Cracoviensis: Studia Romanica* 3, folia 49 (2008): 58.

42
Ewa Panecka, "Ted Hughes," 58.

Conclusion

Aidt established a connection between *Carl's Book* and Eranos when she placed *The Central Spiritual Sun* on the cover. Although there exists no such thing as a homogenous spirit of Eranos, there are common cultural and critical themes that occurred in the twentieth-century heyday of Eranos through the lectures and works of Jung, Eliade, and Campbell. *Carl's Book* is a testimony to the fact that—for contemporary authors such as Aidt—these existential and spiritual questions have not been adequately answered. Aidt, the grieving mother, was not susceptible to any metaphysical shortcuts. Aidt's anti-creed and declarations of non-believing concern *any* literal mythological belief system. She does, however, find solace in ancient myths and philosophy, spiritual poetry and art, trauma literature, and shamanistic visions and dreams.