

Transmutation and Homogenization of Consciousness in Italian Esotericism during the Fascist Period: Mario Manlio Rossi's *Spaccio dei Maghi* and Julius Evola's *Maschera e Volto dello Spiritualismo Contemporaneo*

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Abstract

During the 1920s and 1930s the idea of transmutation, so essential to esotericism, was at the core of the Fascist agenda in Italy. Sharing with esotericism a repertoire of myths, symbols and rituals, Fascism aimed to create a new kind of man pushing the individuals to fuse into one radically transformed common consciousness. In order to create the new Italian man, to form and fashion the masses into a homogeneous and compliant collectivity, Fascism disqualified individualistic tendencies: subjects had to integrate into collectivity and only thus attain consciousness of themselves as Italians and as Fascists. While these processes were taking place in society, Italian esotericists continued to elaborate the theme of the transmutation of consciousness. Two books published in Italy in those years significantly warned against the risks that such a transmutation could entail: Mario Manlio Rossi's *Spaccio dei maghi* (1929) and Julius Evola's *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo* (1932). Both these works were harsh critiques of esotericism written by esotericists, as they reviewed the main schools and personalities of the contemporary occult scene with the purpose of demolishing most of them. Starting from very different premises, both Rossi and Evola expressed a deep concern about the self-determination and distinctiveness of individual consciousness, and denounced the possibility that the ideal of the "new man," shared by esotericism and Fascism, could lead to the flattening of the differences among otherwise unique human beings and to the erasure of individual specificity.

Keywords

Rossi, Mario Manlio; Evola, Julius; transmutation; consciousness; fascism; homogenization

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Transmutation, Consciousness, Homogenization

A fundamental component of the esoteric form of thought is the idea of transmutation.¹ The term of course derives from alchemy, intended as a system for operating not so much on metals but on human beings: after achieving a special piece of knowledge or going through an exceptional event, the individuals not only transform themselves but become *radically* different from what they were before.² As a rule, the experience brings about a crucial change in the interiority of the subjects, in what is sometimes referred to as the *soul*.³ The discourses on transmutation often incite the individuals to become more aware of who they are, to realize their true nature, to attain or rediscover their authentic self. In this sense, these discourses describe a *metanoia*, a change of mind, a condition in which consciousness drastically shifts to another level. More than consciousness or the soul generically, in these contexts the object of transmutation is *self-consciousness*, the center of individuality, initiative and experience, the awareness of oneself and of one's mental contents, a notion involving a wide range of philosophical and psychological issues, such as memory, intentionality, and the persistence of personal identity over time (and in the course of different lives, when examining the doctrines of reincarnation).⁴

¹ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 13. On Faivre's definition of the characteristics of Western esotericism, see: Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5–14; Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*, trans. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (London: Equinox, 2005), 3–5; Arthur Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 6–10.

² Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 13.

³ Also in the two main texts that we will analyze in this article the Italian word for "soul" (*anima*) tends to recur in relation to the topic of radical transformation of the interiority of the subject (the authors, it must be noted, were highly aware of the terminology issues related to the idea of consciousness in philosophy and psychology). For example, Mario Manlio Rossi, *Spaccio dei maghi* (Roma: Doxa editrice, 1929), 57–59, 66, 104; Julius Evola, *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo: analisi critica delle principali correnti moderne verso il "sovrannaturale"* (Torino: F.lli Bocca, 1932), 6–19, 50–53, 70–71.

⁴ In spite of its intrinsic high degree of ineffability, self-consciousness has been a much-debated theme throughout the centuries. Its definition is made even more complicated by the diverse semantic values that the terms it relates to ("self," "I," etc.) assume in different languages and in different disciplines (philosophy, psychology etc.) Among the scholarly works in English that include a clear overview on the topic, see Brian Garrett, *Personal Identity and Self-Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 1998); Genevieve Lloyd, *Being in Time: Selves and Narra-*

The discourses on transmutation concern not only the consciousness of the single individual but also that of collective subjects, when these subjects manifest a unitary character as testified in expressions like *class consciousness* or *national consciousness*.⁵ The social and political aspect of the inner change thus comes to the foreground. During the late 1920s and early 1930s – the period on which this study focuses – the idea of transmutation, so essential to esotericism, became extremely important in the vision of the individual and of the collectivity promoted by the Fascist regime in Italy.⁶ A crucial aspect of this vision was the creation of a *new man* who would lay the foundation for a new political and social order, a goal that had a tremendous power of fascination for the masses. To this end, Fascism incited individuals to refashion themselves as proud members of the nation, of the state and of the party, and to acquire awareness of their true identity as heirs of a glorious past and heralds of a shining future. The unity of consciousness was an important mission for Fascism, which had inherited from the Risorgimento – the 19th century political and social movement of national independence and unification – the vexed task of “making Italians.”⁷ In the context of Europe, Italy was a relatively young nation, built of geographical components that for centuries had remained divided culturally, socially, economically, and linguistically. Fascism wanted to provide the various peoples of Italy with *one* soul in order to establish a society free from interior frictions and conflicts: as members of *one* nation, Italians had to perceive themselves as the *same* people. Clearly

tors in Philosophy and Literature (London: Routledge, 1993); Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). On the idea of consciousness in esotericism at the turn of the 20th century, with repercussions well beyond that period, see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 114–47.

⁵ See Mark Evans, “Self-realization,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London-New York: Routledge, 1998), 8:632.

⁶ Fascism is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that encompasses both individualist and collectivist aspects. As I explain at a later point in the article, I approach Fascism above all as a form of secular, lay, civic, political religion, as understood in the studies by Italian historian Emilio Gentile, particularly in his volume *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). On the relationships between Fascism and esotericism, see note 9.

⁷ “We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians” is a famous (and apocryphal) statement generally attributed to Massimo D’Azeglio, one of the leaders of the Risorgimento. On Italy’s nation formation in connection to altered states of consciousness (in particular those induced by hypnotic suggestion), see Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio Effect: On Making Italians (1860-1920)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 21–96.

such ideas on transmutation entailed issues of conformity and homogenization, erasure of specificity and flattening of the differences among otherwise unique individuals. In order to create the new man, to mold the masses into a homogeneous and compliant force, Fascism pushed subjects to integrate into the collectivity of the party-state, and only thus attain consciousness of themselves as Italians and as Fascists.⁸

As an object of historical research, during the past thirty years the relationships between esotericism and Nazi-Fascism have increasingly attracted the attention both of specialists and of wider audiences. The early intuitions of George Mosse and pioneer works such as those by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke certainly have stimulated and broadened the interest in the esoteric origins of German Nazism, inspiring analogous inquiries into the Italian situation.⁹ In my view, a highly fruitful starting point for analyzing the connections between esotericism and Fascism, with particular reference to the transmutation and homogenization of consciousness, is represented by the works of Emilio Gentile (b. 1946) on the sacralization of politics in Fascist Italy, as they make clear to what extent the regime relied upon the devices of ritual, myth and symbol – important building blocks for the esoteric form of thought – to forge a harmonious collectivity from the heterogeneous and discordant Italian masses.¹⁰

⁸ “Movements such as Bolshevism, Fascism, and Nazism have affirmed themselves as *political* religions and intensified the aura of the sacred that always surrounds power [...] Through the state or a party they propose to realize a ‘metanoia’ in human nature, whence a ‘new man’ should emerge, regenerated and totally integrated in the community... Once in power, Fascism instituted a lay religion by sacralizing the state and spreading a political cult of the masses that aimed at creating a virile and virtuous citizenry, dedicated body and soul to the nation.” Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 158–59.

⁹ See George L. Mosse, “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 1 (1961): 81–96; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany 1890–1935* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1985). On esotericism in Italy during the interwar period, and its relationship with Fascism, see Gianfranco de Turrís, ed., *Esoterismo e fascismo: storia, interpretazioni, documenti* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2006); Gian Mario Cazzaniga, ed., *Annali 25: Esoterismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010), in particular the essays by Marco Pasi, “Teosofia e antroposofia nell’Italia del primo Novecento,” 569–98, and by Marco Rossi, “Neopaganesimo e arti magiche nel periodo fascista,” 599–628. See also the very recent volume by Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); the book is based on Staudenmaier’s dissertation “Between Occultism and Fascism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race and Nation in Germany and Italy, 1900–1945” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2010).

¹⁰ See especially Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), originally published as *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell’Italia fascista* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993).

Gentile illustrates how Fascism institutionalized a *civic religion* (or lay, secular religion) and attempted to establish, through mass rituals, a *collective cult* for itself.¹¹ In periods of crisis and tension, civic religion provides the collectivity with a meaning to life in its totality as a way to overcome chaos and increase social stability.¹² It maintains leadership and control over the members of the society mainly through processes of integration of the “other,” and promotes a regeneration of all human beings that belong to its cult. The leaders of the civic religion, “anxious to mold human nature”¹³ according to the truth they believe themselves to possess, endeavor to “change the nature of men and women, to create, in a new era of salvation, a ‘new order’ and a ‘new man’.”¹⁴ Although the main focus of Gentile’s analysis is not strictly on the esoteric aspects of the Fascist regime, researchers in esotericism will surely recognize the aspiration under discussion in his pages. The anxiety at stake is one of alchemical transmutation, performed on a mass scale. As Gentile writes, modern political religions “organize collective life as though it were some vast human laboratory in which party and state perform experiments on the body social in order to create the ‘new man’.”¹⁵

With the aim of bringing individuals to fuse into one common consciousness, Fascism made ample use of standardizing devices, ranging from the black shirts to the synchronized gestures and exercises that were to be performed during parades and other official ceremonies. In order to achieve a homogeneous collectivity, all the distinct components had to conform to the same model. Gentile appropriately speaks of a “molding” of the masses through various forms of mobilization and propaganda (to “forge” and to “mold” were verbs frequently used in the rhetoric of the regime).¹⁶ These mobilizations created a liturgy of “collective harmony” – an expression that Gentile takes from Mussolini himself (*armonico collettivo*) – and constituted one of the most powerful tools of the Fascist propaganda, because through collective rituals the regime managed to transform an “occasional crowd” into a “liturgical mass,” a unanimous worshipping entity made of millions of individuals who were absolutely certain of their consonance of feeling and intent.¹⁷ In an article

¹¹ Gentile, *Sacralization*, 158–59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 156.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 80–101 (on the “liturgy of collective harmony”), 11 and 94 (“occasional crowd” vs. “liturgical mass”).

published in *Gioventù Fascista* (“Fascist Youth”) in 1932, Massimo Scaligero (1906–1980) – who would become one of Italy’s most renowned Anthroposophists of the 1960s and 1970s – excitedly describes his impressions of one such mass celebration. In his attempt to emphasize the presence of a specific form of self-consciousness in the worshipping crowd, Scaligero implicitly recognizes that a process of homogenization and erasure of identity is actually taking place. His denial signals a challenge, an objection, the site of a struggle:

With Fascism, a crowd has become a harmony of souls [...] This was no crowd misled by demagogic-romantic hallucinations; this was a crowd conscious of itself [...] This was no faceless collectivity [...] not an amorphous mass, but an amalgam of values and fresh intelligences.¹⁸

An insightful firsthand account by another young author, Giaime Pintor (1919–1943), an anti-Fascist not particularly involved in esoteric matters, is highly revealing of the homogenizing fascination that the collective rituals could induce in their participants. Pintor wrote in his diary about the mass rehearsals in preparation for Hitler’s visit to Rome. Like many young Italians, he had to train for whole days in the suburbs of the capital to learn how to march correctly, in synchrony with other schoolmates:

[...] we intimately penetrated the spectacular complex of totalitarian regimes: we learned to disappear in the thousands and thousands of men who took part in the parades, to walk at the sound of traditional tunes and to get pleasure from the impersonality that the uniform provides.¹⁹

¹⁸ Massimo Scaligero, “La folla,” *Gioventù fascista*, November 10, 1932, quoted in Gentile, *Sacralization*, 94. For the clarity of my argument, I have modified Botsford’s translation to make it more faithful to the original, albeit less elegant. Original text in Italian: “Con il fascismo la folla è divenuta armonia di anime [...] E non era folla trascinata da allucinazioni di carattere demagogico-romantico, ma quella consapevole di sé [...] Non collettività senza volto [...] non massa amorfa, ma amalgama di valori e di fresche intelligenze.” On Massimo Scaligero, see Massimo Introvigne, “Scaligero, Massimo,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1038–39; Fausto Belfiori, ed., *Massimo Scaligero: il coraggio dell’impossibile* (Teramo: Tilopa, 1982). On the attitude of Scaligero and other Italian Anthroposophists toward the Fascist regime, with particular reference to racial politics, see Peter Staudenmaier, “Between Occultism and Fascism,” 410–99.

¹⁹ Giaime Pintor, *Doppio diario: 1936–1943*, ed. Mirella Serri (Torino: Einaudi, 1978), 38. Translation is mine. See Gentile, *Sacralization* 99 (in Botsford’s translation the sexual implications of Pintor’s word choices for this particular passage are partially lost). Original text in Italian: “[...] penetrammo intimamente nel complesso spettacolare dei regimi totalitari: imparammo a scomparire nelle decine di migliaia di uomini che prendevano parte alle riviste, a cam-

The harmonizing ritual makes the participants vaguely uneasy, but it also generates a pleasure that Pintor describes in terms similar to that of sexual intercourse. Based on thorough and unalterable repetition but meant to produce a spontaneously enthusiastic state of mind, the grandiose mechanism of the parade is at the same time poised and orgiastic, and it works effectively toward the dissolution of specific individuals into an undifferentiated Whole.

While these homogenizing processes were occurring in the society in which they lived, Italian esotericists continued to elaborate the theme of the transmutation of consciousness. What stances did their discourses take on the issue of the specificity and distinctiveness of individual consciousness? Two books on esotericism published in Italy in the Fascist period significantly warned against the risks of homogenization that a radical change of consciousness might induce: Mario Manlio Rossi's *Spaccio dei maghi* ("Expulsion of the Magicians," 1929) and Julius Evola's *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo* ("Mask and Face of Contemporary Spiritualism," 1932).²⁰ Both of these works have the remarkable characteristic of being harsh critiques of esotericism written by esotericists, who review the main schools and personalities of the contemporary occult scene with the purpose of discrediting most of them. In this sense, the two books function as small polemical encyclopedias of esotericism, and provide a colorful survey of the spiritualist and occult milieus of those years.

The authors of these books are two intellectuals whose influence goes beyond the borders of Italy. Mario Manlio Rossi (1895–1971) was a young scholar at the time, first a pupil of the pragmatist philosopher Mario Calderoni (1879–1914) at the University of Florence, then a devoted Kantian.²¹ He was

minare al suono di musiche tradizionali e a godere della impersonalità che procura l'uniforme."

²⁰ The title of Rossi's book echoes Giordano Bruno's *Lo Spaccio de la Bestia Trionfante* (1584), generally translated in English as *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, hence my translation as "Expulsion of the Magicians." The general idea that the original title conveys, in regard to esotericism, is that of leave-taking, banishing, discarding. However, the noun *spaccio* and the verb *spacciare* have multiple meanings in contemporary Italian and *spaccio dei maghi* could also indicate, for example, a store that sells a variety of items of small value and dubious provenience (i.e. the magicians). For a more detailed analysis of these works, see Roberto Bacci, "La trasmutazione della coscienza nell'esoterismo italiano del periodo fascista: *Spaccio dei maghi* (1929) di Mario Manlio Rossi e *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo* (1932) di Julius Evola" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2012).

²¹ On Rossi, see Fiorenzo Fantaccini, "'Dear Mariotto': Lady Gregory and Mario Manlio Rossi," *Roots and Beginnings: Proceedings of the 2nd AISLI Conference, Spilimbergo Palazzo Tadea, 3–6 ottobre 2002*, eds. Pietro Deandrea and Viktoria Tchernichova (Venezia: Cafoscarina, 2003), 285–94; Fiorenzo Fantaccini, *W. B. Yeats e la cultura italiana* (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2009): 74–97, 108–11; W. J. McCormack, "We Irish" in *Europe: Yeats, Berkeley and Joseph Hone*

introduced in several esoteric circles by the influential mathematician, pagan and freemason Arturo Reghini (1878–1946). Rossi was also an expert on literature and philosophy of the British Isles, a fact that won him the friendship of the Golden Dawn's W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), Lady Gregory (1852–1932), and other exponents of the Irish Literary Renaissance, whom he personally visited at Coole Park in 1931.²² During the Fascist period he worked as a high school teacher. Despite his impressive record of scholarly publications he was restricted from teaching at the university, since the regime precluded that possibility to anybody who refused, like Rossi, to become a member of the Fascist National Party. He managed however to be appointed as a visiting faculty member in Germany, lecturing at the universities of Leipzig (1929) and Tübingen (1931). After WWII Rossi taught for two decades at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

The other author I am going to consider, Julius Evola (1898–1974), is probably more familiar to the reader of esoteric texts, being internationally regarded, with René Guénon, as the *maître à penser* of Traditionalism in the

(Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2010): *passim*; Luciano Mecacci, *Psicologia e psicanalisi nella cultura italiana del Novecento*, 2nd ed. (Roma: Laterza, 1998), 10–13; L[ea] R[ossi], "Biografia carriera e operosità di Mario Manlio Rossi," *Bollettino storico reggiano* 7, no. 24 (1974): 71–77; Lino Rossi, "Comico e felicità nella psicologia pragmatista di Mario Manlio Rossi," *Rivista di psicologia* 75, no. 3 (1990): 89–94; Maurizio Torrini, "Mario Manlio Rossi: un 'irregolare' nella cultura del Novecento italiano," in *Un illuminismo scettico: la ricerca filosofica di Antonio Santucci*, eds. Walter Tega and Luigi Turco (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), 97–112. Rich in first-hand anecdotes is the newspaper article by Masolino D'Amico, "Uno scorbutico a caccia di fate," *La Stampa*, June 6, 2005, sec. Cultura e spettacoli. To Rossi are devoted parts of the very recent book by Luciano Mecacci on the assassination of the philosopher Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944): Luciano Mecacci, *La Ghirlanda fiorentina e la morte di Giovanni Gentile* (Milano: Adelphi, 2014).

²² Rossi was invited to Ireland by Joseph Maunsell Hone to co-write a book on George Berkeley, published with an introduction by Yeats: Joseph M. Hone, and Mario Manlio Rossi, *Bishop Berkeley: His Life, Writings, and Philosophy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1931). Through Hone, Rossi became friends with the intellectuals of the Irish Literary Revival, especially Lady Gregory and Yeats. Within a few months Rossi wrote a book on his Irish experience: Mario Manlio Rossi, *Viaggio in Irlanda* (Milano: Doxa, 1932). An abridged English version of the volume was published shortly after: *Pilgrimage in the West* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1933). Years later, Rossi wrote an essay about his conversations with Yeats at Coole Park: Mario Manlio Rossi, "Yeats and Philosophy," *Cronos* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1947): 19–24. Part of Rossi's essay can also be read in Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats, 1865–1939*, reissued (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 422–23. Letters of Rossi to Yeats are published in Richard J. Finneran, George Mills Harper, and William M. Murphy, eds., *Letters to W. B. Yeats*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan; New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); letters of Yeats to Rossi are included in Allan Wade, ed., *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1954).

20th century.²³ Evola started his career as a Dadaist painter, and then turned to philosophy and esotericism. His political views – strongly marked by the Traditionalist perspective – were more radically right wing than those of Fascism, with which he had a complicated relationship. Like Rossi, but for quite different reasons, Evola never became a member of the Fascist party or an exponent of the Fascist academic intelligentsia. He did, however, write several articles for journals that were published under the direction of influential party officials, and his racial theories were met for some time with interest by the regime.

Through the accounts, analysis and evaluations contained in Rossi's and Evola's books, we can appreciate how rich and multifaceted the debate on the transmutation of consciousness was during the interwar period both in Italy and abroad. Differences of views emerge, but also a shared anxiety for the risks that a radical change in human beings could involve.

Expulsion of the Magicians

Upon reading her friend Mario Manlio Rossi's *Spaccio dei maghi* (1929), Lady Gregory was so deeply impressed that she wanted to translate the book for Yeats. Her death from cancer in 1932 prevented her from starting the project.²⁴ It is indeed a compelling and intense book; it constitutes the corrosive and irreverent farewell of the author in his mid-thirties to his earlier passion for the occult.²⁵ No esoteric movement or personality is spared by Rossi's well-argued, derisive prose. The form and the style are more characteristic of a pamphlet

²³ Evola was a very prolific author. For a bibliography of his writings see Renato Del Ponte, "Julius Evola: Una bibliografia 1920–1994," *Futuro Presente* 6 (1995): 28–70. The list of critical studies on his thought would also be too long; unfortunately many of these studies are extremely biased politically in one direction or the other. In the past decade, however, a number of fairly unprejudiced and valuable academic works have been published. To mention but a few of them: Francesco Cassata, *A destra del fascismo: profilo politico di Julius Evola* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, *Julius Evola: dal dadaismo alla rivoluzione conservatrice, 1919–1940* (Roma: Aracne, 2001); Francesco Germinario, *Razza del sangue, razza dello spirito: Julius Evola, l'antisemitismo e il nazionalsocialismo, 1930–43* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001). For a preliminary introduction in English to Evola (with bibliography) see Hans Thomas Hakl, "Evola, Giulio Cesare (Julius or Jules)," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 345–50; Hans Thomas Hakl, "Julius Evola and the UR Group," *Aries* 12, no.1 (2012): 53–90.

²⁴ Fantaccini, "Dear Mariotto," 290.

²⁵ Mario Manlio Rossi, *Spaccio dei maghi* (Roma: Doxa editrice, 1929). All translations from the book are mine.

than a systematic treatise. The arguments are kept lively by the many autobiographical anecdotes about the times when Rossi as a young man frequented futurist, occultist and spiritualist milieus in Florence, under the guidance of his more experienced friend Arturo Reghini. Now that Kant's philosophy had rescued Rossi from the muddle of spiritualism,²⁶ the hour had come for him to expose and debunk the youthful illusions of esoteric wisdom. This is the origin and purpose of *Spaccio dei maghi*, as its author states clearly from the beginning.²⁷

Rossi touches on the problem of the distinctiveness of individual consciousness in several occasions throughout *Spaccio dei maghi*. For instance, questioning the doctrine of reincarnation embraced by the Blavatskian Theosophists, he identifies one of its major flaws in the fact that the consciousness of personal identity does not persist from one life into the next one. The new existence is a continuation of the preceding one, but it is also distinct from it, so how can consciousness be “at the same time *identical* and *different*” in the two lives? Rossi points out that there cannot be various self-consciousnesses in one single being. Self-consciousness is incompatible with a state of multiplicity and diversity from itself: an “I” cannot be an “other.”²⁸ In another passage, criticizing Rudolf Steiner's claim that self-consciousness can be grasped by intuition, Rossi turns to Kant in order to explain that knowing the “other” as different from “me” is the only way to achieve consciousness of oneself.²⁹

It is however in the discussion of initiation and ritual magic that Rossi's views on the relationship between transmutation and homogenization of consciousness emerge most clearly. Rossi remarks that there is a “social aspect” in magic.³⁰ In spite of the conceited individualism of the initiated and their tendency to present their ideas as the result of ineffable individual experiences, the self-styled magicians search to connect through ages and places, organizing themselves in a sort of mystical church. The “social aspect” of magic, however, is for Rossi in sharp contrast with the “absolute solipsism”

²⁶ Ibid., 14. Rossi compares spiritualism to a “strange” and “absurd” “mental disease” that is born of ignorance (more specifically: ignorance in the field of philosophy) and produces confusion.

²⁷ Ibid., 15. Rossi refers in particular to Kant's *Die Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch die Träume der Metaphysik* (“Dreams of a Spirit Seer, Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics,” 1766), in which the German philosopher discusses Emanuel Swedenborg's conceptions of the spirits and the afterlife.

²⁸ Rossi, *Spaccio*, 54–57.

²⁹ Ibid., 62–67.

³⁰ Ibid., 92.

of the magicians and the “a-historical” nature of their knowledge.³¹ Initiation is based on experiences that are personal and incommunicable, and a community cannot be built of such foundations. At best, such a community will have a funereal character: “a church is not a linear juxtaposition of the faithful, but a living organism, in which flows the living blood of social communication. The magical tradition, on the contrary, has a mummified, almost repulsive, look.”³² It is the ritual, and not the living relationship among the members of a community, that keeps the group of initiated together. Rossi tends to depict the initiated as dehumanized beings, almost walking corpses, strangers to one another and dependent on a leader – *il Maestro* – who does not show signs of having a specific identity either. In time, master and disciple will become “indistinguishable” from each other: because the magical tradition is “absolute and immutable,” when the disciple has received the initiation he is “absolutely equal to the master.”³³

Rossi directs his attack at the ritualistic aspect of initiatory magic, an area in which Reghini and Evola were prominent figures. Quite surprisingly, given the elitist character of such esoteric groups, Rossi condemns magic as a “democratic” practice that depersonalizes individuals in the homogenizing mechanism of the ritual, which is the “ultimate essence” of magic itself. Magic is, above anything else, ritual.³⁴ For Rossi, this idea serves as the starting point to prove that magicians’ individualism is only illusory. In magic, rituals do not vary much according to the different schools. The ritual has value independently of the dogma on which it is supposedly founded: “Praxis transcends theory.”³⁵ The magician is different from the common people not because he has learned doctrinal knowledge, but because he has acquired an instrument. Behind the veil of individualism, its opposite looms – a reality of homogenizing egalitarianism:

If magical knowledge *arises* autonomously, always the same, in each initiate that performs the ritual, then what becomes of the rumored magical “individualism”? It turns into the beautiful assertion (democratic, egalitarian also in metaphysics – and in meta-metaphysics!) that “all men are equal.”

Equal, provided that they perform the magic ritual. There are blind people, who cannot see... But they are blind not due to their human essence, but because they refuse to get educated [...]

Let’s assume that some magicians claim that there are different ranks among

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 92–93.

³³ Ibid., 94–95.

³⁴ Ibid., 100–107.

³⁵ Ibid., 101–102.

men: some of them more capable of initiation, others less so. – But among those who are capable, there is no longer any difference! *None whatsoever!* They all know the same things, they all think the same stuff, and all of them do this *in the same manner*. They are individuals just because they are atoms. Not because they are *persons*.³⁶

Magic does not guarantee a diversification of individuals on the basis of an intrinsic “human essence.” On the contrary, it brings about a complete flattening of the personality in those who let themselves be indoctrinated. With initiation to magic ritual, individuals find themselves deprived of their autonomy, of the very possibility to think differently from others. In Rossi’s discourse, the initiated appear as creatures lacking a consciousness of their own. In this perspective, the refusal to get “educated” is implicitly charged with a positive value of humanity and life. Crossing the threshold of the Temple, where the society of magicians gathers, one finds a gray and spectral atmosphere.³⁷ The homogeneity of consciousness creates an unsettling picture:

Beyond that famous door there are no longer faces of men. In the Temple there are absolutely undifferentiated units: you can tell one from the other only (and vaguely... since consciousness is no longer what distinguishes a human being) by a name. Why not a number then? – That which distinguishes them has remained *on this side* of the door. Their way of reasoning, of seeing, of living [...] disappears with the initiation. [...] Their reality as magicians, their superior consciousness (“*sit venia verbis...*”) is absolutely undifferentiated.³⁸

The magicians are victims of a “depersonalizing ideal.”³⁹ Identical one to the other, serialized like automata or prison inmates, they want to “swallow” the others, reducing them to their own state of “undifferentiated consciousness.”⁴⁰ Unlike philosophy and art, which can become part of individuals without destroying “their unmistakable peculiarity,”⁴¹ magic deprives its practitioners of their uniqueness:

[Magicians] have wanted to be immortal *in actuality*, instead of limiting themselves

³⁶ Ibid., 103–104.

³⁷ Ibid., 104.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. In the original Italian text: “ideale ‘spersonalizzante’.”

⁴⁰ Ibid., 104–105. Original: “la loro coscienza [...] è assolutamente indifferenziata” (104).

⁴¹ Ibid., 105. Original: “inconfondibile peculiarità.”

to praying: “In dissolutione formae specificaе salva animam.” And their wish has been granted: now they fear that their own person drowns into magic! And because on the other side of the Sublime Gate they are all equal and identical, they want the others to be equal and identical to them. [...]

They want to assimilate the others to themselves. [...]

The magician [...] precisely because he *surpasses* the humanity of others, he negates *also* his own. The theory swallows and digests man: after that, nothing is left but little dark things, all looking alike...⁴²

However one wants to interpret the “little dark things, all looking alike”⁴³ – whether one sees in them simply the initiated in ceremonial aprons, or the vile final products of digestion, or the black-shirted Fascists, depersonalized and dehumanized in the liturgy of collective harmony – it is clear that for Rossi the original impulse of magicians to differentiate themselves by asserting their superiority gets ironically perverted in a “mechanical” process, founded on ritual, that transforms a society of aspiring self-proclaimed super-men into a fowl, anonymous assembly of dark uniforms.⁴⁴

Rossi relates the desire to be different from others and the impulse to make others identical to oneself. His discourse is a warning against the reduction of the different into the same, of the specific into the indistinct. This process takes place more easily when the state of consciousness is lowered and, once it has been set in motion, it functions as a type of automatism: “Magic is practice not theory, ie. ritual not dogma [...] Magic is a pure mechanics, it works the soul (and nature) as unformed, or uniform, non-individualized matter: ‘Do like this and this, folks, and *whoever you are*, you will become this and this.’”⁴⁵ Because in magic practice precedes theory, nobody, not even the masters of a group, know in advance the ruinous consequences of the ritual. Rossi underlines the irresponsibility of leaders who deceive subjects into believing that by performing ceremonies together they will achieve a “magic hyper-consciousness” which will make them superior to others. In reality – argues Rossi – what they will obtain is a state of dull mediocrity, which stands in ironic contrast to the elitist stance of magicians: “*Ritual is the true magic*. And therefore magic is leveling; it’s the true democracy of the spirit.”⁴⁶

When ritual is devoid of dogma, when practice is independent from doc-

⁴² Ibid., 104–105.

⁴³ Ibid. Original: “cosini tutti bruni, tutti uguali uno all’altro” (105).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 105–106. On magic ritual as “mechanical” process.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 107.

trine, the result is an unsettling combination of haughty *superomismo* and conformity. Rossi derisively portrays the magician, because of his firm belief of having stolen something from God, as a modern Prometheus in uniform, guiltily hiding his little spark “in the same way a boarding school boy would hide his cigarette.”⁴⁷ The magician only apparently breaks the norm; he actually gets sucked into an even sneakier form of conformity of which he is unaware. This happens also to occultists of the “intellectual” type (Rossi includes in this category Novalis, Hermann Keyserling, Julius Evola, and Arturo Reghini), who are familiar with philosophy and have read Kant but nevertheless slip down into the regions of magic and mysticism. These occultists pursue an aristocratic “palingenesis” founded on the principles of differentiation and superiority, but involuntarily end up promoting depersonalizing and homogenizing ideals.⁴⁸

As Rossi sees it, the attainment of a state of super-consciousness is a pitiable blunder. It is part of a larger collection of fascinating but ultimately deceptive notions, through which human beings delude themselves into believing that they have the ability to surmount the limits inscribed in their own nature.⁴⁹ Yet from those constraints nobody can escape. The refusal to accept their limits and the incapacity to embrace “rational uncertainty” as the most correct attitude toward existence lead esotericists to negate instead of affirm the value of human beings as individuals with their own unique consciousness.⁵⁰ The life of magicians will be dreary, deathlike, dull: “Everything will be the same [...] all even, all equal, all without relief.”⁵¹

Mask and Face of Contemporary Spiritualism

Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo by Julius Evola was published three years after *Spaccio dei maghi*, in 1932.⁵² This work also belongs to a class of polemical texts in which an esotericist assesses, and mostly rebukes, a variety

⁴⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 146–148.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 150–152.

⁵¹ Ibid., 151.

⁵² Julius Evola, *Maschera e volto dello spiritualismo contemporaneo: analisi critica delle principali correnti moderne verso il “sovrannaturale”* (Torino: Einaudi, 1932). The present study focuses on the Fascist period and therefore refers exclusively to this first edition of the book. In the course of the years, Evola expanded and revised the text several times; the English versions are generally based on later editions. Here all translations are mine from the 1932 Italian original.

of currents and doctrines within esotericism itself. Compared to Rossi's book, *Maschera e volto* is more systematic and follows a less extemporary vein in the sequence of topics and arguments, in spite of the fact that most of its chapters had been previously published as journal articles.⁵³ Rossi's work displays the irreverent exuberance of a pamphlet; Evola's book aspires to the more solemn form of a treatise. Evola knew *Spaccio dei maghi*, in which his doctrines were also criticized, but he does not mention Rossi's volume in *Maschera e volto*. His main points of reference seem to be instead the much admired works by René Guénon, *Le Théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion* (1921) and *L'erreur spirite* (1923), with which Evola had great familiarity.⁵⁴ Unlike Rossi, Evola attacks particular aspects of the variegated world of esotericism from a position that still remains within the confines of esotericism itself: it is the perennialist-traditionalist perspective that functions for him, as for Guénon, as the touchstone for evaluating validity in the doctrines he discusses.

Evola's condemnation of spiritualism does not originate from a disillusioned skepticism. He attacks the spiritualist doctrines as an actual danger, not just a harmless cultural attitude. These doctrines attract and set in motion real forces that have devastating effects on human consciousness. Their action is comparable to that of demonic possession in Catholicism and causes people to lose their "soul," their "unity," their "self-awareness."⁵⁵ The "spiritual" in this perspective corresponds to the "demonic" (Evola employs this term mostly in the sense given to it by Paul Tillich in *Das Dämonische*, 1926) or the "natural" (or "pre-natural"): a formless and impersonal force that generally has no intentionality of its own and disintegrates anything that has "form" in human beings, and notably the "personality."⁵⁶ The "demonic" can access and damage

⁵³ Some chapters appeared in Evola's journal *La Torre* in 1930. See *La Torre: foglio di espressioni varie e di tradizione una*, reprint, with an introduction by Marco Tarchi (Milano: Il Falco, 1977): 301–11, 321–28, 372–79. *La Torre* – arguably the most political of the journals directed by Evola in the interwar period – had a short life, from February to June 1930, when the Fascist authorities put a stop to its publication.

⁵⁴ See René Guénon, *Le Théosophisme: Histoire d'une pseudo-religion* (Paris: Nouvelle librairie nationale, 1921); René Guénon, *L'erreur spirite* (Paris: M. Rivière, 1923). Quite curiously Evola was thirty-four years old when *Maschera e volto* was published; the same age as Rossi when *Spaccio dei maghi* came out. Guénon was thirty-five at the time of *Le Théosophisme*. Inebriated by the correspondences, a student of esoteric matters might be tempted to conjecture the existence of a midlife syndrome that induces many esotericists in their mid-thirties to critically assess the range of doctrines which contributed to form them as intellectuals.

⁵⁵ Evola, *Maschera*, 1–6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6. On the issue of the "demonic," Evola, the proponent of pagan imperialism, declares to be substantially in agreement with the views expressed by Paul Tillich, the protes-

individuals more easily when they lower their level of consciousness, i.e. when they regress from a condition of “formed personal consciousness” to one of “sub-consciousness.” When human beings are in this latter state, they quit experiencing “nature” as something external to themselves, as “not-I.”⁵⁷ This is the end of the “person,” and the threshold of the “impersonal,” of the “natural.” There is an inescapable cause-effect relationship between lowering the level of consciousness and depersonalization: whoever “opens himself passively,” “ecstatically” to nature and to the realm of the spiritual will end up having his personal identity weakened and harmed. For Evola, authentic spirituality is always characterized by clear self-awareness, which is the only trait that elevates man above other beings. Trance, hypnosis, ecstasy and all states of diminished consciousness entail a movement downward, not upward, in the ladder of beings.⁵⁸

Evola maintains that the transmutation of human beings must be finalized to a state of “super-consciousness”: this is the true direction toward the supernatural, the path that was known by Traditional civilizations as “asceticism.”⁵⁹ In *Spaccio dei maghi*, Rossi illustrated how magicians surrender their personal identity through the “mechanical” fascination of ritual, an inexorable though imperceptible process; in *Maschera e volto*, Evola repeatedly describes the obliteration of individual personality as something that takes place when the unaware subject is in a state of lowered consciousness. Evola’s discourse on the right attitude toward transmutation, consciousness and the supernatural draws very sharp demarcations. On the one hand, we have the positive pole of the authentically “supernatural”: awareness of oneself, individualized personality, ascent from consciousness to super-consciousness. On the other hand, we have the negative pole of “nature”: lowering or total loss of self-awareness, annihilation of individual personality, descent from consciousness to “sub-consciousness.”⁶⁰

Therefore it is not surprising that Evola denounces the practice of mediumship both in spiritual séances and in the experiments of psychical researchers. Mediumship constitutes a real danger because, by lowering the subject’s level of consciousness, it puts the sub-personal forces in the condition to shatter the formed personality. Due to the fact that many people practice medium-

tant theologian close to socialist ideals. See Paul Tillich, *Das Dämonische: Ein Beitrag zur Sinnbedeutung der Geschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr 1926).

⁵⁷ Evola, *Maschera*, 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11. In the original Italian text: “supercoscienza” (super-consciousness) and “asceti” (asceticism).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-12. Original: “subcoscienza” (sub-consciousness), 8.

ship around the globe, all of humanity is exposed to the risk of a “psychic infection” transmitted by “obscure and impersonal forces.”⁶¹ In Evola’s text a relation steadily takes shape between two semantic fields that comprise words referring, on the one hand, to the loss of individual specificity (“impersonal,” “collective,” etc.), and on the other, to the altered states of consciousness (“ecstasy,” “trance,” etc.). Obsession, for example, is one of the most pervasive manners in which the forces of the spiritual world annihilate the specificity of the individual:

The free person is imperceptibly replaced by something that, without letting the coercion be noticed, constrains and perverts any superior aspiration. The personal principle, being mutilated, “ecstatically” recedes in the collective – and the collective, the unformed psychical, eminently displays the “demonic” invasion and destruction.⁶²

And it does not matter whether mediumistic phenomena are caused by “external agents” (e.g., the spirits of the dead) or by “sub-conscious elements” in living human beings, because the “sub-conscious” belongs to the sphere of the “sub-personal.”⁶³

In the political religion of Italian Fascism the rituals revolving around the dead had a crucial homogenizing function. The cult of the fallen was widely employed by the regime to this end. The soldiers killed in WWI and the “martyrs” who gave their lives for the Fascist cause were regularly celebrated in mass rituals. These ceremonies usually involved some form of roll call of the dead, an emotionally intense experience for the participants. Typically the leader celebrating the ritual called out the name of the dead and the crowd replied in unison identifying itself, as a whole, with the deceased person. The ritual served the purpose of integrating individuals into the group, inspiring in them the feeling of belonging to a community that reached beyond earthly life.⁶⁴ In *Maschera e volto* Evola does not explicitly deal with the Fascist rituals connected to the cult of the fallen. However, his views on the evocation of spiritual forces appear in clear contrast with the conceptions of the dead and their function in creating social cohesion and political consent that were at the basis of these ceremonies. Evola claims that it is not possible to summon

⁶¹ Ibid., 14.

⁶² Ibid., 16.

⁶³ Ibid., 18. Original: “subpersonale” (sub-personal).

⁶⁴ See Gentile, *Sacralization*, 26–27, 66–67, 116–17.

the spirits of the dead individually by name. The realm of the dead is one of chaotic impersonality, a restless whirl of impulses and forces beyond the control of a single consciousness. Only a few superior individuals become immortal after leaving their physical body, but in general the dead don't have "spiritual unity": they are "decomposition products" of the soul, muddled compounds of "deindividuated psychic waste."⁶⁵ Far from the Fascist celebrations of the fallen martyrs, Evola conceives the deceased as impersonal energies that infect the living with their lack of individual specificity. Evola's discourse depicts the spiritual plan as an insidious dominion permeated by chaotic and shapeless drives which disorient man and ravage everything in him that is form and uniqueness: a triumph of the collective over the individual.⁶⁶

Evola's criticism does not spare Blavatskian "Theosophism" and its dissident offshoots, the doctrines of Rudolf Steiner and Jiddu Krishnamurti.⁶⁷ In these cases too, Evola advocates the idea of consciousness as "one" in the sense that it is unique and specific, the result of a process of individuation; meanwhile he censures Theosophy because it promotes a model of "oneness" in the sense of a collective entity, resulting from leveling the differences into a homogeneous totality.⁶⁸ According to Evola, Theosophy correctly sets as a goal for the individual the achievement of an "independent self-consciousness," but then it gets side-tracked by the typically British anti-aristocratic notion of "social collective progress" – a spiritual evolution across the ages involving all human beings indiscriminately – and ends up promoting an ideal of unity understood as immanence of the "One Life" in every being.⁶⁹ In Evola's view, the "One Life" should be the point of departure and not of arrival in the transmutation of consciousness. The "One Life" is the "undifferentiated substrate" starting from which each being, forming itself, builds its own "qualification"; it is not – as the Theosophists misunderstand it – a final state of perfection in which distinct individuals dissolve themselves, losing their identity in a pantheistic fusion with the Whole.⁷⁰ This mistake of the Theosophists is yet another aspect of their tendency to encourage undifferentiated states of being and uphold "semi-communistic ideals" of "equality, universal solidarity, leveling of sexes and classes" instead of pursuing the Traditional "virile law

⁶⁵ Evola, *Maschera*, 19–22.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

⁶⁷ See *ibid.*, 41–42, on the distinction between "Ancient and Traditional Theosophy" and "Anglo-Indian Theosophy" (or "Theosophism").

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 56–57.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

of hierarchy, difference, and caste.”⁷¹ In this sense, Theosophy contributes to pushing the crisis of modern civilizations even further “into the collective, the promiscuous.”⁷²

The doctrines of Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) give Evola the opportunity to discuss the notions of ecstasy, mysticism, and messianism, with particular regard to the risks of losing one’s specificity that are implied in them. These concepts also played an important role in the political religion of Mussolini’s regime, which explicitly referred to a *mistica fascista* (Fascist mysticism) and heavily relied on the personality cult of the *Duce*. Krishnamurti had been chosen at a very young age by the leaders of the Theosophical Society as a sort of messiah. He renounced that role in 1929, dissolving the organization that the Theosophists had created for him (the *Order of the Star*) to continue his path in a more personal way. For Evola, this is a step in the right direction, but the fundamental inclination of Krishnamurti’s doctrine remains unchanged. His teachings are a contemporary example of “mysticism,” a form of spiritualism based on ecstasy, on the “personality going out of itself.”⁷³ Ecstasy results in the loss of one’s individuality, as the mystic is absorbed into an incommensurably vaster entity like God, Nature, or – in Krishnamurti’s case – Life. For Evola, what makes the idea of ecstasy even more dangerous is that it generates a form of pleasure, of “enjoyment” (*godimento*, the same sexually-charged term that Pintor uses to describe the feeling of impersonality derived from wearing a uniform); and this pleasure may become an end in itself.⁷⁴ Mysticism for Evola is a “sentimental or passional state,” entailing passivity and self-bewilderment, and is associated with “a contempt for the autonomous personality.”⁷⁵ In the “mystical identification,” people deviate from the task of forming themselves as unique individuals: instead of pursuing their own inner completion, they identify with an “object” or an “ideal.”⁷⁶ This mystical object fascinates people, who “go out of themselves” (ecstasy) and thus get the impression of having been “freed” from themselves, hence a pleasurable feeling of release, of *détente*.⁷⁷ But this is a fake freedom; it is actually subjugation to the object with which one identifies. The resulting pleasure is a pleasure of slaves. Moreover,

⁷¹ Ibid., 57–58.

⁷² Ibid., 58.

⁷³ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁴ Ibid. Pintor uses the infinitive of the verb (*godere*: “to enjoy,” “to get pleasure”) and Evola uses the noun derived from the verb (*godimento*: “enjoyment,” “pleasure”). See note 19.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 77.

this process is not necessarily caused by a religious experience, because there is also “a mysticism of profane things,” like “a political party or a sport.”⁷⁸ Evola does not refer explicitly to Fascism. However, the fact that his remarks were written in times of censorship and mass enthusiasm for a charismatic leader allows the reader to see Fascism, especially in its collectivist aspect, as a possible “object” capable of setting off the mystical fascination which brings about secular ecstasy and loss of the self.

In Evola’s view, messianism can be considered as a particular case of mysticism.⁷⁹ A spiritual leader like Krishnamurti or Rudolf Steiner can cause disciples to derail in their process of forming a unique personality; he can make disciples identify with him as a collective entity, and enslave them by means of a fascination that they perceive as pleasure-inducing freedom. Very rarely – warns Evola – the messiah is a truly superior being, capable of guiding individuals in forming their own identity. Most often, the “messianic phenomenon” produces “collective entities of an irrational nature, that replace single individuals and make use of their energies for something like their incarnation and nutrition.”⁸⁰ Evola favorably considers the fact that Krishnamurti’s idea of transmutation is oriented toward the attainment of “unconditioned awareness,” the expression of “the eternal I,” and the recuperation of “individual uniqueness.”⁸¹ However, Evola objects that Krishnamurti is absolutely wrong in equating “the eternal I” with “Life,” a mistake that makes him conceive the realization of a person’s most authentic identity in a pantheistic fashion.⁸² The “self” that Krishnamurti wants to realize is “the I of everything, the absolute unity with all things, [...] undifferentiated, proteiform life.”⁸³ Any sign of individual specificity is erased. In opposition to this view, Evola exalts an ascetic-alchemical teaching which aims at refining the inner core of individuality as a grain of pure gold. Transmutation – states Evola – must always proceed from “formless universality” to “formed individuality” and not the other way around.⁸⁴

Maschera e volto does not only challenge and criticize other viewpoints. It also contains a few sections in which the author openly declares his admiration for other esotericists whose views he considers correct. Besides Guénon, Evola holds in high regard Eliphas Lévi (1810–1875), Giuliano Kremmerz

⁷⁸ Ibid., 76–77.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 77–78.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁸¹ Ibid., 79–80.

⁸² Ibid., 80–81.

⁸³ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 86.

(1861–1930), Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932) and, to a lesser extent, Hermann Keyserling (1880–1946). These authors – roughly corresponding to the figures that Rossi classifies as magicians of the “intellectual” type – are for Evola the exponents of authentic magic, of a “metaphysical attitude” oriented toward the “supernormal integration of the personality.”⁸⁵ They nourish an “ideal of independence” and set as a goal for man a higher level of consciousness, a “super-personality” that transcends physical death and is in opposition to all the elements that are ephemeral in a person.⁸⁶ Their teachings, which are all expressions of the one Tradition, promote an “awakening” that is transmutation of the self into a completely formed and super-conscious individuality, not the dissolution of the unique individual into an undifferentiated Whole. The “discipline of magic” aspires to “freeing from the stratum of the collective an independent personal principle.”⁸⁷ Evola describes this path of transmutation as “magical asceticism,” the “discipline intending to form a spiritual unity, an authentic personality instead of the insubstantial and exterior one that is created by social conventions, upbringing, environment, heredity.”⁸⁸ The process is one of subtraction, a deliberate “taking form” of the individual through a “disrobing” of the self, a removal from oneself of all that does not belong to the true essence of the personality.⁸⁹ One of the ways to achieve this condition is the magic ritual. Evola clarifies that the forces evoked in ceremonial magic are not necessarily “determined by a collectivity, or condensed in a collectivity”;⁹⁰ the real magician knows how to recognize, discriminate and direct these forces, and distinguish between the real self and the illusory (and often frightening) double that ritual tends to generate, and therefore he is able to preserve and strengthen his own personality.⁹¹

Consistent with the Traditionalist perspective, Evola deems the conditions of contemporary society to be extremely unfavorable to the realization of a super-personality or super-consciousness.⁹² In the present situation, in the “age of the demonic collective” – as Evola defines it, employing an expression (*demonia del collettivo*) that is sharply in contrast with the “collective harmony” (*armonico collettivo*) envisioned by Mussolini – too many forces hinder man in this achieve-

⁸⁵ Ibid., 110–11. Original: “integrazione soprannormale della personalità,” 111.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 111–16. Original: “superpersonalità,” 116.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 114.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 34–35.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 115–16.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 119.

⁹¹ Ibid., 119–20.

⁹² Ibid., 126–28.

ment.⁹³ Moreover, this type of transmutation is an “aristocratic right,” reserved for a precious few. The others can only be misled by contemporary spiritualism into an increasingly ruinous state of sub-personality and sub-consciousness.⁹⁴

Conclusion

The reading of *Spaccio dei Maghi* and *Maschera e volto* shows how the debate on the transmutation of consciousness generated fiery controversies, but also subtle convergences, among esotericists on the possible risks that such transmutation could imply for a society ruled by a regime that was charging the old alchemical ideal of the “new man” with further values and implications. When the transmutation of consciousness is intended as movement not toward the consolidation of the core of personality but toward the creation of the common soul for all the individuals in a collectivity, Fascism and some sectors of esotericism (not necessarily the most obvious ones from a political perspective) seem to go out of tune with each other. Starting from very different premises, both Rossi and Evola warn against a view of transmutation in which individuals cannot realize themselves in their own specific manner, independent from the influence of the group and its leaders. For the two authors, it is important that individuals maintain their autonomy in the course of the profound modifications they undergo, not letting themselves be absorbed by an external agency that obliterates their specificity. Rossi and Evola denounce a type of transmutation that creates an undifferentiated consciousness. While discussing matters that seem to pertain strictly to the debates within esotericism, they express a deep concern about the molding of souls performed in the society around them, and warn against the possibility that the ideal of the “new man,” shared by esotericism and Fascism, leads to the erasure of individual distinctiveness. In regard to Fascism, the denunciation remains mostly implicit, indirect, made of hints and allusions, as one may expect from authors writing in a totalitarian regime. What they criticize is not a political organization but the underlying structure of a project, the *forma mentis* it implies, and the mechanisms it could set off. *Spaccio dei maghi* and *Maschera e volto* do not depict esotericism as a form of thought that challenges the authority of Fascism or as a subversive and heretical discipline that is antagonistic to the dominant

⁹³ Ibid., 128.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 126.

ideology.⁹⁵ Instead, they convey a subtle awareness that the approach of some sectors of esotericism to individual transmutation as dissolution of personal identity may not be too different from the changes that were taking place on a collective level in Italy under Fascism.

Issues of homogenization and conformity tend to manifest themselves more clearly in societies that are ruled by totalitarian regimes, but they are not exclusive to those societies. Trying to answer the questions raised by the discourses elaborated during Fascism can help us to understand what kind of relationships exist between the incitation to radically change one's consciousness and the socio-political pressure toward standardization that is also at work in cultures that present themselves as free, liberal and democratic. Because of its hardwired concern with the transmutation of human consciousness, esotericism seems more predisposed than other modes of thought to discern the possible consequences of the crucial adjustments that are expected from subjects in a society in search of its soul, the one and same soul for all its members.

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⁹⁵ On the dynamic interplay of orthodoxy and heresy in the discourses of Western esotericism, see Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad, eds., *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

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