

# Deification as a Core Theme in Julius Evola's Esoteric Works

**Hans Thomas Hakl**

E-mail: [ht.hakl@a1.net](mailto:ht.hakl@a1.net)

## **Abstract**

“Deification” or “Becoming God” is used in this article as a central hermeneutical key to understand Julius Evola’s (1898-1974) philosophic and, most importantly, esoteric work. Although the concept of deification can be found in his early work, it naturally developed itself and underwent many transfigurations, for which he employed different forms of symbolic systems. One cornerstone of his intellectual buildings has remained constant, however: the desperate endeavor to transcend the limitations of the human being. To find and teach “practical” paths to reach this goal became the supreme aim in his works.

## **Keywords**

Julius Evola; deification; magic; Tantrism; salvation; spiritual development

## The Early Years

Evola's efforts to overcome the ordinary conditions of life can be detected when he was still a young man. This soon led him to an exploration of transcendental realms not bound by material limits. He remarked in his "spiritual autobiography," written in 1963, that his decisive impulse toward transcendence "manifested itself" in him "from his earliest years."<sup>1</sup> This can also be clearly seen in his artistic period, from 1915 to 1923, when he became one of the most renowned Dadaists in Italy. In his brochure *Arte astratta* [*Abstract Art*], written in 1920 when he was 22 years old, he expressed it in the following way:

I see art as an interest-free creation that comes from an individual's higher consciousness and is therefore capable of transcending the passions and the crystallizations that are based upon common experiences, and which is independent of them.<sup>2</sup>

Another sign of Evola's urge for transcendence is the recurrence of alchemical symbolism in his abstract art.<sup>3</sup> This urge to be different from common man is also shown in his striving for an absolute self-sufficiency of the "I" as a necessary condition for genuine freedom. Not to depend on anything outside himself was his ultimate goal. It was the young Italian philosopher Carlo Michelstaedter (1887–1910), who guided him in this direction, and Evola continued to work toward this end for the rest of his life. Thus, he said, real

value is found only in that which exists for itself, which demands the principle of inner life and personal power from nothing and nobody – in autarchy.<sup>4</sup>

There is only a small step from demanding total autarchy to the conviction of being in control of everything. This was the necessary condition for what

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<sup>1</sup> Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar: An Intellectual Autobiography of Julius Evola*, trans. by Sergio Knipe (London: Integral Tradition, 2009), 11. Translation of Julius Evola, *Il cammino del cinabro* (Milano, All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1963). I use the term "spiritual autobiography" because the text contains very little biographical information, and is rather a guide to his books.

<sup>2</sup> Julius Evola, *Arte astratta* (Roma, Maglione e Strini, 1920), 8. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

<sup>3</sup> This has been pointed out by the major Italian art critic Carlo Fabrizio Carli in his essay "Evola: la pittura e l'alchimia; un tracciato," in *Julius Evola e l'arte delle avanguardie* (Roma: Fondazione Julius Evola, 1998), 55–60. See also Elisabetta Valento, *Homo Faber: Julius Evola fra arte e alchimia* (Roma: Fondazione Julius Evola, 1994), particularly 54, and Vitaldo Conte, "Evola e l'arte-poesia," in *Julius Evola e la sua eredità culturale*, a cura di Gianfranco de Turreis (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2017), 23–37.

<sup>4</sup> Julius Evola, *Saggi sull'idealismo magico* (Todi-Roma: Atanòr, 1925), 136.

Evola named the “Absolute Individual,” and it became the aim of his philosophical system, which he called “Magical Idealism.” The term is taken from the German poet Novalis (1772–1801), but it is likely that Evola first came across it in the writings of Giovanni Papini (1881–1956), the Italian poet and philosopher who Evola befriended during his Futurist period, from 1915 to 1919.<sup>5</sup> Papini, according to Evola,

brought particularly noteworthy works [...] to the attention of young people like myself, thus providing the young with some genuine guidance.<sup>6</sup>

In 1903 Papini had written an essay titled “L’Uomo-Dio” [The God-Man], in which he talks about various ways to transform oneself.<sup>7</sup> Papini puts particular significance on Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328) and his process of *deificatio*, which renounces the mundane world through a kind of purification process.<sup>8</sup> It was Papini, as Evola reveals in his biography, who prompted him to study Meister Eckhart’s doctrine.<sup>9</sup> Evola did so using the German edition of Meister Eckhart’s *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* [*German Sermons and Tracts*], in which one can find the following crucial sentence about God and man:

If I am to recognize God in an immediate way, then *I* must become *he* and *he* must become *I* [...] so completely at one, that this *he* and this *I* are one, and will become and be one, and exist and act eternally in this way and form of being.<sup>10</sup>

## The Philosophical Period

In 1925, Evola’s first major philosophical work, *Saggi sull’idealismo magico* [*Essays on Magical Idealism*], was published. In the text he developed his notion of “Magical

<sup>5</sup> Papini seems to have been one of the first to popularize the work of Michelstaedter (see Antonio Martuscelli in his article “Carlo Michelstaedter Filosofo,” Rodoni, accessed October 1, 2018, <http://www.rodoni.ch/busoni/bibliotechina/michelstaedter/filosofo.html>). Evola apparently became familiar with Carlo Michelstaedter’s work through his close friend Emilio Michelstaedter, who was Carlo’s cousin (see Giuliano Borghi and Gian Franco Lami, *Introduzione a Julius Evola* (Roma: Volpi, 1980), 85).

<sup>6</sup> Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Papini, “L’Uomo-Dio,” *Leonardo* 1, no. 3 (January 27, 1903): 3.

<sup>8</sup> It seems that Papini even made an attempt to “become God” in a secluded place apparently under the guidance of Arturo Reghini, as Evola reports in *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 78.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Schriften und Predigten*, ed. E. Büttner (Jena: E. Diedrichs, 1912), 167. Evola himself indicates this edition in his *Saggi sull’idealismo magico*, 48, n. 1.

Idealism” using not only philosophical concepts, but also elements from Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535) and the Western esoteric tradition,<sup>11</sup> as well as elements from Tantrism and the Upanishads. His philosophical aim was to reach absolute knowledge that was totally certain and where doubt was not possible. But such a knowledge was not imaginable as long as his thinking was modeled after the outside world, as is usually the case, because this world was beyond his reach and thus fundamentally uncertain. Evola dates his main philosophical efforts to the years 1923 to 1927, although some of his writings during these years were published only later, as late as 1930.<sup>12</sup>

Evola had studied mathematics and, reflecting on the mathematical and geometrical theses of Bernhard Riemann (1826–1866), who had theorized a fourth dimension and paved the way for Einstein’s general theory of relativity, was no longer convinced of the absolute certainty of mathematical theorems. Evola strongly maintained that nothing was absolutely certain for the “I,” unless it had total power over all conditions determining the object in view. One can only have absolute certainty with regard to an object of which one fully dominates the principle and all its causes. The I must thus become a profound center of dominion and power. To meet this requirement, however, it is “in fact necessary to put the I in the place of God.”<sup>13</sup> The logical solution for Evola was therefore to model the world after his thinking. By being master of his thinking, he also became master of what his thinking produced. To him, Magical Idealism meant not reproducing the world passively, but rather generating it actively.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of his concepts of freedom and power, which were heavily influenced by the writings of John Woodroffe (who wrote under the pseudonym of Arthur Avalon, 1865–1936), Evola longed for the “absolute individual” with absolute freedom and absolute power, but also absolute responsibility. “The body of the absolute individual is the universe,” Evola said.<sup>15</sup> This “absolute individual” – analogous to the Indian concept of the *ātman* – is the expression of a complete and abundant power that inevitably grows out of total spiritual realization and the actual *lived experience* of it. Evola considered absolute freedom

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<sup>11</sup> Evola cites Agrippa (*De occulta philosophia* I, 1) approvingly saying that according to the latter’s teachings the “magicians” deem it possible to penetrate all three worlds reaching finally the archetypal world, which creates and maintains all the others. Therefore the “true” magicians are able to act from this world on all natural powers and spark even new ones.” Evola, *Saggi sull’idealismo magico*, 73.

<sup>12</sup> Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 26.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

to be a primary sign of being “God,” as it required being grounded in oneself alone and not depending upon any external factor. The later chapters in the book, which bear titles such as “The Construction of Immortality” and “The Essence of Magical Development,” clearly show the direction of Evola’s thinking.

The first explicit appearance of the term “farsi dio” [to make oneself God] that I have found in Evola’s writing is in an article in *Ignis*, the magazine edited by his early mentor Arturo Reghini (1878-1946), in which he remarked: “There is only one way to prove God: to make oneself God.”<sup>16</sup> Later on in this article he speaks about Novalis and his ideas on man becoming God.<sup>17</sup> He then writes about Kirilloff, one of the protagonists in Dostojewsky’s (1821-1881) novel *Demons* (*The Possessed*), who does not believe in God and does not accept inventing an imaginary God like many generations had done before him, and is therefore forced to manifest his own divinity in order to demonstrate that God exists. Evola enumerates the attributes of Kirilloff’s so-called divinity: first his free will and particularly all actions with which he can prove his insubordination to God. This new and terrifying freedom is most convincingly proved, according to Kirilloff, by committing suicide. He who dares to kill himself has found the secret to becoming God. To commit suicide he must conquer utmost fear, but as a result he will become the new man that is God. Evola also alludes in this essay to an analogous practice of *kundalini-yoga*, which cuts right through the root of organic life itself. This is said by the Tantric tradition to provoke a supernal light shining through the chaos, whereupon the realized can take possession of the “three kingdoms,” having thus become supreme Lord towering even above (a personal) God.<sup>18</sup>

Based on talks he gave in 1925 at conferences of the Lega Teosofica Indipendente in Rome, Evola published his seminal essay, “L’individuo e il divenire del mondo” [The Individual and the Becoming of the World], which was issued as a modest brochure of only forty pages in 1926.<sup>19</sup> In reality, this was a condensed synthesis of his three major philosophical works, which

<sup>16</sup> Julius Evola, “Diòniso,” *Ignis*, anno I, no. 11-12 (novembre/dicembre 1925): 357, 367.

<sup>17</sup> Novalis’s idea was that man in future should become independent from God and through this become God himself, insofar as all the attributes of God such as omniscience, omnipotence, and immortality would be characteristic of the single individual, too.

<sup>18</sup> Evola alludes to this in “Diòniso,” loc. cit. 368, and calls this practice *kevala-kumbhala* (stopping the breathing in deep meditation). This is a complete dominance of the mental faculties. *Kundalini* awakens and there are no obstacles any more in *sushumna*, where *kundalini* is flowing and thus unification with the Absolute is made possible.

<sup>19</sup> Julius Evola, *L’individuo e il divenire del mondo* (Roma, Libreria di Scienze e Lettere, 1926). Reprint: (Roma, Ed. Mediterranee, 2015). This revised and reviewed edition includes several essays that put the importance of this text into the right perspective. I use this edition, as the first edition is extremely rare.

partly came out only years later, because Evola lacked a publisher. He later referred to this brochure, in *The Path of Cinnabar*, as a text written “in a state of intellectual vertigo.”<sup>20</sup> Here Evola is very explicit and says:

We bitterly fight all the intellectual and philosophical rhetoric by means of which man amuses himself to talk *around* his impotence instead of jumping up, gripping it then firmly and burning it so that he becomes what he really is: *A God, a Builder of the world.*<sup>21</sup>

One page later he exclaims: “And therefore the individual has only one imperative: BE, become GOD, *and in so doing, make the world be, SAVE the world.*”<sup>22</sup>

Up to this point in his philosophical work, Evola had sought to tackle the question of “becoming God” in a speculative way. A further, more “practical” step in Evola’s approach can be traced back to his studies of the Mithras cult. It was less the outward rituals that interested him than the inner experiences of the adepts of these mysteries. In the first sentence of his article “The Way of Realization of Oneself According to the Mysteries of Mithras,”<sup>23</sup> he declares that at a certain stage (of inner development) it becomes clear that the myths of the (ancient) mysteries are essentially allusive transcriptions of a series of states of consciousness along the path of self-realization.<sup>24</sup> That is why he regards Mithraism as part of the “great Western magical [i.e. for Evola initiatic] tradition.”<sup>25</sup> In a footnote, he underlines that as his basis he had studied the historical facts of Mithraism as expounded by the texts of Franz Cumont (1868–1947), Albrecht Dieterich (1866–1908), and George Robert Stow Mead (1863–1933).<sup>26</sup> In this fundamental and highly original essay, Evola described some basic ideas of the initiatic path that would be taught in the later Group of UR (1927–1929),<sup>27</sup> where they were to be further developed in a systematical

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<sup>20</sup> Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 76.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 38. The English text is taken from Thomas Sheehan, “*Diventare Dio: Julius Evola and the Metaphysics of Fascism*,” *Stanford Italian Review* 6, nos. 1–2 (1986): 284.

<sup>23</sup> Julius Evola, “La via della realizzazione di sé secondo I Misteri di Mithra,” in *Ultra* 20, no. 3 (Giugno 1926): 146–54.

<sup>24</sup> This affirmation is of paramount importance to Evola’s understanding of all forms of traditional, initiatic teachings.

<sup>25</sup> Evola, “La via della realizzazione di sé,” 146.

<sup>26</sup> Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1903); Albrecht Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1903); George Robert Stow Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1900). Evola, “La via della realizzazione di sé,” 154.

<sup>27</sup> For a full story of the Group of Ur see Renato del Ponte, *Julius Evola e il magico gruppo di*

way and corroborated by material from other traditions as well. In the Mithraic mysteries the aspirant was guided on a well-defined itinerary through seven stages to a final initiation above the seventh sphere “in which there is neither a here nor a not-here, which is stillness, illumination and solitude like in an infinite ocean,” and which is called the grade of the Father.<sup>28</sup>

As Stefano Arcella, a specialist on Mithraism at the Fondazione Humaniter in Naples, emphasizes in his compelling introductory essay to the new edition of this essay,<sup>29</sup> it cannot be over-stressed that Evola’s reading of the Mithraic mysteries was unique and thoroughly original compared to other academic publications of the time. Evola was the first to point out the precise correspondence of each symbolic degree to an exact technical-operative phase of realization on this path of deification.

## Tantrism

A decisive practical step in this direction was formed by Evola’s study of Tantrism, enabled by the translations of Sir John Woodroffe, who used the pseudonym of Arthur Avalon for his translations of Indian source-texts carried out with Indian experts. It was Decio Calvari (1863–1937), the head of the Lega Teosofica Indipendente, who acquainted him with this Far Eastern path,<sup>30</sup> which excited Evola so much that a rather important correspondence with Woodroffe ensued.<sup>31</sup> Tantrism taught Evola not an intellectual or ascetic-contemplative path, but rather a whole system based on techniques leading towards god-like self-realization and practical self-transformation through one’s own power. As Woodroffe put it in his seminal work *S’akti and S’akta* (1918), which was one of the most important texts on Tantrism for Evola, and was quoted by him numerous times: “The unfolding of this self-power is to be brought about by self-realization which is to be achieved through Sadhana (practice).”<sup>32</sup> Evola explains:

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*Ur* (Borzano: SEAR, 1994), and for an extensive English overview see Hans Thomas Hakl, “Julius Evola and the UR Group,” *Aries* 12 (2012): 53–90.

<sup>28</sup> Evola, “La via della relizzazione di sé,” 154. *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>29</sup> Julius Evola, *La via della realizzazione di sé secondo I Misteri di Mithra* (Napoli: Controcorrente, 2007), 31.

<sup>30</sup> For more details on Evola’s dealings with this special theosophical lodge, where he got to know several important Italian esotericists and orientologists, see Marco Rossi, “Julius Evola e la Lega Teosofica Indipendente di Roma,” *Storia Contemporanea* 25 (February 1994): 39–56.

<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, only one letter to Woodroffe has survived. But Evola mentioned the Englishman’s comments in several of his works, e.g. *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 71. Evola also translated Avalon’s *The World as Power: Arthur Avalon, Il mondo come Potenza*, trans. Julius Evola (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1973).

<sup>32</sup> Sir John Woodroffe, *S’akti and S’akta*, 9th ed. (Madras: Ganesh, 1969), 15.

Here knowledge is not a luxury, but a tool for action and for the annulment of the obscurity and passivity which dominate profane life. Liberation and knowledge, metaphysics and self-realization, thought and power are here one and the same thing.<sup>33</sup>

This dominant and immediate desire for a personal, practical realization perhaps explains why Evola developed an affinity for Tantrism, and not for Mahayana Buddhism, which aims at the redemption of all sentient beings. In his book *L'uomo come potenza* [*Man as Power*] Evola shows himself to be midway between philosophical speculation and actual experience through practice.<sup>34</sup> His main interest lay in the *Shakti-Tantras*, the *Tantras* of Power, and in the so-called “Left-Hand Path,” which was specially adapted for the *vira*, the “heroic” man, and “supreme path of the absolute absence of law” devoid of any “fetish of morality.”<sup>35</sup> A few lines later on Evola adds:

The “idea of becoming God” was perceived as blasphemous and Luciferian in the West [...] By contrast, the notion of the deep identity of the Self, or *atma* with *Brahman*, the absolute principle of the universe, and the formula which expresses it – “I am *Brahman*” or “I am Him” ... which in Tantrism becomes “I am Her”, i.e. *Shakti*, or Power) – were all widely perceived in the East as truths marking the path of knowledge and the destruction of “ignorance which one leads man to believe that he is merely human.”<sup>36</sup>

The central topic of *L'uomo come potenza* is power (*shakti*) as the primordial cosmic energy and feminine creative force in the universe. Besides such religious or “esoteric” explanations, Evola’s practical understanding of power is idiosyncratic, and to avoid misunderstandings it must be thoroughly analyzed. For him, power was definitely something that did not merely derive from the earthly plane, but had to have a higher reference point. As a result, in a practical sense it can also be seen as being a “divine” attribute with which one can identify. Power is essentially a natural quality of someone who is truly (spiritually) strong and unshakable. It is by necessity bound to such a person, just as the power of water surges around a strong bridge pylon in a river, without the pylon itself doing anything. True power is simply there and operates on its own. It is the unity of subject and object. This peculiar usage of Evola’s concept of power also holds true for his political work. Not understanding this has led many of his political commentators to completely wrong conclusions.

<sup>33</sup> Julius Evola, *L'uomo come potenza* (Todi-Roma: Atanòr, n.d. [1926]), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Later, in Julius Evola, *Lo yoga della potenza* (Milano: Fratelli Bocca, 1949), he brought out a complete revised edition of this book, devoid of the Western intellectuality that characterized the first edition.

<sup>35</sup> Terms used by Evola in *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 70, when speaking about this book.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

In the revised German version of his first political book, *Heidnischer Imperialismus* [*Pagan Imperialism*],<sup>37</sup> Evola therefore emphasized that

superiority is not based on power, but rather power is based on superiority. To use power is impotence, and he who understands this will perhaps understand in which sense the path to a certain renunciation (a “masculine” renunciation based on “not needing anything” and on “being satisfied”)<sup>38</sup> can be a condition for the path to the highest power, and he can also comprehend the concealed logic, according to which [...] ascetics, saints, and initiates suddenly and naturally develop suggestive and supra-sensual powers which are stronger than any power of human beings and things.<sup>39</sup>

Power is simply the *pure* strength of a spiritual act in which spiritual vision and action meld into one. This spiritual, “magical” power cannot therefore be compared with the “power” of modern technology, which simply makes use of the existing laws of nature. For example, anyone can flick a switch and the light will come on. By contrast, action that emanates from this “magical” type of power necessarily presupposes an inner change of being for the person acting. This change has firstly elevated him to a higher level from where he stands above (material) things and has command over them from the realm of the spiritual. In order to attain such a power, or, still better, in order to *attract* such a power, the spirit and the I must strive toward perfection, toward unification with the “gods.”<sup>40</sup>

Back to *L'uomo come potenza*. After theorizing extensively about power in the Tantric doctrine, Evola's concern shifts immediately to the technique of achieving this power, which is essential to transcend human nature. This is carried out through several steps of purification, divinization of man's natural functions, opening of the *chakras*, awakening of the *kundalini* as human equivalent of the cosmic energy, and the construction of a cosmic body. In the course of this itinerary comes the identification of the “I” with *Shakti*: “Between this power which is everything, and me there is no difference whatsoever. Verily, I am *parashakti* (highest force of the highest being),” Evola writes.<sup>41</sup> To show the universal truth of this statement for the initiate he quotes a whole passage from the *Corpus Hermeticum*:

<sup>37</sup> Julius Evola, *Heidnischer Imperialismus* (Leipzig: Armanen Verlag, 1933). *Imperialismo Pagano*, the earlier Italian version of this book, published in 1928, differs from this expanded German version.

<sup>38</sup> The strong influence of Carlo Michelstaedter is unmistakable here.

<sup>39</sup> Julius Evola, *Heidnischer Imperialismus*, loc. cit., 32f.

<sup>40</sup> Evola takes this idea from Tantrism, insofar as power = *shakti* is something “feminine” which is drawn to the “masculine” “unmoved mover,” similar to how eddies in a river form around the bridge pylons.

<sup>41</sup> Julius Evola, *L'uomo come potenza*, loc. cit., 195.

If then you do not make yourself equal to God you cannot apprehend God; for like is known by like. Leap clear of all that is corporeal and make yourself grow to like expanse with that greatness which is beyond all measures ... For it is the height of evil not to know God.<sup>42</sup>

Towards the end of the text Evola again underlines the special features of Tantrism:

Tantric yoga differs from the other branches of yoga related to the Samkhya and Vedanta schools insofar as it refutes the purely intellectual methods (*dhyana-yoga*) and claims to achieve spirit through the powers of the body not aiming at an ascetic liberation but at a liberation which is simultaneously possession, dominion and enjoyment of the earthly reality.<sup>43</sup>

Before the last chapter, in which Evola compares and contrasts Tantrism and Christianity, he gives an account of the hierarchical steps of Tantric practices until the material body is resolved into the cosmic body,<sup>44</sup> and *kundalini*, the power which through animal generation ties man to a finite and mortal existence, is transformed into the power “which renders man a God.”<sup>45</sup>

With this book, Evola had definitely defined all the necessary theoretical and practical steps to “become God,” which for him became another term for spiritual self-realization to the highest degree, which leads to and allows one to identify with transcendence. Evola’s following works on magic, Alchemy, and Buddhism were based on exactly the same esoteric principles outlined here and formed only the various adaptations required for these other teachings proving to him that all “true” initiatic paths came from one transcendental and primordial source, a central idea he had adopted from René Guénon (1886–1951). The necessary steps towards total liberation and immortality, tantamount to Evola to becoming God, were practically always the same: purification; identification with higher states of consciousness (i.e. with the various gods, and spheres = liberation from the material world); and finally identification with the highest principle, which entails absolute freedom and spiritual immortality, that is, salvation.<sup>46</sup> The only differenc-

<sup>42</sup> Chapter 11, 20b–21b, *Corpus Hermeticum*, vol. 1, trans. Walter Scott (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), 221. Here I use Walter Scott’s translation of *Corpus Hermeticum*. Evola used the French translation, by Louis Ménard, (Paris: Didier, 1866).

<sup>43</sup> Julius Evola, *L’uomo come potenza*, loc. cit., 291.

<sup>44</sup> “[...] the old body of sin is destroyed and in its stead there lives a new divine body,” corresponding to the Gnostic “body of resurrection,” as Evola underlines (*ibid.*, 290f.).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>46</sup> To summarize Iamblichus’ famous work *De Mysteriis*, the purpose of every theurgy is the

es were the symbolism and the language used in the various traditions. It remains intriguing to see how Evola always seemed to be able to find hundreds of pertinent quotations in the primary sources of all those respective fields in order to prove his hypothesis.

### Group of UR — High Magic

Let us start in chronological order with Evola's endeavors in "High magic." In 1927, together with Arturo Reghini, he founded the Group of UR, one of the most challenging magical orders of the twentieth century, which delineated a comprehensive, systematic, and straightforward path to initiation, and was not based on beautiful theories, but on practical experience.<sup>47</sup> It issued monthly booklets written by anonymous members of the group. Upon the English publication of the first volume, comprising all of the booklets of 1927 (the first of the three years of its existence), the renowned esoteric expert Joscelyn Godwin remarked: "This is a powerful and disturbing work, and a classic. One can be quite certain that it will still have readers centuries from now."<sup>48</sup> The radically formulated goal of the group was "the realization of oneself, in itself, and of existence. That or nothing." This goal was understood as a transcendent *experience* — not something dependent upon divine grace, but which had to be achieved on one's own. This demanded a real struggle — a battle against one's own weaknesses — as well as asceticism (in the Greek sense of hard "practice," and not at all to be understood in a Christian-moralistic sense).

The transcendental *experience* and knowledge being striven after presupposed a transcendent, spiritual "change of one's inner being," a prior *opus transformationis*.<sup>49</sup> This required nothing less than a merciless transformation of one's own instinctual nature and entailed the gradual shedding of mundane traits — analogous to the traditional path through the planetary spheres in antiquity and to the *Mithras Liturgy*. According to UR, it was only such a

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purification, liberation, and salvation of the soul.

<sup>47</sup> For details of its history and members see Hans Thomas Hakl, "Julius Evola and the Ur Group," *Aries* 12 (2012): 53-90.

<sup>48</sup> Statement from the back cover of the English edition of Julius Evola and the Ur Group, *Introduction to Magic*, trans. Guido Stucco, ed. Michael Moynihan (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2000). Joscelyn Godwin also contributed considerably to the English translations in this edition.

<sup>49</sup> Or, as Evola put it later: "a change of one's personal condition." He even underlines "change of one's most inner nature is all that counts towards higher knowledge," in Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 89.

fundamental “mutation” that made it possible for the human being to gain access to higher transcendent realizations and experiences until one was finally able, “purely” and with open eyes, to confront the “divine” (the sphere of the “fixed stars”). It was a straight and thoroughly practical path, indeed.

Abstract-philosophical or emotional considerations were no more relevant than were “good” or “evil.” Spiritual attitudes based on a faith or philosophy could only scratch the surface. Instead, the transformation had to come on a much deeper level: “You must transform yourself. You must overcome yourself. You must make yourself whole and lift yourself up to a higher honour.”<sup>50</sup> The demand was not merely for self-awareness, but for self-creation. Only in this way could the personality get rid of the old Ego and ascend toward transcendence. Underlying this was the conviction that such a path had existed since primordial times, even if it may have repeatedly fallen into obscurity and was trodden only by solitary and often unknown “initiates.” Numerous testimonies and references from wisdom literature around the world were cited and believed to corroborate this.

The “ultimate goal” of UR was to elevate man to such a level that he transformed himself into a god. Here one might recall the statements from Meister Eckhart, which were quoted above in connection with Evola’s philosophical studies. Taken together it was an *opus contra naturam*, an operation against one’s own inner human, and dependent, passive nature — a work of liberating the body, soul, and spirit from their “natural” material characteristics. It is a goal that in Christianity might well correspond to the only unpardonable sin: the “sin against the Holy Spirit.” And few people are probably capable of seeing it as anything other than a terrible act of “hubris” against God.<sup>51</sup>

As outlined, the path to this goal began with the liberation of the self from “earthly chains.” In the first place, this concerned one’s own emotions, in particular fear, and especially the fear of death. This was described in ancient hermetic style as the struggle against the “waters” which primordially and powerfully surge against us, tearing the ground from under our feet and carrying us away if we do not develop the characteristics of “centeredness” and “Logos.” It was paramount to be a bridge pylon in the violent stream of life so that the waters could not do any harm.

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<sup>50</sup> This and the following quotations come from the editorial in the first issue of the *UR* journal, of 1927, p. 1 f. entitled “To the Readers.”

<sup>51</sup> Also to be kept in mind here is the “daimon” in the ancient Socratic sense, or the conversation with the “Holy Guardian Angel” in the teachings of Aleister Crowley, both of which concern a communication between the everyday I and the “higher self.” A modern psychologist would probably speak of a direct access of the I to the unconscious. The initiate in the sense of UR has, however, totally integrated his I into the “higher self.”

Another necessary step was the liberation of the self from its usual, limited self-image as a purely human being. Only in this way could one's view be opened to higher realms. The goal of the entire cleansing process – again expressed in the hermetic language preferred by Evola – was to separate the “dense” from the “subtle,” until the “inner sun,” the “gold,” the “divine spark,” or the “incorruptible core” was liberated, and formed the center of an absolute stable consciousness that was capable of becoming God. Identification with ever-higher levels of existence (sometimes symbolized by gods) is the indispensable tool for this. For only then, when one is unified with something, can one truly “know” it – in other words, know it from the inside out. Evola describes this as “active identification.” The highest “object” for active identification was the “divine spark,” the Self that must assume the place of the everyday I.<sup>52</sup> At this stage one had “finally” reached the transcendent, “divine” realm. Immanence and transcendence had then become one. In the following paragraphs, I show just a few examples of how this path of deification was mentioned in the publications of UR. These examples are also chosen in a way that shows some of the sources Evola used for the metaphysical teachings of his magical group, which he naturally interpreted in his sense.

Already in the first *UR* volume one finds maybe the most basic and complete text of “deification” in antiquity: *Apathanatismos* – the “Mithras Liturgy” from the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris.<sup>53</sup> *Apathanatismos* is a technical term for the self-identification with the Deity, the immortalization and experience of salvation. The text is based on the invocation of Helios Mithras, who grants immortality through the identification with him. The following example from the text describes the identification of the initiate with the “highest Logos”:

Hail, Lord, Master of the Waters; hail, Origin of the Earth; hail Sovereign of the Spirit!

Lord, in palingenesis I die in an integrated state, and in integration I have achieved the fulfilment.

Born of animal birth, having been liberated I am transported beyond mortal generation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> E. A. [Julius Evola], “Come poniamo il problema della conoscenza?” in “UR – Rivista di indirizzi per una scienza dell'io” (Gennaio 1927): 22.

<sup>53</sup> *Ur* 1, no. 4 (Aprile 1927): 89-120. All translations from the Greek published in *Ur* were original and done by members of the Ur Group. The material here is chosen from the original booklets of 1927-1929. In order to present a historically accurate picture, later revisions of Evola (which were very frequent) have not been taken into account.

<sup>54</sup> *Ur* 1, no. 4 (Aprile 1927): 101. English text in Julius Evola and the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic*, loc. cit., 108.

It should also be noted that this translation of the *Mithras Liturgy* from the Greek was the first to ever appear in Italian, and although it can be described as academic according to the standards of the time it was issued not in an academic journal but in the esoteric booklet of a magical order. It was also equipped with a very extensive commentary. In the same volume there are extracts from Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis*, one of the highest acclaimed ancient works on theurgy. The passages that Evola chooses speak of the "uniform connection with divinity,"<sup>55</sup> and of rendering "the will of man adapted to the participation of the Gods," even "elevating it to them."<sup>56</sup> This shows clearly that there was no question of "forcing" the gods. Man should rather elevate himself to the gods.

In the second volume of *UR* (the booklets of 1928), there is a translation of verse 71 from Pythagoras's *The Golden Verses*, which says: "Thou shalt be a God, immortal, incorruptible, and Death shall have no more dominion over thee."<sup>57</sup> In this volume, Evola once again takes up his interest in Kirilloff, previously addressed in *Ignis* in 1925. He does so in a whole article, in which he explains his point in more detail,<sup>58</sup> explaining that Kirilloff discovered that there was only one way to reach the unshakable stability within oneself to be able to withstand the absence of God and that was to make oneself God. Knowing how avidly Evola studied Nietzsche, the article reminds one of the latter's words in *The Gay Science*, spoken by the mad man: "Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy [of killing them]?"<sup>59</sup>

For the third volume of *UR*, in which its name was changed to *KRUR*, just a short selection of pertinent quotes is possible. Interestingly, Evola again chooses a classic text — this time from the Renaissance — to find a confirmation for his magical (or was it a theurgical?) path to "becoming God": Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, out of which two passages quoted by Evola are selected here:

We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend

<sup>55</sup> *Ur* 1, no. 11–12 (Novembre, Dicembre 1927): 325.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 326. The English translations of these passages are taken from the English edition of Julius Evola and the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic*, loc. cit., 330, and 331.

<sup>57</sup> "The Golden Verses of Pythagoras," Sacred Texts, accessed September 9, 2018, <http://sacred-texts.com/cla/gvp/gvp03.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> "Kirilloff and Initiation," *Ur* 2, no. 6 (Giugno 1928): 187–92.

<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 3, part 125, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120. Accessed September 9, 2018, [www.holybooks.com/the-gay-science-friedrich-nietzsche/](http://www.holybooks.com/the-gay-science-friedrich-nietzsche/).

to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.” [...]

And if, dissatisfied with the lot of all creatures, he should recollect himself into the center of his own unity, he will there become one spirit with God, in the solitary darkness of the Father, Who is set above all things, himself transcends all creatures.<sup>60</sup>

In another essay in this volume, “Il meccanismo della coscienza” [The Mechanics of Consciousness], Evola quotes the following passage from Agrippa’s *Occult Philosophy* in order to corroborate his point of view:<sup>61</sup>

let us, ascending to the intellectual life, and simple sight, behold the intelligible essence with individual and simple precepts, that we may attain to the highest being of the soul, by which we are one, and under which our multitude is united. Therefore, let us attain to the first unity, from whom there is a union in all things, through that one which is as the flower of our essence: which then at length we attain to, when avoiding all multitude, we do arise into our very unity, are made one, and act uniformly.<sup>62</sup>

The next quotation is taken from a ten-page collection of aphorisms by Plotinus, most probably selected by Evola himself, under the title “Precepts of Pagan Wisdom”: “It is for the Gods to come to me and not for me to go to them” – a phrase that had been repeatedly quoted by Evola in several books and essays.<sup>63</sup> In his commentary to this saying Evola affirms: “One must create within oneself a quality by which the transcendental powers (the gods) are *compelled* to come...” He continues with the next aphorism taken from the *Enneads*: “For one must become similar to the Gods, not to the Good.”<sup>64</sup> Evola explains: “A god is not a ‘moral model’. He is a totally *different* being.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, initiation is a radical transformation from one level of being to another.

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<sup>60</sup> KRUR 1, 3 (Marzo 1927): 89. An English translation may be found here: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, The University of Adelaide, accessed September 9, 2018, [https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/pico\\_della\\_mirandola/giovanni/dignity/](https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/pico_della_mirandola/giovanni/dignity/).

<sup>61</sup> Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, vol. 3, 55, in Apro, “Il meccanismo della coscienza,” KRUR 1, no. 3 (Marzo 1929): 98. Apro is probably the pseudonym of the famous Italian psychoanalyst Emilio Servadio, who also was a member of UR, but was not active in magical rituals.

<sup>62</sup> Translation accessed at: Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, Book 3 (part 4), Esoteric Archives, accessed September 9, 2018, <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp3d.htm>.

<sup>63</sup> Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus*, 10, in ‘Plotino “Massime di sagesza pagana”,’ KRUR 5 (Maggio 1929): 129.

<sup>64</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, II, 7. Translation from the Italian version by Ur.

<sup>65</sup> KRUR 5 (Maggio 1929): 130.

## The Hermetic Tradition

Alchemy, or as Evola terms it in his book dedicated to the subject, *The Hermetic Tradition*,<sup>66</sup> is another tradition of that ancient (and, according to Evola, worldwide) art of transforming man into God, which Evola wants to teach. In his spiritual autobiography Evola writes:

The various alchemical operations are essentially concerned with the initiatory transformation of the human being. Alchemical “gold” is a metaphor for the immortal and invulnerable being, here conceived in terms of the [...] theory of conditioned immortality, which is to say: not as a given, but rather as something which is to be obtained by means of a secret procedure.<sup>67</sup>

The basic ideas of this book had previously been set out over several issues of the *UR* and *KRUR* booklets: the book simply forms them into a coherent whole. Nevertheless, it is a comprehensive and detailed text that contains hundreds of quotations taken from classical alchemical and hermetic works, with which Evola seeks to support his path to the “Stone of the Philosophers,” which symbolizes immortality, liberation, and *becoming God*.<sup>68</sup> This book is perhaps his best-documented work to illustrate his path of “deification.”

Again, a number of passages from *The Hermetic Tradition* indicate Evola’s sources:

Between the eternal birth, the process of restoration after the fall, and the process of the wise with their philosophers’ stone, there is no point of difference, because it is all resurrected in the eternal birth and all must have a restoration in the same fashion.<sup>69</sup>

For Jacob Böhme (1575–1624), birth in the eternal as well as reinstatement in the primordial condition of divinity after the great “fall,” and the process of the stone of the wise, are one and the same procedure of spiritual perfection. This is exactly what Evola means when he links the alchemical process with the Hermetic Tradition, and also with “high” magic (in his special sense as given in *UR/KRUR*). The goal is always to transform the un-liberated, earthly

<sup>66</sup> Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica* (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1931). For the English translation of the third edition published in 1971 (revised by Evola), see: Julius Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, trans. E. E. Rehmus (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1995).

<sup>67</sup> Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, 119.

<sup>68</sup> For an overview and explanatory notes on its symbology see Hans Thomas Hakl, “The Symbology of Hermeticism in the Work of Julius Evola,” in *Lux in Tenebris*, ed. by Peter Forshaw (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 334–63.

<sup>69</sup> Jacob Böhme, *De Signatura Rerum* (Amsterdam: Gichtel, 1682), chapter 7, §78, §70, quoted by Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit., 7.

human into a god (*deificatio*) — not merely similar to a god — and to make him immortal. For this reason, Evola represents Alchemy not as a specialty field, “which preoccupies itself with the metals and their correspondences in man, but as a complete, all-encompassing, physical and metaphysical system.”<sup>70</sup>

Thus, the work of Alchemy for Evola is above all an inner transformation of the state of consciousness of the alchemist, which first lifts him to a “higher” plane, from which position he “stands over” and rules things. This is possible because of the “double nature” of man. He quotes from the *Corpus Hermeticum*:

Man loses no worthiness for possessing a mortal part, but very much on the contrary, mortality augments his possibility and his power. His double functions are possible for him precisely because of his double nature: because he is so constituted that it is possible for him to embrace both the divine and the terrestrial at the same time.<sup>71</sup>

Further on one finds another quotation, also from the *Corpus Hermeticum* (out of nearly thirty in the whole book):

So let us not be afraid to tell the truth. The true man is above them [the celestial gods], or at least equal to them. For no god leaves his sphere to come to earth, whereas man ascends to heaven and measures it. Let us dare to say that a man is a mortal god and a celestial god is an immortal man.<sup>72</sup>

Two quotations from classical alchemical works further confirm Evola’s outlook:

The soul calls out to the illuminated body: Wake up from Hades! Resurrect from the tomb! Come out alive from the darkness! Indeed, you have recovered the spiritual and divine state.<sup>73</sup>

Further on we find:

When man shall have been glorified, his body will become like the angelic body in this respect. If we carefully cultivate the life of our souls, we shall be sons and heirs of God, and shall be able to do that which now seems impossible.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> H. T. Hansen (a.k.a. Hans Thomas Hakl), “Foreword,” *The Hermetic Tradition*, op. cit., vii.

<sup>71</sup> Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit., 200.

<sup>72</sup> Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit., 24. Both English translations are from Julius Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, op. cit., 11.

<sup>73</sup> Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit. 202. An English translation of this text may be found at: “Greek Alchemy,” KIA Magic, accessed September 10, 2018, [http://kiamagic.com/wiki/index.php/Greek\\_Alchemy](http://kiamagic.com/wiki/index.php/Greek_Alchemy).

<sup>74</sup> Basilus Valentinus, *The Twelve Keys*, Key 7, accessed September 10, 2018 <http://www.crys->

One of the main inspirations for Evola's understanding of Alchemy was Cesare della Riviera (the exact dates of his birth and death are unknown, although presumably he lived between 1560 and 1630). Evola republished his work *Il mondo magico de gli heroi* as a modernized version with a foreword.<sup>75</sup> According to this text, the hermetic "fire" had to be transformed from the downward-directed, earthly fire of sexuality into the upward-directed, "divine" fire. In this way the elements of earth were transformed so that they could form the "transcendent" human, or as Cesare della Riviera expressed it, in order "to shift the heroes to heaven by divine wisdom and to make them lords of the magical universe."<sup>76</sup>

### Buddhism and, Again, Tantrism

The next tradition that Evola tackled in order to evaluate the possibility of gaining absolute liberation and salvation was Buddhism. In 1949, when presenting the new and completely revised edition of his Tantric book *L'uomo come potenza* [*Man as Power*], mentioned earlier in this article, he said the following about his Buddhist work, which had been published six years earlier:

In our book, *La dottrina del risveglio* [*The Doctrine of Awakening*],<sup>77</sup> we have based on the teachings of the original Buddhism expounded the methods peculiar to a path purely and olympically ascetic, where the detachment in the highest virile and aristocratic sense, devoid of any devout effusion and devoid of any mythologizing but full of a precise, scientific conscience is shown as the main instrument for the reintegration of the individual into the spiritual and transcendent reality.

Whereas in Tantrism:

we are dealing with a liberation not to be realized only through detachment and the enucleation of a "sidereal" element, but by affirming and assimilating forces of the becoming, of life and the body itself, that is to say through an element which one could call "telluric," and by bringing it finally to a potency and a transfiguration in order to reach the same goal as in the other path.<sup>78</sup>

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[talinks.com/basilvalentine.html](http://talinks.com/basilvalentine.html), quoted in Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit., 201.

<sup>75</sup> Cesare della Riviera, *Il Mondo Magico degli Heroi* (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1932). The original edition was Padua, per Francesco Osanna, 1603.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Julius Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio* (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1943).

<sup>78</sup> Julius Evola, *Lo Yoga della Potenza — Saggio sui Tantra* (Milano: Fratelli Bocca, 1949), 15.

By writing *The Doctrine of Awakening*, it was Evola's intention to repay a debt to the figure of Buddha, one of whose sayings had prevented him from committing suicide immediately after his return from the First World War. In *The Path of Cinnabar* Evola even affirms: "At a later date, I came to employ Buddhist texts daily as a means to develop a detached awareness of 'being'."<sup>79</sup> He goes on to explain that the "essential nature of Buddhist doctrine was metaphysical and initiatory." And that

Buddhism was rather born of a will to attain the unconditioned, a will that was radically affirmed by seeking to attain what transcends life and death. It was not so much "pain" that Buddhism seeks to overcome, as the agitation and contingency implied by all conditioned existence, which has its origin, root and foundation in greed: a thirst which, by its very nature, cannot be extinguished by leading an ordinary life.<sup>80</sup>

Evola's perspective on the goal of Buddhism is very clear. He concentrates on Buddhism in its original form (i.e., on so-called Pali-Buddhism; Theravada or Hinayana-Buddhism) and rarely talks about the more widely spread Mahayana-Buddhism. Buddha's mercy for all beings is not his topic, but he explains:

An aspiration towards the unconditioned leads the Buddhist ascetic beyond Being and beyond the god of Being; beyond the very bliss of celestial heavens, which the ascetic views as a binding force – for the hierarchies of the traditional, popular deities are seen as parts of the finite, contingent world to be transcended. In Buddhist texts it is frequently written that: "He (i.e. the ascetic) has transcended this world and the world beyond, the human bond, and the divine bond: for both bonds he has broken". The ultimate goal of Buddhism, therefore, the Great Liberation, perfectly coincides with that of the purest metaphysical tradition, and coincides with the supersubstantial apex, both anterior and superior to being and non-being, and to any personal "creator" god.<sup>81</sup>

Evola also wants to underline a minor goal in his book:

How at least part of these disciplines for self-realization can be pursued while leading an ordinary life, as a way of strengthening one's inner character, of achieving detachment, and of establishing something invulnerable and indestructible within oneself.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Julius Evola, *Il cammino del cinabro*, loc. cit., 153. English translation from Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 157.

<sup>80</sup> Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 158; Italian original, loc. cit., 153.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 159; Italian original, loc. cit., 154-55.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 160; Italian original, loc. cit., 155.

When describing those who have achieved the highest aim of Buddhism, the words of the *Doctrine of the Awakening* are explicit:

Having destroyed the roots of the mania of the “I”, for them the net of illusion has been burned. Their heart is transparent with light, they are divine beings [...] “Supreme are those who are awakened!” Invincible and intact beings, they appear as “sublime supermen”.

And describing the Awakened:

He has touched the depths of the element free from death. He has abandoned the human bond and he has overcome the divine bond and he is freed from all bonds. The path of him who can be conquered by none in the world and whose dominion is the infinite, is not known to the gods, nor to the angels, nor to men.<sup>83</sup>

For Evola, Buddhism, as opposed to a “religion,” is much more a detailed and long-time proven system to achieve initiation into higher realms of being through asceticism and spiritual exercises. When discussing asceticism however, Evola warns immediately that he does not mean anything like “mortification of the flesh and painful renunciation of the world,”<sup>84</sup> practiced in the hope of reconciliation with an omnipotent Creator who grants “salvation.”

Buddhist ascetic rules or spiritual disciplines thus represent for him a clear-cut and straightforward system, quite similar to a training program according to our modern mentality. As Evola points out:

Buddhist techniques might be described as scientific, for they take account of each step in the path to self-realization, and of the organic links existing between each phase of the ascetic process.<sup>85</sup>

Buddhism needs no faith, and no priests, but rather knowledge and perseverance. For Evola, this gives it a genuinely universal character, which means that it should not be regarded as a specific Eastern religion. He maintains that in theory Buddhist precepts can thus be grafted onto any religion. And that was perhaps the main reason why he was so attracted by these teachings and wrote *The Doctrine of Awakening*. Evola, whose principal aim in all his studies was to find a path to transcendence for the man of today, saw in Buddhism by far the best possible system to attain the

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<sup>83</sup> The last two quotations are from Julius Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening*, trans. H. E. Musson (London: Luzac & Company, 1951), 262–63; Italian original: Julius Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio*, loc. cit., 287–88.

<sup>84</sup> *Op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, 160; Italian original, loc. cit., 155.

aspired spiritual enlightenment and liberation from the — for him — “decadent” world of today, characterized by materialism and egoism. He also underlined the fact that Buddhism possessed “texts and teachings available to all and that it is not an esoteric school with its knowledge reserved for a restricted number of initiates.”<sup>86</sup>

*The Doctrine of Awakening* is therefore written with the specific aim to provide an eminently practical, exact, and detailed guide through the necessary exercises, meditations, and spiritual stages up to the ultimate goal of nirvāna (Pali: *nibbāna* = cessation of restlessness), as given in Buddhist texts. Evola describes this path in a succinct way in his major work *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* [*Revolt Against the Modern World*] when defining his concept of asceticism, which means stripping the nucleus of consciousness from all mundane conditionings:

Once all the dross and obstructions are removed (*opus remotiois*), participation in the overworld takes place in the form of a vision or enlightenment [...] this point also represents at the same time the beginning of a truly continuous, progressive ascent that realizes states of being truly superior to the human condition. The essential elements [...] are the universal as knowledge and knowledge as liberation. [...] to turn the knowledge of the ultimate non-identity of the Self with anything “else” into a fire that progressively devours any irrational self-identification with anything that is conditioned. [...] The final outcome [...] is *bodhi*, which is knowledge in the eminent sense of superrational enlightenment or liberating knowledge, as in “waking up” from sleep, slumber, or a hallucination. [...] Buddha’s doctrine is permeated by a sense of superiority, clarity, and an indomitable spirit, and Buddha himself is called “the fully Self-Awakened One”, “the Lord.”<sup>87</sup>

It may have been this particularly clear and straightforward exposition that prompted Joscelyn Godwin to call *The Doctrine of Awakening* “one of [Evola’s] best books, by any standard.”<sup>88</sup> Evola’s practical, or even “technical,” approach is also shown by the fact that from the very beginning of the text he underlines the necessity to destroy the “demon of dialectics.” Instead of constructing theories, dealing with speculations, and expressing mere opinions, one should rather concentrate one’s efforts on direct experience. Evola quotes the *Majjhima-nikāya* (140): “He who has overcome all opinion, o disciples, is called a saint, one who knows.”<sup>89</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening*, *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> Julius Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1934), 152–57. English text: Julius Evola, *Revolt against the Modern World*, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1995), 111–15.

<sup>88</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, “Julius Evola: A Philosopher for the Age of the Titans,” *TYR* 1 (2002): 135.

<sup>89</sup> Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening*, *op. cit.*, 38.

Tantrism and its relation to deification has already been a large topic in this essay when discussing Evola's *Man as Power*. In 1949, a nominal "second edition" of this work was published, but it was essentially a new book with the text almost completely rewritten, new material added (on Tantric Buddhism), and its focus heavily shifted. The title was also changed to *Lo Yoga della potenza* [*The Yoga of Power*], although Evola later said that the old title was better suited because Yoga was only one part of the text's subject. Evola's former attempt to combine his Magical Idealism with an Eastern practical path to liberation was now completely dismissed. Evola himself writes in his spiritual autobiography of "a shift of emphasis away from the notion of power."<sup>90</sup> According to him, using the term *maha-shakti* to indicate the Supreme Principle is somewhat misleading, because this highest principle should be "best described as that which — like Plotinus' One — embraces all possibilities." He continues:

Just as *Shakti* is dynamic, productive, and changing, so *Shiva* is immobile, luminous, and detached. Just as in Hindu cosmology, the union of *Shiva* and *Shakti* engenders the universe so the mystery of the inner transformation of the human being and the highest principle of freedom are described as the union, within man, of the two principles — rather than as a self-abandonment to the pure unrestrained power of *Shakti*.<sup>91</sup>

This is a major shift indeed from female power to androgyny as key to the "mystery of the inner transformation of the human being." By doing this Evola also wanted "to banish all forms of 'titanic,' pandemic and chaotically ecstatic deviation," where man remains basically at the same existential level. Therefore, he pointed out that the Tantric system is based on a crucial premise: the presence of a "transformative" and mystical element, and of a kind of *metanoia* (or change of polarity).<sup>92</sup>

Evola saw another danger in his first Tantric work, actually already extant in his philosophical work, in

the erroneous idea of a continuous development in time (a kind of "progression" [...] of a development of almost possessing eschatological overtones).<sup>93</sup>

On the contrary, Evola sought

to emphasize the idea of a sudden jump to a different existential level, a return to the doctrine of multiple levels of being, and a change of polarity.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 73; Italian original, loc. cit., 75.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 73; Italian original loc. cit., 76.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 75; Italian original loc. cit., 78.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 75; Italian original loc. cit., 78.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 75; Italian original loc. cit., 78.

Evola confessed openly in his autobiography that it had taken him some time even after having finished his work on Tantrism to understand this fundamental difference, and that he only gradually came to define these central points with due clarity.

In conclusion to this section I want to quote one passage in the new edition of 1949 that is relevant to our topic: “Moreover it is a Tantric notion that one cannot adore a god without ‘becoming’ that God.”<sup>95</sup> In the third revised edition, the last completed by Evola personally, he inserts another quotation from the *Tantratattva* 1:27:

Reasoning, argument, and inference may be the work of other schools (*shastras*), but the work of the Tantra is to accomplish superhuman and divine events through the force of their own words (*mantras*).<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

There is one fundamental assumption in Evola’s esoteric work: that genuine traditions conceal and can even convey a “higher” form of supra-rational knowledge. That such a superior knowledge above poetic or artistic metaphors or symbols could “really” exist has generally been fiercely disputed by academic science, if one disregards certain academics of a “traditional” bent. But things are changing. I quote a few sentences from an article by Wouter Hanegraaff from 2008. Hanegraaff is long-standing professor for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam and known for his empirical and historical methodology. In his article he argues that

the authors of the hermetic corpus assumed a sequential hierarchy of “levels of knowledge”, in which the highest and most profound knowledge (gnosis) is attained only during ecstatic or “altered” states of consciousness that transcend rationality. While the hermetic teachings have often been described as unsystematic, inconsistent, incoherent or confused, in fact they are grounded in a precise and carefully formulated doctrine of how the hermetic initiate may move from the domain of mere rational discourse to the attainment of several “trans-rational” stages of direct experiential knowledge, and thereby from the limited and temporal domain of material reality to the unlimited and eternal of Mind.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Evola, *Lo yoga della potenza* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1972), op. cit., 22. English translation in Julius Evola, *The Yoga of Power*, op. cit., 12.

<sup>96</sup> Evola, *Lo yoga della potenza*, 11. English translation in Evola, *The Yoga of Power*, op. cit. 2.

<sup>97</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Altered States of Knowledge: The Attainment of Gnosis in the Hermetica,” *The International Journal of Platonic Tradition* 2 (2008): 128-63.

Hanegraaff defends the position of the quoted unknown authors and concludes:

My final argument in favour of a Hermetic “hierarchy of knowledge” – reflected in a sequence of texts that describe a progress through successive levels of initiation – is, quite simply, that it does better justice to the sources than the alternatives, and that it allows for an amount of inter-textual consistency and internal logic which does not implicitly offend the intelligence of its presumed authors, editors, compilers and readers.<sup>98</sup>

Naturally, such a form of knowledge goes far beyond Kant’s views on the limits of the human cognitive faculties and the strict concatenation of our thinking and understanding to a specific historical period. It is, as Hanegraaff would say, “essentialist.”

Another important intellectual position in all of Evola’s religious and esoteric writings is his belief in the basic unity of all genuine metaphysical and spiritual traditions, an idea he inherited from René Guénon. This leads him to explain one tradition by another, elucidating a difficult text of one tradition with analogous but clearer passages from totally different ones.

In his *Doctrine of Awakening*, for instance, he draws parallels to Tantrism,<sup>99</sup> Taoism, and Alchemy and quotes from Gustav Meyrink’s novel *Golem* just as from the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius if he wants to make a point. And, in many cases, his surprising intuition and broad knowledge of different traditions leads to new and valid interpretations of formerly obscure texts, as even religious scholars have had to admit.<sup>100</sup> But this does not and cannot mean that Evola should be regarded as a genuine academic scholar, because his methodology greatly differs from current university standards. Nevertheless, in several cases he has certainly contributed to academic knowledge. For instance, he was the first researcher to bring Tantrism, as well as a new approach to Alchemy, to the Italian public, and he was one of the first Italian writers to write on Zen Buddhism.<sup>101</sup> His pioneering role in these fields has been acknowledged by intellectuals such as Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961).

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* 136.

<sup>99</sup> In Tantrism Evola saw a “wet” path to liberation, as opposed to Buddhism, which he defined as a “dry” path because of its intellectual detachment.

<sup>100</sup> See, for instance, Silvio Vita, “Il ‘Tao-tê-ching’ di Julius Evola: dalla filosofia alla tradizione,” in Julius Evola, *Tao Tê Ching di Lao-tze* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1997), 23.

<sup>101</sup> Just prior to his death, Evola also translated the first volume of Deisetz Teitaro Suzuki’s *Essays on Zen Buddhism*. Deisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen*, trans. Julius Evola (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1975).

His ideas and his writings never pretended to be neutral in the academic sense, but were always “biased” by his specific worldview, or even ideology. He was not interested in being a pure scholar, providing some kind of new information. Evola wanted to *change* the world. Evola’s aim in writing was always a “pedagogic” or rather “anagogic” (leading upwards) one. What he wanted was to “educate” the readers in order to lead them towards transcendence or to “become gods” in his specific sense. This holds true not only for his religious or esoteric research but for all his work, be it in philosophy, art, or even politics and racial theories. His opponents may call this a flight into irrationalism, but this is vehemently contradicted by Thomas Sheehan, a scholar of religious studies and philosopher at Stanford University, who writes:

Evola’s assertion of supra-rational over the rational is emphatically not a flight to a supra-sensible Beyond but always remains inner-worldly. As he [Evola] puts it, from within life itself one attains a superiority over life. Evola’s supra-rational *nous* does not remove man from the world.<sup>102</sup>

A third fundamental and consistent factor in all of Evola’s metaphysical and practical approach to religions and esotericism is his concept of initiation, which was for him a hallmark of all genuine traditional spirituality. He defines initiation as a factual transition to a higher world, which in its turn presupposes the possibility for man to live in various existential modes (both higher and lower). Evola teaches, as we have seen, the ascending path with its goal of the “Great Liberation” and the extraordinary possibility of immortality.<sup>103</sup> In order to achieve his task, Evola developed a concept of self-initiation that stood in sharp contrast to René Guénon’s idea that only traditional orders with a chain of initiates could confer a valid and real initiation. As Evola, however, deemed it nearly impossible for Westerners to enter into contact with such orders, his teachings tried to supply the basic principles that would enable an individual to conquer the transcendent realms with his own forces: a path naturally open only to a very limited number of gifted and dedicated individuals.

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<sup>102</sup> Thomas Sheehan, “Diventare Dio: Julius Evola and the Metaphysics of Fascism,” *loc. cit.*, 285.

<sup>103</sup> Julius Evola, *L’arco e la clava* (Milano: Scheiwiller, 1968), 99. English translation: Julius Evola, *The Bow and the Club*, trans. by Sergio Knipe (London: Arktos, 2018), 130.

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