

Correspondences

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Editors

Justine Bakker

Aren Roukema

Jimmy Elwing

Journal for the Study of Esotericism

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Layout by Studio Sinjin Li, <https://sinjinli.com>

Editorial contacts

Editors-in-chief

Aren Roukema: aren.roukema@correspondencesjournal.com

Justine Bakker: justine.bakker@correspondencesjournal.com

Jimmy Elwing: jimmy.elwing@correspondencesjournal.com

Associate Editors

Keith Cantú: keith.cantu@correspondencesjournal.com

Tommy Cowan: tommy.cowan@correspondencesjournal.com

Book Review Editors

Naamleela Free Jones: naamleela.free.jones@correspondencesjournal.com

Mriganka Mukhopadhyay: mriganka.mukhopadhyay@correspondencesjournal.com

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A Practical Turn

Tommy P. Cowan

tommy.cowan@correspondencesjournal.com

In Justine Bakker and Aren Roukema’s reflection on the tenth anniversary of the journal in Volume 10, no. 2 (2022),¹ they speculate on the trajectory of the practitioner-scholar (or experiencer-researcher) divide, and mark that it seems to be softening,² pointing out Jeff Kripal’s groundbreaking deconstructions of the barrier in books like *The Flip* (2019). As such, the desire to reduce barriers between experiencer and researcher is a possible mitigation of the quasi-colonialist “social reductionism” sometimes attendant to critical distance and/or methodological agnosticism. Judging from projects in the field following Volume 10’s publication, Bakker and Roukema’s observation looks accurate. At the recent ninth conference for the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism hosted in Malmö (June 2023), the theme was “Western Esotericism and Practice,” and included a talk by Cavan McLaughlin, subtitled, “Practice-Based Research Methodologies.” The talk openly challenged the feasibility and usefulness of the insider/outsider dichotomy. McLaughlin is the main organizer of the UK-based Trans-States conference,³ a highly multidisciplinary event that actively blurs the scholar-practitioner boundary, particularly in its emphasis on esotericism as performance. Events like these provide a venue for art, music, and history to mingle, accentuating the overlap between scholarship and practice;

1. Bakker and Roukema, “10 Years of Correspondences; or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Esotericism Studies.”

2. Ibid., 247.

3. See <https://trans-states.org/about/>.

other examples might include the Magickal Women Conference,⁴ the various gatherings at Treadwell's Books in London,⁵ the Occulture Conference,⁶ or La Societa dello Zolfo that offers classes and conferences on the history of magic as well as on practical magic.⁷ These interepistemological events are a clearly potent forum for disciplinary growth. All the above does not necessarily constitute a broader "turn to practice," but it certainly indicates a swell of attention to the framework of practices as a mode for challenging the insider/outsider categories.

The swell towards practice doesn't always have to challenge the scholar-practitioner boundary directly. The ESSWE 9 conference's emphasis on esotericism as a "practice" is surely in part a nod to the newly founded Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices (RENSEP), which contributed to the event. RENSEP's "Research Agenda" from their website emphatically adopts a scholarly distance, claiming that although their "praxeological approach" is focused on studies of ritual and art through direct experiment, in opposition to social reductionism, they also cannot "endorse" practitioner perspectives, and don't seem keen on consciously crossing the scholar-practitioner divide.⁸ Director of the Scientific Committee for RENSEP, Bernd-Christian Otto, co-edited a 2021 volume on esoteric literature with the title *Fictional Practice*, on which a thoughtful review by Khanim Garayeva appears in the present issue of *Correspondences*. The introduction to *Fictional Practice* advocates for a "practical turn" in esotericism studies,⁹ and stipulates "performance" as critical to the framing of esoteric practices.¹⁰

Near the end of their "Agenda," RENSEP states that "art has the potential to promote interest in esoteric practices." The language here implies that that's a good thing, which has the hint of evaluation. This is a delicate balance to strike

4. See <https://www.magickalwomenconference.com/>.

5. See <https://www.treadwells-london.com/events>.

6. See <https://occultureconference.com/#history>.

7. See <https://lasocietadelozolfo.com/>.

8. See <https://www.rensep.org/research/research-agenda/>.

9. Otto and Johannsen, "Introduction," 4.

10. *Ibid.*, 1.

between non-endorsement and non-reductionism, which is perhaps the exact balance that the field should be going for. Yet, in the inevitable failure to be perfect, on which side of the fence should one err? Reduction or endorsement?

The praxis of esotericism studies in relation to scholarly distance seems to be in a state of transition. On the one hand, there remains the strong recognition of the need for agnosticism, as noted by Manon Hedenborg White in relation to the COVID pandemic.¹¹ Scholars need disassociation in order to talk about things like anti-vaccine movements, conspirology, sexism, and racism and all of the social problems that culturally intersect with esoteric practices. The current desires to complicate the insider/outsider distance do not call for the total rejection of methodological agnosticism. But at the same time, especially when we're considering that there's theoretical interest in marginality from a multitude of angles, a praxis of advocacy could be beneficial in some cases.

If we take literary esotericism as an example, the process of establishing an esoteric canon of great English literature will reach a point when one would have to think about the esoteric as its own literary aesthetic. From the perspective of criticism, the canonization of texts with esoteric properties implies an assessment and preservation of beauty just the same as an art exhibition on Hilma af Klint. This theorization of esotericism's beauty is methodologically troubling. Esoteric practices can often be a way of achieving beauty. If doing a study on a group ritual, it's possible that the test subjects will experience beauty in the performance process. At what level do we separate the facilitation of experiences of beauty from endorsements of contingent worldviews? At what level is endorsement implied due to esotericism studies' transmission of beauty? And what of esoteric openings to "the sublime," a close connection to the beauty question? How do scholars (whether etic or emic) dilate and/or constrict these various openings? We ought not assume that methodologically agnostic studies of the esoteric can only ever disenchant.

11. Hedenborg White, "Transformations and Troubled Times," 1.

Furthermore, it's not necessarily a bad thing that esotericism can be beautiful. Perhaps grasping through direct practices would help scholars illuminate esoteric aesthetics. Perhaps endorsing esoteric practices could be a resistance to the marginalization of certain epistemologies. When to apply scholarly distance and when to invoke firsthand experience may be forever difficult to clearly ascertain, but it's a type of methodological flexibility that many are interested in at the moment.

The present issue of *Correspondences* has articles by Israel Koren, Per Faxneld, and Giuliano D'Amico, a review article by Justine Bakker, and book reviews by Antoinette M. von dem Hagen and Khanim Garayeva. Koren's article, "Rudolf Steiner's Thought as 'Philosophic Mysticism' and the Question of the Continuity between His Early and Later Writings" takes a deep look at Steiner's philosophies and his identity as a philosopher. Faxneld's "Exchanging Apples: Leonora Carrington and the Pro-Mythical Turn in Post-War Feminism" offers cogent insights into the entanglements of esotericism, visual art, and social movements. D'Amico's "The Fantasy of Peer Gynt: Ibsen and Theosophy in Early Twentieth-Century Scotland" examines an esoteric interpretation of Norway's most canonical playwright. Bakker's "White Esotericisms? - New Directions in the Study of Race and Esotericism," discusses the feasibility of "white esotericism" as an analytical category and the value of articulating race theory with religious studies. Garayeva reviews *Fictional Practice* (2021), edited by Bernd-Christian Otto and Dirk Johannsen, and von dem Hagen reviews *What Is It Like To Be Dead?: Near-Death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult* (2018) by Jens Schlieter.

In both Faxneld's and D'Amico's pieces for this issue, an artist (Carrington, Ibsen) creates something that opens a window into the esoteric, but these artists do so in radically different ways from one another. While Carrington's personal engagements with occultism are known, Ibsen was not directly influenced by esoteric currents. And yet, esoteric readings of Ibsen, particularly in the context of both adaptation and reception studies, can illuminate the spiritual value of his works, and can expose how aesthetic practices and spirituality inform each

other dialectically. Thus, D'Amico demonstrates that seeing the possibilities of an esotericism performed via literature can strengthen critical and literary insights without sacrificing scholarly distance. The thread of performance as woven through Faxneld and D'Amico here resonates with the swell to practice we see elsewhere, and this connection is an opportunity to reflect on questions regarding the relationship of performance to beauty, performance to secrecy, or performance to marginality.

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The Fantasy of Peer Gynt: Ibsen and Theosophy in Early Twentieth-Century Scotland

Giuliano D'Amico

giuliano.damico@ibsen.uio.no

Abstract

The article studies *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt*, an abridged version of Henrik Ibsen's 1867 play *Peer Gynt* that was also its first British staging (Edinburgh, 14 February 1908). Focusing on the work of its stage manager, the Theosophist Isabelle M. Pagan, the article discusses how this adaptation was entangled with Theosophical discourse of the period and how Theosophy can illuminate an assessment of the production. In addition, the article touches on the place of *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt* in "occult" theatre history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and its performative nature at the crossroad between performance and ritual. Finally, it also argues that Pagan's adaptation can shed new light on its hypotext, *Peer Gynt*, and offer a way out of an impasse that characterizes the scholarly tradition on the play. In doing so, the article studies Pagan's production, introduction, and translation of the play, as well as their contexts, as an example of reception, as a theatrical form at the crossroads between theatre and ritual, and as a "fluid" adaptation text.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen; Theosophy; Reception Studies; Performance; Ritual; Adaptation

Introduction

Has *Peer Gynt* a Key? And how far is it legitimate to insist on the mystic interpretation of a work of art for which the author has emphatically disclaimed any hidden or esoteric meaning whatever? The question is most fitly answered by another: How far is it possible for a poet, writing in the full flow of what is loosely termed inspiration, to gauge, fully and accurately, the value—on all the planes—of what he has written?¹

With these words Isabelle M. Pagan opened a pamphlet that was distributed to the actors and the musicians that participated in the first British performance of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which took place in Edinburgh on 14 February 1908.² Pagan was a Theosophist, astrologer and stage manager who had provided the script for this performance and supervised its rehearsals. From a scholarly point of view, this disclaimer is fascinating for at least two reasons. First, there is the implication of Pagan's words—*Peer Gynt* can be read through Theosophy. In her production, as well as in the introduction to her script, published in book form a year later, she elaborates on how this is the case. Second, Pagan's project does not attempt to appropriate Ibsen and distort his oeuvre into an esoteric discourse—as often happens with “esoteric” readings of literary, artistic or dramatic works³—but rather tries to see how Theosophy can illuminate an interpretation of the literary, philosophical and spiritual value of the play.

In this sense, Pagan's *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt* (as her abridged version was titled, henceforth *The Fantasy*) not only represents a peculiar episode in Ibsen's reception in Great Britain, but also opens the door to more encompassing research questions. How can Theosophical thought help us read *The Fantasy*? What place does this production have in the “occult” theatre history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? And can *The Fantasy* shed new light on its hypotext, Ibsen's 1867 play *Peer Gynt*? This article approaches these questions by studying Pagan's production, introduction and translation. It places the dramatic text and

1. Pagan, “Has *Peer Gynt* A Key?”

2. J.H.E., “*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh,” 667.

3. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*; Eco et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*.

its realization on stage within the broader context of the early Ibsen reception in Great Britain, and more specifically within the Theosophical Society. In order to do so, this article draws upon a threefold methodological framework.

First, it studies *The Fantasy* from the perspective of theatre historiography and reception studies, focusing on what Thomas Postlewait has named “possible worlds” that gravitate around performance.⁴ Also, it looks at this episode of the British reception in the context of what Ika Willis has called “active audiences,” and of the interpretive “impertinence” they show towards established literary or dramatic texts. In the first part of this article, I will concentrate on the historical context of Pagan’s endeavour and put the shifts found in her script in dialogue with the spiritual thought of the Theosophical Society.⁵

Second, the article will look at *The Fantasy* in the context of the flourishing of occult-inspired theatre at the turn of the century, which Edmund B. Lingan has termed a “theatre of the occult revival.”⁶ I will do so by drawing upon the tradition of theatre studies at the crossroads of performance and ritual. Erika Fischer-Lichte’s idea of theatre as “sacrifice” that provokes “change” in the audience is strictly interrelated with developments in the academic study of the theatricality of ritual and ceremonial magic and of the epistemologies they offer.⁷ In this section of the article, I will focus on the translation, and especially on its paratexts (introduction, stage directions, as well as reviews of the performance) as sources for reconstructing the dramatic and ritual components of Pagan’s 1908 production.

Third, I will look at Pagan’s script and performance as an example of adaptation and discuss whether the esoteric interpretive key that lies at its foundation yields some relevance for a reading of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*. In doing so, I will review Umberto Eco’s concept of “hermetic semiosis” and discuss whether it fits into Pagan’s interpretation

4. Postlewait, *Theatre Historiography*, 15–18.

5. Willis, *Reception*, 92–93.

6. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*.

7. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 4–5. See also Hammer, *Between Play and Prayer*; Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*.

of Ibsen's play.⁸ I will also draw upon recent scholarship in adaptation studies that has insisted on the “fluidity” of the adapted text and on the “two-way communication” of meaning between the adaptation and its source.⁹ Therefore, in this final section of the article, I will discuss how Pagan's interpretation of *Peer Gynt* can challenge some classical, philosophically oriented avenues of research into Ibsen's play.

The Fantasy of Peer Gynt Between Theatre Historiography and Reception Studies

Direct sources about this production and its context are few, but significant. When Pagan published her script in book form a year after the premiere, she added lengthy practical explanations and suggestions for cuts, clearly aimed at possible future stagings. Therefore, it can be claimed to represent, with reasonable approximation, the script that was at the base of the 1908 production in Edinburgh.¹⁰ It also includes an introduction by Pagan that elaborates on the pamphlet mentioned earlier, and provides insight into her interpretation of the play. In addition, the archive of the Theosophical Society in Edinburgh keeps the records of the so-called Orpheus Lodge, which was the milieu in which Pagan's spiritual view of theatre developed. Last but not least, the reception of the premiere is documented by reviews in both Theosophical journals such as *The Theosophist* and *Theosophy in Scotland*, as well as in local newspapers.¹¹

8. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Eco et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*.

9. Bryant, “Textual Identity and Adaptive Revision,” 47–68; Bruhn, “Dialogizing Adaptation Studies,” 69–88.

10. The Edinburgh archive of the Theosophical Society in Scotland keeps a copy of the book with extensive annotations and cuts in pencil, proving that this printed version was used as a script for further stagings.

11. Unfortunately, these sources provide scarce details about the relationship between the practical side of the performance (such as scenography, costumes and light effects) and Pagan's Theosophical interpretation. In the book version of the script, when commenting on the “astral” scenes concerning the trolls, Pagan mentions that “the lighting should vary effectively, and the movements throughout suggest the dream-world rather than the physical plane” (Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 71). Similarly, she notes that “at performances where it is specially desired to emphasise the inner meaning of the play, the colours [of the costumes] should be symbolic; e.g. clear azure and tender rose colour for SOLVEIG [*sic*] instead of navy blue and scarlet” (Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 50). Two black and white stage photographs were published in *Theosophy in Scotland* (no. 4, August 1911 and no. 9, January 1912), featuring the main characters in peasant clothes. This suggests a rather traditional staging, with no direct hints at Pagan's Theosophical interpretation.

When it comes to a historiographical study of this production, I find Postlewait's heuristic model to be a fruitful starting point. Trying to avoid a mimetic approach, in which the historical context either mirrors or dialogues with the performance event in a binary relationship, Postlewait proposes a multidirectional approach in which the event is embedded in a complex web of relationships between agents (in this specific case, the Theosophical Society), artistic heritage (both the theatre of the occult revival and the British stage at large), receptions (both emic and etic reactions to the production) and the world around it.¹²

The latter instance, however, can be a slippery and vague category. Postlewait claims that “this model implies that theatrical events provide a perspective *on* and *of* the world” and that “every human event articulates and mediates a series of relations with the world of which it is part,”¹³ but this model does not in itself provide a clear idea of what this relationship consists of. Therefore, Postlewait suggests the notion of “possible worlds” that an event speaks and relates to, encompassing “biographical factors, linguistic codes, sociopolitical conditions, values, beliefs, and views, national experiences and identities, ideologies and possible understandings.”¹⁴ This clarifies that the performance event communicates a worldview, rather than a vague connection to the world. *The Fantasy* can be considered the product of one possible world, i.e., that of the Theosophist, and it is important to acknowledge that this specific worldview cannot be separated from the event itself.

The particularity of this worldview resonates with *The Fantasy*'s dimension as an episode in the reception of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* on the British stage. In the field of reception studies, two key concepts return often in order to account for collective audiences' reactions and interpretations of works of literature and art. These are Hans Robert Jauss' “horizon of expectations” and Stanley Fish's “interpretive communities.” Although these concepts are still widely

12. Postlewait, *Theatre Historiography*, 15.

13. Postlewait, *Theatre Historiography*, 13. Italics in the original.

14. Postlewait, *Theatre Historiography*, 17.

relevant for studying general trends in reception, they fall short in accounting for the peculiarity, and also the marginalization, of non-mainstream acts of reception, such as *The Fantasy*. Jauss' term envisages "an objectifiable system of expectations that rises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance, from a preunderstanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the opposition between poetic and practical language."¹⁵ Such a definition, in other words, focuses on an "objectifiable system" of response that is hegemonic, i.e., follows leading trends in societies, reading communities and interpretive conventions. Fish's notion of "interpretive communities," in spite of his insistence on their agency with "writing" texts as a result of the reception process, also fails to account for divergent readings, as such communities of readers, in his understanding, generate relatively consistent interpretations of texts. Readers belonging to the same interpretive community tend to conform to a common set of reading strategies or "interpretive conventions," typically governed by ruling institutions in the context in which reading takes place.¹⁶ As I will show in the third section of this article, *The Fantasy* as a reception of *Peer Gynt* finds its starting point by problematizing usual interpretations of the play. Such hegemonic approaches to reception, therefore, appear unfit to study the implications of this case.

In contrast to Jauss and Fish, Ika Willis' reflections on divergent readings are much more illuminating. In a recent book, Willis insists that by studying real readers, i.e., actual interpretive communities rooted in time and space, scholars have discovered "active audiences" that use "a range of active interpretative strategies which frequently appear disobedient or, in the term used by [Michel] de Certeau, 'impertinent,' especially in contrast to professional interpretative strategies which tend to emphasize the coherence and unity of texts."¹⁷ She especially focuses on "marginalized groups" that use "a range of actively interventionist and creative interpretative strategies to open texts onto readers'

15. Jauss, "The Identity of the Poetic Text," 22.

16. Machor and Goldstein, *Reception Study*, 171.

17. Willis, *Reception*, 92.

own lived experiences, concerns and desires.”¹⁸ It is debatable to what degree the Theosophical Society can be considered a marginalized group, but Willis’ points about creative interpretation resonates with the worldview that is at the base of Pagan’s project. Drawing upon, but at the same time surpassing, classical concepts of reception studies such as idiosyncratic reading, the deconstructionist and Marxist idea of a “resistant reader” that “reads against the grain,” and the psychoanalytical “symptomatic reading” that identifies manifest and latent meanings in texts, Willis focuses on “the reader’s power over the text” as a function of their freedom of interpretation, putting an emphasis on reading practices that develop themselves outside of theoretical, interpretive and genre-based constraints.¹⁹ This inclusive understanding of creative reception will be the overarching approach in order to frame and understand the Theosophical reading that is at the base of *The Fantasy*. A few words on Theosophy and its worldview are necessary here in order to understand Pagan’s take on Ibsen’s text.

As it is known, although the word “Theosophy” had been used in an esoteric context earlier,²⁰ it came into common usage in connection with the Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875, opening a British branch in 1878. Drawing upon a growing fascination with science and Spiritualism, which suggested that the spiritual realm was scientifically verifiable, the society maintained that Truth or Divine Wisdom (*Theosophia*) is to be found in all religions, with an emphasis on the Eastern ones as particular repositories of such “ancient wisdom.” The Theosophical Society therefore encouraged the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science. It also called for a “Brotherhood of Humanity,” without discrimination based on race, creed, sex, caste or color.²¹ Summing up the main features of the movement that the Theosophical Society

18. Willis, *Reception*, 92–93.

19. Willis, *Reception*, 74–117.

20. Such as the case, for example, of Jacob Böhme’s “Christian Theosophy” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 87–106.

21. Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 3–4.

developed between the US, Europe and India at the turn of the 1880s would require far more space than what is allowed here. Three aspects, however, are particularly important for the present study: first, the popularization of Indian philosophy and spirituality in the West, for instance when it comes to concepts like karma and reincarnation; second, the ideal of a universal brotherhood and a belief in a collective, spiritual and human advancement by means of esoteric practice; and third, the diffusion of the Theosophical movement across the European middle class, which made the Theosophical Society one of the most important players in the revival of occultism at the end of the nineteenth century.²² I will return to these three perspectives over the course of my analysis.

More generally, Theosophy is commonly understood to be a form of “esotericism” or “occultism,” although these two terms have a complex history and have proven difficult to define. The scholar of religion Wouter J. Hanegraaff sought to refine the traditional characterization of esotericism as a “form of thought” focused on alchemy, astrology and magic—and occultism as a late nineteenth-century variant of it²³—by proposing that, in the wake of the Enlightenment, these three esoteric disciplines merged in “a conceptual waste-basket for ‘rejected knowledge’” that “has kept functioning as the academy’s radical ‘Other’ to the present day.”²⁴ To what degree Theosophy should qualify as “rejected knowledge” is open to debate, especially if one takes into account the diffusion it met at the turn of the twentieth century and especially the influence it had and continues to have on Western culture and art.²⁵ However, the doctrines and worldview of the Theosophical Society, at least in its original articulations, went against mainstream Christianity and spirituality, and this partly contributed, in spite of its popular

22. Among the vast bibliography on the Theosophical Society, see at least Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*; Chajes, *Recycled Lives*; Dixon, *Divine Feminine*; Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*; Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 211–28; Rudbøg and Sand, *Imagining the East*.

23. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 4–8.

24. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 221.

25. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*; Scheer, Turner and Mansell, *Enchanted Modernities*.

diffusion, to its relegation outside a religious mainstream, a status that has not changed. This can be one of the reasons why Pagan's Theosophical reading of *Peer Gynt* has remained relatively unknown among Ibsen scholars.²⁶

By 1908, when *The Fantasy* was staged, Theosophy was not a totally new discourse in the British reception of Ibsen. The first translation of *A Doll's House*, which came out in 1882, was made by Henrietta Frances Lord, a women's rights activist and Theosophist who wrote a long introduction inspired by another Theosophist, Anna Kingsford. In 1890, her translation and introduction to *Ghosts* mixed a Theosophical view on karma and reincarnation with Christian science.²⁷ Shortly later, in 1893, the Theosophical magazine *Lucifer* featured an article in multiple instalments titled "Ibsen's Works in the Light of Theosophy," where Theosophical concepts such as will-power, the higher self and the stages of soul development were linked to Ibsen's works. Such efforts put Theosophy on the map in the early reception of Ibsen in Great Britain. Their strategy consisted of attempting to find legitimation for a doctrine or beliefs through the aid of a recognized author; in the end, these articles tell us very little about Ibsen and his dramaturgy, and more about Theosophy.²⁸ As we will soon see, Pagan's take on Ibsen and the work of her Orpheus Lodge was quite different.

Isabelle Mary Pagan (1867–1960) was an astrologer and Theosophist, mostly known for her treatise *From Pioneer to Poet* from 1911, which "became immensely popular and went through five editions."²⁹ According to the membership records of the Theosophical Society in England, Pagan enrolled in 1902, before moving

26. The relationship between Theosophy and Christianity is complex and multi-faceted. For instance, Anna Kingsford, one of the prominent figures of the early British Theosophical Society, was a Christian occultist (Kluvel, *Anna Kingsford*, 664). The Scottish Theosophical lodges were also, especially in their early phases, distinctively Christian (Shaw, "Theosophy in Scotland"). These Christian impulses, however, seem hardly to have had an impact on Pagan's reading of *Peer Gynt*.

27. D'Amico, "Henrietta Frances Lord," 96–122. An earlier English translation had appeared in Copenhagen in 1880, but it had scarce circulation and remained obscure.

28. Cuffe, "Ibsen's Works in the Light of Theosophy," 201–5, 295–302, 388–94.

29. Vandervoort, *Tell the Driver*, 8.

to Edinburgh in 1910 (thus shortly after her work on *The Fantasy*), where she founded the Orpheus Lodge of the Theosophical Society in Scotland.³⁰ The records of the activities of the lodge document a continuing effort at collective readings of drama and literature (such as Shakespeare), musical recitals (especially Wagner) and lectures from its founding up till 1955, with regular attention to Ibsen's dramas.³¹ The records also state that "the Lodge would make Art its chief field for study with Beauty as its Keynote."³² The records as well as her articles in Theosophical magazines make Pagan's focus on studying the arts as means of spiritual achievement and development clearly evident. It is, therefore, in this context that we should read *The Fantasy*, arguably Pagan's first and most powerful attempt to approach Ibsen in the artistic and spiritual vein that two years later would culminate in the foundation of the Orpheus Lodge. Her commitment to Ibsen was not temporary, as she staged both *The Lady from the Sea* and *Emperor and Galilean* later in her life, and the mainstream newspaper *The Glasgow Herald* would write in her obituary that she "was first to introduce Ibsen's works to Edinburgh audiences, when, under the auspices of the Theosophical Society, she staged *Peer Gynt*."³³ *The Fantasy* seems thus to have been her life's work.

The book version of *The Fantasy* opens with an introduction, where Pagan points out that "The dialogue then used had been hastily transcribed for the occasion from the translations already existing in French and English," i.e., those

30. Theosophical Society in England, Membership Records, 181–82.

31. Orpheus Lodge, Records of activities.

32. Orpheus Lodge, Records of activities, 2. The Orpheus Lodge was not a unique group in British Theosophical milieu. In 1907, a so-called "Art Movement" was founded within the Theosophical Society in London, for discussing questions related to Theosophy and the arts (Anonymous, *The Art-Movement of the Theosophical Society*).

33. Anonymous, "Miss Isabelle Pagan." In 1924, again with the cooperation of the Theosophical Society, she translated and produced *Emperor and Galilean*, which was performed in Glasgow and Edinburgh (Anonymous, "Ibsen's *Emperor and Galilean*," 8. See also [Ibsenstage.hf.uio.no](https://ibsenstage.hf.uio.no)). In 1936, she translated *The Lady from the Sea*, which was apparently also performed (see Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea*). Pagan also published articles on *When We Dead Awaken* and *Emperor and Galilean* ("Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*," "Ibsen's Great Soul-Drama").

of Moritz Prozor and William and Charles Archer, but that she, afterwards, started “the study of Norwegian” and “set to work again, remodelling the lines and revising the cuts.”³⁴ Therefore, if we are to trust Pagan, her text is partly a relay translation and partly a translation from the Norwegian, although the book version (and the 1908 performance as well) did not include the whole play. Apart from cutting selected scenes and almost the whole fourth act, as was customary in the early performance history of *Peer Gynt*, the most important shifts are to be found in the paratexts, and in particular in the stage directions, which in turn informed the way in which the play was staged.³⁵ Interestingly, a comparative reading of Pagan’s translation with the original text, as well as Archer’s and Prozor’s translations, shows no major shifts in the speeches, that would develop a Theosophical narrative or interpretation. The only exception regards the following scene, and Pagan motivates it as follows:

In this play one of the strongest and most dramatic situations is to be found in Peer’s second dialogue with the “Green-Clad One,” when she suddenly confronts him with the hideous misshapen elemental, which represents, on the astral plane, the result of his treachery to Ingrid. These lines as they stand are impossible from the stage manager’s point of view, although they are far too important to be omitted. The transcriber, after much cogitation, decided, in rendering them and the corresponding passage in the Troll-scene, to emphasise as strongly as possible the fact—abundantly evident to any careful student of the poem—that the scene is astral or “psychic,” and not physical, and so to lift the passage out of all danger of a merely gross and material interpretation into the region of the weird and uncanny.³⁶

We gather from this quotation that Pagan had a double challenge here: on the one hand, a practical exigence to clarify the original text for the benefit of the

34. Pagan, “Introduction,” 7. For a brief synopsis of the play, see Figueiredo, *Henrik Ibsen*, 235–36; The Norwegian Ibsen Company, “Peer Gynt.”

35. I use the term “shift” here to refer to the so-called non-obligatory translation shifts theorized in Descriptive Translations Studies. They include, for example, changes in content or syntax, text additions or omissions that are not motivated by linguistic or structural differences between the source and target texts. See Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*.

36. Pagan, “Introduction,” 10–11.

actors and the audience (a problem she repeatedly returns to in her notes and stage directions) and, on the other, a need to properly convey what she deemed to be the meaning of the speeches. This is the only occasion in which a translation shift is evident, and it consists in the addition of the following lines: “*Green*: There’s a law that holds good. Ay! Believe it or not. / Still desires will take shape, thoughts are things, and exist.”³⁷ Pagan’s idea here is that the events that have taken place on the astral plane—in this case, sexual intercourse with the Green-Clad Woman, that resulted in the birth of a half-human, half-troll child—have consequences on the physical plane. As this trollish child repeatedly haunts Peer during the play, this event and character become a token of Peer’s failed earthly and psychic possibilities that deeply affect his spiritual development.

Apart from this example, as mentioned earlier, Pagan does not operate with major shifts in her translation to support her Theosophical reading. The cuts found in the translation mostly serve a practical goal of shortening the length of the performance and avoid costly scenography solutions.³⁸ In Pagan’s “impertinent” reading, Ibsen’s play in itself was a carrier of Theosophical knowledge, and the text did not need to be tampered with in order to convey it. What needed to be done, on the contrary, was to orient both the actors and the readers of the book version of the script towards a Theosophical interpretation. That is why the paratexts of the book, and especially its stage directions and dramatis personae, are so important: they are meant to inform the reading and the performance of *The Fantasy*. The absence of shifts in the text may seem surprising in such a biased reading as Pagan’s is, but it is actually not an uncommon strategy in “activist” translation, a practice that resonates with Willis’ idea about “active audiences” that operate with “disobedient” or “impertinent” readings of

37. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 86. This shift is prepared by a tiny interpolation occurring a few pages earlier, in a dialogue between Peer and the troll king, who asks him, “Do you really believe . . . That your thoughts bear no fruit?” (Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 74).

38. The fourth act in particular has always been proved difficult to stage, because of Peer’s many travels to exotic places. As mentioned, it was customary to cut it in the early stage history of the play. See Aarseth, “Oppførelse.”

texts. As Mona Baker has pointed out, activist translators are often engaged in social or political issues, and use translation as means of their battle. Activist translation presupposes a narrative that backs up and guides the translation's interpretation, but textual manipulation in activist translations is actually quite rare. As the risk of being unmasked and accused of appropriation of the text is high, such a strategy may easily backfire.³⁹ Activist translators, therefore, choose carefully which borders to trespass and which to respect, and, in this case, it looks like Pagan chose to stay away from the text and concentrate on the paratexts to convey her interpretation. She is also careful to inform the reader, with the use of notes and stage directions, when cuts or paraphrases are made in the text.

More specifically, the quotation above gives the key to Pagan's interpretation of the play. Her main point is that *Peer Gynt* develops according to two "planes," namely the physical plane, which corresponds to our reality, and the astral plane, which, according to Theosophical thought, can be described as a sphere of consciousness/existence where the "astral body" of the individual (a sort of doppelgänger of the physical body, or projection of the self) would be able to wander and come into contact with the astral bodies of other individuals, as well as "nature spirits," sometimes also called "elementals." But since this plane is a "home of errant thoughts"⁴⁰ and of such "spirits," it is also intrinsically "deceptive, because it reflects indiscriminately the good and the bad, and is so chaotic."⁴¹

This dichotomy is the fundament of Pagan's "impertinent" reading of *Peer Gynt*. As she states it in her list of dramatis personae,⁴² the characters that appear in the second act of the play (for instance, the Old Man of Dovre, the trolls, the Bøyg and the Green-Clad Woman) belong to the astral plane because they are either elementals or projections of other selves: this is the case for the Green-

39. Baker, "Translation and Activism."

40. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 67.

41. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 324. On the astral plane in a Theosophical context, see also Deveney, *Astral Projection*.

42. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 31.

Clad Woman, whom she considers “a shadowy, astral counterpart of Ingrid,”⁴³ the girl Peer has seduced and abandoned earlier in the play. In the same vein, she points out in a stage direction that “most of the actors in this scene [in the hall of the Old Man of Dovre], though fantastically disguised, should yet be recognisable as feverish nightmare reproductions of the wedding guests, and the whole action should be reminiscent, though not obtrusively so, of the wedding festivities.”⁴⁴ The main idea, therefore, is that the agitated moments of the bride theft in Heggdal and Peer’s subsequent escape have put him in a state of mind that has caused him, in one way or another, to reach the astral plane, where his recent experiences meet him again as in a distorted mirror.⁴⁵ As Pagan puts it in the same stage direction:

Later in the drama, in a monologue uttered while looking at the sphinx in Egypt, PEER refers to the TROLL KING and the GREAT BOYD [sic] as people “from fairy-tales,” whom he had “seen in a dream while he lay in a fever,” so there is no doubt about the character of the scene as conceived by the poet; i.e. it certainly represents delirium.⁴⁶

But the duality between the two planes in the play goes further. In Pagan’s interpretation, Peer’s escape from the Dovre palace marks his “awakening on the physical plane,”⁴⁷ which is followed by the meeting with Solvejg, Aase’s death, Peer’s travels abroad and homecoming. All these events happen, according to Pagan, on the plane of reality. But something else happens in the fifth act: Pagan interprets the so-called “onion scene” as Peer’s death. In this scene in the original play, Peer is making a desperate attempt to find a witness who could attest that he has “been himself” as a fully developed human being. He peels an onion in search of a core that might give him a clue to the essence of things, and of

43. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 22.

44. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 66.

45. According to Theosophical sources, the astral plane can also be reached involuntarily. See Deveney, *Astral Projection*, 29.

46. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 67.

47. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 32.

himself, but as the onion has no core, he is left in even greater despair. According to Pagan, “Peer awakes on the astral once more—not in delirium this time, half on and half off; but wholly and completely free from the trammels of the physical.”⁴⁸ This is in accordance with Theosophical thought, because after having died, the soul goes back to the astral plane to wait for a new reincarnation.⁴⁹ In the following stage direction, here is how this is supposed to be realized on stage:

This is the close of PEER’s life on the physical plane, and an ordinary exit hardly conveys the idea to the audience. It is only the soul of him that “hurries off” and continues to pass on from stage to stage in the passage from life to life through death. Therefore his body should be left lying in front of the hut.⁵⁰

This scenic trick (in this passage, two Peers are supposed to be on stage) means that everything from this point on is taking place in Peer’s afterlife, or, more precisely, in the quarantine period between his past and his next incarnation. The encounter with the enigmatic figure of the Button Moulder therefore also takes place on the astral plane; according to Pagan’s interpretation, he is one of the angels concerned with the working out of karma as a law of reincarnation.⁵¹

In order to understand the ending of the play in the context of Pagan’s “impertinent” reading, it is necessary to introduce briefly her understanding of other characters Peer meets. Peer, his mother Aase and his wife-to-be Solvejg are not only physical characters, but personifications: Peer represents “the human soul,

48. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 27.

49. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 67.

50. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 104.

51. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 27. Interestingly, Ibsen biographer Michael Meyer proposed a similar interpretation in the early 1970s, one that did not leave a mark on Ibsen studies. According to this interpretation, “whether one regards Peer as having died in the madhouse at the end of Act Four, or in the shipwreck at the beginning of Act Five, we must surely take that fifth act as representing either the unreeling of his past life in his mind at the moment of death or (which is perhaps the same thing) as the wandering of his soul in purgatory” (Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen*, 272). As the quotation shows, however, the similarity between Pagan’s and Meyer’s interpretation stops at Peer’s death, as Meyer’s mention of purgatory firmly maintains his reading within a Christian worldview that does not include reincarnation.

slowly evolving through variety of experience,” Aase is “the conscience . . . i.e., the voice of past experience,” and Solvejg is “the higher self, the divine element which Peer must ultimately wed.”⁵² Consequently, this stage direction shows how Pagan conceives Peer’s scene at the hut in the fourth act, as he hears Solvejg’s song:

Mystically, this symbolises his entrance on the *Path of Wisdom*, as the building of the hut suggested his resolute entrance on the *Path of Action*. Both stages are followed immediately by the vision of SOLVEIG [*sic*], . . . the higher self; but the third path, the *Path of Devotion*, which is only reached through the gate of humility, must be trodden before permanent union is achieved.⁵³

The three “paths” mentioned here are the classical forms of yogic spiritual development (Jñāna Yoga, Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga), as theorized in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which the Theosophical Society began to popularize in the Western world in the 1870s.⁵⁴ The duality of planes in the interpretation of the play, therefore, is not only a function of the extended understanding of reality typical of Theosophical thought, but mirrors the aim of the adaptation, namely the notion that *Peer Gynt* is an allegory of the spiritual development of the human subject. This is, once more, explained in the stage directions. The final part of the fifth act, or “Epilogue” as Pagan calls it, becomes a journey of:

the restless spirit trying to free itself from the trammels of the flesh; the same spirit which, through its craving for physical incarnation, originally built the “pyramid” or temple of the body that clothed it during its earthly pilgrimage; and which now, wearied out by the stress and strain of physical action, longs for the rest and freedom of the realms above, turning from material things as transitory and illusive, and viewing the whole physical plane as a forest laid waste by fire.⁵⁵

The allegorical interpretation and especially this last quotation should not lead one, however, to think that the play ends in a univocal, conciliatory note. In the

52. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 23.

53. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 95. Italics in the original.

54. Baier, “Yoga,” 2.

55. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 107.

end, during the final encounter with Solvejg, Peer's soul gets back on the track of his path of self-realization, but this only means that he is allowed to reincarnate again and pursue his path of evolution towards the spiritual realm, until, as the Button Moulder puts it in his last line, "at the cross-roads we meet again, and then we shall see. Now I say no more,"⁵⁶ i.e., until his next death and reincarnation, when karma will again be waiting for him. The relevance of this cyclical, non-teleological reading of the ending and its consequences for the "impertinent" interpretation of the play will be analyzed in the third part of this article.

The Fantasy and the Occult Revival—Ritual and Performance

The theatre scholar Edmund Lingan, in a book titled *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, looks at the phenomenon of occult theatre in the decades around the turn of the century. "Occult revival" is used here as an umbrella term that encompasses the various occult groups and currents that arose in the wake of Darwin's evolutionary theory and the crisis of Christian faith that followed.⁵⁷ Central for many of these groups was a quest for self-realization, in which the adept, be it through the repeated use of rituals, invocations, meditation or other practice, aimed to reach a higher degree of consciousness and divine knowledge. In this process, according to Lingan, drama played a crucial role: "The art of theatre became an important tool for expressing and disseminating alternative spiritual ideas. . . . In fact, many occultists esteemed theatre as a sacred art with potential to spiritually transform human beings."⁵⁸ In particular, Lingan insists that "the theatre of the Occult Revival did . . . answer religious questions" and that "the occultists who wrote plays and created theatrical productions to promote a specific cosmology during the Occult Revival should not be confused with theatre artists who have incorporated occultism and religious content into

56. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 129.

57. McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi*.

58. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, 2.

theatre and drama for the purpose of creating secular works of art.”⁵⁹ The main aim of these “occult” theatre practitioners was thus less artistic than it was spiritual.

In his book, Lingan argues that movements of the occult revival elaborated a corpus of rituals that were theatrical and performative at heart, with Aleister Crowley’s public series of *Rites of Eleusis* (1910) as a peak.⁶⁰ In addition, occultists of the turn of the twentieth century, for example the Californian Theosophist Katherine Tingley, looked at classical dramatists such as Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Goethe as initiates, whose plays could reveal esoteric truths to the spectators, and staged their plays accordingly.⁶¹ As a whole, these theatre occultists esteemed theatre as a sacred art with the potential to spiritually transform human beings. Generally speaking, these forms of occult theatre had a threefold aim: 1) a ritual purpose in which the performance was supposed to have an effect on the performer or the audience; 2) self-development in which the initiated spectator or actor learned about specific spiritual concepts or realms through the staging; and 3) self-promotion, as these events were often open to a public consisting of the non-initiated. All these aspects are important to keep in mind when looking at *The Fantasy*.

In the first place, there is the ritualistic aspect, which encompassed the possibility of causing change or obtaining a spiritual effect through performative action. This is in keeping with studies that, at the borders between performance and ritual, have emphasized how the theatrical performance can have a spiritual effect on both the performer and the audience. In *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, Fischer-Lichte famously claimed that particular forms of performance “transgressed the boundary between the semiotic and phenomenal body,”⁶² thus also transgressing

59. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, 9.

60. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, 3.

61. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, 47–52.

62. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 5. I use these terms in accordance with modern performance theory, which sees the “phenomenal body” as the actor’s “bodily being-in-the-world” and the “semiotic body” as “the use of that body as a sign to portray a character.” See Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre and Performance Studies*, 26.

the boundary between theatre and ritual.⁶³ Such theatrical ritual—or ritual theatre—resulted in the creation of “a temporary community of actors and spectators” that experienced the same transgression and transformation.⁶⁴ For Fischer-Lichte, the crucial point is the emergence of an ephemeral community between the performer and the spectator, even to the point of reaching “a hypnotic state” and “a dissolution of their selves.”⁶⁵ Such experience focuses on integrating the individual into the community, with sacrifice as a focal point,⁶⁶ and presupposes a before and an after, two distinguished states and/or experiential stages that both the actor and the spectator transgress during a performance that becomes a rite of passage.⁶⁷

Such perspectives on performances are corroborated by research into Western esotericism, and especially rituals of initiation. For instance, Henrik Bogdan has emphasized that in several secret societies, such as those of Freemasonry, rituals are conceived as essentially performative acts that include a transformative moment focused on experiential knowledge, as well as a fixed pattern (as in the case of a theatre performance that follows a script).⁶⁸ More specifically, these rituals have a transformative power inasmuch as they separate the candidates from their old state of being, bring them into a liminal phase in which the candidate is suspended between these two, and finally find them a new identity/state within the society.⁶⁹ Initiation is in these cases a form of experiential *gnosis*.⁷⁰ More recent studies at the crossroads between theatre and occultism have also shown how contemporary performance makes use of ritual, focusing on transgression of theatrical and physical boundaries (such as forms of ritual masochism), liminality,

63. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 9.

64. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 10, 7–13.

65. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 13.

66. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 31–32.

67. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 36–37.

68. Bogdan, “Esotericism Practiced,” 249.

69. Bogdan, “Esotericism Practiced,” 251.

70. Bogdan, “Esotericism Practiced,” 255.

and healing; in these cases, the performance/ritual is supposed to provide spiritual development to both the performer and the audience.⁷¹

These aspects are important to understand the aim and nature of *The Fantasy* as a piece of drama of the occult revival, and the potentialities of its Epilogue or fifth act. In the moment in which Peer ends his life on the physical plane and his body is left lying in front of the hut while another actor continues to play his role in the rest of the scene, this doubling tends to blur the distinction between the phenomenal and the semiotic body.⁷² With one “dead” body and another “living” one on stage, the Epilogue of *The Fantasy* invites the spectators into a liminal state, in which they both experience the bodily, physical presence of Peer and his own astral body looking for a new incarnation. This liminal moment binds the performers and the audience together in an ephemeral community that experiences a rite of passage, as Peer passes from the physical to the astral plane, but is also promised a return to the former when his higher self (Solvejg) puts him back on track and grants him a new incarnation. Apparently, this was also evident in the play’s reception. According to the report of the performance published in *The Theosophist* in April 1908, theatregoers at the Edinburgh premiere reported that “we were so absorbed in the play we forgot to notice who were taking individual parts” and that “there was an atmosphere in the whole company that came right across the footlights to the audience—you *felt* it.”⁷³

Such circulation of spiritual energy is a function of the second aspect of *The Fantasy* as a play of the occult revival, namely its nature as a means to self-development for the actors. This ties in with Lance Gharavi’s framing of spiritual performance as an act that generates faith, and not the opposite—performance thus becomes the fulcrum and origin of religious experience, and

71. Bogdan, “Esotericism Practiced,” 260–63; Rockbrand, “Boundaries of Healing;” Alston, “‘Burn the Witch.’”

72. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 104.

73. J.H.E., “*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh,” 667. Italics in the original.

not an expression of it.⁷⁴ Also, although spiritual performance indeed can bear the mark of ritual, which Gharavi considers to be a bridge between performance and religion,⁷⁵ it includes elements that are not embodied (as in ritual) and are intrinsically ineffable: “a person’s sense of something mysterious, just beyond the grasp of mental comprehension, something that defies representation except by metaphor.”⁷⁶ Such movement in and out of the performer’s body opens up productions such as *The Fantasy* to interpretations which not only focus on the body of the actor, but, more generally, on performance as a function of spirituality, “a sense of being in relation with ineffability [that] can be investigated as a domain of human experience from which people formulate knowledge.”⁷⁷

Such ineffability of the theatrical experience is at the core of *The Fantasy*, not only because of the exchange of energies between actors and audience, but because of the nature of the performance. Its value, as Pagan argues in her introduction, develops on several “planes” and “it is as if the larger man—the subliminal self of the psychologist—had somehow got a free hand for once, and using the outer self, or limited personality, as a channel, had poured through it something of the higher wisdom and wider knowledge that lay within his reach.”⁷⁸ The aim and scope of staging *The Fantasy* is thus to perform, and therefore both reflect upon and disseminate, the “ineffable” spiritual wisdom that is allegedly at the root of the play; namely the spiritual advancement and progressive purification of the human soul through different incarnations, of which Peer’s life is just a particular turbulent one. As *The Theosophist* put it in their review of the Edinburgh premiere:

It is not often realised how much may be done for the evolution of the powers of combination in the individual by association for dramatic purposes. Here we had a body

74. Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*, 18–19.

75. Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*, 27.

76. Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*, 44.

77. Gharavi, *Religion, Theatre, and Performance*, 51.

78. Pagan, “Introduction,” 18.

more than usually coherent, harmonious, and singularly free from the element of personal ambition which so often mars a dramatic enterprise as a whole. . . . That this atmosphere was given by the Theosophical ideal of brotherhood and unity cannot be doubted.⁷⁹

Therefore, the kind of drama represented by *The Fantasy* is supposed to foster Theosophical knowledge within the theatre group and a sense of community founded on the “ineffable” spirituality of the performance, but it is also deeply rooted in the establishment of a temporary fellowship as described by Fischer-Lichte. Theatre practice thus becomes a practice of spiritual self-development that goes beyond artistic performance per se and concentrates on the development of the actor as a human being. Actually, one could argue that the spiritual goal of having actors affiliated to the Theosophical Society work together was the most important goal for *The Fantasy*, regardless of the status of the author. As Pagan’s sister, Mrs. Frank Baily, who played Solvejg, put it in a private letter, the performance “was partly amateur, and naturally felt below accepted standards. But it was a worth-while experiment. . . . The profound *ideas* mattered more than the scenery.”⁸⁰ These “profound ideas” were both emic, aimed at the theatre group, but also etic, aimed at the audience.

It should not be forgotten that as a typical performance of the occult revival, *The Fantasy* also had an instrumental function in promulgating Theosophical thought. If this aspect is very prominent in the book version of the play, which is enhanced with Pagan’s introduction and the large number of notes and added stage directions explaining her interpretation of the play, it is less clear if and how these aspects would have been evident for the spectators of the Edinburgh premiere. There is no clear indication of how Pagan communicated on stage that scenes from the hall of the Old Man of Dovre take place on the astral plane, and that the “dead” Peer left on stage was understood as a sign of Peer’s journey to reincarnation. The only etic review of the Edinburgh performance, published in the newspaper *The Scotsman*, does not mention any Theosophical concept whatsoever, and even *The Theosophist*,

79. J.H.E., “*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh,” 667.

80. Quoted in Farmer, *Bernard Shaw’s Sister and Her Friends*, 178. Italics in the original.

apart from mentioning “the atmosphere” that the audience felt, does not report much on whether the performance had succeeded in spreading a Theosophical message.⁸¹ We know from the same source that Pagan wrote a pamphlet, on which her introduction to the book is based, and that it was given to actors, as well as musicians playing Edvard Grieg’s music for the play, thus at least spreading the word in the Edinburgh artistic community, but it is unknown whether it also was distributed to the spectators.⁸² A later note by Pagan on subsequent performances of Ibsen plays under the auspices of the Orpheus Lodge seems, however, to leave no doubt about the nature of the enterprise:

The subjects chosen by the Lodges were rarely of the ordinary propaganda type. Ibsen plays were selected fifteen times, some of the *Peer Gynt* music being provided by local talent in at least four places—usually in centres where Theosophy was already strong. The Society has still to realise that it is where centres are weak, or propaganda just beginning, that these more ambitious efforts, along art lines that introduce Theosophical subjects, are most required. People will go to hear *Peer Gynt* who won’t stir a foot to hear a lecture upon reincarnation: and having gone to *Peer Gynt*, and heard about reincarnation in dramatic dialogue of such power that they are unlikely to forget it, they generally want to hear more.⁸³

Therefore, the instrumental nature of *The Fantasy* seems to be evident, in addition to its nature as theatre ritual and moment of spiritual development. It remains to be seen, however, if and how Pagan’s interpretation makes sense as an “impertinent” reading of Ibsen’s original play, *Peer Gynt*.

From *Peer Gynt* to *The Fantasy* and Back Again

I intend here to look at *The Fantasy* as an example of adaptation, and, starting from its Theosophical setting, see whether this can shed light on its source. The reason for such an operation is as simple as it is a slippery one in literary

81. Anonymous, “Amateur Performance of *Peer Gynt*,” 8; J.H.E., “*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh,” 667.

82. According to the review in *The Theosophist*, a number of amateur actors and the orchestra were unconnected to the Lodge (J.H.E., “*Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh,” 668).

83. Pagan, “A Lecture Tour,” 151.

studies, and especially in those that deal with esoteric interpretations of literary, dramatic or artistic works. Pagan poses the question succinctly in the opening of her pamphlet, as noted above:

How far is it legitimate to insist on the mystic interpretation of a work of art for which the author has emphatically disclaimed any hidden or esoteric meaning whatever? The question is most fitly answered by another: How far is it possible for a poet, writing in the full flow of what is loosely termed inspiration, to gauge, fully and accurately, the value—on all the planes—of what he has written?⁸⁴

This raises the question of which insights esoteric readings can offer into works of art that are not concerned with esoteric doctrines. As Pagan puts it very clearly in her pamphlet (and as Ibsen biographers seem to confirm), Ibsen had no interest in esotericism whatsoever, although his wife, especially after his death, developed an interest in Spiritualism.⁸⁵ Pagan suggests that *Peer Gynt*, independently of the beliefs of its author, disseminates a form of knowledge that the Theosophical Society happened to share.

A famous, fierce critic of esoteric interpretations of works of art has been the semiotician Umberto Eco, who uses the term “hermetic semiosis” to describe a mode of interpretation that originated among the Gnostics in the first centuries CE, was revived by Renaissance esotericism, and is still widely used in esoteric interpretations of works of art. Hermetic semiosis is based on “principles of universal analogy and sympathy, according to which every item of the furniture of the world is linked to every other element (or to many) of this sublunar world and to every element (or to many) of the superior world by means of similitudes or resemblances.”⁸⁶ Hermetic semiosis, Eco continues, “assumes that everything can recall everything else—provided we can isolate the right rhetorical connection.”⁸⁷ Central to hermetic semiosis is an idea of analogy

84. Pagan, “Has *Peer Gynt* a Key?” 3.

85. Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen*, 423, 433–34.

86. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 24.

87. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 27.

between element A and element B, which causes the informed reader to make a connection between them. The main feature of Hermetic drift, concludes Eco, seems to be the uncontrolled ability to shift from meaning to meaning, from similarity to similarity, from one connection to another. In other words, any element can be a sign pointing at something else, if one has the eyes to see.⁸⁸ The relevant question for us is whether this mode of interpretation is at the basis of Pagan's "impertinent" reading and of *The Fantasy* as an adaptation of *Peer Gynt*.

One could start by stating the obvious, namely that, from a literal point of view, Pagan's interpretation is "wrong;" there is no reason to believe that Ibsen wanted to convey Theosophical knowledge, for the Theosophical Society was founded eight years after he wrote the play and there is no later evidence that he had read Theosophical literature. The interpretation of the trolls as astral figures is therefore totally to be ascribed to Pagan, as is the idea that Peer dies after the onion scene. From a dramaturgical point of view, there is nothing, not even an element of analogy (in Eco's terms), that would suggest such a connection and interpretation. If her reading of *Peer Gynt* is thus literally "wrong," we could ask next if this reading is equally "wrong" on an allegorical level.

First, one could stress that Pagan was presenting a *Fantasy of Peer Gynt*, and not *Peer Gynt* itself. In an explicit way, hers is more an adaptation of that play than a simple staging of it. Second, she does not appropriate *Peer Gynt* and try to stick Theosophy into it, which is quite a common trait in esoteric readings of the kind mentioned by Eco. On the contrary, Pagan puts it openly in her pamphlet: "How far is it possible for a poet, writing in the full flow of what is loosely termed inspiration, to gauge, fully and accurately, the value—on all the planes—of what he has written?"⁸⁹ And precisely this last question is worth considering.

We can of course choose to consider Pagan's interpretation irrelevant because it is esoteric, but this solution strikes me as too simplistic. Her Theosophical

88. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 26–27.

89. Pagan, "Has *Peer Gynt* a Key?" 3.

parlance resembles that of early psychology and of its entanglement with esoteric discourse.⁹⁰ To put it another way: when Pagan speaks of Ibsen's "subliminal self" that finds expression in *Peer Gynt*, or of Solvejg as an allegory of Peer's "higher self," her argument is not necessarily weaker than that of the psychoanalytical readings that have made their way in Ibsen studies in the last decades.⁹¹ And if it is true that Ibsen could not have had a knowledge of Theosophy at that point, is this not also true for most of the theories (for instance, psychoanalysis) that are often used to understand his work? Also, if it makes sense to read *Peer Gynt* through Hegel and Kierkegaard—two central philosophers with strong ties to Christian thought that we do not definitively know Ibsen read—this does not necessarily mean that it is impossible to read Ibsen with Theosophy, just because this system of thought has been marginal and arguably not a part of a shared cultural knowledge in Scandinavia and in the West at large. Ultimately, I have the impression that hermetic semiosis is not the right key to understand *The Fantasy*. Its nature as a fluid adaptation text needs other interpretive categories.

In the anthology *Adaptation Studies. New Challenges, New Directions*, Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen give an interesting perspective on the vast field of research into adaptation studies. Placing adaptation in the broader context of intermedial studies, their intention is to "readress the question of authority and originality,"⁹² thus decentring adaptation's dependency on its source. One of their central questions is the following: "Should we not admit that the adaptive process is dialectical, and that the source text is changed in the process of adaptation as well?"⁹³ Echoing a central point of George Steiner's hermeneutics, the authors open up for a view of adaptation that overcomes the traditional

90. Hanegraaff, "Magic V," 738–44.

91. See for example Aarseth, *Dyret i mennesket*, 116–18; Rekdal, *Fribetens dilemma*; Kittang, "Ibsen, Heroism and the Uncanny"; Pollan, *Peer Gynt og Carl Gustav Jung*; Aalen and Zachrisson, "Peer Gynt and Freud's the Uncanny."

92. Bruhn, Gjelsvik and Hanssen, *Adaptation Studies*, 3.

93. Bruhn, Gjelsvik and Hanssen, *Adaptation Studies*, 9.

reception impasse that many esoteric readings of literature suffer from.⁹⁴ In other words, adaptations such as *The Fantasy* and their hermeneutic foundations are often looked upon as strange examples of reception, which can be studied historically in themselves, but have little to say about the original work. In contrast to this approach, John Bryant, one of the contributors to the anthology, argues that

we need a broader conception of geneticism in which the notion of work embraces all versions of a text, including sources and adaptations, and the creative process is extended to include all forms of revision, both authorial and cultural. . . . In the fluid-text approach I propose here, a work is the sum of its versions; creativity extends beyond the solitary writer, and writing is a cultural event transcending media.⁹⁵

This perspective opens up for an idea of a “total work” in which adaptations and their sources stand in a non-hierarchical relationship to each other and in which their authors contribute to making meaning, regardless of geographical, temporal, cultural and/or ideological distances between these versions. While such an approach breaks with any idea of stable meaning within the text—an assumption that reception studies abandoned decades ago, but that stands fast among more conservative literary critics—it also opens up for the possibility of a cross-pollination between source and adaptation in the process of making meaning, a process in which it is not only the former that informs the latter, but also the other way around. Bruhn argues that

adaptation . . . ought to be regarded as a two-way process instead of a form of one-way transport. . . . We should study both the source and result of the adaptation as two texts, infinitely changing positions, taking turns being sources for each other in the ongoing work of the reception in the adaptational process.⁹⁶

Bruhn’s perspective is as simple as it is game-changing in its consequences; building upon the breakdown of temporal and hierarchical relationships between

94. Steiner, *The Hermeneutic Motion*, 196.

95. Bryant, “Textual Identity,” 47–48.

96. Bruhn, “Dialogizing Adaptation Studies,” 73.

the source and the adaptation proposed by Bryant, Bruhn suggest that an adaptation can help reading and making meaning of its source by opening up interpretations, showing unknown or underplayed aspects, and so on. In Bruhn's view of this dialogic relationship between source and adaptation, "the two texts enrich each other: the two versions point to interpretations of each other that would have been hard to reach with the knowledge of one and not the other."⁹⁷ It is in this vein that I will discuss how Pagan's "impertinent" thesis about Peer's death and reincarnation can in turn inform our reading of Ibsen's play.

One of the most important questions related to *Peer Gynt*, which continues to engage Ibsen scholars, is whether Peer's final encounter with Solvejg and his escape from the clutch of the Button Moulder represent a form of salvation, be it secular (Peer has finally "found himself" and can start a life as a "whole" subject) or religious (Peer has been absolved of his sins). The question about the ending mirrors another recurring issue related to the play, namely the search for an overall unity in the text, of narrative, thematic or aesthetic kind. Such searches for unity, Ellen Rees has pointed out, are linked to *Peer Gynt's* status as a Norwegian "national epos," "the most canonical work by Norway's most indisputably canonical writer."⁹⁸ As *Peer Gynt* has become a play that "holds some key to understanding what it means to be Norwegian in a globalized world,"⁹⁹ it is natural that its interpretive history has been characterized by a unifying tendency; if *Peer Gynt* is a "national play," it needs to convey some sort of integral, if not edifying, meaning.

Such interpretive tradition has mainly been based on philosophical readings that, in slightly different ways, grant Peer as a subject the possibility of a development and, in the end, of reaching itself.¹⁰⁰ Solvejg's encounter is the

97. Bruhn, "Dialogizing Adaptation Studies," 81.

98. Rees, *Ibsen's Peer Gynt*, 8.

99. Rees, *Ibsen's Peer Gynt*, 9.

100. See for instance Aarseth, *Dyret i mennesket*; Shapiro, *Divine Madness and the Absurd Paradox*; Dvergsdal, "To Be Oneself"; Selnes, "Ibsen's orientalisme."

ultimate reconciliation on the part of Peer with his own “being in the world.” In recent years, such unifying readings of *Peer Gynt* have been criticized, most radically by Rees and Leonardo F. Lisi. Rees rejects them because, she claims, the play has a “profoundly parodic nature”¹⁰¹ that resists a stable interpretation of its ending.¹⁰² According to Rees, “*Peer Gynt* should be understood as expressing a fundamentally non-transcendent world-view.”¹⁰³ Lisi, on his part, criticizes interpretations that “would place that text squarely in the tradition of idealist aesthetics”¹⁰⁴ and contends that “the ambiguous ending of Ibsen’s dramatic poem arguably introduces a new structural principle of linear temporality that effectively rejects the primacy of aesthetic reconciliation.”¹⁰⁵

Key to all the traditional readings as well as their critiques, is the salvaging nature of the encounter with Solvejg, especially on a religious level. What strikes me about all these readings, is that they are built upon a Western, Christian worldview in which such salvation happens one single time and is valid from there to eternity—principally because in the Christian tradition, we have only one life, and can only be saved once. Such readings are at odds with the fact that, as Lisi points out, “it nevertheless remains unclear if Peer is ultimately saved from the Button-Moulder, who promises further encounters.”¹⁰⁶ For Rees and Lisi, the conclusion cannot be anything other than a refusal of the definitive possibility of salvation, either in the name of a parodic nature or an aesthetics of dependency proper to a new narrative of modernity.

What strikes me about Pagan’s reading, in contrast to the established scholarly reception, is that a Theosophical interpretation would disintegrate such oppositions and offer a way out of this impasse. Neither Lisi nor Rees

101. Rees, *Ibsen’s Peer Gynt*, 11.

102. Rees, *Ibsen’s Peer Gynt*, 17–18.

103. Rees, *Ibsen’s Peer Gynt*, 19.

104. Lisi, *Marginal Modernity*, 87.

105. Lisi, *Marginal Modernity*, 88.

106. Lisi, *Marginal Modernity*, 95.

offer an alternative to the systems they deconstruct, other than advocating parody as a source of possible, diversified and ever-changing interpretations of the play or ascribing to *Peer Gynt* a sort of Marxist function as a mirror of existential fragmentation of the emergent capitalist system.¹⁰⁷ But if the Button Moulder is the agent of karma, his final warning, “at the cross-roads we meet again, and then we shall see. Now I say no more,”¹⁰⁸ loses its menace, the meeting with Solvejg its salvific power, and the ending loses its ambiguity and problematic interpretive nature. It becomes less important to understand whether the ending is conciliatory or represents Peer’s salvation, as the only thing that has happened is that Peer has concluded one of his incarnations, possibly not one of his most spiritually successful ones, and will be given the possibility to do better in the next. In this way, *Peer Gynt* acquires more of a circular than a teleological structure, emphasizing the complexity of human experience, and offers an alternative solution to a scholarly quandary that seems to be stranded into either a saved/not saved dichotomy or a blunt statement about the fragmentation and aporias of modernity.

Conclusion

I am not writing this in order to conclude my article with the somewhat sensational claim that Ibsen wrote a drama on reincarnation, or that he must have known of it while writing *Peer Gynt*.¹⁰⁹ I am instead suggesting that Pagan’s main interpretive point in *The Fantasy*, however heterodox, may function as an example of an adaptation that sheds light on its source and participates in the interpretation of *Peer Gynt* as a “total work.” In so doing, I also intend to pinpoint and stress

107. Rees, *Ibsen’s Peer Gynt*, 11; Lisi, *Marginal Modernity*, 94–112.

108. Ibsen, *The Fantasy*, 129.

109. In any case, this would not be totally impossible, as even in the Western world, the idea that souls reincarnate in different bodies before going on to a higher existence had long provided a recurrent alternative to the Christian belief in bodily resurrection and the afterlife. See Keller, “Reincarnation I”; Zander, “Reincarnation II.”

the value of *The Fantasy* beyond its nature as an isolated episode in the British reception of Ibsen. *The Fantasy* is indeed a token of the Theosophical interest in the arts, which has been a recurring scholarly topic in the last few years—but it is also far more than that. Its nature as dramatic adaptation emphasizes the potential of the theatre of the Occult Revival as a practical means of spiritual development, and, more specifically, of the engagement of occult organizations such as the Orpheus Lodge in the staging of theatrical performances. Last but not least, as an interpretation of *Peer Gynt*, *The Fantasy* helps extrapolate such episodes of reception from their status as divergent, ancillary instances that have a historical value, but hardly participate in the critical tradition on a work of art. Cases like *The Fantasy* make a point for the validity of esoteric interpretations when they are conceived as hermeneutical possibilities rather than hidden truths. The latter is the case of hermetic semiosis or even of conspiratorial readings of works that aim to show us that “everything we know” about a specific work “is wrong.”¹¹⁰ Pagan’s “impertinent” reading does not do so, but tries to show how Theosophy can illuminate art. As a system of belief, I see no *a priori* obstacle to using Theosophy in order to unpack the significance of *Peer Gynt*, and the advantages of Pagan’s interpretation, given the critical impasse mentioned above, seem evident to me. If this still means reading *Peer Gynt* “wrongly,” cases like *The Fantasy* seem to highlight Jacques Lacan’s paradox while reading André Gide: “Nous avons mal lu . . . Mais c’est en lisant mal que nous avons bien lu pourtant.”¹¹¹

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110. See for example D’Amico, “Henrik Ibsen and Conspiracy Thinking.”

111. Lacan, “Jeunesse de Gide,” 14.

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Rudolf Steiner's Thought as "Philosophic Mysticism" and the Question of the Continuity between His Early and Later Writings

Israel Koren

israel_k@oranim.ac.il

Abstract

This article joins the debate regarding the issue of continuity in the worldview of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), known as the founder of anthroposophy. It presents the early Steiner's philosophy, especially in *The Philosophy of Freedom* (written before Steiner became a theosophist/anthroposophist), as belonging to what scholars refer to as "philosophic mysticism." Herein, *mystical experience* is achieved through philosophical thought, the possibility and features of that *mystical experience* being justified on philosophical grounds, and *mystical experience* itself and its contents are linked to thought/thinking/"idea." The early Steiner drew on his idealistic interpretation of Goethe's inquiries in nature and Goethe's claim that he perceived the "idea" in nature, and Nietzsche's individualism and ideals of authenticity, and human beings as the source of ethics; both thinkers serving him as sources of inspiration for his distinctive philosophical fusion of idealism and individualism on an experimental mystical plane. Steiner's early philosophic mysticism carried through into his later thought (Steiner the occultist, theosophist, and anthroposophist), forming the conceptual foundation for all his spiritual experiences and inquiries and their objective verifiability (anthroposophical Spiritual Science).

The later (from 1902 onwards) Steiner's occult knowledge thus functions as another brick in his arguments regarding spiritual experience and its nature in his early philosophy. This article thus essentially confirms Steiner's own assertion that his early and later thought were consistent in principle, without yet being identical—while challenging the claim that he became an anti-idealist individualist during the 1890s. Based on a diachronic analysis, the latter reading focuses on the development of his thought, ignoring its synchronic elements—such as his desire to found a spiritual science as an alternative to the sciences of his day, and his altering ideas and arguments by which he sought to justify his new scientific spiritual ideal. It also takes no account of the essentially dialectical component of his philosophy (the blending of idealism and individualism)—which is revealed precisely by treating it as "philosophic mysticism."

Keywords: mysticism; philosophic mysticism; theosophy; anthroposophy; occultism; esotericism; Goethe; Nietzsche

A. The question of the continuity between Steiner’s early and later writings

Herein, I wish to propose an alternative to the well-known scholarly approach of dichotomously dividing Rudolf Steiner’s writings into earlier and later periods.¹ According to this approach, Steiner’s thought underwent a dramatic change at the beginning of the twentieth century (at the end of 1901)—a “conversion” of sorts that led him to become a member of the theosophic movement (early in 1902) and a theosophist/occultist/mystic. This new position served as the bedrock for his subsequent philosophy, it also underpinned the history of the anthroposophic movement (from 1913 onwards). According to this distinction—which I seek to challenge—Steiner was originally a free thinker and idealistic philosopher who edited Goethe’s scientific writings in this vein rather than as an academic researcher. He then became a radical individualist (under Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Stirner’s influence), anti-idealist, and even materialist. Finally, in another “conversion,” he became a theosophist/mystic immersed in the upper worlds. Despite initially expressing views considered deviant and changing his opinion, he was thus primarily aligned with the philosophical, cultural, and intellectual school prevalent during his day, then crossing over to the “occult sciences” of his day at a particular point in his life.²

1. In this article, the “early Steiner” signifies the period prior to 1901, the “later Steiner” his theosophic/mystical and anthroposophic writings.

2. Cf. Zander (*Die Biografie*, 53), who argues that Steiner experienced a *theosophische Wende* after seeking his way through diverse and conflicting channels—including his brief dabbling in theosophy and mysticism. Cf. Staudenmaier: “Between 1900 and 1902 Steiner *underwent a profound transformation* from unaffiliated free-thinker to *committed occultist*. His *conversion to theosophy*, consolidated in January 1902 with his entry into the Theosophical Society, *is not easy to explain biographically*. While Steiner had briefly flirted with theosophical notions around 1890, his published discussions of theosophy during the 1890s were scathingly critical. The philosophical position outlined in his pre-1900 works is decidedly this-worldly and makes no reference, even obliquely, to the ‘higher worlds’ that stand at the center of theosophical and anthroposophical thought” (*Between Occultism and Nazism*, 27–28); see also idem, “The Higher Worlds Meet the Lower Criticism.” French recently espoused a similar view: “Steiner’s life and works defy easy categorization, shifting between many polarities, positions and fields of interest” (“Disenchanting and Re-Enchanting German Modernity,” 36). Unless otherwise noted, all italics are mine.

On this reading, the early Steiner—at least in his first steps as a philosopher (up until the beginning of the first decade of the twentieth century)—fits into the idealistic philosophical framework as a representative of *objective idealism*. This philosophical stream holds that reality is predicated on the “idea” (an ontological claim), the latter being directly and objectively graspable (an epistemological argument).³ The very early (and later) Steiner thus opposed both the natural sciences of his day (to their point of viewing the concrete facts of the natural and human as the sole manifestation of reality [materialism]) and the subjective idealism of Kant and all other forms of subjectivism. The later (theosophist/mystic) Steiner, of course, belongs categorically to the alternatives to philosophy and sciences of his time—occultism and mysticism.⁴

This distinction between Steiner’s early and later thought also gives rise to a hermeneutic argument: it is a forced anachronism, which Steiner himself shared and has been adopted by many of his followers, to understand the early (philosophic) Steiner through the prism of the later (theosophic/mystical) Steiner.⁵

3. Zander, *Die Biografie*, 25–27. Quoting the early Steiner—“Just as the eyes see colours and the ears hear sounds, so thought grasps ideas” (ibid, 27)—Zander also notes that Steiner espouses an “objective idealism,” regarding thought as a “sense organ.” For the two streams of German idealism during the period preceding Steiner—that which attributes the idea to human beings (subjectivism) and that which ascribes it an autonomous existence (objectivism), see Beiser, *German Idealism* (who does not refer to Steiner).

4. Denoted by various terms—theosophy, mysticism, occultism, esotericism, spiritualism, gnosticism, and finally anthroposophy—all these require elucidation, the fields of knowledge and experience associated with them intersecting. Nor does any consensus exist regarding their definition and parameters. Until I clarify the term “mysticism” in section D, I will largely follow Zander in employing the compound “theosophy/mysticism” to characterize Steiner’s affiliation with alternative ways of gaining knowledge (vs. the discursive/analogous thought that underpins the sciences).

5. See Traub, “Reconciling Philosophy.” While primarily philosophical (Steiner in the framework of German idealism), Traub’s grounds are also developmental/historical: Steiner’s turn to theosophy/mysticism was due principally to circumstantial factors; had he accepted an academic post after completing his doctorate (1891) and publishing *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1893/4), the trajectory of his life might have been very different. Traub thus contends that Steiner’s early philosophy would stand in its own right even if anthroposophy had not subsequently developed. In his tome on Steiner (*Philosophie und Anthroposophie*), he further observes that he does not treat the esoteric and mystical contexts of Steiner’s philosophy. Tazer-Myers adopts a

Although Steiner scholars have drawn attention to some of his early mystical utterances, as well as his early contacts with theosophy/theosophists and mysticism (in particular in 1889), they have generally regarded these as lying on—or beyond—the seam between idealistic philosophy and mystical thought.⁶ They likewise treat his early contacts with theosophy/mysticism as a passing episode (Zander)—another example of his youthful spiritual peregrinations as he sought to shape his worldview and life path (including its practical aspects—profession and income). The early Steiner occasionally flirted with theosophy/mysticism; however, he also critiqued and opposed it (Staudenmaier).⁷

Contra this current prevalent view of Steiner, which dichotomizes his early and later thought, I would like to present an alternative. This alternative view can be traced back to a period before any of the scholars cited above (1961), being proposed by Samuel Hugo Bergman (1883–1975). In the introduction to one of the English editions of Steiner’s *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1893/94, and under its other name, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*) Bergman argues that “In the history of recent Western philosophy, Rudolf Steiner appears as a unique personality because *his whole philosophical work* is not the result of a thinking

contrary synchronic/harmonizing approach to Steiner’s worldview, making no reference to the sharp scholarly diachronic differentiation between the early and the later Steiner, in his recent dissertation: “His [Steiner’s] mysticism was driven by lifelong clairvoyant perceptions of the dead and other spiritual beings. . . . Steiner empirically validated his perceptions and then tried to construct a philosophical proof of super-sensible cognition” (“Rudolf Steiner’s Theory of Cognition,” iii–iv). This approach is typical of most of Steiner’s adherents, scholars and laymen alike: see, for example, Steiner’s biographer Christoph Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner: A Biography*.

6. Zander (*Die Biografie*, 29) notes that, at the beginning of his philosophic journey, Steiner followed in Goethe’s metaphysical footsteps, believing, like the poet, in *Lichtfrommen* (the religiosity of light).

7. He thus participated in Marie Lang’s theosophic/mystical circle in Vienna in 1889–1890, shortly before leaving for Weimar to continue his editing of Goethe’s works. Herein, he was exposed to a “mystical element” and “occultic environment” (Zander, *Die Biografie*, 36) and thence to theosophic literature. During this period, he met Friedrich Eckstein, a theosophist and unique occult/symbolism scholar. Steiner greatly admired Eckstein, expressing his esteem for him in an 1890 letter in which he adduced their encounter as one of two events that made him who he was. For this brief interval in Steiner’s life, see also Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner*, 109–11 (first published in German in 1997).

effort, but *is based on spiritual experiences*.”⁸ Bergman further notes that “Steiner’s Anthroposophy—with which we are not dealing here—differs from the ‘mystical’ schools in the extremely high value it accords to thinking. This high evaluation of thinking originates here, in Steiner’s philosophy: man has his right place in the cosmos as a thinking being.”⁹ While contending that Steiner’s early philosophy rests *principally* upon spiritual experience (thus not forming part of philosophic discourse in the conventional sense), Bergman recognizes that it cannot be compared with anthroposophy (a scholarly developmental approach), finally commenting that anthroposophy differs from other “mystical” schools (Bergman’s own quotation marks) in extolling thought/thinking.

This characterization of the later Steiner’s (anthroposophic) doctrine as exhibiting links with mysticism and privileging thought/thinking returns us to Bergman’s assertion that Steiner’s early philosophy is primarily based on “spiritual experience” and “experiences of our consciousness.” This is predicated on Bergman’s opinion that Steiner’s early and later writings are both informed by thinking and spiritual experiences.¹⁰ The necessary inference from Bergman’s statement is that thought/thinking based on “spiritual experiences” is the axis that connects all Steiner’s doctrine. As we have noted, according to Bergman

8. Bergman, “Introduction,” 11. He then proceeds to remark: “In the world of the East it goes without saying that a great thinker is at the same time a great initiate; in the West, however, it never before occurred that a whole philosophical system was based on immediate spiritual experience. For this reason Steiner had to face the greatest mistrust from the world of the ‘official’ philosophers” (ibid). The context indicates that Bergman understands “spiritual experiences” as revelatory experiences, dependent on inner strengthening and anchored in union with the world essence. I follow this definition herein. *Contra* von Hartmann and Kant (as expressed in his autobiography [1923–1925]), Bergman argues, Steiner believed that the “experiences of our consciousness can enter the true realities by means of strengthening of our soul forces, and that the divine spiritual principle manifests itself in man if he makes this manifestation possible by his soul life” (ibid).

9. Ibid.

10. I suggest that Bergman’s distinction between Steiner’s (early) philosophy and anthroposophy should be read as follows: anthroposophy deals with subjects that Steiner did not address in his early philosophy (as per Staudenmaier), anthroposophy forming part of “mysticism” à la Bergman but remaining independent of many mystical phenomena in favoring thinking over subjective experience. Nor did Steiner himself ever define his anthroposophic teaching as “mystical.”

the early Steiner's philosophy was regarded suspiciously in his own day, its detractors discerning that it rested *primarily* on spiritual experience—a view that Steinerian scholars (Zander, Staudenmaier, and Traub) do not share.

Bergman's 1961 article preceded the above-mentioned scholars' contributions. While we cannot know how he would have responded to their statements, it appears to have left no impression on them. In my opinion, *contra* Bergman, it is difficult to confidently identify—on the basis of a philosophical literature that is speculative/theoretical by nature—the “spiritual experiences” that lie at its foundation. By the same token, however, it is also not easy to maintain the opposite with regard to a philosophical literature whose descriptions and claims can readily be interpreted as such—in particular if it wishes to lead to such “spiritual experiences.”¹¹

Here, we may also note the more cautious view of Christian Clement, a scholar with a close affinity to Steiner and Anthroposophy, responsible for the critical edition of Steiner's writings. Like Bergman, Clement took a continuous middle way in understanding the relationship between early and late Steiner; namely, he did not claim that early Steiner was the same as late Steiner, but he also did not take the dichotomous approach. In the introduction to the volume containing Steiner's philosophical works, Clement posed the relationship between Steiner's early philosophy and mysticism as a question.¹²

11. Although Bergman's specialization was modern philosophy, he was intensely interested in mystical literature, even writing on it, thus being drawn to Steiner. In contrast, the Steiner-scholars referred to above belong to other disciplines and inclinations. It is thus possible to assume that personal and academic disciplinary affiliations influenced the conclusions of both sides.

12. “True philosophy or mysticism clothed in philosophic guise...did the author, who subsequently became known as a prominent esoteric and the founder of anthroposophy, employ philosophical tools already in his early [philosophical] writings perhaps only as an external form, as a means of expressing a mystical-occult understanding of the world?” (“Einleitung,” 2: xxiv). Good reason exists to suspect that Clement's question is primarily rhetorical, the answer being similar to Bergman's. See French, “Disenchanting and Re-Enchanting German Modernity,” 74. In any case, Clement's hermeneutical approach (accepting in principle the scholarly historical/developmental perspective), an approach which I am not discussing here, produces a more integral understanding of the relation between early and later Steiner when compared with the discontinuity approach. See: Clement, “A New Paradigm in the Academic Study of Anthroposophy?” 9–10.

It is also worth noting Kaj Skagen’s book *Anarchist, Individualist, Mystiker—Rudolf Steiners Frühe Berliner Jahre 1897–1902* (2020) [“Anarchist, Individualist, Mystic: Rudolf Steiner’s Early Berlin Years, 1897–1902”]. A Norwegian author and essayist, Skagen focuses on the change in Steiner’s views between 1897 and 1902. Directly countering Zander’s arguments, he asserts that “Steiner is always a mystic” (p. 14)—the mystical element existing during these years only as an underground current, however. Like Bergman and Clement, he adopts a diachronic/developmental approach to Steiner, pointing at some shifts and altering emphases in Steiner’s views during that period of time, while claiming that Steiner’s entrance into the theosophical sphere was essentially natural.¹³

Herein, I seek to re-establish, elaborate, and anchor Bergman’s phenomenological approach. My intention is to identify the significant role mysticism plays in early Steinerian thought. Continuing through to his later work, it thus constitutes a *foundational and continuous* component of his thought as a whole. In my opinion, a line runs through the early Steiner’s writings, both in his interpretation of Goethe and in his independent philosophical contributions, especially his *The Philosophy of Freedom*.¹⁴ Although he took pains not to highlight it, it remains the pillar of his teaching *in toto*—his fundamental

13. Skagen, *Anarchist, Individualist, Mystiker*, 17–25. Following the *via media* between two views he calls fundamentalist, motivated by self-interest: a) The “correct” anthroposophical perception, according to which Steiner is a kind of saint, his thought being treated synchronically à la later Steiner; on this reading, the debate over Steiner’s intellectual and spiritual biography is also one over his credibility, this thus becoming an emotional discussion; b) The claim that Steiner’s self-presentation, espoused by his adherents, is not the true Steiner, who was in fact a dilettante thinker, charlatan, and opportunist ready to embrace any view at any time when pragmatic or convenient to do so.

14. Steiner’s own thought and his understanding of that of others (such as Goethe, Nietzsche, Stirner, Haeckel) must, of course, be distinguished. While Steiner clearly interpreted others’ work through his own prism and with the same themes and emphases with which he felt an affinity (as he himself acknowledged), his perception of their ideas cannot be totally identified with his own stance (as he also observed): see, for example, Steiner, “Forward to the First Edition,” in *Goethe’s World View*.

intuition, the Archimidean point of his overall oeuvre.¹⁵ I shall refer to it herein as “philosophic mysticism” (section D), regarding it as a foundation on which the later Steiner erected an additional storey—namely, occult knowledge *in toto* (“knowledge of the higher worlds”)—on top of the philosophic ground floor; an additional storey with some of its components already existent in early Steiner.¹⁶

In order to ground my assertion that a significant mystical element played a decisive role already in early Steinerian thought, I must first “unravel” Zander’s claim that Steiner’s essential book *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1993/94) already demonstrates Steiner’s shift from idealism to anti-idealistic individualism and even a materialist and nihilist worldview (section B). I shall then explore how

15. In addition to the difficulty in distinguishing the foundational *experiential* elements in philosophical writings, which may be read in two ways (hypothetical and experimental), in my view the early Steiner hoped to be recognized as a philosopher of the central cultural stream of his day, both personally and professionally (his ambition to be an influential rather than marginal figure). Mysticism having a poor reputation during this period—a fact of which Steiner was well aware—he thought it better not merely to conceal his internal spiritual world but also to join his voice with those who maintained that mysticism could not serve as a reliable source of knowledge. See the introduction to his first book on Goethe in relation to the latter’s early concept of *wholeness as unity* (written under the influence of Paracelsus’ alchemical thought): “Nevertheless, this way of looking at the world, which borders on the *mystical*, represents only a passing episode in Goethe’s development, and so on gives way to a healthier and more objective way of picturing things” (*Goethean Science*, “Introduction”). However, Steiner’s characterization of Goethe’s thought in this book (1883) is fully mystical: “We have the task, with regard to every single entity, of working upon it in such a way that it appears as flowing from the [all-inclusive one] idea, that it *completely dissolves as a single thing and merges with the idea*, into whose element we feel ourselves transferred. . . . With this we have arrived at where the Goethean way of looking at the world takes its start” (Steiner, *Goethean Science* [1883], original italics). Cf. also Steiner’s account of the mystical phenomenon in his *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* (1901), an account very similar to the way he presented Goethe’s conception of nature: see p. 14 below.

16. In the face of alternative readings of Steiner, the assertion that the mystical element already pervades the early Steiner raises questions about Steiner’s post-*The Philosophy of Freedom* volume, which covers his early years in Berlin (1897 onwards) through to his “theosophical turn” (1901/2). Did he retreat from his early (mystical) idealism during this period? Did he frequently change his views? These questions—which are not limited to 1891–1902—relate to what I refer to as “Steiner as a hermeneutical problem.” A significant and thorough discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article, though relevant to the discussion here. For Steiner’s early years in Berlin as characterized by inner struggle and confusion, see French, “Disenchanting and Re-Enchanting German Modernity,” 92–94.

the early and later Steiner understood “mysticism,” his reservations concerning it and identification with it (section C). Further, I shall introduce the mystical current known as “philosophic mysticism” (D1), also drawing attention to phenomenological links between that current and Steiner’s philosophy, then analysing several passages from *The Philosophy of Freedom* (the early Steiner)—his *magnum opus* in his own view and that of his followers. I regard these as mystical descriptions linked to “spiritual experiences.” Depicting revelation, these experiences form, in my opinion, the bedrock of the book as a whole.

The exegesis I shall present of the Steinerian sources leads to my argument regarding Steiner’s doctrine as a whole—namely, that we can draw a line from the early Steiner (*The Goethean Science* [1883]) through *The Science of Knowing: Outline of an Epistemology Implicit in the Goethean World View* (1886) and *The Philosophy of Freedom* and his further treatment of Goethe (*Goethe’s Worldview* [1897]), to 1901’s *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* (prior to his becoming a theosophist), *Christianity as Mystical Fact* (1902), and the remainder of his theosophic/anthroposophic works (the later Steiner). In this respect, the late nineteenth century may be regarded as a period during which the diverse elements of Steiner’s thought never achieved full harmony.

B. From idealism to individualism? The claim that *The Philosophy of Freedom* is a hybrid creature

Zander’s postulation that the early Steiner was capricious, even making 180° turnabouts—his abandonment of objective idealism (Goethe) and theosophy/mysticism (1889–1890) in favour of individualism, naturalism/materialism (Nietzsche and Haeckel); and, of course, his theosophic/mystical shift (“conversion”), which appears to have occurred towards the end of 1900, wherein he readopted idealism within a theosophic/anthroposophic structure—features prominently in his biography of Steiner. Following the way-posts in Steiner’s life and the developments in his conceptual system, Zander illuminates his

biographical contexts (encounters, events, and intellectual influences), interpreting them through a critical lens. To my mind, he stretches the historical-developmental approach—so prevalent in modern scholarly research—too far, however.¹⁷

His thesis rests on Steiner's 1890s writings, which he perceives as pointing to a measure of retreat from Goethe and critical (even gross) remarks about theosophy/mysticism that continue through to his critique of metaphysics in *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Zander correctly links Steiner's idealism with his theosophical/mystical period, during which he joined the Viennese theosophical circle, citing the potential tie between idealism and mysticism and the influence German mysticism exerted on German idealism.

Zander's argument regarding Steiner's shift from idealism to individualism in the 1890s also rests on his view that *The Philosophy of Freedom* forms a transitional link to Nietzschean individualism (1895) and naturalist monism (Haeckel, 1900). This has direct ramifications for our present discussion. Zander presumes that Steiner began penning *The Philosophy of Freedom* as early as 1891, the same year in which he submitted his dissertation, contending that he completed it in a flurry in Vienna at the end of 1893.¹⁸ In contrast to his dissertation, he

17. It is worth noting that after Zander read Clement's introduction to the eighth volume of the critical edition of Steiner's books, he moderated his initial position regarding a complete theosophical "conversion" that occurred in Steiner at the beginning of the twentieth century, admitting in a review of the volume (from 2018), that it is "necessary to revise certain ideas that postulate a sharp rupture between the pre-esoteric Steiner and Steiner the Theosophist. His (Clement's) critique of this (Zander's) postulate, even in my own earlier interpretations is, therefore, justified" (quoted by Clement in his "A New Paradigm in the Academic Study of Anthroposophy?" 21n42; I thank Christian Clement for bringing Zander's "conversion" to my attention). To put it accurately—in Zander's eyes there is still a rupture, but not a sharp one. Yet, it seems to me quite valuable to discuss some of Zander's arguments about Steiner's departure from idealism and mysticism/theosophy in the last decade of the nineteenth century, for any further discussion on the topic.

18. Zander posits a sharp turn in Steiner's thought from idealism to an individualism he had sought to minimize /conceal in his doctorate, perhaps because his supervisor was dedicated to an idealistic approach and supported Steiner on this basis. To my mind, Steiner downplayed his *mystical idealism* primarily during this period—an idealism that (also) emerges at the end of *The Philosophy of Freedom*, which (according to Zander) he wrote in great haste on his return to Vienna, thus being less careful in his wording. In the final section of the first edition (1893/4),

posits, it presents an incoherent view of the world—a hybrid of two conflicting philosophies: (Goethean) objective idealism and (Nietzschean) individualism. He thus makes two claims: a) the occurrence of a watershed in Steiner’s thought in 1891 (developmental); and reinforcing the first, b) that the objective idealism in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is inconsistent with the individualistic element of it (philosophical). Steiner himself being aware of this problem or contradiction, Zander thus regards the final result as forced.

Relating to these in order, Steiner adopted an explicitly individualistic approach in an open letter to the Austrian poetess Marie Eugenie Delle Grazie in 1886, in which he called for the release of human beings from nature—i.e., five years before the point at which Zander maintains that he shifted to individualism.¹⁹ The same year also saw the publication of *The Science of Knowing: Outline of an Epistemology Implicit in the Goethean World View* (objective idealism). Steiner thus clearly and unambiguously expressed individualistic views even before the watershed Zander ascribes to him, at the same time as espousing idealism.

We must thus turn to the place in which he combines the two—*The Philosophy of Freedom*; namely, he shifts from a developmental to a conceptual/philosophical perspective. The first passage we shall examine is the following:

However true it may be that we have estranged ourselves from Nature, it is none the less true that we feel we are in her and belong to her. It can be only her

he thus opines: “Die Welt ist Gott” (*Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, 239). In the subsequent editions, however, he corrected/modified this formulation: “To live in reality, filled with the content of thought, is at the same time to live in God” (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, 215). This remains an idealistic description, anyone not informed by thought independent of him or herself is not only not living in God but also not living in reality.

19. “What would remain of divine freedom if nature were to treat us as children, leading us, carry for us, protecting us? She has to deny us everything so that when we find joy, it is born out of the innermost of our independent selves! Nature should destroy what we built daily, that we might each day rediscover the joy of creation! We wish to thank nature for nothing, and ourselves for everything” (quoted in Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner*, 88).

own working which postulates also in us.²⁰ We must find the way back to her again. . . . We have, it is true, torn ourselves away from Nature, but we must none the less have taken something of her with us into our own being. . . . We can find Nature outside us only if we have first learned to know her within us. What is akin to her within us must be our guide. . . . we probe into the depth of our own being, to find there those elements which we saved in our flight from nature.²¹

According to this text, human beings formed part of nature in the ancient past. Although subsequently cut off from it, as they withdrew they took in themselves the element that reconnects them (concepts/ideas).²² The present and future of humanity thus encapsulate individualism and idealism, the later Steiner holding to the connection between each individual and the spiritual worlds (as thought content) with which he or she must align, be contained by, and incorporate them within him or herself.

Thus, the later Steiner defined anthropology as “a path of knowledge, [designed] to guide the spiritual element in the human being man [= individualism] to the spiritual in the universe [= idealism],” combining both

20. Such are the elements and forces of nature, as well as ideas/thoughts—as clearly emerges from analysis of *The Philosophy of Freedom*. In distancing ourselves from nature (individualism) in a developmental-evolutionary sense, we take upon ourselves thought/ideas (idealism), thereby prompting the illusion that thoughts/ideas are our distinctive creation (subjectivism).

21. *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 19 (original italics). In my view, the passage quoted here depicts the mystical union that may (and should) occur in human consciousness, pointing to the essential and *a priori* identity between a person’s inner nature (the “idea”) and nature (“What is akin to her within us”)—awareness of whose existence has been lost and must be restored. This reclamation—reunification with nature—is achieved through the element that links human beings and nature, namely, the “idea.” Although Zander notes that Steiner recognized that his accounts of the relationship between the two separate elements (individualism and idealism) in *The Philosophy of Freedom* was problematic, in my opinion Steiner specifically refers to the ethical realm of action, as evinced by his clarification in the 1918 edition (139). He thus maintains that in the *human-nature union*, the former is sometimes to be found on its own individualistic side and sometimes on that of the “idea,” representing a “living pendulum”—i.e., the field of moral decision-making that enables ethical autonomy to manifest itself when a person falls more on his or her own side.

22. From a synchronic perspective relating to all Steiner’s doctrine, this account embodies a person’s development in relation to nature from the distant past to the present and thence to the future.

components in an inseparable manner.²³ This distinction holds true for both his early and his later writings. The fact that he adduces both schools of thought in *The Philosophy of Freedom* cannot thus indicate that he had distanced himself from (mystical) idealism at this point. Individualism and idealism co-exist quite happily together in the early and later Steiner alike. While such a blending of the personal and collective/universal is fraught with philosophic problems, in a mystical framework it is eminently possible, one of mysticism's features being the synthesis of antitheses (unio-mysticism)²⁴—a fusion that rehabilitates the primal unity. If in principle individualism and idealism are not antitheses in the realms of idea and (spiritual) experience—i.e., if the idealism in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is not necessarily a forced, artificial creature or disguise for Steinerian individualism—we can engage in a clearer and deeper exploration of Clements' question of whether Steiner's idealism serves as a facade for mysticism.²⁵

We must also briefly address Zander's observation that Steiner's reservations regarding metaphysics in *The Philosophy of Freedom* further attest to his abandonment of idealism. Close examination of Steiner's critique of metaphysics in this volume indicates clearly that this relates to *hypothetical metaphysics*: the

23. Steiner, *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*.

24. For the relationship between individualism and mystical union, cf. Walter Stace's distinction between two types of the latter: a) *undifferentiated unity*, in which the autonomy of the subject stands for a period of time within the whole (the individual as subsumed within the "idea"); and b) the subject's *identity in difference* within the whole (*Mysticism and Philosophy*, 72). In other words, the internal integration of a person, his or her separateness and sense of such, is preserved within his or her unity with the "idea" (in nature or God), he or she thus perceiving themselves experientially as part of this unity. Unity as *identity in difference* more closely fits Steiner's views not only in *The Philosophy of Freedom* but also in general—his later (anthroposophic) teaching also not regarding human beings as losing their self-awareness within the state of union. Similarly, intuition underpins human-Nature unity in both the early and later Steiner: see pp. 27–28 below. Steiner's doctrine must also be analyzed synchronically in order to properly understand each specific passage.

25. While the possibility of individualism and (mystical) idealism coexisting is one question, the question of whether or not *The Philosophy of Freedom* succeeds in persuasively demonstrating that the union of the two presents human beings with a free choice (free will) is quite another. In my opinion, the answer to the first question is affirmative and that to the second negative. I conclude that Steiner was a mystic on the grounds of the "natural" element in his thought—vs. his weaknesses as a philosopher: see Koren, *Judaism and Anthroposophy*, Vol. 1, Part 2 (in Hebrew).

assumption of the existence of something unseen and inconceivable, employed to explain something observable and comprehensible—the speculative, inconceivable, hypothetical cause of something graspable.²⁶

In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner maintains that hypothetical (indirect) premises concerning *wholeness* are unnecessary, the elements of *wholeness* being identifiable through unmediated experience. In other words, “one cannot speak of limits to knowledge.”²⁷ *Contra* Goethe, who declared to Schiller that he directly perceived the “idea” in its activity in nature, metaphysics infers its existence rather than seeing it. The early and later Steiner denounces everything that expresses a mediated view of reality because it challenges his desire—even in his early writings—to establish a form of knowledge (a spiritual science) that is not hypothetical, setting no bounds to knowledge and leaving no room for doubt.

Steiner’s objections to metaphysics are epistemological in nature, forming part of his vehement criticism of monotheism (an ontological argument). The latter champions the existence of an all-encompassing, transcendent, creative Being who lies beyond human comprehension and employs nature and human beings to realize its purposes. Such an entity—which Steiner never accepted—undermines both his epistemology and his idea of freedom. In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner affords nature no role or purpose (teleology), human beings alone determining their own goals.²⁸ His laudation of Nietzsche in 1905 and Haeckel in 1900 is based on his rejection of these two pillars—(hypothetical) philosophical metaphysics and religious monotheism.

26. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 67, 96–97, 136–38, 187–88, 191.

27. *Ibid.*, 92. In my opinion, we should also understand Steiner’s later opposition to the principle of the “hypothetical ether” in the same way—i.e., he argues that unmediated experience is not only possible but also proper in the etheric realm: see Aspren, “Vorwort,” xvi.

28. *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Chapter 11.

C. Steiner's position with regard to mysticism

In this section, I shall discuss Zander's and Staudenmaier's postulations with respect to Steiner's retreat from mysticism and theosophy between 1891 and 1901, exploring his attitude towards them synchronically. Up until this point, I have treated the two terms as synonyms per Zander. Now, I shall be focusing on mysticism—the necessary discussion of this leading to the proposal that Steiner's philosophy is in fact a “philosophic mysticism” (section D).

Let me begin by addressing Steiner's statements about mysticism in his 1891 letter to Paulina Specht, just after he moved to Weimar. Herein, he speaks sarcastically of the phenomenon in relating the brief period (1889–1890) he spent in Vienna amongst the theosophist circle and his early years in Weimar:

You can imagine that I *immersed myself quite thoroughly in the mystical element* in which I swam for a while in Vienna, *almost alarmingly* . . . it is possible that mysticism will still be quite acceptable here. *Since this is probably the last stage before its extinction, one could welcome this phenomenon with joy.*²⁹

Here, Steiner makes two significant remarks: a) that his early attraction to mysticism was “almost alarming” in nature/extent—a statement I believe to be directed more towards the Viennese theosophist circle than himself personally; and b) its disappearance from the world is a happy event (sarcasm). On the other hand, he “immersed” himself “quite thoroughly in the mystical element”—a fact that should not surprise Paulina (“You can imagine”).

Even if he exaggerates somewhat, his mysticism does not appear to have been limited to salon discussions of the phenomenon (as per Zander). If we add to this passage his acknowledgement to the esoteric/theosophist Frederick Eckstein, whom he had met through the Viennese theosophist circle a year or so earlier, that without his influence he would not have become the person he had, we may perceive that he had developed a close (albeit complex) attachment to both theosophy and mysticism.³⁰ Nor should we forget the reservations he expresses in his letter to Paulina Specht.

29. Steiner, *Briefe II*, 85–86, letter 283.

30. Letter to Eckstein, cited in Zander, *Die Biografie*, 47.

Steiner's 1891 welcoming of the fortunate ephemerality of theosophy/mysticism contrasts with his lack of sarcasm, over thirty years later (1923), in the preface he added to his *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* (1901).³¹ While in 1901 he expressed his great admiration for German mystics/mysticism (from Meister Eckhart through to Angelus Silesius), in the new passage he is much less enthusiastic. Although acknowledging their inspiration (received and transmitted), he regards what passed down through them to the new era as having already become invalid and inauthentic. Belonging primarily to the pre-modern period, it deserved to become extinct.

This reflects a fundamental Steinerian principle—namely, that the good of the past can turn into the evil of the present, exceeding its “expiry date.” I suggest that we should understand Steiner's 1891 statement (in his letter to Paulina Specht) in light of what he maintained in 1923. As observed above, such a synchronic approach to Steiner's writings (identification of consistent features) can help us better and more precisely pinpoint his ideas/intentions along a temporal trajectory.

Continuing to examine Steiner's view of mysticism from a synchronic perspective, we may now observe that in effect he never renounced mysticism either essentially or categorically, rather believing that it should take a specific form. Thus, his early reservations with regard to it represent the position of a person finding his way towards the type of spirituality he wished to embrace personally and culturally, rejecting other forms along the way that did not fit what he thought proper. These early words are thus perfectly commensurate with his later utterances regarding mysticism.

C1. Common synchronic features in Steiner's attitude towards mysticism

If we explore how Steiner perceived mysticism and his attitude towards it synchronically—i.e., if we seek to extract from all his statements, pro and con, the features that remain constant, we find them already in *The Philosophy of Freedom* and his reflections on his youth in his autobiography (first published in parts

31. Steiner, *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age*, 126–93.

between 1923 and 1925). In *The Philosophy of Freedom*, Steiner only denigrates mysticism to the extent that it does not reach the objective realm of ideas, not identifying himself or his doctrine with any such ideational mysticism.³² In the autobiography, he addresses the subject at greater length and on a more personal level, following his doubts with a half-hearted admission that, after all was said and done, he was a mystic in a certain sense.³³ Even this confession did not come easily: “I also could say that my view rests upon ‘mystical’ ideal experience.”³⁴ In both places, he thus denigrates a mysticism based solely on emotions rather than one that rests on thought/“ideas.” It is also important to note that late in life he referred to himself as a “mystic of the ‘I.’”³⁵ These self-characterizations from the end of his life, as an ideational mystic/mystic of the “I,” may also be read as authentic descriptions in light of the close association in Steiner’s thought between the “I” and thought/ideas.

If so, mysticism takes various shapes and forms—one of which fits his thought and philosophy. What unites them all, before they can be distinguished and accepted/rejected, is their origin—namely, *inner immersion* as the basis for

32. “The error in a mystical outlook based upon mere feeling, is that it wants to *experience directly* what it ought to gain through *knowledge*; that it wants to raise feeling, which is individual, into a universal principle” (Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 115 [original italics]).

33. “As this [mysticism] passed in review before my mind at the various epochs in the evolution of humanity—in Oriental Wisdom, in Neo-Platonism, in the Christian Middle Ages, in the endeavours of the Kabbalists—it was only with the greatest difficulty that I, with my different temper of mind, could establish any relationship to it. The mystic seemed to me to be a man who *failed to come into right relation to the world of ideas, in which for me the spiritual has its existence*. I felt that it was a deficiency in real spirituality when, in order to attain satisfaction in one’s ideas, one plunges into an inner world void of all ideas. In this I could see no road to light, but rather a way to spiritual darkness. . . . And yet something attracted me toward the mystical strivings of humanity. This was the character of the inner experience of the mystics. They desire *living contact* with the sources of human existence, not merely a view of these. . . . But if anyone enters into the interior of his own soul without taking ideas with him, he thus arrives at the inner region of mere feeling. . . . I objected with all positiveness to mere feeling as a way into the spiritual. And yet, when I thought *of the nature of the mystic’s experience*, I felt once more a **remote kinship** between this and my own attitude toward the spiritual world” (Steiner, *Story of My Life*, Chapter 11 [bold original]).

34. Ibid.

35. Kiersch, “On Rudolf Steiner’s Conception of Consciousness Soul,” 77.

understanding the fundamentals of the world and full perception of reality. Steiner hints at this internal activity in his autobiography in differentiating between hypothetical thought (e.g., metaphysics) and direct spiritual experience. It also forms the pillar of his doctrine in general: the key to comprehending the world lies in human inwardness.³⁶ The mystic’s introverted starting point is a “deposit” of sorts from which he or she must emerge into the world by means of thought/“idea” in order to acquire established, true knowledge.

This, according to Steiner, is the default that distinguishes a mere soul/feelings/inner experience, from truth, from a true and unconditional cognition. Mystics who do not find their way into the world via an “idea”-infused consciousness will remain within their own emotional/experiential inner life, steeped in cognitive darkness. While they may imagine themselves to be in contact with the foundation of creation and in possession of spiritual enlightenment, in actuality they merely gain a reflection of their soul/interiority. Such persons—to whom Steiner refers as “half or quarter mystics” in his lectures published as *The Evolution of Consciousness* (1923)—are neither mystics nor representatives of the mysticism he lauds in *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* (1901).³⁷ Herein, he highlights the inner awakening (the key lies in interiority) that further unites a person with reality, changing the “aggregated state” of the latter as a whole. While inner unitive experience is the key, the mystical state can raise knowledge of the world as a whole—rather than merely in the psyche—to a higher level:

36. “Our Age can only accept *truth* from the depth of human soul. Of Schiller’s two well-known paths, it is the second that will mostly be chosen at the present time. . . . A truth that comes to us from outside always bears the stamp of uncertainty” (Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, xxvii [original italics]). Cf. also: “In my own world of feeling and thought the loftiest mysteries lie hidden, only I have hitherto not been aware of them” (Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, 63 [first published in parts between 1904 and 1906]).

37. Those mystics “do not penetrate to any great depth. They believe that by means of a more or less nebulous spiritual training they can come to an inward experience of a higher divinity underlying the world. And these mystics, these half or quarter mystics, are often heard to say how an inner light of the soul has dawned within them, how they have had some kind of spiritual vision” (Steiner, *The Evolution of Consciousness*, 10–12). At the same time, he defends Goethe in 1910 against the charge of being a mystic, speaking out against the view that mysticism is abstract thought (Steiner, “What is Mysticism?”).

A thing which confronts me is no longer separate from me once I know it. That part of it which I can take in is incorporated into my own nature. When I awaken my own self, when I perceive what is within me, then I also awaken to a higher existence what I have incorporated into my nature from the outside. The light which falls upon me when I awaken, also falls upon what I have appropriated to myself of the things of the world. A light flashes in me and illuminates me, and with me everything I know of the world. Everything I know would remain blind knowledge if this light did not fall upon it . . .

What I add to things by this awakening is not a new idea, is not an enrichment of the content of my knowledge; it is a raising of knowledge, of cognition, to a higher level, on which everything is endowed with a new brilliance.³⁸

While mysticism can thus create an illusion with regard to knowledge reflecting one's inner life alone, it can also serve as a significant source of the same, also adding to reality in the most elevated sense. This account—in which he adduces an example of a mystical-unitary connection with a tree (nature mysticism)—evinces that mysticism is not merely introvertive but also becomes extrovertive when the mystic turns outwards to the world, thereby joining the inner with the outer by means of knowledge.

According to Steiner, in the higher sense knowledge not only reflects reality in human cognition but can also change it. The close correspondence between his characterization of mysticism in this 1901 volume and his description of Goethe's perception of reality in other writings—when he had ostensibly retreated from idealism and mysticism—enables us to assume that, *a priori*, his idealism did not occasionally slip into the field of mysticism.³⁹ His philosophical idealism rather serves as a channel for expressing his philosophical mysticism: his statements concerning Goethe's worldview—e.g., “*In opposition to that way of looking at things which destroys life in order to know life, Goethe early on established the possibility and need of a higher way*” (original italics)—and his quotation of Goethe: “The true is Godlike; it does not appear directly; we must divine it from its manifestations.”⁴⁰

38. Steiner, *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age*, 109.

39. His book on Goethe from 1897 (*Goethe's World View*) contradicts the assertion that at that time Steiner abandoned his objective idealism/early mysticism.

40. Cf. also: “The greatness of this idea [= the “idea” operating in nature], which Goethe then

D. Steiner's philosophy as "philosophic mysticism"

In addition to the complexities in understanding Steiner himself—the inconsistencies in some of his arguments, and actual/imagined contradictions—I shall also briefly explore another issue that, while not related to his own figure, exacerbates them. The latter arises from several semantic fields associated with the subject of this article—mysticism, revelation, visions, prophecy, spirituality, metaphysics, occultism, esotericism, gnosis, and theosophy. Representing diverse fields of experience and knowledge, at least some of which intersect, all are amenable to divergent interpretations.⁴¹

To this we should add the closely-related or parallel terms the later Steiner preferred when outlining his thought—(spiritual) initiation, enlightenment, super-sensible perception/seeing/hearing/knowledge, consciousness (divided into imagination, inspiration, and intuition), and, of course, anthroposophy, (anthroposophic) spiritual science, and spiritual investigation/research. Steiner perpetually sought to highlight the fact that his teaching was not the same as any of the former despite the close correspondence his terminology displays

sought to extend to the animal world also, *dawns upon one only when one tries to make it alive in one's spirit*, when one undertakes to rethink it. One then becomes aware that this thought is the very nature of the plant itself translated into the *idea* and living in our spirit just as it lives in the object; one observes also that one makes an organism alive for oneself right into its smallest parts, *that one pictures it not as a dead, finished object, but rather as something evolving, becoming, as something never at rest within itself* (Steiner, *Goethean Science* (1883), chapters 2 and 6).

41. See the relevant entries in the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. In that on mysticism, Jérôme Rousse-Lacordaire points to the affinities the latter exhibits with esotericism and the difficulty in distinguishing between them, both privileging *experience* over theory, pursuing unity, maintaining that the core of religion lies beyond rational discourse, and being attacked for their irrational foundation (ibid, 819). I treat mysticism herein as a spiritual experience customarily referred to as revelation and unity. I understand esotericism (and occultism) more as a corpus—i.e., I regard the two terms as cause and effect, the first (mysticism) prompting the second. Authentic esoteric/occult knowledge thus rests on unmediated mystical experience/revelation—prior to becoming a tradition. I am of the opinion that hereby I am not limiting myself to “just feel right” (Hammer, “Mysticism and Esotericism as Contested Taxonomical Categories,” 20), as the mean to clarify the terms and distinguish between them.

with these semantic fields.⁴² We have already remarked on Steiner’s ambivalent and complex attitude towards mysticism (section C), also having seen that he could identify himself with a mysticism grounded in thought/ideas.⁴³

Endless definitions of mysticism and its features have been proposed, indicating the broad range it covers—from the “moderate” pole represented by the spiritual experience of the divine presence (revelation) to the “radical” pole (in the sense of distancing from given human states of mind) of *unio-mystica*, in which the individual is subsumed within the divine fullness.⁴⁴ The first merges with revelatory, visionary, and prophetic phenomena, thereby blurring mysticism’s uniqueness to the extent of existing in and of itself. The “radical” pole of effacement/annulment, in contrast, excludes non-extreme mystical states from the phenomenon—e.g., mild mystical union of the ilk of nature mysticism, which preserves the distinction between subject and object despite their unity. Following Stace, we refer to this as “identity in difference,” positing it as the thread that runs through all Steiner’s thought, both early and late.⁴⁵

42. Steiner’s employment of the conventional vocabulary serves various purposes. The title of his *Christianity as Mystical Fact* (1902) draws attention to authentic Christianity as a direct, inner mystical experience rather than a faith or creed (such as could be expected from someone who would regard Christianity as a mystical fact even if he did not call himself a mystic). In *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds: How Is It Achieved?* (1904/6), Steiner observes that the spiritual reality he addresses is fundamentally the same as that of which the “mystics,—Gnostics, and theosophists” speak (p. 20)—without identifying himself completely with them. His *Occult Science in Outline* (1909/10) similarly evinces that the fields of knowledge discussed therein belong to an occultism that posits itself as an alternative to ordinary science even though the author does not explicitly refer to himself as an occultist.

43. See below.

44. Cf. McGinn’s series *A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, and Blumenthal’s writings on philosophic mysticism (see below). Nor does William James list unity as one of the features of mysticism in his chapter on mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. According to the latter, one of mysticism’s most prominent hallmarks is its noeticism—i.e., experience of another, deep form of knowledge that stamps a strong imprint on the individual even after the event itself. Stace and Underhill, in contrast, contend that mystical experience rests on *unity*—visions and the hearing of voices only being secondary phenomena: “Now we have said that the end which the mystic sets before him is *conscious union with a living Absolute*. . . . In the mystic this union is conscious, personal, and complete. ‘He enjoys’, says St. John of the Cross, ‘a certain contact of the soul with the Divinity; and it is God Himself who is then felt and tasted’” (Underhill, *Mysticism*, 73).

45. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 72. See n24 above.

In characterizing Steiner as a mystic, I follow a *via media* approach—i.e., neither moderate nor extremist. I understand mysticism in the original meaning of the knowledge of things hidden from human senses, cognition, and consciousness in their given, familiar state. This can manifest itself to human beings, whether proactively (through practice) or randomly. I also regard mysticism as focusing on mystical union—also concealed from the given human state of mind.

As we have already noted, Steiner does not speak of what Stace refers to as “undifferentiated unity.” The early and later Steiner both rather relate to the moderate type. The extreme form, in which all the distinctions and boundaries merge, is incompatible with the *spiritual science* Steiner sought to establish as an alternative to the science of his day—that which investigates details and their integration within the whole.

As we saw in the previous section, Steiner regards the mystical state as enabling supreme knowledge, the key to insight always lying in inwardness and direct experience vs. theory and inferential metaphysics. Hidden knowledge is enabled/prompted by union; in the language we adduced above, the products of the mystical state of union are the fields embodied in the terms occultism, esotericism, gnosis, theosophy, and anthroposophy as “knowledge of the higher worlds.” In relation to the cause and effect, as evinced by the citations from Steiner in the previous section, the mystical state is the cause, the contents linked to the terms being the outcome.⁴⁶

D1. What is “philosophic mysticism”?

I explored the claim regarding the existence of philosophic (or intellectual) mysticism as a branch of mysticism some years ago with the aid of two Maimonidean

46. For the early (in *The Philosophy of Freedom*) and later Steiner (in *The Stages of Higher Knowledge*, 46 [1908] and in *The Evolution of Consciousness*, 101 [1923]), *intuition* is an unmediated cognitive/thought perception of reality that creates unity on the thought/idea level, rather than an emotion or gut feeling (p. 24 below).

scholars—David Blumenthal and Gideon Freudenthal.⁴⁷ Philosophic mysticism is philosophy as a branch of mysticism rather than mysticism as a branch of philosophy or philosophy that crosses over into mysticism (as may happen with idealistic philosophy). Blumenthal in particular has devoted many years to the study of the mystical background of Maimonidean thought, including possible influences, such as Egyptian Sufism. Outlining the features of philosophic mysticism in the Jewish-Muslim context and in general, he suggests that it encompasses various types. His working premise (also espoused by several of his colleagues) is that scholars make too sharp and arbitrary a distinction between philosophy and mysticism with regard to medieval thought.⁴⁸

Blumenthal defines philosophic mysticism as “Contact with the divine, whether it be initiated by the divine or by the human.” Although it requires strict philosophical, intellectual preparation, the outcome is a “flow of intellectual energy from the divine . . . generating an experience which will be abstract in quality and mystical (or prophetic) in nature.”⁴⁹ On this reading, philosophic mysticism is a mode of intellectual study and cognitive observation of the contents of the world that originates in God, leading to trans-philosophical experience.

Maintaining that Maimonides was just as much mystic as philosopher, he characterizes Maimonides’ philosophic mysticism as an “intellectual contemplation” that is

47. I preceded this with a mystical commentary on Maimonides’ view of prophecy through the prism of Steiner’s doctrine.

48. The historian, Orientalist, and scholar of mysticism Paul Fenton identifies Georges Vajda—a philosopher and Arabic/Jewish philosophy scholar who mentored Fenton and Blumenthal—as adopting this term in the wake of Ibrahim Medacour’s discussion of Al-Farabi’s philosophy (“Forward,” in Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 14).

49. Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 21; idem, “What is Philosophic Mysticism?” 26. His mystical interpretation of Maimonidean philosophy rests first and foremost on the final chapter of the *Guide for the Perplexed* (3.51), which compares the path leading to God through the Torah (Judaism) and philosophy—which culminates in reaching Him, standing before Him, seeing Him, hearing Him, speaking with Him, and cleaving to Him intellectually—to a person’s journey to the king’s palace (Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 618–20). The other passages in the book Blumenthal regards as mystical he reads through the prism of this chapter, not focusing on unity in his definition of mysticism.

the moment when thought fades into mystical experience. It is the transition from thinking-about-God to being-in-the-presence of God. It is a mystical moment or, more appropriately, a mystical-intellectual way of being in the world.⁵⁰

In his view, philosophical mysticism thus belongs to what I called the “moderate” category of mysticism—i.e., it is primarily awareness of the divine existence/presence and a flowing of intellectual energy from God.⁵¹

Both the early and later Steiner meet these definitions. At the beginning of the first German edition of *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1893/94), for example, which shifts from (ordinary) abstract thought to the experiential level, Steiner states:

The book leads at first into somewhat abstract regions, where thought must draw sharp outlines if it is to reach clearly defined positions. But the reader will also be led out of these *arid concepts* into concrete life. I am indeed fully convinced that one must *raise oneself into the ethereal realm of concepts* if one would *experience* every aspect of existence. Whoever appreciates only the pleasures of the senses is unacquainted with life’s sweetest savors. The oriental sages make their disciples live a life of renunciation and asceticism for years before they impart to them their own wisdom. The western world no longer demands pious exercises and ascetic habits as a preparation for science, but it does require the willingness to withdraw oneself awhile from the immediate impressions of life, and to betake oneself into the *realm of pure thought*.⁵²

50. Blumenthal, “Maimonides’ Philosophic Mysticism,” 133.

51. Blumenthal does not emphasize the unifying feature of mysticism despite the fact that the final chapter of the *Guide* includes (moderate) accounts of contact/union with God: “This kind of worship ought only to be engaged in after intellectual conception has been achieved. If, however, you have apprehended God and His acts in accordance with what is required by the intellect, you should afterwards engage in totally devoting yourself to Him, endeavor to come closer to Him, and *strengthen the bond between you and Him—that is the intellect*” (ibid, 620). Maimonides later comments with respect to the forefathers of the Hebrew nation that “because of the union of their intellects through apprehension of Him, it came about that He made a lasting *covenant* with each of them” (623–24 [original italics]). I shall not discuss here the important distinction between Maimonides and Steiner, which is linked to the former’s (mono)theism and the latter’s monism, also affecting the issue of knowledge and its limits. Precisely here we should note the two elements they share: a) the value of reinforcing thought for knowledge; and b) the individual cleaves to God by means of the intellect, only this being capable of uniting them in the deepest sense.

52. Extracted from the English translation: *The Philosophy of Freedom*, xxix.

The Philosophy of Freedom's ultimate goal is thus to reach the level of direct experience in the spiritual realm—the realm of pure thought. Steiner's ontological argument for the existence of such a sphere, within which it is possible to “experience every aspect of existence” and to which one must cleave in order to draw out everything embedded in the book, seems to me inconsistent with idealistic philosophy and the philosophy of inner experience (*Erlebnis*) on their own. The volume thus appears to be a manual intended to enable the individual to reach another realm of existence rather than simply a polemic offering philosophical answers to existential questions.

Drawing on Blumenthal's definition of philosophic mysticism, we may say that Steiner refers to a trans-philosophic experience attained through philosophical discourse and study. Within this framework, *thought itself* becomes spiritual-mystical experience.⁵³

Further support for the claim that Steiner regarded *The Philosophy of Freedom* as forming a bridge from philosophy to trans-philosophical experience can be found in the fact that the later Steiner presented his theosophic/anthroposophic teaching as serving the same purpose—merely by a different route (i.e., not philosophic). In the preface to the third edition (1910) of his *Theosophy: An Introduction to the Supersensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man* (1904), he observes: “Those who are attracted more to another way of searching for the [super-sensible] truths described here will find it in my book *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Both these books lead in different ways to the same destination.”⁵⁴

53. In a Hebrew article on “Maimonides as Mystic”—based on a lecture delivered at a Maimonidean conference on this subject in 2004—Blumenthal remarks that in philosophic mysticism “thought gradually shifts into standing before God in intellectual observation without completely being detached from thinking. Here, intellectualism gradually becomes spiritual experience” (p. viii). In other words, philosophical speculation is not merely a channel that leads to trans-philosophical mystical experience but (as per Steiner) thought itself becomes a spiritual experience—experiencing thought as an entity linked to the world no less than to the thinking person.

54. Steiner, *Theosophy*, 16. I see no reason here to suspect that the later Steiner misled his followers, projecting his later thought (in the sense of instructions for spiritual development) upon his earlier views.

The early *The Philosophy of Freedom* thus accompanied Steiner towards his later writings, serving as their philosophical, ontological, and epistemological foundation. Steiner expanded it in 1918, also inserting a number of clarifications some scholars consider artificial—i.e., designed to make his early and later thought consistent (see below).

D2. Union of the “knower, known, and mind”

While Freudenthal also presents Maimonides’ philosophic thought as mystical, he places greater emphasis on philosophic mysticism as mystical union. His article on Maimonides’ and Salomon Maimon’s philosophic mysticism takes us one step further in comparing Steiner and Maimonides as philosophical mystics.⁵⁵ Rather than revolving around the last chapter of the *Guide*, Freudenthal’s discussion of Maimonides as a mystic rests on his account of the “union of knower, known, and mind.”⁵⁶ Maimonides holds that God exemplifies this union perfectly and eternally (i.e., is already fully actualized) as an indistinguishable unity because He has no plurality—even within His unity. In the human realm, however, this union originally only existed potentially, human beings needing to realize it by operating their minds if they wish to grasp reality, cleave to God and to their own divine nature.⁵⁷

55. According to Freudenthal, “Philosophical mysticism should satisfy two further demands. First, the experience itself should involve philosophical content. Second, philosophy should be able to account for the experience” (“The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon,” 116).

56. Blumenthal: “intellecting subject, intellected object, intellect”—or without preserving the original Arabic/Hebrew root: “the knower, known, and mind” (“What is Philosophical Mysticism?” 36). According to Maimonides, the “knower” is the person who operates his intellect in practice, the “known” the intellect inherently imprinted in things (e.g., the form of a tree abstracted cognitively from its material), and the “mind” human intellect in conjunction with the known.

57. Maimonides thus maintains that God’s “mind” or God as the unity of “knower, known, and mind” differs categorically from humanity, God thus understanding reality differently—perfectly—than human beings. Steiner’s argument that human knowledge is unlimited (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, 91–92) is consequently implausible from Maimonides’ monotheistic/theistic perspective. If we apply Maimonidean terminology to Steiner’s *The Philosophy of Freedom*, the “knower” is Steinerian “thinking” (person who relates in his or her thinking to the world’s content), the “known” Steiner’s “concepts” and “ideas” as the world’s content independent of human cognition (i.e., abstracted from their materiality), and the “mind” the notions that arise intuitively in an individual.

According to Freudenthal, what characterizes mysticism in general and distinguishes it from philosophy in particular is its *structure* rather than *content*:

Like all mystical experience, philosophical mysticism attempts *to overcome some form of opposition between subject and object*. And like all negations, the negation of this opposition is saturated with the content of what it negates. . . . Philosophical mysticism seeks to overcome the opposition between subject and object by philosophical means.⁵⁸

Freudenthal thus regards mysticism as a structural change in the individual's relation to God and/or the world. This by definition also requires a structural change in a person's relationship with him or herself—a self-perception as forming part of something broader rather than remaining an isolated subject. On this reading, mysticism is always linked to experience of the “ontological union of the subject and sacred object”—a union that can exist in diverse forms and various intensities.

D3. The Philosophy of Freedom as “philosophic mysticism”

In my opinion, such descriptions of experience as structural, conceptual, mental, or even physical change, associated with the individual's union with the world's essence (thought) and sustained by human thinking, form the pillars of Steiner's arguments in *The Philosophy of Freedom*. Philosophically, the latter are anchored in “ontology” (concepts and ideas as objective realities independent of human beings), cognition (epistemology), ethical conduct (Steinerian moral individualism), and human freedom (transcendence of any conditions). Steiner specifically asserts that the book is essentially grounded in the “experience of intuitive thought” rather than hypothetical or inferential arguments—and thence hypothetical or inferential metaphysics.⁵⁹

First addressing the edition that does not include the 1918 additions (the later Steiner), I then turn my attention to the latter and their relationship with

58. Freudenthal, “The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon,” 116. Freudenthal further argues herein that this type of mysticism can exist in consistent materialism in precisely the same way as it can in consistent idealism, the object of experience being culture dependent.

59. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 212.

other later statements. Herein, I set out to demonstrate that Steiner did not arbitrarily seek to bring his later thought into line with his earlier.

Let us first analyze a passage in *The Philosophy of Freedom* that, in my view, presents the experience of union linked to structural change (à la Freudenthal) with respect to an individual's attitude towards the world (subsuming the gap between separate subjects and objects) and towards him or herself (including the corporal aspect, to which Maimonides does not refer). For the sake of clarity, we must first place the book in its literary context.

The Philosophy of Freedom is divided into two primary parts and three as a whole. The first ("Knowledge of Freedom") discusses epistemology, Steiner herein offering both ontological and cognitive arguments. They all rest on the claim that concepts and ideas exist independently (objective idealism) as part of the totality of the world.⁶⁰ Steiner asserts (*contra* Kant) that human beings can grasp concepts and ideas as they exist in and of themselves, knowledge thus not being bounded.⁶¹ The second part of the book ("The Reality of Freedom") explores human free will.

The two sections are linked as follows: Steiner's interest lying in transcending Spinozan "free necessity" (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, Chapter 1)—i.e., demonstration of the possibility of human free choice unbound by any constraints—he is compelled to locate human freedom in a place that encompasses objective reality (ideas) and is independent of human being. To this end, his first task (in the first part) is to evince: a) that concepts/ideas actually exist; b) that human beings

60. Concentrated in the first part, in Chapter 5 ("The Act of Knowing"). With the exception of the first chapter (the second in the first edition), in which Steiner deals with Spinozan determinism, the title ("Knowledge of Freedom") thus has nothing to do with the content.

61. Concentrated in Chapter 7 ("Are there Limits to Knowledge?"), which concludes the first part. Herein, Steiner presents a further epistemological claim—namely, that any allegation regarding existence that lies outside percepts (phenomena perceived by human cognition), concepts and any union beyond that of percepts and concepts is mere speculation (*The Philosophy of Freedom*, 90). In Steinerian terminology, percepts are related to that part of reality that can be grasped by human beings before becoming attached to concepts (which belong to another realm of reality).

can think objectively (perception of concepts/ideas in and of themselves); and in the second part; c) that the highest level of human moral decisions and deeds does not rest on any coerced impulsion, *also* being anchored in a reality that is independent of human beings (pure thought).⁶² The content of the *experience* that stands at the heart of these three arguments and unites them consists of *a priori* perception of human union with the reality outside a person—i.e., the inner human and outer, external world as phenomenon and idea that also includes the human body. All these form part of the whole as a single continuum:

We certainly are not external things, but we belong together with them to one and the same world. The section of the world which I perceive to be myself as subject is permeated by the *stream of the universal cosmic process*. To my perception I am, in the first instance, *confined within the limits bounded by my skin*. But all that is contained within this skin belongs to the cosmos as a whole. Hence, for a relation to subsist between my organism and an object external to me, it is by no means necessary that something of the object should slip into me, or make an impression on my mind, like a signet ring on wax. The question: “How do I get information about that tree ten feet away from me?” is utterly misleading. It springs from the view that the boundaries of my body are absolute barriers, through which information about things filters into me. *The forces of which are at work inside my body are the same as those which exist outside. Therefore, I really am the things*; not, however, “I” in so far as I am a percept of myself as subject, but “I” in so far as I am a *part of the universal process*. The percept of the tree belongs to the same whole as my I. *This universal world process produces equally the percept of the tree out there and the percept of the I in here. . . . In so far as these are entities that belong together, I can as world knower discover the common element in both only through thinking, which relates one to the other by means of concepts.*⁶³

62. Zander’s contention that Steiner’s idealism in *The Philosophy of Freedom* is arbitrary and artificial, the volume serving as a bridge from idealism to Steiner’s individualism is thus untenable from a philosophic perspective as well (Steiner’s philosophical structure and logic). Without the “idea,” Steiner’s view of freedom (free choice beyond Spinozan determinism) collapses—just as it does without the element of individualism. Steiner’s idealism constitutes the necessary foundation of his theory of freedom. To this we may add the question of whether Steiner succeeded in proving (or at least reasonably demonstrating) in *The Philosophy of Freedom* that objective thinking is possible and that those who unite themselves with the objective content of *thought* free themselves from their conditionality (free choice). This issue—the answer to which I suggest is negative—lies beyond my present purview: see in detail: Koren, *Judaism and Anthroposophy*, Vol. 1, Chapter 11 (in Hebrew).

63. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 82–83.

Human beings as subjects forming part of the world (object) in a primary and essential sense, the feeling of separateness (“a Monad which receives information about the rest of the world in some way from without”⁶⁴) is an illusion (“due to perceiving”) for two reasons: a) the confines of human skin—i.e., a person’s body appears to him or her cognitively as a barrier in relation to the outside world; and b) the fact that human beings perceive the concepts they produce as deriving from (within) themselves, because they themselves are the thinkers. In the sense of cause and effect, this Steinerian experience of union—an experience to which he seeks to introduce his readers—is the cause, in line with the following philosophical tenet:

It is not due to the objects that they are given to us at first without their corresponding concepts, but to our mental organization. Our whole being functions in such a way that from every real thing the relevant elements come to us from two sides, from *perceiving* and from *thinking*.⁶⁵

Mystical experience being apprehended as real, unmediated, and absolute (à la James and Freudenthal)—i.e., lying on a higher level than discursive, hypothetical, sceptical thinking—it imparts to the one exposed to it a sense of total certainty in the verity of its contents. This, in my opinion, is the way in which we should understand the following statements—which are more a reprimand of those who hold prejudiced views contrary to those Steiner held:

*What right have you to declare the world to be complete without thinking? Does not the world produce thinking in the heads of men with the same necessity as it produces the blossom on a plant? Plant a seed in the earth. It puts forth root and stem. It unfolds into leaves and blossoms. Set the plant before yourself. It connects itself, in your mind, with a definite concept. Why should this concept belong any less to the whole plant than leaf and blossom?*⁶⁶

64. Ibid, 211–12.

65. Ibid, 67 (original italics). In other words, while human beings, including their thought/consciousness (the united-universal aspect), are part of the world, they also possess their own consciousness as part of it, thus being able to separate themselves thereby from the world or unite themselves with it through thought/consciousness, in this way restoring their primal union with the world.

66. Ibid, 65.

The Philosophy of Freedom was written with precisely such confidence, a fact that may be linked not only with its mystical-experiential basis but also with Steiner's own personality; his temperament was such that he did not readily recognize hindrances. Whatever the case may be in this respect, the book unconditionally meets Blumenthal and Freudenthal's criteria of philosophic mysticism.

In this context, we must also recall that in *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steinerian *intuition* serves as the vehicle whereby a person extrapolates the concepts for his percepts, thereby linking together the elements of the world—ties that are inherent in things themselves. According to Steiner, intuition relates not only to objective knowledge of the world but also to specific events (occurrences) into which a person is absorbed on the social and interpersonal level. Ethical conduct in its highest form is thus founded upon a moral intuition that deduces from the whole independent world of ideas the right (ideal) act to perform in any given situation:

From every occurrence which I perceive, and which concern me, *there springs at the same time a moral duty*: namely, to do my little bit towards seeing that this occurrence is made to serve the development of civilization. In addition to the concept which reveals to me the connections of events or objects according to the law of nature, *there is also a moral label attached to them which for me, as a moral person, gives ethical directions as to how I have to conduct myself*.⁶⁷

This passage suggests that intuition is a person's innate ability to gain *revelation* from the outside world. Under normal circumstances, a person does not recognize the moral imprint of things/events in the world. World content (the "idea") thus manifests itself to a person in his or her inner self through intuition as a self-capacity. Occurring within the soul, it is a spiritual epiphany human beings attain by their own power. Rather than passively acquired (as per James' mystical criteria), it is gained by intense inner cognitive activity. Steiner's mysticism is thus "realistic and activist" in the terms Bergman applied to Martin Buber during his mystical phase—directly connected to events in the world and human deeds.

67. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 133–34.

This presentation of spiritual revelation alongside human activity is not necessarily strained or apologetic in nature, more likely being the closing of a circle: prophetic/mystical tradition treated as revelation from above (top down) can also be the outcome of human endeavor (bottom up). The whole includes what can derive from the divine dimension with what may come from the human sphere.

D4. Later Steinerian utterances linked to “The Philosophy of Freedom”

Excluding the additions Steiner made to the book in 1918 in order to identify the early/original formulation—the mystic “nerve” that haunts his early thought—is an interesting exercise. As noted above and is well known, Steiner allowed himself greater license in the 1918 edition, even employing more openly mystical tones.⁶⁸

Let us turn first to the 1918 additions. Some of the *revelation* that forms part of the Steinerian intuitive expanse (intuition being, as we observed, the manifestation of content/guidance the thinking person grasps and is presented as such) becomes clearer herein, for example, serving as both explication and elaboration: “Intuition is the conscious experience—in pure spirit—of a pure spiritual content. Only through an intuition can the essence of thinking be grasped.”⁶⁹ Steiner could thus immediately proceed to speak of the “*manifestation* of thinking,” so that in “its own essential nature,” thinking “certainly contains the real “I” or

68. Most of the 1918 additions occur at the end of chapters (3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13) and in the two expansions in the chapter entitled “The Consequences of Monism” in the third part of the volume (“Ultimate Questions”). Others are the appendix and the “Preface to the first edition, 1984, revised 1918.” In the first edition of the volume, this constitutes the first chapter rather than a Preface, however. To these we add the elaboration at the beginning of Chapter 9. Some of the passages are explanations and responses to questions and criticism leveled against Steiner between 1894 and 1918; others are clarifications and amplifications. The mode of the latter (the late Steiner) differs from the majority (but not all) of the descriptions in the original version, these being responsible for creating the impression that Steiner projected his late thought onto his earlier philosophy.

69. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 122. This statement suggests that experiencing the essentiality in *thought* is not accessible to ordinary speculative/inferential philosophy, no self-existence thus being attributed to thought. The essence of thinking as the unmediated experience of reality is only available through intuition.

ego.”⁷⁰ Only the consciousness of the “I” is originally dependent upon the human physical frame, which gives the “I” its sense of separateness and the capacity for self-reflection. The true “I,” in contrast, lives eternally within thought/the “idea.”

Although these notions are present in the original version of the book, they are formulated obscurely—the only exceptions being some passages the most important of which we have discussed above.⁷¹

Nor do I regard as forced the 1918 addition to the effect that,

It is to be remembered, too, that the idea of *percept* developed in this book is not to be confused with the idea of external sense percept which is but a special instance of it. . . . “percept” is here taken to be everything that approaches man through the senses *or through the spirit*, before it has been grasped by the actively elaborated concept.⁷²

The version that does not contain the additions already adduces a spiritual reality that can be experienced—i.e., not as the hypothetical metaphysics Steiner rejected on several occasions—no problem exists in attributing to the term “percept” (pre-conceptual experience) as a sensory perception a super-sensible one. Steiner was and remained a monist and naturalist. A reality in which only percepts and concepts exist can contain all the upper worlds and hierarchies of the spiritual beings about which Steiner later spoke.

In other words, what he later referred to as “this world” also covers the upper realms. The super-sensible is not supernatural; no supernaturalism exists in Steiner’s world—just as there are no miracles. The super-sensible is merely an addition to the sensory as part of the whole. In effect, Steiner thus already presents *thinking* and its products/contents as spiritual (super-sensible) perception/experience in *The Philosophy of Freedom*.

Let me conclude this section by citing statements Steiner made in 1912 and 1913 that may be read as arising from the early edition of *The Philosophy*

70. Ibid, 123–24 (original italics). In the original German, the “Erscheinen” (des Denkens) is italicized—i.e., the *appearance* (or epiphany) of thinking.

71. To these we may add pp. 40, 66–68, 115–16.

72. Ibid, 108 (original italics).

of *Freedom*. In a passage quoted above according to which, in a profound sense and from an elevated perspective, the human body does not separate a person from the world—i.e., no world exists outside a person just as none exists solely within a person and “*Therefore, I really am the things*” as part of “the stream of the universal cosmic process.” As our discussion indicates, for Steiner “the stream of cosmic process” that unifies all reality is the stream manifested in the “idea.”

Steiner’s spiritual manual, *A Way of Self-Knowledge* (1912), opens with a meditative exercise designed to change the individual’s attitude towards his or her body—i.e., lead to the inner experience that a person is not his or her body, that the corpus belongs to the external world more than to the individual, that the body will eventually disappear and dissolve into the elements of the world to which it belongs, and that the soul has no essential association with it. According to Steiner, this meditative observation regarding death/the dissolution of the body prompts an inner human experience that is independent of the body and death—foreign to both. Although people live in this world in the body, their skin separating them from the external world (as evinced by the account in *The Philosophy of Freedom* [pp. 82–83]), in a deep sense the soul and cognition—and in particular the “I”—live in an unbounded world, just as knowing is unlimited.⁷³

A similar passage for a meditative exercise occurs in *The Threshold of the Spiritual World* (1913) in light of the fact that human beings form part of the “stream of the universal cosmic process,” in which they participate through thinking:

In thinking, I experience myself united with the stream of Cosmic existence. The value of meditating the thought lies much less in the abstract understanding of it than in what is to be gained by repeatedly experiencing the strengthening effect it has on the soul if it flows powerfully through one’s inner life. It expands in the soul like a deep spiritual breath of life.⁷⁴

73. Steiner, *A Way of Self-Knowledge*, 103–13.

74. *The Threshold of the Spiritual World*, 8–9 (original italics). The “deep spiritual breath of life” to which he refers here may be related to the “ethereal realm of concepts” about which he wrote in the Preface to the first edition of *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1893/94).

In this sub-section, I have demonstrated the continuity between *The Philosophy of Freedom* without and with the later additions, also adducing other Steinerian sources that point in the same direction—namely, that Steiner’s doctrine as a whole (the early and late Steiner) is founded upon philosophical mysticism in the primary sense of mystical experience through thought/ideas.

E. Epilogue and conclusions

In this article, I adopt a more synchronic approach to Steiner, identifying recurring elements that shed light on what I regard as Steiner’s “central intuition”—namely, his philosophic mysticism as an alternative to modern philosophy and science. In my opinion, the “scarlet thread” that runs through Steiner’s thought, both early and late, is the founding of a science anchored in spiritual (mystical) experiences raised to a cognitive level and explained rationally. In early Steiner this primarily includes *The Philosophy of Freedom*, and his books on Goethe (before and after he wrote *The Philosophy of Freedom*), and on Mysticism (1901).⁷⁵ This perspective allows us to examine and understand all his writings—his views, intentions, polemics, the (real and imaginary) contradictions in his descriptions and claims, what he chose to obscure or reveal and intensify for diverse reasons (Steiner as a hermeneutical problem), and the developmental stages of his philosophy. On the one hand, this spiritual science is the heir of contemporaneous sciences—as his own words indicate. On the other, it conflicts with them, modern sciences not recognizing *experience* in the existence of an objective spirit as the completion of tangible reality and its source and cause. Steiner thus referred to them as materialistic—a product of

75. To this we may add the champion of individualism and authenticity, Nietzsche propounded a personal morality beyond prescribed good and evil, thereby expressing one dimension of Steiner’s “science of freedom.” And unlike Goethe, Haeckel enabled Steiner to present the “idea” from the side of the developing concrete and animated universe—as arising from within it naturally and necessarily in the framework of a monistic conception and non-transcendence. Again, because of a problem of length and scope, I have refrained in this article from discussing how Nietzsche and Haeckel (individualism / authenticity and naturalism) fit into Steiner’s grand scheme (during the years 1895–1900). I hope to expand on this elsewhere.

abstract, hypothetical thought that has no direct intercourse with reality. Covering *all areas of life and existence*, this spiritual science relates to them in an unmediated fashion, in a similar manner to the way in which Goethe perceived the “idea” in nature (the particular and the whole). It also does not subsume human beings as individuals within a cold, charmless, and meaningless mechanical universe, because it acknowledges that the person as an individual and his or her moral deeds are the most elevated elements (the “crowning feature of the edifice”) in the drama of nature and evolution.⁷⁶ Enchantment and signification are found in the merging of nature, “idea,” development, and freedom—without any need for religion or a transcendent God.

The early Steiner’s engagement with Goethe points to two aspects of this spiritual science. Goethe laid the foundation for seeing and understanding nature and evolution from the perspective of the immanent “idea” that operates in creation. This makes a transcendent “idea” obsolete. Steiner also attributed to Goethe a form of thinking/perception of reality rather than merely distinctive views and opinions regarding nature. This serves as the basis for Steiner’s categorical distinction between abstract and spiritual thinking.

These aspects of spiritual science, which subsequently became anthroposophic spiritual science, are already enshrined in *The Philosophy of Freedom*. According to Steiner, this volume was intended to serve as the “basis for a modern world conception” (as per its subtitle). In other words, it was designed to unify the all-inclusive “new spiritual sciences”—in line with the role classical philosophy played for all the sciences:

The realms of life are many. For each one, special sciences develop. But life itself is a unity, and the more deeply the sciences try to penetrate into their separate realms, the more they withdraw themselves from the vision of the world as a living whole. There must be a knowledge which seeks in the separate sciences the elements for leading back once more to the fullness of life. . . . *in this book the aim is a philosophical one—that knowledge itself become organically alive.*⁷⁷

76. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 169.

77. *Ibid.*, xxix. See also the original German edition.

The new spiritual science, whose core Steiner sets out already in *The Philosophy of Freedom* and the two-preceding works on Goethe, is a mystical, “occult” science because it rests on the claim of *spiritual experience* through revelation and unity. In other words, it embodies Steiner’s thesis that he sees the “idea.” Most people not possessing this faculty, they do not perceive themselves as united with it. In *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner thus already presents an occult knowledge in the field of thinking/the “idea.”

On this reading, we must distinguish between two mystical/occult dimensions in Steiner’s overall thought: a) the nature of thought and the “I” essentially linked to it; b) occult knowledge in the sense of “knowledge of the higher worlds.” The relationship between the two is such that the first constitutes the foundation of the second by reinforcing it with epistemological and ontological arguments. Steiner thus regarded *The Philosophy of Freedom* as the basis of all future sciences—up to the period when humanity advances towards super-sensible cognition.

This element of *thinking* and the “I” continues into later Steinerian thought, everything embodied in the “knowledge of the higher worlds” being added to it as an extra storey as proposed above. Steiner’s doctrine thus clearly developed, the late Steiner displaying much greater occult knowledge than the early. While Staudenmaier’s claim that the late Steiner was much more creative than his early counterpart is also plausible in principle, this does not mean that the early Steiner was unfamiliar with occult knowledge and the super-sensible faculties that lie at the heart of it on a personal experiential level—not only because seeing the “idea” is already an occult form of knowledge. It would be an interesting scholarly exercise to try and identify the intimations of super-sensible cognition in the early Steiner. In my opinion, at least something of this (in addition to seeing the “idea”) already existed.⁷⁸

78. We may adduce one example: In the preface to his 1897 volume on *Goethe’s World View*, (the early) Steiner argues that he could penetrate Goethe’s soul after the latter was already deceased and trace lines of his character of which Goethe himself had been unaware. In his

In this context, we should also note that Steiner’s manual for spiritual development (in his *knowledge of the higher worlds*), with its detailed exercises and descriptions of their consequences, was written between 1904 and 1906—i.e., around two years after he became a theosophist. While not entirely impossible, it is difficult to imagine how in such a brief period he could have found a way of establishing an orderly and detailed theosophic doctrine (also in his 1904 *Theosophie*) and become a spiritual guide of such caliber.

I originally suggested that Steiner’s early philosophy, which carries over into his later, belongs more to philosophical mysticism as presented here while his later teaching as “knowledge of the higher worlds” falls more into the category of occult knowledge (science). While this division is warranted, an important part of Steiner’s later writings deals with the stages of spiritual development and instructions for achieving states of enlightenment and spiritual initiation. Steiner’s accounts of the spiritual imagination, inspiration, and intuition exhibit close correspondences with earlier prophetic teachings that depict the psycho-spiritual mechanism of states of revelation and lead towards them.⁷⁹ In other words, Steiner’s later thought is not limited to occult knowledge as data but seeks to lead his readers to the “*ethereal realm of concepts*” of which he speaks in *The Philosophy of Freedom*.

1917 lecture on *Anthroposophy and Psychoanalysis* II, Steiner speaks of the spiritual link between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche after the former’s death (pp. 72–73). He also criticizes Jung for being ignorant of the intimate spiritual connection between human beings and the spiritual world—*inter alia* because his psychology was abstract, not transcending the archetypes or directly perceiving the specific spiritual occurrences in human life. The early Steiner’s observations about Goethe’s psyche may thus be seen as a “super-sensible introduction” to his later occult knowledge concerning Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. A further common Steinerian synchronic motif is that abstract thought does not grasp reality in its detail and depth.

79. We may adduce Maimonides’ treatment of prophecy in the *Guide*, Part 2 (chapters I have not discussed here in light of my definition of mysticism as the establishment of union as a condition for knowledge), in which he describes the cosmic intelligence that informs the prophets and philosophers and the importance of imagination within the prophetic process—both on the level of receiving divine messages and on the pedagogic-didactic level (i.e., the prophet as guide and social leader).

This article thus essentially affirms the claim—made by Steiner himself and his followers—that his early and later thought exist along a continuum. While not everything asserted naively is necessarily specious, I still reject the contention that the two periods of creativity are identical, however.

In conclusion, I suggest the following points:

- a) The young Steiner warmly welcomed Goethe’s response to Schiller, perceiving the “idea” in nature rather than simply assuming its existence—i.e., it is not merely an “idea” in the sense of a notion.⁸⁰ This can be seen as a cornerstone for the new spiritual/mystical science that he sought to establish.
- b) We should take the later Steiner seriously when he speaks about his youthful spiritual experiences, before he began writing on Goethe and natural science (the later Steiner can serve as a touchstone for understanding the early Steiner). Casting doubt on his later thought with respect to his earlier spiritual experiences is thus like questioning the authenticity of any autobiography’s mystical documentation.⁸¹
- c) His youthful preoccupation (also) with sciences and philosophy merged with the Goethean “idea,” appearing in *The Philosophy of Freedom* as a foundation for the new science. Herein, he minimizes the mystical-experimental dimension (with only partial success) in favor of philosophical writing—partly due to his wish to establish and prove the book’s arguments on the speculative/philosophical level, science not accepting of mystic-prophetic authority.
- d) Steiner’s exhibited shift to the “occult sciences” (his joining the theosophical movement and open remarks concerning occult contents) was in effect a

80. Steiner, *Goethean Science* (1883), Chapter 11.

81. See his 1881 letter to Josef Köck (mentioned in Wood, “Exoteric & Esoteric,” 117), in which Steiner comments in the wake of Schelling that “[I] believed and still believe, that I have discovered this *innermost faculty* quite clearly in myself—I had suspected it long ago—the whole idealistic philosophy now stands before me in an essentially modified form; what is a sleepless night against such a discovery!” (<https://en.anthro.wiki/I>).

search for a concrete “home” for his spiritual perceptions (including the practical aspects of life)—his recognition that he could not be a member of the dominant cultural stream of his day (including academia) but must offer an alternative from the other side.

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Exchanging Apples: Leonora Carrington and the Pro-Mythical Turn in Post-War Feminism

Per Faxneld

per.faxneld@sh.se

Abstract

The surrealist Leonora Carrington made extensive use of esoteric material throughout her career. The article focuses on the iconography of a painting she created for a poster produced by the Mexican women's liberation movement *Mujeres Conciencia* and how it can be understood by considering some of the key esoteric currents Carrington engaged with. Many of the themes on display in the poster, the article argues, can also be found in a series of other works by Carrington, and should be seen as part of a life-long treatment of intertwined esoteric, mythological, and feminist concerns. While it is impossible, as well as undesirable, to establish absolute symbolical “meanings” when analyzing Carrington’s creations, it is suggested her artistic project aimed at the undermining of oppressive, monolithic patriarchal myths by making polyvalence itself a key strategy. The article situates Carrington in the traditions of surrealist anti-clericalism and turn-of-the-century esoteric and myth-embracing feminism that she visibly drew on, and finally demonstrates how her work also fits with a new pro-mythical turn in the second-wave feminism of the early 1970s.

Keywords: Leonora Carrington; surrealism; esotericism; feminism; anti-clericalism; myth

“I think there are very dangerous devils, and I think there are interesting devils . . .”

– Leonora Carrington¹

Introduction: Of Intertextuality and Polyvalence

The British-born Mexican surrealist author and artist Leonora Carrington’s (1917–2011) reputation has been growing steadily over the years since her death. A well-established name already during her lifetime, Carrington has recently been the subject of a successful documentary, an academic conference, several books, and exhibitions in prestigious museums across the world. Moreover, the main exhibition of the 2022 Venice Biennale featured her work prominently and was even named after her book of children’s stories *The Milk of Dreams* (originally published, posthumously, in Spanish in 2013 as *Leche del sueño*).² Throughout Carrington’s oeuvre, esoteric themes abound—and she has accordingly been analyzed by several scholarly experts in this topic.³ Considerably more common, however, are investigations of feminist dimensions in her texts and images, often focusing on how such features intersect with Carrington’s use of mythological imagery.⁴ The present article will attempt to make a further contribution to these discussions by situating Carrington in a tradition of turn-of-the-century esoteric and myth-embracing feminism that she visibly drew on and demonstrating how her work further fits with a new pro-mythical turn in the second-wave feminism of the early 1970s.

1. Quoted in Chloe Aridjis, “An A-Z,” 17.

2. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/leonora-carrington>, accessed June 17, 2023.

3. It has been said that “Carrington, more than any other Surrealist, went on to explore a wide range of esoteric themes” (Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 7). Aberth’s book provides much insightful analysis of such themes, as does Wouter Hanegraaff, “A Visual World”; Victoria Ferentinou, “Surrealism, Occulture and Gender”; Victoria Ferentinou, “The Quest for the Goddess Matriarchy”; Victoria Ferentinou, “A Witch in Search of Myth”; Kristoffer Noheden, “Leonora Carrington, Surrealism, and Initiation.” Janice Helland’s “Surrealism and Esoteric Feminism,” 53–61, 102–4, is somewhat less convincing.

4. The most important efforts taking feminism and myth as well as esotericism into account are the aforementioned works by Ferentinou and Aberth.

There are a few important caveats to address before proceeding. Surrealism scholar Kristoffer Noheden has emphasized that “as a consequence of Carrington’s meandering interest in a wide range of esoteric material, there is no . . . stable framework in which the manifestations of these components in her work can be anchored.”⁵ Similarly, the art historian Susan Aberth stresses that in Carrington’s creations “symbols cannot and do not ‘illustrate’ ideas in the manner we are accustomed to.”⁶ Comparative literature scholar Jonathan P. Eburne characterizes them as a “carnavalesque accumulation of intertexts” and “an intertextual framework whose instabilities render it virtual rather than propositional.”⁷ Moreover, her son Gabriel Weisz Carrington has pointed out that “people always want to ‘explain’ Leonora’s work,” by for example referring to “‘mythical traditions’—which by the way has turned into a cliché.”⁸ He suggests it is better “to avoid the interpretative curtailment that so often accompanies the search for specific cultural backgrounds or influences for her work.”⁹ Instead, he says, “I will not interpret, I will remark and engage in dialogue but cannot brand upon the object of my observation a definite meaning over a pictorial world that I read and scrutinize.”¹⁰ In the same spirit, this article will not endeavor to fix *definite* symbolical “meanings,” but rather attempt to tease out what represents *one* layer of resonances and intertexts.

Point of Departure: Of Women and Snakes

As the point of departure for my analysis, I would like to discuss Carrington’s poster for the Mexican women’s liberation movement *Mujeres Conciencia*.¹¹ Completed in 1972, the painting was printed as a poster in 1973.¹² Carrington

5. Noheden, “Leonora Carrington,” 39.

6. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 9.

7. Jonathan P. Eburne, “Poetic Wisdom,” 160.

8. Gabriel Weisz, “Shadow Children,” 131.

9. *Ibid.*, 132.

10. *Ibid.*, 139.

11. Image link: https://masdearte.com/media/n_carrington_mapfre12.jpg

12. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 63; Susan Aberth & Tere Arcq, “As in a Mirror with Multiple Facets,” 103.

subsequently brought a considerable quantity of these posters to the US, where they were handed out to various feminists and generated considerable excitement.¹³ Stylistically, the image differs from the artist's typical manner of painting in being more symmetrical, schematic, and flattened, creating an icon-like quality as if it was an altar image intended for the temple of a new religion of Carrington's devising. Moreover, it atypically exhibits only one color (aside from black and white), green. Dense with connotations, the poster's image depicts a black female figure giving a white apple to a white female figure, who is in turn giving her a black apple. Above them a serpent hovers. Like all Carrington's works, it represents what Eburne calls a sort of "mythomaniacal diversity" and "participates in a vigorous intellectual genealogy."¹⁴ Examining Carrington's 1974 novel *The Hearing Trumpet*, Anna Watz has pointed out that it questions "the notion of origin," playing "with a multitude of renditions and translations of the same myths or narratives."¹⁵ Arguably, a similar multitude of layers is present in the poster's many mythical echoes and polyvalent references through which Carrington reconfigures a central Christian myth and impishly adds layer upon layer of subversion, inscribing herself in several dissident traditions that have targeted this specific narrative.

Susan Aberth comments that here "man has been eliminated as the chooser and instead the snake from Eden, provider of wisdom not Satan, stands in the Garden."¹⁶ I will presently demonstrate that in Theosophy, and other esoteric currents that Carrington was exposed to, the snake as a benevolent provider of wisdom was not necessarily a notion in opposition to retaining its identification with Satan.

13. Terri Geis, "Leonora Carrington in the 1970s," 21-22.

14. Eburne, "Poetic Wisdom," 143.

15. Anna Watz, "'A Language Buried At the Back of Time,' 95. Though published in 1974 (in French, as *Le Cornet Aconstique*), the novel was completed already in 1950. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 60.

16. Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 103. Salomon Grimberg instead offers a goddess-centered interpretation, stating that it "rejects the patriarchal myth of her expulsion from the Garden of Eden" and serves as "a reminder to women everywhere to be conscious and to have conscience to restore the original vision of the Goddess to avoid future destruction of the planet." Quoted in Tere Arcq, "The Mystery of the White Goddess," 187.

Moreover, this identification coupled with a positive understanding of the eating of the forbidden fruit fits well with broader concerns in Carrington’s oeuvre.¹⁷

To unpack the cultural resonances of this specific image, a brief delineation of certain iconographical traditions surrounding the myth of the Fall is necessary. If we commence with the figure of Satan in Christian art more broadly, it frequently exhibits some female anatomical parts—typically breasts—which make the figure a sort of hermaphrodite. Satan was also often represented as explicitly female. Narrowing our focus to Satan exclusively as the snake in the Garden of Eden, it is notable that from the late twelfth century until the late sixteenth century this creature was commonly depicted with a woman’s head on the serpentine body. Sometimes also with the breasts of a woman. For example, Michelangelo’s *Temptation and Expulsion* (1511) in the Sistine Chapel ceiling features such a creature handing Eve the forbidden fruit,¹⁸ as does a sculpture (ca. 1220) at the so-called “Portal of the Virgin,” the Western entrance to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Raphael, Cranach, and Hans Holbein the Younger all painted the motif. Historically, then, Satan as female is a central concept in Christian visual culture.¹⁹ This notion of Eve plotting against Adam and God in alliance with a female Satan has been called an expression of “male dread of conspiring females, the fear of the witches’ coven.”²⁰

The female serpent-Satan iconography is something that Carrington would have been familiar with. During her 1932 year at a finishing school for girls in Florence, she spent considerable time exploring the city’s treasures of art.²¹ One of the works she might have seen is Michelangelo Naccherino’s (1550–1622) celebrated marble

17. I would, then, to some extent take issue with the notion of a dichotomy between the snake as provider of wisdom and the snake as Satan, as several important systems of esoteric thought in fact identify the snake as both simultaneously: a benevolent Satan who bestows gnosis upon mankind. See, e.g., Kennet Granholm, “Dragon Rouge,” 149; Per Faxneld, *Mörkrets apostlar*, 183–87; Per Faxneld, “Intuitive, Receptive, Dark,” 222; Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 117–21.

18. Image link: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/michelangelo/sistine-chapel-ceiling-the-temptation-and-expulsion-1512>

19. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 45–51.

20. John A. Phillips, *Eve*, 62.

21. Stefan van Raay & Joanna Moorhead, “The Young Artist,” 29–30.

sculpture featuring a female Satan in the Boboli Gardens.²² And indeed, Paolo Uccello, one of the Florentine artists Carrington frequently mentioned as a favorite, painted a version of this motif.²³ Hieronymus Bosch, another of Carrington’s major sources of inspiration, also depicted a female serpent (with a clearly visible breast) giving the apple to Eve in the left panel of his triptych *The Haywain* (1510–1516).²⁴ That Carrington chooses to portray the giving of the forbidden fruit as a woman-to-woman affair thus finds a logic in this iconographic tradition. Additionally, the motif of two women exchanging consciousness-expanding fruit could be seen in light of Carrington’s well-known explorations of Mexico City’s markets in search of magical herbs together with her equally esoterically inclined artist friend Remedios Varo (1908–1963).²⁵ Read thus, the figures in the painting handing each other fruit mirror the magical reciprocity between the two artist witches.

Of Gnosis and Mythical Revision

What about the idea of the serpent as a *benevolent* bringer of gnosis-inducing fruit, then? Carrington’s poster clearly depicts the triumphantly rising serpent and the sharing of fruit in a celebratory manner. This stance has roots in ancient Gnosticism but was established in modern esotericism primarily by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the main ideologist of the Theosophical

22. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 50.

23. Susan L. Aberth, “An Allergy to Collaboration,” 27. Paolo Uccello, *Creation of Eve and Original Sin* (1432–1436), fresco, 244 x 478 cm, Green Cloister, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. Image link: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/25/Paolo_Uccello_006.jpg.

24. Image link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Haywain_Triptych#/media/File:Bosch_-_Haywain_Triptych.jpg. Paul van Calster, ed., *Catalogue Raisonné*, 340. It has also been suggested Lilith appears in a different Bosch painting, though the argument is somewhat vague. See Virginia Tuttle, “Lilith in Bosch’s ‘Garden of Earthly Delights,’” 119–30. On Bosch’s importance for Carrington, see Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 70; Ara H. Merjian, “Genealogical Gestation,” 47–48. Merjian has rightly criticized how “scholars have frequently downplayed the extent to which Carrington’s work engages with the history of art and literature from more ancient sources, through the Renaissance, up to late nineteenth-century Romantic and Symbolist precedents” (49).

25. On the friendship between Carrington and Varo, see Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 59–64 and Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo*, 93–98.

Society.²⁶ In her late 1880s writings, Blavatsky retained the traditional identification of the serpent with Satan but reinterpreted the figure as a positive gnosis-bringer setting our spiritual evolution in motion:

...it is but natural—even from the dead letter standpoint—to view *Satan*, the Serpent of Genesis, as the real creator and benefactor, the Father of Spiritual mankind. For it is he who was the “Harbinger of Light,” bright radiant Lucifer, who opened the eyes of the automaton *created* by Jehovah, as alleged; and he who was the first to whisper: “in the day ye eat thereof ye shall be as Elohim, knowing good and evil”—can only be regarded in the light of a Saviour. An “adversary” to Jehovah the “*personating* spirit,” he still remains in esoteric truth the ever-loving “Messenger” (the angel), the Seraphim and Cherubim who both *knew* well, and *loved* still more, and who conferred on us spiritual, instead of physical immortality—the latter a kind of *static* immortality that would have transformed man into an undying “Wandering Jew.”²⁷

This understanding also influenced the choice of name for Blavatsky’s Theosophical magazine *Lucifer* (1887–1897, subsequently changing name to *The Theosophical Review*).²⁸

It is highly likely Carrington was in some way or another familiar with Blavatsky’s ideas. Firstly, it has been suggested she may have read Theosophical periodicals during her early years in England.²⁹ Secondly, it is documented that she socialized with Piet Mondriaan (1872–1944) during her transitional 1941–1942 year in New York.³⁰ Mondriaan was a member of the Theosophical Society from 1909 until his death, and his work was deeply marked by its influence.³¹ Thirdly, the occult milieu in her later home Mexico City was imbued with Theosophy, and it seems Carrington encountered it directly through Remedios Varo.³²

26. For a classic discussion of the serpent as a kindly bringer of gnosis in Gnosticism, see Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 84, 247–49.

27. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 2, 243.

28. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 121–23.

29. Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 67–68.

30. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 52.

31. Pablo Bris-Marino, “The Influence of Theosophy on Mondrian’s Neoplastic Work.”

32. Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 67–68, 74; Ferentinou, “The Quest,” 190n41.

Echoes of Blavatsky’s beliefs also appeared in works we know for certain that Carrington read, like British occultist Dion Fortune’s (1890–1946) *The Mystical Qabalah* (1935),³³ which discusses the symbol of the serpent in several places, often with reference to Blavatsky, declaring that “the Serpent . . . represents the dawn of objective consciousness and is the symbol of initiation.”³⁴ At least by the early 1980s, it is documented that Carrington was moreover acquainted with such notions from reading Hans Jonas’ 1934 classic *The Gnostic Religion*.³⁵

Theosophy had been highly attractive to independent-minded turn-of-the-century women, as it offered them agency in various manners—including roles as spiritual leaders and interpretative freedom regarding theology.³⁶ Accordingly, an important dimension of Blavatsky’s new version of the Eden myth, detailed above, was its feminist implications. The traditional telling of it supposedly proved that all women, being daughters of Eve, are weak and receptive to Satan’s guiles. For most of Christianity’s history it was the most invoked Biblical story when priests, inquisitors, theologians and even nineteenth-century medical doctors and politicians wanted to keep women subjugated. Several of the most prominent feminists around the year 1900 therefore singled this narrative out as a vital target for critique.³⁷

Many of these early feminists, like Matilda Joslyn Gage (1826–1898) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), were also Theosophists. Thus, their political counter-readings of the Biblical narrative of the Fall closely followed the esoteric counter-readings established by Madame Blavatsky in an effort to calculatedly undermine the frequent patriarchal use of this story to keep women in place. According to this understanding of the tale, eagerly embraced by a multitude of

33. Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 67.

34. Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabala*, 272. Cf. Blavatsky’s expounding in *The Secret Doctrine*: “. . . that which the clergy of every dogmatic religion—pre-eminently the Christian—points out as Satan, the enemy of God, is in reality, the highest divine Spirit—(occult Wisdom on Earth)—in its naturally antagonistic character to every worldly, evanescent illusion, dogmatic or ecclesiastical religions included.” Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 2, 377.

35. Ferentinou, “The Quest,” 192n86.

36. Siv Ellen Kraft, “The Sex Problem”; Siv Ellen Kraft, “Theosophy, Gender, and the ‘New Woman’.”

37. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 35–45, 136–37; Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine*.

Blavatsky-reading feminists, Eve was in fact a heroine, not the first sinner. However, these dramatic reinterpretations, which in many cases resulted in an attitude of “Satanic feminism,” proved too controversial for mainstream feminism at the time, and such radical voices soon found themselves marginalized as suffragettes forged alliances with the Christian temperance movement to gain the vote.³⁸ In the feminism of the 1920s through to the 1960s, this form of drastic feminist counter-mythology thus arguably became somewhat less prominent.

With the second-wave feminism of the early 1970s, though, the older approach would see a powerful resurgence in what can be called a pro-mythical (or mythical revisionist) turn. In emancipatory literary texts of the same period, we see a similar preoccupation with subverting patriarchal myths—for example in Angela Carter’s (1940–1992) reworking of the Eden story in “Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest” from her 1974 collection of short stories *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974).³⁹ This project would come even more to the fore in the same author’s 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber*, which revises fairytales into startling narratives of powerful females striking back at violent patriarchal figures and structures.⁴⁰ Significantly, Carter—clearly recognizing a kindred spirit—later selected Carrington’s short story “The Debutante” for an anthology she edited in 1986 (*Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*).⁴¹

In 1974, the journal *WomanSpirit* started publication, and in 1978 the theologian (later redubbing herself “theologian”) Carol P. Christ’s (1945–2021) influential essay “Why Women Need the Goddess” first appeared in print.⁴² This coincided with developments in the same direction within Wicca and other neopagan currents. Carrington was very much part of this renewed feminist interest in

38. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 130–41.

39. Later reprinted in Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats*, 58–67.

40. Carter, *Burning Your Boats*, 111–228.

41. Marina Warner, “Leonora’s Storytelling Imagination,” 296. A clear parallel between the two is Carrington’s preoccupation with children’s books (e.g., Lewis Carroll) and her depiction of Blue Beard (Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 112), a figure Carter also reworked (Carter, *Burning Your Boats*, 111–43).

42. Carol P. Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” 8–13.

myth, and, as art historian Victoria Ferentinou has highlighted, an important precursor to it.⁴³ Other artists treading a similar path include the Swedish-born English artist Monica Sjöö (1938–2005), who just like Carrington was influenced by the work of poet Robert Graves (1895–1985). In her controversial 1968 painting *God Giving Birth*,⁴⁴ Sjöö depicted God as a woman with a face that is sharply divided into a black and a white portion, interestingly recalling the yin-yang black/white of the women from Carrington’s poster.⁴⁵ Later works by Sjöö include *Aspects of the Great Mother* (1971),⁴⁶ where the assembled goddesses comprise one that can be read as having horns and demonic-looking red eyes, and several paintings featuring sacred serpents.⁴⁷ In 1975, Sjöö issued the pamphlet *The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All* (eventually expanded into a 1981 book of the same name in cooperation with Barbara Mors), and in 1976 she published the article “The Witches Are Returning” in *Peace News*.⁴⁸ Though it does not seem Carrington and Sjöö knew each other, and there are many differences between their artistic approaches, they can definitely be described as fellow travelers on the road of feminist-artistic mythical reworking.⁴⁹

43. Ferentinou, “The Quest,” 187; Ferentinou, “Surrealism, Occulture and Gender,” 112.

44. Image link: <https://guide.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/collection/monica-sjoo/fodande-gud/>

45. Sjöö read Graves’ *The White Goddess* (1948) in 1963. *God Giving Birth* was attacked as being both blasphemous and pornographic and was reported to the police when exhibited in London in 1973 (the charges were, however, dropped). “Biography,” in *Monica Sjöö*, 160, 163. For further discussion, see: Shai Ferraro, “God Giving Birth.”

46. Image link: https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/03/sjoo-monica_aspects-of-the-great-mother_1971_f_albin-dahlstrom.jpg

47. The horned figure here likely represents Diana (and the “horns” would be the crescent moon traditionally found in depictions of her), but on a purely visual level it also suggests the depictions of a female Satan discussed earlier.

48. “Biography,” in *Monica Sjöö*, 163.

49. Another artist whose work has interesting parallels to Carrington’s is Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002), especially her tarot garden in Tuscany, Italy (which she started planning in 1974, opening in 1998, see: <https://ilgiardinodeitarocchi.it/en/about/chronology/#1955-1977>, accessed June 17, 2023) and the big sculpture work “Le paradis fantastique” (originally created for the World Fair in Montreal in 1967, since 1971 located close to the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm) reworking the Eden motif (see <https://webshop.modernamuseet.se/en/posters/niki-de-saint-phalle-1>, accessed June 17, 2023).

In the early 1970s, Carrington—who had always been a staunch advocate of equality and an active subverter of patriarchal structures—became involved with organized feminism. It was thus she came to design the poster for the Mexican women’s liberation movement in 1972. Feminists in other countries also started to become interested in her life and work around this time, which led to a 1974 feature article in *Ms. Magazine*, the first mainstream feminist publication. Written by Gloria Orenstein (b. 1938), who would develop into a famous proponent of goddess-based eco-feminism, it introduced Carrington to a broad US feminist audience.⁵⁰

Asked in an interview many years later if there were others in contemporary feminism who thought along the same lines as Carrington regarding paganism, witchcraft, and so on, Orenstein answered: “I think there were probably plenty, but we had not made Ecofeminism mainstream within feminism yet. . . . In those early years, it was the urban feminists who were politicized in a Marxist way.” Carrington, though, “was very ahead of her time,” Orenstein explained, “drawing the chakras and talking about women’s psychic evolution.”⁵¹ Her reworkings of mythical imagery can be seen as similarly ahead of her time, but also, like her esoteric interests, as grounded in pre-war forms of feminist radicalism. Carrington’s poster thus served as one of the bridges between 1970s radical feminism and turn-of-the-century pro-mythical (and often esoterically inclined) feminism. It was, in other words, one of the factors that helped effect what I have referred to above as the pro-mythical turn in post-war feminism.

A key work in the latter was theologian Mary Daly’s 1978 book *Gyn/ Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Daly embraces the witch, the hag, the fury, and other negative stereotypes of women, making them mythic heroines and sources of emancipatory power. Enthusiastically, Daly draws on the vocabulary of esotericism in referring to her project as “a process of alchemy,” where feminists “transmute the base metals of man-made myth by becoming

50. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 103.

51. Geis, “Leonora Carrington in the 1970s,” 23.

unmute, calling forth from our Selves and each other the courage to name the unnamable.”⁵² Using her characteristic neologisms and deconstructed words, she also introduces a sort of initiatory theme when talking of “dis-covering the labyrinth of our own unfolding/becoming,”⁵³ and discussing “re-calling/re-membering/re-claiming our Witches’ power to cast spells”⁵⁴ and “igniting the divine Spark in women,”⁵⁵ which involves the “Fire of Female Friendship.”⁵⁶ Carrington’s imagery in the poster clearly fits tremendously well with such (slightly later) feminist projects, and can be seen as one of the triggering factors of a broader development.

Interestingly, in *Gyn/Ecology* Daly highlights an interpretation of the Eden narrative according to which “it was Lilith who persuaded Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge,” and mentions how one of Carrington’s favorite authors, the earlier mentioned poet Robert Graves, has delineated the demonization of Lilith. She also discusses the identification of Lilith with the ancient Greek goddess Hecate, and stresses that “Yahweh is a derivate and reversal of the Goddess, one of whose primary names is Lilith.”⁵⁷

Of Lilith, Fruit, and Serpents

The notion of Lilith as the one who gave Eve the forbidden fruit was not Daly’s invention but an idea present since at least the nineteenth century (with some interpreters suggesting certain depictions in medieval art show this, though it in fact seems more likely they reference the tradition of a feminized Satan).⁵⁸ We can approach it as another potential layer of meaning in Carrington’s poster.

52. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 34.

53. *Ibid.*, 32.

54. *Ibid.*, 318.

55. *Ibid.*, 319.

56. *Ibid.*, 355.

57. *Ibid.*, 86. In a later book, Daly proclaims: ‘Refusing to shrink into mummified marys, goody goddesses, eternally feminine toadies, we join with Lilith’. Mary Daly, *Pure Lust*, 82.

58. John K. Bonnell, “The Serpent with a Human Head in Art and in Mystery Play,” 290.

Was Carrington aware of Lilith, then? Yes, we can safely assume so. Through her Jewish husband (and their large circle of Jewish friends, as well as her own reading in Kabbalah), Carrington would no doubt have been familiar with this famed mythic “first feminist” from Jewish folklore and mysticism. In fact, Jewish mysticism had increasingly become a theme in her work during the second half of the 1960s.⁵⁹ Moreover, we know that Carrington and Orenstein performed an exorcism from the kabbalistic classic *Zohar*, a book which features a detailed (and negative) discussion of Lilith.⁶⁰

We can also note how Carrington’s friend Leonor Fini (1907–1996)⁶¹ commented on her own long-standing fascination with Lilith in 1969: “. . . I know that I belong with the idea of Lilith, the anti-Eve, and that my universe is that of the spirit. Physical maternity instinctively repulses me.”⁶² As Fini and Carrington were close, it seems reasonable they might have discussed Lilith at some point. Fini’s argument that she aligned with Lilith through her choice of creating art instead of birthing children is evocative. Carrington, by contrast, chose to embrace a maternal, domestic and perhaps to an extent more Eve-like identity in her role as a mother and her well-known “enchanting of the kitchen realm.”⁶³ Are we thus witnessing an exchange between two forms of femininity in Carrington’s poster? An acknowledgement that both are valid parts of the feminine spectrum, with the additional proposition that both need to contain elements of the other to achieve balance (considering they are exchanging apples)?

Lilith as a feminist symbol was quite widely circulated in nineteenth-century discourses, and a revival was imminent at the time when Carrington did

59. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 102.

60. Geis, “Leonora Carrington in the 1970s,” 20; Aridjis, “An A-Z,” 18.

61. It was Max Ernst who introduced Carrington to Fini in Paris, and the two would remain friends. On this, see: Whitney Chadwick, “The Two Leonors,” 57.

62. Fini quoted in: Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and Surrealist Movement*, 130. See also Alyce Mahon, “La Féminité triomphante,” 16.

63. On Carrington and the (esoteric) symbolism of the kitchen, see Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 60, 64–70.

her painting.⁶⁴ In fact, the 1972 article simply titled “Lilith” by Lilly Rivlin, published in the same magazine that featured Carrington in 1974, *Ms. Magazine*, has been identified as the text that sparked a renewed interest in Lilith among feminists.⁶⁵ Rivlin here establishes several of the leitmotifs of contemporary feminist veneration of Lilith, claiming that Lilith has her origins in older goddess cults that have become distorted by “patriarchal inversion” (a term she borrows from the Jungian scholar of myth Joseph Campbell), and speculating on why both God and Adam find Lilith’s longing for equality and freedom unacceptable (in other words, condemning them both as male chauvinists).⁶⁶ Nineteenth-century texts on Lilith, by contrast, tended to retain more of her demonic features, making her a frightful enemy for all male oppressors in a manner that might have appealed to Carrington’s gothic sensibilities.⁶⁷ The poster I have focused on so far was not the only time Carrington treated the Eden theme. Another example is *Forbidden Fruit* (1969),⁶⁸ done only a couple of years before the poster.⁶⁹ In this painting, the serpent gives a pomegranate to a humanoid figure covered in fur and with feet growing from the head, possibly a reference to how the serpent’s gift according to Blavatsky set in motion the evolution to our current state.⁷⁰ In such a reading, this figure would be a primitive version of humanity. The serpent’s tail turns into a spiral, a symbol of (spiritual) evolution in Theosophy.⁷¹ Such a spiral can also be seen in the

64. On nineteenth-century use of Lilith, see Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 58–65.

65. Enid Dame, Lilly Rivlin & Henny Wenkart, “Editors’ Introduction,” xviii.

66. Lilly Rivlin, “Lilith,” 6–7.

67. Cf. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 58–65, 366–70.

68. Image link: <https://biblioklept.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/forbidden-fruit-1959-oil-on-canvas.jpg> (note the date in the link is incorrect, Aberth, “Leonora Carrington”, 118, dates the painting to 1969).

69. Reproduced in Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 118.

70. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 2, 389.

71. Several key Theosophists employed the spiral as an evolutionary symbol; for some examples see: Malin Fitger, “Själens arkitektur,” 503; Gary W. Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory,” 384; Anna (Bonus) Kingsford, *The Perfect Way, or The Finding of Christ*, 335–337.

poster, indicating the theme of a spiral movement towards higher consciousness. Moreover, the serpent's coiled body comes across as a labyrinth, the classic symbol of initiation so recurrent in Carrington's production, thus accentuating the serpent's role as initiator. This might also be how we can understand this animal in *Self-Portrait in Orthopedic Black Tie* (1973),⁷² which features a walking stick in the shape of a snake, or perhaps an erect snake companion.⁷³

Snakes can be seen in several of Carrington's works, but of special interest for the present discussion is one image in the 1969 series of seven untitled rectangular gouaches on parchment that may have been an aborted attempt at a rendition of the tarot.⁷⁴ It has been described as follows by Susan Aberth and Tere Arcq: "A large white snake crowned with Hathor's horns . . . is set against a fruit-bearing tree alluding to the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise. Satan has been transformed by Carrington into a benign deity of wisdom aligned with the goddess, women, and nature, as the trinity near its head implies."⁷⁵ Another possible association regarding the birds might be that Lilith is translated as "screech owl" in the King James Bible.⁷⁶ As mentioned above, several interpreters have suggested the female Edenic serpent in medieval iconography might in fact be Lilith. While this is probably incorrect, Lilith as the serpent is an idea with some resonance in this painting.

72. Image link: <https://www.artnet.com/artists/leonora-carrington/self-portrait-with-orthopedic-brace-zSEy1b0zClze3Q5xno3wcA2>

73. Arcq and Aberth write: "intimating the many magical associations Carrington had with that creature: giver of knowledge to women, symbol of shamanic transformation, the mystical feathered serpent Quetzalcóatl, etc" (Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 87). They also note that The Hermit in Wirth's *Le tarot des imagiers du Moyen Age*, which she had in her library, is accompanied by a snake (ibid.).

74. Image link: https://arthive.com/leonoracarrington/works/543428~Snake_and_swallows. Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 90–91.

75. Ibid., 93, image on p. 90.

76. Isaiah 34:14.

Of Witches and Devils

Carrington's use of demonic subject matter can be further contextualized by considering the type of intellectualized, polemical Satanism that was quite prominent in surrealism, usually with a clear genealogy stretching back to Baudelaire as well as to anti-clerical anarchists like Mikhail Bakunin. The latter praised Satan as a symbol of the rebellious impulse in man and we can note that Carrington's son has mentioned Bakunin as an important author for his mother, one whose books were always on the shelf in their home.⁷⁷ For surrealist pro-satanic discourse, a key example is the discussion of Lucifer/Satan that constitutes the culmination of André Breton's small 1944 book *Arcane 17*, where he emphatically states that "rebellion alone is the creator of light."⁷⁸ In the 1948 collective (signed by fifty-two group members) surrealist tract, co-authored by Breton, "Back to Your Kennels, Yelpers of God," the intrinsic value of blasphemy is underscored.⁷⁹ Breton moreover referred to the tract's stance as one of "Luciferianism" in an interview.⁸⁰ The examples could easily be multiplied, and in the visual realm we can for example think of Man Ray's 1929 photograph where an inverted cross is superimposed over a pair of buttocks.⁸¹

We should also consider Breton's enthusiasm for Jules Michelet's 1862 pseudo-historical monograph *La Sorcière* ("The Witch"), and his well-known claim that Carrington epitomized the book's heroic witch.⁸² It must here be remembered that unlike the pagan witch figure popularized by the new religious movement

77. Gabriel Weisz Carrington, "Leonora Carrington, My Mother," recording available online via <https://www.thelasttuesdaysociety.org/event/leonora-carrington-my-mother-gaby-weisz-zoom-lecture/>, accessed June 17, 2023. On Bakunin's "Satanism," see Per Faxneld, "The Devil is Red," 537–39.

78. André Breton, *Arcanum 17*, 132. Breton here partly draws on Victor Hugo's unfinished epic *La Fin de Satan* (which he worked on between 1854–1862). See discussion of the latter in Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 91, 275–76.

79. *A la niche, les glapisseurs de dieu*.

80. André Breton, *Conversations*, 222.

81. On this work, *Monument à D.A.F. de Sade*, see John Fuller, "Atget and Man Ray in the Context of Surrealism," 131.

82. Image link: <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/191531-0>. André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, 335. Cf. Tere Arcq & Stefan van Raay, eds., *Leonora Carrington: Magical Tales*, 192.

Wicca in the 1950s and 60s, Michelet’s anti-patriarchal witch is very explicitly a Satanist, whose rebellion against God the Father and his church represents a sort of justified Luciferian proto-socialist revolt.⁸³ Another work admired by the surrealists, Émile Grillo de Givry’s *Le musée des sorciers, mages et alchimistes* (1929) highlights woman’s intimate ties to Satan, emphasizing that this makes her naturally subversive—a good thing, to the surrealists.⁸⁴ Carrington’s surrealist friends, then, were employing Satanic symbolism as part of their seditious repertoire, and Breton explicitly situated Carrington in this tradition.

It is also clear she herself had such predilections from a young age. An early watercolor by Carrington, *Spirito di Firenze* (c. 1932–33),⁸⁵ features a Satan-like figure or demon hovering above Florence, while the cover she drew for a sketchbook from around the same time shows cobwebs, bats, and a grimoire titled “Black Sorcery.”⁸⁶ Blasphemous and anti-clerical motifs can also be found in Carrington’s late-1930s short story “As They Rode Along the Edge.”⁸⁷ This may be connected to the negative experiences Carrington had in Catholic boarding schools as a child, which led to a life-long antipathy towards the Catholic Church.⁸⁸ The same antagonism is certainly a dimension of her later frankly proclaiming herself to be a witch in conversations, and the use of the witch motif and various registers of blasphemy in her art and writing.⁸⁹

83. Jules Michelet, *La sorcière*, xviii, 108–9, 151, 382, *et passim*. For further discussion, see Robert Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb*, 211–12.

84. Ferentinou, “A Witch,” 158.

85. Image link: <https://www.artnet.com/artists/leonora-carrington/spirito-di-firenze-bwFwWf-SG2pWrGyyXMWBzeA2>.

86. Aberth, “‘An Allergy,’” 27–30.

87. Leonora Carrington, *The Complete Short Stories of Leonora Carrington*, 44, 49, 53. Moreover, ecstatic revelry reminiscent of the mythical witches’ sabbath abound in Carrington’s paintings, often referencing and subverting the misogynistic iconography of early-modern clerical anti-witchcraft discourses. Examples of this include *Garden Bedroom* (1941), *The House Opposite* (1945), *Plain Chant* (1947), *Samain* (1951), *The Garden of Paracelsus* (1957), *The Magical World of the Mayas* (1963), *The Chrysopeia of Mary the Jewess* (1964), *Sinister Work* (1973), *Night of the 8th* (1987), and *The Q Symphony* (2002).

88. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 15, 18.

89. Gloria Orenstein, “The Lost Story of Women of Power,” 371.

Carrington's celebrated painting *Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen* (1975) features a figure that Aberth describes as "a horned goat-like creature holding a broom—a sign of the hearth and of witchcraft from centuries past."⁹⁰ The painting also contains Carrington's famous backwards writing incorporated into an explicitly ritualistic, magical context.⁹¹ Combined with the goat and the broom, the writing evokes demonological notions of how witches did everything backwards at their Satanic sabbaths.⁹² Carrington, of course, always created her own idiosyncratic, multilayered version of any established motif that she employed. For example, Arcq and Aberth point out how Carrington in *The Artist Travelling Incognito* (1949) plays with the notion of a witches' familiar, providing herself with a white cat instead of the traditional black one.⁹³

Potentially, the complex symbolism of the goat being sacrificed in Carrington's novel *The Stone Door* can also be related to motifs like the Satanic sabbatic goat. In the novel, it is proclaimed that "... the Goat will renew the life blood of the Myth and will violate the Garden of Paradise. The Goat will deliver us the New Myth."⁹⁴ The goat is, naturally, a well-known visual representation of Satan, while the quest for a new myth is of course very much in line with the ideas so famously propagated by Breton, Pierre Mabille, and other surrealists in the 1940s.⁹⁵ Interestingly, so is connecting Satan with the attainment of the new myth which is to replace Christianity's hegemonic mythology. This theme is implicit in, for example, Breton's *Arcane 17*.

90. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 122. Image link: https://worldartfoundations.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/leonora-carrington-grandmother-moorheads-aromatic-kitchen-1975_0.jpg.

91. *Ibid.*

92. On the diabolical inversions of witches as imagined in the early modern period, see Robert Rowland, "Natthäxor och vardagshäxor."

93. Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 85. Again, then, Carrington subverts and inverts demonological iconography. Image link: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/leonora-carrington/the-artist-traveling-incognito-1949>.

94. Leonora Carrington, *The Stone Door*, 67.

95. Noheden, "Leonora Carrington," 63.

However, this is but one layer of cultural echoes. Victoria Ferentinou has written convincingly about the pagan, non-diabolical dimensions of Carrington's employment of the witch figure. Ferentinou shows how Carrington was likely inspired by Kurt Seligmann's *The History of Magic* (1948), where the argument is that the witches' sabbath was a pagan remnant, Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (which she read in 1949), and probably also at least one book by the creator of Wicca, Gerald Gardner.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, considering the context of surrealist use of Satanism as a subversive strategy facilitates alternative ways to frame certain other features in Carrington's work and persona as well. In July 1971, Carrington visited New York, and Orenstein describes how she greeted her by making the sign of the horns, calling it the holy horns of consecration of the goddess.⁹⁷

Carrington's first major work, *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)* (1937–38) also sees her make this hand-sign, which Aberth calls "the age-old sign of malediction."⁹⁸ Used in several Mediterranean countries both to ward off the evil eye and to direct evil at someone, it is a polyvalent gesture.⁹⁹ We can here again note the iconographic tradition that portrays Satan as a female, often with horns, that certainly resonates with this hand-sign of a horned goddess. In the self-portrait, on the other hand, the sign is perhaps better understood as indicating her interest in sorcery.

By 1971, when Carrington employed the sign as an actual greeting, it had however taken on other connotations in the broader culture of the time. The 1969 debut album of Chicago-based psychedelic Satanic rock band Coven, released on major label Mercury Records, featured a photo of its members giving

96. Ferentinou, "A Witch," 158–59; Ferentinou, "The Quest," 185. See also Kurt Seligmann, *The Mirror of Magic*. Carrington knew the author and congratulated him on this book, praising it in a letter, as detailed in Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 74.

97. Gloria Orenstein, "In Memory of the Most Magical Friend I Ever Had," 194.

98. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 33. Image link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/492697>.

99. See discussion in Adam E. Nowakowski, "'Horns Up!,' " 63–67; Henk Driessen, "Gestured Masculinity," 247.

the “sign of the horns” as a sign of Satanic allegiance.¹⁰⁰ The UK band Black Sabbath also began using it around 1969.¹⁰¹ It had moreover been established as a salutation in both informal and ritual contexts in Anton LaVey’s Church of Satan, with a description of it in the 1969 *Satanic Bible*.¹⁰² This is not to say Carrington was specifically listening to psychedelic rock or reading LaVey, which would appear highly implausible, but clearly this understanding of the hand-gesture was floating around in a variety of contexts at the time. It may partially be derived from an illustration of a hand gesture,¹⁰³ “The Sign of Excommunication,” in one of Carrington’s favorite occult books, Éliphas Lévi’s 1856 *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*, which is slightly different but casts the shadow of the Devil’s face. We can also observe the presence of a yin-yang symbol that suggests the black and the white apple in Carrington’s poster.¹⁰⁴

In the early 1970s, Carrington and Orenstein attended radical feminist events organized by the group NOW (National Organization for Women) in the US. Carrington became so enthusiastic she wanted to start a branch of NOW in Mexico and met with its leadership. In the subsequent discussion with Orenstein, Carrington flippantly asked her if she “thought we could work a little devil worship into NOW.”¹⁰⁵ When Carrington in 1971 describes the hand-sign as indicating an unnamed goddess, it is hence not entirely far-fetched to once more recall the old tradition of Satan as a female entity, and of the demonic

100. Coven, *Witchcraft Destroys Minds and Reaps Souls*, LP, Mercury Records, 1969. Image link: <https://i.discogs.com/3B2trXLbt1qLlIJNYEHdj5BwkTY8cz9KPyqehKMGA-g/rs:fit/g:sm/q:90/h:600/w:599/czM6Ly9kaXNjb2dz/LWRhdGFiyXNILWlt/YWdlcy9SLTEzMzYy/ODItMTI3MjM0OTIy/MS5qcGVn.jpeg>.

101. Geezer Butler of Black Sabbath can be seen “raising the horns” in a photograph taken in 1969 (included in the CD booklet of the compilation album *Symptom of the Universe: The Original Black Sabbath 1970–1978*, Rhino Records/Warner Bros. Records, 2002).

102. Anton Szandor LaVey, *The Satanic Bible*, 133–34.

103. Image link: <https://www.weiserantiquarian.com/pages/books/64154/eliphas-levi/an-original-hand-coloured-matted-illustration-sacerdotal-esotericism-making-the-sign-of>.

104. Éliphas Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 33.

105. Geis, “Leonora Carrington in the 1970s,” 23.

Lilith as a powerful female demon rebelling against patriarchy and potentially the giver of the forbidden fruit to Eve. This seems especially reasonable given Carrington's untitled 1969 gouache (discussed above) of a horned, feminine serpent next to the tree bearing the forbidden fruit.

Closing Analysis: Of Tarot Cards and Hermaphroditism

Finally, let us consider the Devil card in Carrington's tarot designs.¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, the figure has the breasts familiar from the 1889 Oswald Wirth deck, not seen in for example the Rider–Waite–Smith deck (where Satan is purely masculine).¹⁰⁷ Carrington has thus consciously chosen to draw on the version featuring a feminized Satan, while she turns to the Rider–Waite–Smith deck for some of the other cards.¹⁰⁸ Aberth and Arcq moreover direct attention to the fact that the figure has “an upside-down cross for male genitals that also resembles the sign for Venus (and women).”¹⁰⁹ This could be said to connect the Satanic inverted cross (somewhat similarly superimposed over buttocks in the Man Ray work discussed earlier) with the symbol of woman, furthering the feminization of Satan inherent elsewhere in her works. Unlike the Egyptian ankh in the same place in Wirth's deck, Carrington's choice also underscores her antagonism towards Christianity.

Wirth's conception of the Devil is heavily indebted to Éliphas Lévi's figure Baphomet. This enigmatic entity was illustrated by Lévi himself for his book

106. The card is reproduced in *The Tarot of Leonora Carrington*, 49. Image link: https://i.guim.co.uk/img/media/b2bfa126ea705f20bd5317246109c6924668457a/707_676_4521_5055/master/4521.jpg?width=720&quality=45&auto=format&fit=max&dpr=2&s=c35a54cf276570fafa4bf7b4bbe7ce3d.

107. The Wirth deck can be viewed online via the Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105110785/f13.item.r=wirth%20tarot>, accessed June 17, 2023.

108. Aberth & Arcq (“As in a Mirror,” 109) state that she drew on the Rider–Waite–Smith deck for the Devil, but in fact this deck's Devil does *not* have female features.

109. Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 109–110. Only two of Carrington's 22 Major Arcana paintings are dated (1955), and it is unknown when the others were produced. *Ibid.*, 89.

Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie,¹¹⁰ that has been considered an especially influential occult tome for the Paris surrealists and which Carrington owned.¹¹¹ Without going too deeply into the intricacies of Lévi’s wordy explication of Baphomet, his visual depiction of it clearly draws heavily on images of Satan presiding at the witches’ sabbath in early-modern treatises on witchcraft. The Devil card in some Tarot decks dating as far back as to the fifteenth century also strongly resembles Lévi’s image, including the hermaphrodite figure’s breasts. Though it is vastly more complicated in Lévi’s system of thought, it soon became established as a devil-figure in the broader occult milieu and popular culture.¹¹² I would like to close my analysis by pointing out some interesting similarities to Carrington’s *Mujeres Conciencia* poster.¹¹³

The gnostic light of illumination Carrington depicts emanating from the serpent’s eye echoes Baphomet’s torch of enlightenment.¹¹⁴ The white and the black female figures can indicate the unification of opposites Baphomet symbolizes in Lévi (there illustrated with a black and a white crescent moon, respectively). The black figure’s hair hangs down towards the ground below, while that of the white rises towards the sky, much like Baphomet’s hands (one pointing upwards and one pointing downwards, illustrating the concept “as above, so below”).¹¹⁵ The cross at the bottom is entwined by the serpent’s tail and appears similar to the caduceus in Baphomet’s lap.

110. Image link: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a4/Baphomet.png/1024px-Baphomet.png>.

111. *Ibid.*, 70, 89.

112. On Baphomet, see Julian Strube, “The ‘Baphomet’ of Eliphas Lévi.”

113. Image link: https://masdearte.com/media/n_carrington_mapfre12.jpg.

114. Further, the flame protruding from the devil’s head in Carrington’s tarot devil design looks more like a plant or perhaps an asparagus than the conventional lit torch, connecting the figure with Carrington’s preoccupation with gardens and woodlands—including, of course, the Garden of Eden of her feminist poster.

115. Lévi himself explains the gesture as expressing “the perfect concord between mercy and justice,” describing how the figure’s “sign of occultism is made with two hands, pointing upward to the white moon of CHESED, and downward to the black moon of GEBURAH.” Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 77.

The wings in the poster form a black crescent moon, echoing the one seen to the right of Lévi's Baphomet. We can also think of the black wings Baphomet itself is endowed with. In the poster, the wings are perhaps a symbol of woman's divinity regained or accomplished, a sign of apotheosis. As Susan Aberth and Tere Arcq point out, the wings "could be from an angel," potentially a fallen angel we might add, "or could belong to the snake, referencing the plumed serpent of the Aztecs, Quetzalcóatl."¹¹⁶ This is simply part of the multivalence and poly-mythological character of the image. For an artistic project aimed at the undermining of oppressive, monolithic patriarchal myths, polyvalence itself may be a key strategic point. In that spirit, the present article has hopefully contributed to the liberatory polyphony by highlighting further intertexts.

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116. Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 103.

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White Esotericisms? New Directions in the Study of Race and Esotericism

Justine M. Bakker

Justine.bakker@ru.nl

Amanda Lucia. *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticisms of Transformational Festivals*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. xvii + 299 pp. ISBN: 9780520376953. €27.99.

Susannah Crockford. *Ripples of the Universe: Spirituality in Sedona, Arizona*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 251 pp. ISBN: 9780226778075. €29.99.

Susan Lepselter. *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. x + 181 pp. ISBN: 9780472121540. €32.99.

Tentatively, but finally, race has emerged as a category of analysis in the academic field of esotericism.¹ The catalyst was, without a doubt, *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*, a comprehensive volume published in 2015. Edited by Stephen Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, and Hugh R. Page, Jr., it demonstrated that esotericisms informed or shaped alternative ideas about

1. Consider, for instance, that the two most significant recent volumes include chapters on “race” and esotericism (Hanegraaff, Pasi, and Forshaw, *Hermes Explains*; Aspren and Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*). Readers should note, however, that scholars in literary studies and other fields did already explore this intersection. See Bakker, “Race and (the Study of) Esotericism.”

blackness, and *vice versa*.² More recently, the widely read blog *The Immanent Frame* published “Out There: Perspectives on Black Metaphysical Religion,” a series of short essays on the “widespread and varied occult interests and mystical orientations of Black communities in the twentieth century.”³ Reading the two collections in tandem provokes a question: if one can write confidently about something like “Black esoteric traditions” or “Black metaphysical religion,” are there also esoteric movements, currents, practices, or texts we should categorize as “white”?⁴

It is remarkable—although, as I will explain, not that surprising—that scholars in the field of esotericism studies speak with ease and conviction about Black esotericisms but seem hesitant to definitively pair “white” and “esotericism.” Indeed, even though several scholars have published on the intersections of esotericism and white supremacy over the years,⁵ as well as on the explicit racial

2. See also: Finley, Gray, and Page, “Africana Esoteric Studies and Western Intellectual Hegemony.” That said, Finley, Guillory, and Page were not the first to publish on Black esotericisms (see: Bakker, “Esotericism, That’s for White Folks, Right?” 24n16 for a comprehensive list). Other more recent publications include: Knight, *Metaphysical Africa*; Dorman, *Princess and the Prophet*; Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*; Finley, *In and Out of This World*; Finley, “The Afro-Theosophysics of Robert T. Browne”; Gray, “Traumatic Mysticism of Othered Others”; Knight, “The Supreme Wisdom Lessons and Problem Book”; Clarke, *A Luminous Brotherhood*.

3. Harris and Roane, “Out There: Perspectives on Black Metaphysical Religion.” In a recent editorial for this journal, Aren Roukema and I reflect on the shift from esotericism to metaphysical religion: Bakker and Roukema, “10 Years of Correspondences.”

4. In this review, I follow many others inside and outside the academy in capitalizing Black to indicate a shared sense of identity, community, and history of people of African descent. There is much more debate over the question of whether one should capitalize white when talking about whiteness in a racial or cultural sense. I use lowercase when I talk about white people, in part to not replicate the use of capitalized White in white supremacy groups. However, scholars like Nell Irvin Painter—who wrote one of the foundational histories of whiteness and white people—have made a compelling case to capitalize White as well. Painter writes that a capitalized White leads to “unmasking ‘Whiteness’ as an American racial identity as historically important as ‘Blackness’—which it certainly is. No longer should white people be allowed the comfort of this racial invisibility; they should have to see themselves as raced. Being racialized makes white people squirm, so let’s racialize them with that capital W.” See: Painter, “Why White Should be Capitalized.”

5. Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*; Staudenmeier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*; Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*; Gilman, *Blood Talk*; Zander, “Sozialdarwinistische Rassentheorien aus dem okkulten Untergrund des Kaiserreichs”; Strube, “Nazism and the Occult.”

theories of esotericists like Rudolph Steiner, Helena P. Blavatsky, and Julius Evola,⁶ this essay is the first to explicitly probe the rubric of “white esotericism.”⁷ Why and how does whiteness remain so often hidden and obscured? Is there such a thing as “white esotericism”? And if so, how can or should we delimit this category? What does it reveal? What does it obscure? And what is lost if whiteness is left out of the study of esotericism?⁸

The three ethnographies under consideration in this review offer some, and various, answers to these questions—although none of the authors planned to write about whiteness. Of the three, Amanda Lucia’s *White Utopias* is most explicitly concerned with the topic at hand: Lucia explores religious exoticism and the viscosity of whiteness at “transformative festivals” like Burning Man. In the two other books—Susannah Crockford’s *Ripples of the Universe* and Susan Lepselter’s *The Resonance of Unseen Things*, both ethnographic studies concerned with esoteric belief and practice in the southwest of the US—whiteness is often a more implicit, but equally haunting, presence.

While all three books help us understand how white Americans use or engage in esotericisms to reject, critique, and distance themselves from white civil society, they collectively paint an immensely complex picture of the ways in which esotericisms are used to reproduce, transform, and transcend (if only temporarily) normative constructs of whiteness. These esotericisms are not grounds for explicit iterations of white supremacy or crude racial theories. They are grounds for critiques of white civil society that, at the same time, reproduce

6. Strube, “Theosophy, Race, and the Study of Esotericism”; Staudenmeier, “Racial Ideology Between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany”; Staudenmeier, “Race and Redemption”; Koren, “Between Racism and Universalism”; Zander, “Anthroposophische Rassentheorie”; Santucci, “The Notion of Race in Theosophy.”

7. That said, in writing this essay I became aware of the controversy over “whiteshamanism” or “White Shamanism”: as Amanda Lucia’s *White Utopias*, under review here, shows, Indigenous scholars have been critiquing the appropriation of Native spiritualities in New Age discourse since the 1990s; 36.

8. This question is inspired by Rachel Schneider and Sophie Bjork-James, who ask in a recent essay to which I return below: “what is lost when whiteness is left out of the study of religion?” (“Whither Whiteness and Religion,” 176).

or reinforce racialized and hierarchical political, social, and cultural structures. This is precisely why these books are so important, and why they present “new directions” in both the field of esotericism and critical whiteness studies.

White Esotericisms

Before we delve into the individual texts, some general remarks about whiteness and esotericism are in order. As I have suggested elsewhere, whiteness functions as one of the foundational structures of the field of esotericism studies.⁹ This is evident from and has had implications for how the field looks, the narratives we tell (or not), the theoretical frameworks we use (or overlook), and the materials we study (or ignore). Scholars in the field are overwhelmingly white, we have mainly looked at currents and movements that are majority white, we have paid too little attention to theoretical frameworks that draw from Black studies, critical race theory, and de- and postcolonial theory, and we have told a somewhat limited story about rejection, deviance, and normativity.¹⁰ Moreover, this overwhelming whiteness was, until recently, hardly acknowledged, recognized, problematized, or theorized. Whiteness was, quite simply, an uninterrogated norm. This does not mean that such whiteness is pure, absolute, or total, but that it functions as scaffolding: it is the locus of our definitions, concepts, and frameworks.

Alongside and occasionally in conversation with a long-overdue embrace of race as an analytical category, scholars in the field of esotericism have debated the use of the adjective “Western.”¹¹ At this point, the various arguments and

9. Bakker, “Hidden Presence.”

10. See also Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered”; Bakker and Roukema, “10 Years of Correspondences.” Together with Tanya Cheadle, I am currently developing a workshop on “normative esotericism,” generously funded by the Radboud-Glasgow Collaboration Fund.

11. For essays that tackle Western and race in conversation, see: Finley, Guillory, Page, “Introduction”; Finley, Gray, Page, “Africana Esoteric Studies and Western Intellectual Hegemony”; Bakker, “Hidden Presence.” See further, for the debate on the adjective: Granholm, “Locating the West”; Asprem, “Beyond the West”; Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, “Time to Drop the ‘Western’”; Strube, “Towards the Study of Esotericism Without the ‘Western’”; Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism”; Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of West and East in the Early Theosophical Society.”

positions in this debate are well known: on the one hand, the adjective was put in use to sharply distinguish the then-emerging field of Western esotericism from religionism. On the other hand, it is rather imprecise, obscures that esotericism is a “globally entangled subject,”¹² and functions, as I argued elsewhere, as a “metalanguage for white.”¹³ To that end, I suggest that the only reason to keep the adjective Western—although not without problems or complications—would be to provide a platform to ask and probe questions about whiteness.

Another way to facilitate such discussions is, perhaps, the moniker or rubric of “white esotericism.” In suggesting this, I take inspiration from recent writings on “white religion.” “What would admitting to and naming the categories of both ‘white Christian’ and ‘white religion’ expose about the strategic and tacit identity-formation processes at work in scholarship and social life alike,” Christopher Driscoll asks in the introduction to his 2015 publication *White Lies: Race and Uncertainty in the Twilight of American Religion?*¹⁴ Such naming is not without concern and risk, however. As Rachel Schneider and Sophie Bjork-James argue in their insightful article “Whither Whiteness and Religion?”: “Even using a term such as white religion is likely to provoke discomfort or confusion in part due to fears that it will serve to reinforce the cultural power and discursive authority of whiteness.”¹⁵ There is no reason to assume that the same would not hold true for “white esotericism.”

Yet, as Schneider and Bjork-James also argue in conversation with Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, “critical attention to whiteness and religion by scholars of religion is necessary to provide a diverse range of scholars institutional space in

12. Strube, “Towards the Study of Esotericism Without the ‘Western,’” 45–66.

13. Bakker, “Hidden Presence.” I made this claim in conversation with Sylvester Johnson’s work on white and American religion (“Religion Proper and Proper Religion,” 160); in writing this article, I realized that Christopher Driscoll made a similar claim in *White Lies*, when he argues that American religion has served as “proxy and code word concealing a more focused assessment of ‘white religion’” (Driscoll, *White Lies*, 14).

14. Driscoll, *White Lies*, 3.

15. Schneider and Bjork-James, “Whither Whiteness and Religion,” 177.

which to examine how white supremacy has functioned across space and time in ways that could help resist white supremacy.”¹⁶ Concerns over the discursive authority of whiteness are important: given the marginalization of scholars of color we must be careful not to centralize or “amplify” the voices of white scholars.¹⁷ However, precisely because conversations about the relationships between colonialism, whiteness, and religion have so far been primarily the domain of scholars of color, scholars who are interested in religions practiced by mostly white subjects, have been allowed to abstain from discussing race.¹⁸ Although there are exceptions, of course, this definitely holds true for the field of esotericism. It was, as noted above, the pioneering work of Stephen Finley, Margarita Guillory, and Hugh R. Page, Jr., all Black American scholars, that marked race as a *constitutive* category of analysis; until then, discussions of race were limited to explicit forms of white supremacy, like occult aspects of Nazism.

Given that much of the institutional force and presence of the field of esotericism is in Europe,¹⁹ this focus on explicit forms of white supremacy is perhaps not surprising. Where conversations around race have been part of the public and academic domain for quite some time in the US—the main focus of Schneider and Bjork-James’s article—in Europe, as sociologist Alana Lentin writes, there has been a general “silence” around race.²⁰ After the Second World War, race would be increasingly seen as a problem originating in science: it was a pseudo-scientific concept, that had to be disproven on scientific grounds, as UNESCO’s “Statement against race and racial prejudice” would indeed do in 1950 when it declared race a harmful, destructive myth.²¹

16. *Ibid.*, 192.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. I need to be careful here, of course, but considering that the overwhelming number of degree programs, journals, and book series dedicated to esotericism are located in Europe, I think this claim is justified. That said, this European hegemony is a problem in itself.

20. I take this idea of “silence” from Alana Lentin: “Europe and the Silence About Race.”

21. Lentin, “Europe and the Silence About Race,” 496.

However, such a disentanglement of race and politics in Europe obscures that, although disproven on scientific grounds, race continues to facilitate and structure the oppression, subjugation, and segregation of people of color. It obscures that racial hierarchies do persist, although they are today concealed in words like background, culture, ethnicity, civilization, or religion.²² It obscures, too, the close intersection between race and colonialism; in Europe, race remains often associated with the Shoah and the scientific racisms of the nineteenth century, rather than the project of endless differentiation that finds its origin in the symbolic year of 1492.²³ This silence around race is even more deafening when it comes to whiteness: to begin to recognize race as something that belongs to racialized peoples is one thing, to acknowledge that whiteness, too, is a racial category—and one that shapes and is informed by esotericisms—would be another. As Richard Dyer once wrote in the opening pages of his famous study of whiteness, *White*, “white people are not racially seen or named . . . Other people are raced, we are just people.”²⁴

Yet, as Schneider and Bjork-James also insist,

to not substantively address whiteness in the study of religion has consequences. Not only does it reinforce an analytic division between race and religion, it also works to obscure the racial dimensions of dominant Western forms of religion, particularly Protestant Christianity in the United States, as well as the religious dimensions of white supremacy.²⁵

Two things are important here. First, Schneider and Bjork-James make clear that the relationship between race and religion works both ways: it is important to understand the racial dimensions of religion, as well as the religious dimensions of white supremacy. Second, the statement reveals a gap, which is also apparent in the rest of the article: Schneider and Bjork-James and, by extension, scholarship on whiteness and religion—after all, they provide an extensive, thorough state

22. Lentin, “Europe and the Silence About Race”; Nye, “Race and Religion.”

23. Lentin, “Europe and the Silence About Race,” 496.

24. Dyer, *White*, 1. Also cited in: Schneider and Bjork-James, “Whither Whiteness and Religion,” 179.

25. Schneider and Bjork-James, “Whither Whiteness and Religion,” 177–78.

of the art—focuses primarily on Protestant Christianity in the United States. Although understandable, this focus is also rather one-sided and limited. The authors are aware of this, concluding towards the end of the article that “it is important not to confine the study of whiteness and religion to Protestant Christianity” or, indeed, the US.²⁶ They list several important interventions that unsettle this focus, including studies that interrogate whiteness in Judaism, Mormonism, Buddhism, and Western Buddhism. Esotericisms are, except for a brief mention of Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and Mattias Gardell on the influence of paganism and Odinism on the racist right, absent.²⁷ The three texts under consideration here offer a helpful and much-needed different take on the relationship between whiteness and religion.

White Utopias

White Utopias, a nuanced study of spiritual growth, meaning making, altered states of consciousness, self-critique *and* cultural appropriation at contemporary transformative festivals, finds its origin in an observation. Spending many days at Burning Man, Wanderlust, Lightning in the Bottle, Bhakti Fest, and Shakti Fest—an astonishing 129 days in total—Amanda Lucia began to wonder: why were those around her so overwhelmingly white? This was particularly apparent at Bhakti Fest and Shakti Fest, two festivals specifically dedicated to yoga. While these take place in California (where white people are the minority), almost 90 percent of those participating were white.

While Lucia noted this as significant, many of her informants resisted her “centering of whiteness” (xvii). Why? Lucia finds an answer to both questions with the help of the concept of “viscosity, or the stickiness of whiteness in countercultural spaces,” which she borrows from Arun Saldanha’s study of whiteness and psytrance in Goa, India (4; see also 150). Saldanha develops this term as part of

26. *Ibid.*, 193.

27. *Ibid.*, 185.

his materialist theory of race: developing a critique of social constructionism and its focus on ideas and representations, he wants to understand race “in terms of bodies and spaces.”²⁸ Like Saldanha, Lucia uses the term to understand how and why the subjects of her study fostered spaces of white hegemony, despite their obvious attempts to decenter whiteness, escape the constraints of white society, critique hegemonic Western modernity, and challenge white supremacy (which is why they felt uncomfortable when confronted with whiteness).

In five chapters, four interludes, an introduction and conclusion, and two appendices, *White Utopias* explores how and why such festivals become spaces of white hegemony. Three concepts are central: the aforementioned white viscosity, white possessivism, and religious exoticism. White possessivism is a form of representational politics in which whites do not only learn from but “embody, possess, extract, and redistribute” alterity as a “form of social capital” (36). At transformative festivals, this is grounded in and facilitated by religious exoticism, a concept Lucia borrows from sociologist Véronique Altglas, and that refers to “a constructed representation of the other in the service of the production of the self” (8).

In Lucia’s study, religious exoticism names a “project of white identity making” (18), specifically one that entails a “*critique of one’s own positionality*” and a “*search for something else, something beyond the familiar*” (37; emphasis original). This also helps her to answer a second major question: why were the majority-white participants at transformative festivals so drawn to Indic and Indigenous practices? While we may expect, at festivals where yoga is the common denominator, a dedication to Hinduism and Buddhism, transformative festivals also display a consistent and deep engagement with Indigenous spiritualities. Lucia found that teachers and participants often “hybridized” Indic and Indigenous, a practice that goes back to the counterculture of the 1960s and is, more generally, a feature of New Age tropes and practices (7). For participants—a “subsection” of people who identify as spiritual but not religious, specifically the group who has turned

28. Saldanha, *Psychedelic White*, 9.

away from “Abrahamic religions” to “Hinduism, Buddhism, and Indigenous religions, and occasionally Sufism, Kabbalah, and Western esotericism”—these spiritualities helped to formulate critiques of white civil society (11).

Yet, precisely this religious exoticism, she concludes, “served as a deterrent to nonwhite potential participants” (4) as it “romanticizes racialized others as unsullied, exotic, premodern subjects” (8). The primary focus of Chapter 1, Lucia invokes religious exoticism as part of a nuanced, comprehensive, and rich exploration of cultural appropriation which shifts the focus from dress, hairstyles, and the ruses of ethnic isolationism and essentialism to inequality, oppression and white supremacy: it is “systemic racism,” she writes, that “makes these cultural appropriations so offensive” (61). In Chapter 2, Lucia homes in on questions of authenticity and knowledge production. She distinguishes between “experience-authenticity” and universal knowledge, and “lineage-authenticity” and local knowledge, a distinction usually—although not always—bifurcated along racial lines (88).

But Lucia is not just interested in critique; in the second half of the book, she takes seriously that transformative festivals produce the conditions for—and encourage and celebrate—participants to engage in acts of self-transformation. She aptly observes that in the realm of religion, forms of cultural appropriation can lead to very serious forms of identification, or “conversions in all but name” (9).²⁹ Lucia is clear on what is at stake for these participants: they are not just looking for play or tourism, but fundamental and thorough change. Through geographical dislocation, dietary practices, and bodily exercise, participants deconstruct the normative self and shape it into a new form. At festivals, such ascetic practices, which are the focus of Chapter 3, produce increasingly “open, porous, and vulnerable selves” (149) that, in turn, welcome wondrous and peak experiences induced by psychedelics, devotional music and the natural environment, which further “shock” the self into a new form.

29. Indeed, Lucia remarks that very few participants would identify as Hindu or Native American religion, in part because these religions are ethnoreligions (41). See also page 167, where Lucia explains that many at Bhakti and Shakti fest regard activities grounded in Hinduism—like chanting Hare Krishna—as universal spiritual experiences, rather than linked to religion or Hinduism.

These mystical experiences are the focus of Chapter 4, where Lucia also returns to the concept of white viscosity as a “subterranean theme of analysis” (150). Lucia cites Saldanha at length: white viscosity explains how white bodies aggregate and, as such, create spaces that are less penetrable by people who are not white. This much is clear. What is less clear, however, is how this works precisely at transformative festivals. Is there something specific about spaces that produce peak experiences—her insightful discussion of the social construction of wilderness would suggest this (154–55)—or is it merely about the sheer number of white people present at these festivals, which produces a kind of impenetrable boundary?

While Lucia is convinced that such acts of self-transformation are genuine, she also problematizes the intense focus on personal transformation—where “the performance of the ascetic self becomes the ideal” (136)—and the creation of temporary utopias, at the general expense of seeking political solidarities and the transformation of society more broadly: participants choose existential meaning over revolution and rebellion. Lucia lists several moments in which participants at transformative festivals clashed with Indigenous communities over issues of appropriation and inequality, although she also makes clear that some festivals do engage in community work. This tension between individual growth and transformation and the wider social worlds in which these take place becomes particularly apparent in the final chapter, when Lucia dissects the longing for “freedom” that, she argues, undergirds the ideology and practice of many who participate and that creates a kind of “ideological commons, united in mutual experiences of and reactions to late-capitalist modernity” (217).

This search for an ideological commons, too, minimizes diversity and reinforces homogeneity as it “impacts ethnic diversity in its homogenizing tendencies, demanding outward signifiers of social inclusion” (221). Lucia illustrates this point with an experience of an African American burner who noted that people responded much more “standoffish” when his “hair looked like every other ‘scary black person’ the white Americans are used to seeing in

their movies and TV shows” than when he had dreadlocks, which at Burning Man suggests the “friendly, hippy, bohemian negro idea that gets attached to having dreadlocks” (219). Burners engaged, used, and reinforced racial stereotypes.

Over the course of her fieldwork, Lucia writes early on in the book, she gave up her decades-long practice of yoga (3). And indeed, her central claim that “white possessivism,” ultimately lies “at the very heart” of these festivals (20) is convincing, even if she mitigates it somewhat in the conclusion. The overwhelming whiteness of such spaces, she speculates, may also be attributed to “the fact that many people of color are located in more secure religious and cultural centers that are less comfortable with spiritual bricolage and religious exoticism” (221–22). She provides little evidence for this claim, however, and acknowledges that it requires further study. To be sure, the Black esotericisms with which I opened this review would complicate it—primarily as it relates to bricolage but, as the scholarship of Philip Deslippe, Alexander Rocklin, and Jacob Dorman demonstrates, also when it comes to religious exoticism.³⁰

I appreciate how Lucia balances a careful, if occasionally biting critique of cultural appropriation, the politics of representation, and systemic racism with a deeply felt appreciation for the sincerity of her informants’ desire to transform themselves and critique normative “Western” ways of being, knowing, and feeling. As she herself asks towards the end of the introduction: how can we “evaluate the ways in which the religious exoticism inherent in spirituality is simultaneously a genuine engagement with alterity, a radically transformative method, and an often exploitative form of cultural appropriation?” (32)

White Utopias performs the answer. In so doing, Lucia also demonstrates the complexities in studying whiteness: many participants and teachers take issue with white norms, but their class and race privilege also creates new norms—around conceptions of freedom, authenticity, and knowledge production, for

30. Deslippe, “Hindu in Hoodoo”; Rocklin, “Hindu Alterity and the Performativity of Religion and Race between the United States and the Caribbean”; Dorman, *Princess and the Prophet*.

instance—and reinforces white hegemony. As she details in her informative but easy-to-miss appendix on “Methodology,” several teachers rejected any acknowledgment of white privilege, because “many have built their careers on white normativity, which allows them to present themselves as universalistic exemplars, as postracial subjects” (239).

Ripples of the Universe

If *White Utopias* is about a set of practices, then Susannah Crockford’s astute, beautiful, and compassionate ethnography is about a place: Sedona, Arizona. The book opens with a photo of Sedona’s “natural” and built environment: an image of one of Sedona’s most famous mountain peaks with apartment buildings at the forefront of the image. This is a fitting image: *Ripples of the Universe* is about how places attract and make people, and how people populate and create a space.

The result of six years of fieldwork—Crockford lived in Sedona for almost three in total—*Ripples of the Universe* is divided in five thematic chapters flanked by an introduction and conclusion. The introduction offers an elaborate discussion of spirituality—which, for the people of Sedona, meant “a path, a route through life” (7)—and related concepts: energy, vibration, frequency, manifestation, vortex, ascension, alignment, and awareness. Firmly grounding Sedona’s “cosmologies of spirituality” in a longer lineage of secularisms produced by “the haunted metaphysics of American Protestantism” (10), Crockford explains that, for spiritual seekers in Sedona, everything is energy. All energy vibrates, at various frequencies. As such, everything is connected, but this does not mean that everything is equal: the higher the frequency, the closer to the universe. “Energy negotiates equality and hierarchy,” Crockford concludes (20). Although most likely branded as New Age believers by outsiders, those on the path in Sedona she encountered had little patience for this term. “Woo woo meant new age and new age meant woo woo,” writes Crockford, and “nobody chose to be associated with either” (7).

The introduction also serves to introduce Crockford's main themes and concerns. Refreshingly, class is central. Deeply immersed in theory and widely read in a range of different fields, Crockford writes deftly about the ways in which people in Sedona reframed "poverty as a choice" (6), even as they worked in the "digitized gig economy" (10). She confidently links neoliberalism and spirituality both historically and conceptually: "spirituality is the complement to neoliberalism; the spiritual side of pure capitalism" (28). Let that sink in. And then consider, too, that Crockford makes the convincing case that even though the spiritual path is, at its core, about raising one's vibration and changing society, such change is not fostered through organized, collective action, but through individuals that act independently (13).

Spiritual seekers in Sedona embraced a particular American conceptualization of society as composed of individuals and of the self "as bounded, discrete, and constituted only by itself (and not through social relations with others)" (31). In such a society, race and class—and the ways in which they forge or limit opportunities—are seen as mere fictions (30; see also 109-11); change is in your hands, and in your hands only. Yet importantly, she points out, "by resorting to individual solutions to social problems, the existing political order is reified, not rejected" (152).

In its critique of the individual nature of spirituality, Crockford's book reminds me of *White Utopias*. But whereas Lucia's critique aimed for the lack of political engagement and community-making across the color line, Crockford demonstrates that the people of Sedona are also profoundly isolated from *each other*. Although her interlocutors emphasize positivity and wellness—and although Crockford is an immensely funny writer—the book mainly captures a deep sense of loneliness, alienation, sadness, and despair. Class, no doubt, is a central difference here: "being God in your own universe is also a way to make money" (31). Put most crudely: the protagonists of *Ripples of the Universe*—which, too, are mainly white (22)—work in the gig economy that the seekers

in *White Utopias* would use (or, indeed, develop).³¹ Put another way, participants at Burning Man can critique white civil society and conceptualizations of self because they, ultimately, benefit from it. Reading the two ethnographies side-by-side, and in the context of an exploration of whiteness and esotericism, thus demonstrates the importance of intersectional readings: race and class must be studied together.³²

This is evident, too, from the subsequent five chapters, each of which is organized around a particular theme. Chapter 1 analyzes the production of Sedona as a “sacred space of special energy” (35). Crockford pays specific attention to how this narrative at once appropriates and encapsulates Indigenous spiritualities—people in Sedona engage in vision quests and medicine walks, often divorcing these practices from their original context—and overwrites Indigenous claims to land sovereignty. “The recorded history of genocide of Native Americans,” Crockford observes, “was rarely addressed by those involved in spirituality” (51). Crockford confidently weaves together Indigenous scholarship on appropriation and genocide with ecocriticism and theories in religious studies about sacred space and transcendence.

However, people remain present and central; often, the same people return in different chapters. The second chapter is, for instance, dedicated to “the idiosyncratic belief system of Peter Gersten,” a Sedona resident who predicted the end of the world on December 21st, 2012. Smartly, Crockford uses this singular worldview as a prism to reflect on the narrativization of the self in the context of forms of hyperreality produced by capitalism. Peter returns in the fifth chapter, now in the context of the overlap between conspiracy theories and spirituality (157).

31. The reader should note that Lucia’s final chapter is also about capitalism and whiteness.

32. Although race has, as noted, recently emerged as a central category of analysis, class remains an overlooked concern in our field. Crockford has done much to address this (see also her “What do Jade Eggs Tell Us About the Category of ‘Esotericism’”). In the summer of 2025, *Correspondences* will publish a special issue on class.

In the third chapter, Crockford links stories about aliens and abductions to alienation “from the norms, expectations, and ideals that [her interlocutors] associated with ‘mainstream’ American society” (96). In Sedona, some believed they were “starseeds”; in choosing this alien identity, Crockford observes, they adopted a stigmatized status but were also responding to already existing feelings of alienation. This chapter also returns to the issue identified above: according to some, “following the spiritual path granted the opportunity to overcome or discard race and class” (111). Some consider race for instance an exclusively earthly fiction: in embracing an alien identity, one of Crockford’s informants, the ethnically mixed Mynzah, rejected the racial identities ascribed to him (114). Others reframe poverty as a choice.

Crockford is skeptical here. Rather than transcending race, discourses about alien races often replicated American racial discourse (122). And “rather than liberating themselves from labor alienation my starseed interlocutors were caught between depending on state welfare or employment-related benefits and the precarious unregulated short-term gig economy” (121). Likewise, the fourth chapter demonstrates that while Sedona dietary practices—organic, non-processed, or simply no food at all—purported to reject and move away from mainstream American foodways, they end up reproducing and celebrating normative understandings of perfect bodies: “the bodies with the highest vibration were thin, young, and free of disease” (150).

In her conclusion, Crockford reflects on her methodology, explaining that she let spiritual seekership guide her ethnographic practice: she let the wide variety of available spiritual practices inform what she should do and where she should go. While this could have led to rather disjointed chapters framed around practices, the chapters instead feel quite tight and neat. In part, this is because each takes on a particular theme—with conspiracy theory as “counter narrative” as the central organizing theme of the fifth and final chapter—but I think this also has to do with the ways in which each is structured around a protagonist

or set of protagonists. It is the spiritual people she meets and engages, rather than spirituality per se, that seem to guide her ethnographic practice. Dedicated to “the people of Sedona, love and light,” *Ripples of the Universe* thus achieves something remarkable: it performs precisely the commitment to community that, Crockford argues convincingly, this form of spirituality often lacks.

The Resonance of Unseen Things

If Lucia writes about a set of practices, and Crockford about a people and their place, then the third and final book under consideration here—Susan Lepselter’s beautiful, haunting, and transformative *The Resonance of Unseen Things*—is about a story. Based on fieldwork conducted as a graduate student in the southwest US in the 1990s, Lepselter traces a collection of stories about hidden, sinister powers. Some of these she heard directly from people she met waitressing at the Little A’Le’Inn and attending UFO experimenter meetings, others she lifted from popular culture. Aliens, UFOs, and abductions are often central to these stories, but Lepselter is adamant that she is not writing a book about UFO culture.

“What happens,” she asks in the introduction, “when you listen to UFO talk ethnographically—when the uncanny is shot through with the ordinary noise of life?” (16) For Lepselter, this produced a kind of “destabilizing opening into other kinds of theories and other structures of the imagination” (18). More concretely, she locates and traces a form of apophenia—“the experience of perceiving connections between random or unrelated objects” (3)—and the feeling of resonance produced through this experience: “something just clicked,” her interlocutors would say, or “it fits all together” (5). She shows how stories congeal, how they stick, and in doing so produce affect.

Lepselter’s book is about people who connect the dots, and in that connecting, find solace, purpose, meaning, and narrative. These parallels, she argues convincingly, *become* a story: a story of captivity and liberation, power and vulnerability, agency and subjection, grounded in the singular American master

trope of freedom, and embedded in experiences marked by class, race, gender, trauma, and living on the margins. As another reviewer insightfully noted, Lepselter accomplishes this task “by largely disembodimenting her interlocutors, focusing on the aesthetic resonance of the narratives rather than the social identities of the storytellers.”³³ She does this on purpose, the reviewer also notes—a point to which I return below—but in the context of *this* review, it is important to stipulate that most of the people Lepselter talks to are white.

The Resonance of Unseen Things consists of six more-or-less thematic chapters and a coda. The first chapter, “Vulnerabilities,” doubles as the book’s introduction: it offers a brief reflection on the book’s central terms, sites, and style. The latter is informed by Lepselter’s ethnographic experience, specifically her sense of being “narratively and poetically infected, altered” by listening (18). Instead of subjecting her material to a theoretical analysis—Crockford’s forte—she “performs the ethnographic experience of hybridization and partial permeation, as a way of dealing with the very real, often seductive power of the discourses I present, and with their prolific growth in America” (18). At points in the narrative, the distance between her and the stories she recounts even collapses. In the coda, Lepselter relays her own experience of resonance, produced by talking to a fervent UFO believer and unknown “Man in Black” who approached her at the airport one day: “conspiracies snaked through my blood, touched forgotten images, and linked together in a chain of unstoppable increase” (162).

There are other ways in which Lepselter bridges the distance between her and her interlocutors, theory and folklore, academic and vernacular, poetics and talk, and epistemology and experience. Lepselter’s most successful strategy is the use of poetic form: in several instances, she presents the words of her interlocutors as lines and stanzas. Consider how she, as part of an extensive mediation on class-informed feelings of immobility and captivity, reproduces the story of Stephanie, someone she met in a UFO community:

33. Mahmud, “Review.”

My water pump went out when I went to go pick up Kelly in
town.
My water pump decided to go out in my car.
OK, ever since then, we have been trying to get a water pump
to fit that car.
And we can't find one to fit it . . .
But for some reason,
we have exchanged that water pump
now four times
and four times now
it will not work on my car.
So there is some unnatural force keeping me here.
It must be something good or it wouldn't keep me here.
I usually don't stay where there's nothing good.
So there is something keeping me here causing this time warp (31-32).

Lepselter then asks her reader to read it out loud: “if you try to hear the words out loud,” she writes, you can “hear the repetitive thud of her cadence.” And indeed, with Lepselter’s help, we begin to notice that the words water pump, fit, and four times are repeated. The story, she concludes, “reiterates the structure of immobility in its form” (32–33). In paying specific attention to form, Lepselter demonstrates that these stories present a kind of poetics of the uncanny, an “American vernacular poetics” as she calls it in the opening paragraph of the book (1). The effect is immediate, and haunting: I keep thinking about this book, about the stories it tells, the histories and memories it uncovers, the futures it opens up.

This is not just because of style, though: Lepselter’s analysis is astute, thought-provoking, and radically compassionate. In Chapter 2, Lepselter expands on some of the themes introduced in Chapter 1, in particular resonance, repetition, and captivity. With the help of Roman Jakobson’s theory of language and Kathleen Stewart’s writings on affect, Lepselter explains how people make meaning by connecting seemingly random events. For members of the Hillview UFO Experiencers group—Hillview is the fictional name she gives to one of her central sites; the other is a well-known UFO-themed bar in Rachel, Nevada—

everything can, for instance, be connected to a UFO. As such, the UFO “becomes a sign expressing that simultaneous sense of contingency and design, an inkling of some complete ‘grammar’ of meaningfulness” (24).

Again, for Lepselter it is not about UFO talk per se, but about how people make sense of their surroundings. Moreover, such apophenia is connected to power: stories of captivity, abduction, and subjugation emerge in the context of the master trope of freedom and liberation (a trope also explored by Lucia and Crockford) which is fully embedded in histories of colonization and enslavement. “I have tried in these pages,” Lepselter writes towards the end, “to show how America is still haunted by its own historical crimes and wounds” (157).

In Chapter 3, Lepselter turns to captivity narratives as a way to think ethnographically through how people stitch together various stories of abduction. A truly impressive chapter, Lepselter does not only describe but also performs apophenia: she brings together colonial writings about Indigenous peoples who capture and abduct white people with twentieth-century stories about UFOs to suggest that we find traces of the former in the latter. “The fall out of the still-open wound of Native American colonization and genocide,” she writes, “drifts into space alien stories” (52). Lepselter is careful, though, not to overstate her case: it would be a mistake to say that the UFO abduction story is *about* Native American colonization (52). Yet, as memory comes to exceed experience— “escap[ing] ownership” to become “a living, growing thing” (53)—others can join in. Here, too, Lepselter avoids quick judgment: we can critique “the New Age discourse of appropriation,” but UFO lore also reveals “a troubled American unconscious, an unstable desire born out of legacies of both colonization and class” (78).

In less capable hands, this insistent, wide-ranging tracking of the uncanny may have felt forced or artificial, but in *The Resonance of Unseen Things*, each new chapter deepens connections and parallels, producing resonance themselves. Lepselter’s mesmeric writing draws you in, deeper and deeper, into the minds and feelings of the people she met along the way: something is wrong, they insist, and nothing is what it used to be. Chapter 4, for example, continues to

trace the “troubled American unconscious” by looking at stories of government cover-ups and “the powers that be”; Chapter 5 reflects on the proliferation and form of UFO abduction stories; and Chapter 6 picks up the theme of self-chosen marginality. Like Crockford, Lepselter conveys a profound sense of loss, drifting, and disappointment, but sees in how people deal with this—finding parallels, which belies a desire for “something more”—the seeds of a theory of power, about “its vastness, its hidden sources, and its just-visible clues” (155).

Class is, once again, important. But these stories are also haunted by race and, more specifically, whiteness even if race is only rarely an explicit concern in the text. Most of Lepselter’s interlocutors, those that “join in” the memory of colonization and enslavement, are white. Moreover, race plays an explicit role in one of the foundational UFO abduction experiences, the abduction of the interracial couple Barney and Betty Hill, in 1961 (64–68). In her sixth and final chapter, however, Lepselter demands caution: yes, most people represented in her book are white, but the stories she traces transcend the boundaries of race and class. They do not belong to “a single social position,” they exceed individual experience to take on a social life of their own (156). As Lepselter explains:

I have taken stories, memories, and dreams from wealthy doctors and homeless drifters, men and women, young and old. A great many of the people here have experienced shifts in their economic position . . . Most, but not all, of the people represented here are white. But using social categories to analyze things like class position, here, would mislead from what I’m trying to say about the unfinalized structures of feeling and imagination that emerge in uncanny talk. These stories are memories and fragments that belong not to a single social position; rather they flood into and out of intersubjective spaces, and in doing so they express something about history and power. Memory and fantasy, like injury, exceed individual experience and become social, lingering and changing. My argument, in the end, is that what we need to know can be heard in the poetic resonance of these stories from multiple sources (156).

This is a rather unusual take, and I frequently wondered what someone like Crockford or Lucia, well-versed in critical race theory, would do with Lepselter’s material. I should note, however, that in her reluctance to foreground social categories, Lepselter seems to take cue from her interlocutors. Consider the

following story, which she shares in the pages preceding the quote above. At some point, Lepselter joined Linda and Ken—a couple she met at the café—to get Linda a new license. Linda was white and Ken was Black and, on their way back, their car was stopped by a police officer: “He had, I think, done a double-take at a black man driving in the deeply rural West with two white women” (154). The cop eventually lets them go, but for Lepselter, it is a clear sign of “racist harassment” (154).

Hours later, Linda spotted a UFO. As Lepselter tells it: “It was hovering on the coppery mountain to the north, a blinking and unnatural glitter, like a mirror tilted to signal us. *Wake up*, Ken, she [Linda] said. *That’s a UFO, there it is*” (155; emphasis original). Back in the café, Ken and Linda would tell everyone about the UFO, but “didn’t mention the cop” (155). It is unclear if she ever discussed the traffic stop with Ken and Linda, but Lepselter seems to take the fact that they did not talk about the cop as evidence for that what resonated for them was “the fact of power” and “its potential for transformation, and the strange pleasure of tearing holes in the real” (155).

However, there can be other explanations for why the couple did not discuss the police stop. Such stops may happen so frequently it’s not worth mentioning anymore, for instance, or Ken may not have wished to share this experience of harassment with what we can assume to be a majority white audience. Perhaps Lepselter discussed these possibilities with them. As a reader, however, we simply do not know. This leaves me wondering about Lepselter’s decision not to focus on social categories. On the one hand, I have come to think about Lepselter’s insistence as a warning against overdetermination. It is not that race plays no role, but that a singular focus on race obscures—or, “misleads”—parallels and resonances between all those who live on the margins, none of whom can be “defined” by any one social category in particular. We would do well to remember this warning as we think about a concept like “white esotericism” (and I would not be surprised if Lepselter would object to the use of this moniker to describe her subject matter). On the other hand, I wonder to what extent the limitations and possibilities produced by race and class make

some resonances, stories, and feelings—some variations of *the* story—more or less accessible, make it more or less possible to “join in.” After all, the history and memory of colonialism, imperialism, and genocide that, as Lepselter’s book shows so well, continues to haunt structures of feeling, continues to work its way into the “American vernacular poetics” of the uncanny, also continues to inform how people (are allowed or forced to) love, live, work, feel, and imagine.

White Esotericisms, Once More

In conclusion, I would like to return to the concept of “white esotericism” and think through what it reveals and obscures. To do so, it is helpful to look at how scholars have conceptualized “white religion.”³⁴ In their aforementioned article, Schneider and Bjork-James conclude that, “to the extent that a white habitus is reinforced by religious practice and theological language—or itself functions with god-like power in relation to others—it becomes possible to discuss something like white religion” (191).

Schneider and Bjork-James conceptualize “white religion” here in two different ways and it is important to keep them apart. First, in relation to habitus, a term they borrow from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s famous analysis of taste and class. A white habitus, for Schneider and Bjork-James, is “a system of enduring dispositions, tastes, practices, preferences, moral norms, epistemologies, and ideologies—all of which are deployed in symbolic and material contests for capital” (190). Following Schneider and Bjork-James’s argument, we can thus speak of white esotericism when esoteric practices and beliefs forge a white habitus: when they produce self-identifications or strategies of differentiation that mark or produce white as distinct, different, and perhaps even superior, and/or produce and reinforce racialized hierarchies.

The second meaning of “white religion” emerges when a white habitus functions with god-like power in relation to others. The first scholar to use the

34. I realize, of course, that we cannot fully subsume esotericisms under the rubric of “religion” or reduce its study to the field of religious studies. See: Bakker and Roukema, “10 Years of Correspondences,” 242.

moniker “white religion” in this way was W.E.B. du Bois, one of the founding fathers of sociology. In an essay first printed in 1917 and later reprinted as “The Souls of White Folk,” serving as a companion to his much more famous book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he conceptualizes “white religion” in two ways. First, white religion is simply another word for white Christianity. Second, he invokes the moniker in the context of speaking of “super-men,” “world-mastering demi-gods,” and “super-humanity,” thereby suggesting that white people claim God-like qualities. White religion, then, is not just another word for white Christianity: it also refers to, frames, and theorizes white people’s claim to superiority. Du Bois’s article, in turn, seeks to dismantle such claims. Referring to the war that is raging at the precise time of his writing—a war, Du Bois also notes, that is about “the jealous and avaricious struggle for the largest share in exploiting darker races”³⁵—he concludes: “This is not Europe gone mad; this is not aberration nor insanity; this is Europe; this seeming terrible is the real soul of white culture—back of all culture, stripped and visible today.”³⁶

Du Bois’s work, in turn, provides the starting point for two more recent explorations of “white religion,” also discussed by Schneider and Bjork-James.³⁷ In his aforementioned *White Lies*, Driscoll argues that the central figure of white religion, whiteness, takes “shape as a kind of God,” or God-idol, “marked by supreme value and ability” and the capacity to “provide the foundation to know, to be certain, and to live without fear.”³⁸ And in *The Religion of White Supremacy*, Eric Weed uses Paul Tillich’s work to argue that white superiority and white supremacy function, in the US body politic, as “ultimate concern.”³⁹ Adamant that he does “not mean tattooed, bald-neo Nazis, nor men in white robes burning crosses,” but “whites and whiteness as a whole,” Weed’s work

35. Du Bois, “Of the Culture of White Folk,” 445.

36. *Ibid.*, 438.

37. Schneider and Bjork-James, “Whither Whiteness and Religion,” 190.

38. Driscoll, *White Lies*, 11, 12.

39. Weed, *Religion of White Supremacy in the US*, xxvi.

refers, like Du Bois and Driscoll before him, to the intersection of whiteness and Christianity.⁴⁰ Given that all three write about the US, such a focus makes sense: as Weed writes, “the United States was the place in which Christianity and white supremacy could come together to form a new religious construct that makes white supremacy and the Christian tradition inseparable.”⁴¹

What can we learn from these writings about white religion? I signal three important take-aways. One, there seems to be a slippage—conscious, but nevertheless—between white religion and white Christianity, which obscures both the ways in which other religious formations have contributed to whiteness and the centrality of whiteness to how people practice and live non-Christian religiosity.

Two, the whiteness in white religion is both irreducible to and extends beyond skin color and phenotype: whiteness names, as Schneider and Bjork-James also note in conversation with J. Kameron Carter, a regime of “political and economic power for arranging (oikonomia) the world”—and we may add here social, religious, cultural, and technological power.⁴² As Du Bois wrote in “The Souls of White Folk” with devastating precision and seeming prophetic insight into our current ecological crisis:

I am quite straight-faced as I ask soberly, “But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?” Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!

Now what is the effect on a man or a nation when it comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this? That nations are coming to believe it is manifest daily. Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of whiteness on the shores of our time.⁴³

This brings me to the third observation: white religion names whiteness’s assumed, claimed, or purported “superhuman” qualities: this assumes various forms, from presenting itself as “superhuman” and beyond fault (Du Bois), to

40. *Ibid.*, xxi.

41. *Ibid.*, xxiv.

42. Schneider and Bjork-James, “Whither Whiteness and Religion,” 191. They cite, in turn, J. Kameron Carter’s *Race*, 35.

43. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 18.

the epitome of certainty, truth, ability, and assurance (Driscoll). White religion, then, frames, names, and theorizes claims to white superiority.

Taken together, these observations provoke a question. In the work of Reed, Driscoll, and Du Bois, “white religion” is invoked to say something about the religious dimension of whiteness: whiteness acts “god-like,” as the sole inheritor of the earth. Can we say something about the esoteric dimension of whiteness? Can theories of esotericism offer additional reflections on the nature of whiteness, beyond matters of divinity and ultimate concern? Could Kocku von Stuckrad’s writings on the dialectic of secrecy, concealment, and revelation help us better understand, for instance, the ways in which whiteness remains hidden and obscured?⁴⁴

In the past decade, the debate over what esotericism is has been rather dormant—overshadowed, perhaps, by the debate on the adjective “Western,” and overwhelmed by the immense success of Hanegraaff’s conceptualization of esotericism as a “waste basket” of rejected knowledge.⁴⁵ Yet, as Egil Asprem writes in his contribution to *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, “a number of different alternatives are on the table,” from new positive definitions along the lines of Antoine Faivre, to genealogical approaches like the one proposed by Michael Bergunder, to his own “building blocks” approach, which “fractures” esotericism into “more fine-grained analytical concepts.”⁴⁶ These are promising initiatives. After all, like the moniker “white religion,” the term “white esotericism” could very well say something specific about the nature of whiteness itself.⁴⁷

44. Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*.

45. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

46. Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered,” 134. Asprem directs readers to a very helpful discussion of the “definitional progression” in the study of esotericism, also published in the *New Approaches*: Okropiridze, “Interpretation Reconsidered.” See also the recently published essay on definitions by Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, “(Re)defining *Esotericism*.”

47. I presented sections of this essay during the panel “Whiteness and Esotericism: Theory, Method, Sources,” which I organized for *Esotericism and Practice*, the ninth biennial conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), held in Malmö in June 2023. I thank Adrienne Rooney for her smart and constructive reading of a draft of the conference paper (as well as this essay), the audience for their insightful questions, and my co-panelists—Aren Roukema, Egil Asprem, and Fredrik Gregorius—for their wonderful contributions.

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Bernd-Christian Otto and Dirk Johannsen, eds. *Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021. 372 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-46599-2 (hardback), 978-90-04-46600-5 (e-book).

Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination is the thirtieth volume of the ongoing Aries book series, Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism. The volume has been compiled to study the relationship between fiction and magic from multi-faceted perspectives. Therefore, the authors in the collection sought to find the initial position and reasons for this interrelation, in what ways the sides instruct each other, and how to situate the boundaries separating them if possible. The volume consists of fourteen chapters accompanied by introductory remarks from the editors. Thematically, depending on the source of inspiration for the writing, most chapters deal with fiction-inspired magical practices. While only one chapter wholly accounts for the opposite tendency, a few more chapters exhibit unique studies based on the reciprocal nature of the magic-fiction interrelation.

Chronologically, the collection covers the period from antiquity up to the present and provides significant arguments for the conceptualization of fiction-magic interconnectedness under a novel phenomenon called “fictional practice.” The term is suggested by the editors of the volume to denote the amalgamated essence of fiction and magical practice since the nineteenth century, as prior to this period, they constituted a pool of inspiration for each another. However, it is slightly difficult to observe fictional practices in the early modern cases as the practitioners are pioneers of the field and reflect both insider and outsider views. Additionally, some originate from oral folkloric traditions, the credibility of which is yet to be determined. Nevertheless, a red thread can be seen woven through most chapters in their acknowledgement of the dominance of fictions over the magical practices that fuel the emergence of fictional practice.

The first two chapters of the volume in particular seem to transcend the above-mentioned conceptualisation since the border between magic and fiction is blurred to the degree that the dominance of either is difficult to identify. Kyle Fraser’s Chapter One, “Magic as Pollution: Fictional Blasphemies and Ritual Realities in the Roman Period (1st century BCE–4th century CE),” introduces the ambiguous approach to magic in the late Roman period. Imaginative representations of magic and rituals were composed in a monastic environment by Hellenised priests who were the “sacred” practitioners of magic, at the same time evaluated as a threat to the Roman order for being impure, fraudulent, and polluting according to authors like Pliny, Strabo, Livy, Cicero, Diodorus Siculus, etc. (22). In Chapter Two, Claire Fanger explores the magical practices in “The Medieval Anti-Faust.” She mainly focuses on those practitioners who use black magic and are present in the Faustian legends, yet not punished like Faust. The first-hand experience of John Morigny, fourteenth-century member of the Order of Saint Benedict, is reflected in his book *Liber florum celestis doctrine* or *Flowers of Heavenly Teaching*, where he reveals his “insider” perspective as a ritual expert influenced by medieval tales about *nigromantia*, a Latin term for demonic magic (43).

Unique perspectives on fiction-inspired magical practices in the Nordic terrains are presented in Chapters Three, Four and Five. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir’s “Enchantment and Anger in Medieval Icelandic Literature and Later Folklore,” explores Icelandic folkloric magical patterns found in the Legendary Sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) ranging from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the nineteenth century. Owen Davies’ “Narratives of the Witch, the Magician, and the Devil in Early Modern Grimoires” explores the emergence of early modern grimoire traditions. Historically, cheap trial pamphlets loaded with fictional witness testimonies were the main devices of negatively shaping public opinion about magicians. However, the fictional writings of the period gave rise to the “genre of Devil’s pact grimoires” called *Höllenzwang*, which focused on the Faustian motifs conveying stories about secret knowledge revelations. Such novels significantly

changed the understanding of actual magicians by serving as textbooks for summoning devils and forming a firm magical manuscript culture in Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Portugal, France, etc. (98). Ane Ohrvik’s “When Ritual Texts Become Legendary: Practice and Fiction in Nordic Folklore” explores two types of written manuscripts that appeared in Norway during the early modern period. The first class, called the Black Books, consists of real historical manuals for practicing magic and conveying knowledge of practical arts and medicine. The second class is the oral legends dedicated to the mythical magus Cyprian. Regardless of the former’s factuality and latter’s fictionality, both texts are loaded with reiterating patterns and motifs of ritual practices.

Chapters Six and Seven deal with the interaction of fictional discourses of magic with the teachings of both the Theosophical Society and its offspring, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In “Magic and Literary Imagination in H.P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy,” Marco Frenschkowski questions this interaction by looking at how literary motifs migrated to the construction of Theosophical conventions and H. P. Blavatsky’s understanding of magic. Though she did not acknowledge practical magic in the early teachings of the Theosophical Society, magic had become one of the fields Blavatsky took inspiration from after experiencing the affirmation of her Theosophical concerns in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s fictional magic writings. Dirk Johannsen’s “The Emergence of Fictional Practice in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,” presents a similar trend in the HOotGD and William Butler Yeats’s fiction. Golden Dawn’s concept of magic differed from its ancestors in the way that its language was designed according to literary trends as its members were mainly literary figures, making the Order an esoteric literary circle (178). It was Yeats who surpassed the line between fictional and magical by creating the Celtic Mystical Order, within which his poems are posited as poetic talismans to unfold “spiritual force” (190).

The only chapter dealing with fictional writing that itself emerged from a magical practice is Chapter Eight, Hugh B. Urban’s “My Life in a Love Cult:

Tantra, Orientalism, and Sex Magic in Early Twentieth-Century Fiction.” Moving the case studies into the twentieth century, Urban conveys a significant example of how the close relationship between magic and fiction is dependent on the related cultural practices of the given period. Urban undermines a comparative study of sexual Tantric magic in the USA and England by comparing the novels of three female writers who have experienced such rituals in person and presented them in their fictions. The British novels Flora Annie Steel’s *The Law of the Threshold* (1924) and Elizabeth Sharpe’s *The Secrets of the Kaula Circle* (1936) are vivid and influential accounts of Tantric magical practices negatively portrayed as the fulfillment of all diabolic sexual desires. Contrary to them, in Alma Hirsig’s *My Life in a Love Cult: A Warning to All young Girls* (1928), Tantric rituals are a medium revealing the essence of body and sexuality for spiritual liberation. Along with her sister’s actual relationship with Crowley as his sexual companion in their rituals, Alma presents her own real encounter with Pierre Bernard, a “loving guru,” who also played an important role in the early reconceptualisation of Tantra in the USA through his “sex cult” (216). Hirsig’s semi-autobiographical presentation of Tantra acknowledges sexual magic rites as women’s rights to the fulfillment of sexual pleasure, desire, and needs.

Chapter Nine, Ethan Doyle White’s “Drawing Down the Moon: From Classical Greece to Modern Wicca,” and Chapter Ten, Christian Giudice’s “Drinking from Hecate’s Fountain: Kenneth Grant’s Typhonian Trilogies and the Fusion Between Literature and Practiced Magic,” focus on fictional practices inspired by Aleister Crowley. White traces the origins of the ritual of drawing down the moon and its adoption by Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) and his Wiccan community. This magical practice is first detected as a joke in Aristophanes’s *The Clouds*. Though Gardner and his Wiccan community do not acknowledge the roots of their ritual, Gardner’s acquaintance with a similar lunar ritual in Aleister Crowley’s *Moonchild* (1929) leaves no doubt as to the same origin of inspiration. Giudice focuses on Kenneth Grant, Aleister Crowley’s secretary, and

his unique style of fictional practice. As Crowley's only follower who went on to provide new contributions to the studies of "magick," Grant practiced magical rituals to communicate with outer space and utilized fictional "crypto-historic and ufological" literature for this purpose. In particular, Grant took Crowley's skrying tradition further and claimed that Crowley opened a magical portal embodied by the portrait of a non-human entity serving as a medium for both human and alien spirits, which can be accessed through ufological literature.

Katerina Zorya's Chapter Eleven, "If One Knows Where to Look, Fiction is Magick: Reading Fictional Texts as Manuals of Magic in Post-Soviet Ukraine, Russia and Belarus," argues that in the Soviet era, some magical works were intentionally labeled as fiction to avoid censorship and practitioners would read such "instructive fictions" as if they were written to teach concealed esoteric ideas (262). Of such types, Richard Bach's and Carlos Castaneda's works were the most influential in post-Soviet publishing, as Bach's works were more general and abstract in terms of revealing the details, while Castaneda's novels transmitted detailed techniques for easy adoption by the readers, both rich with practical knowledge and tools. Zorya claims that, in this way, the label of fiction on such writings was a comprehensible and safe way of spreading practitioners' magical ideas without being censored.

Chapter Twelve explores the fictional heritage of Howard Philips Lovecraft. Justin Woodman's "Cthulhu Gnosis: Monstrosity, Selfhood, and Secular Re-Enchantment in Lovecraftian Occultural Practice," explores how Lovecraft's fictional heritage gave way to contemporary magical practices based on his "Cthulhu Mythos"—a fictional mythological universe inhabited by monstrous and hyper-spatial entities after the extinction of the humankind (290). Woodman conducts anthropological fieldwork among Lovecraft-inspired chaos magic practitioners in the United Kingdom called The Haunters of the Dark, and reveals how Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos has been adopted to connect with the mythos' beings from his tales, which is the center of the HotD's magical practice.

Finally, Carole M. Cusack's Chapter Thirteen, "A Magickal School in the Twenty-First Century: The Grey School of Wizardry and Its Prehistory" maps one more modern magical practice informed by popular fiction. The Grey School of Wizardry was founded by Tim Zell-Ravenheart, taking after the aesthetics of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and the fictional school of Hogwarts. The Grey School became the institution through which Zell-Ravenheart and his wife Diana Moore started their quest to recreate the magical, mythical, and legendary conventions they read in Rowling's books, such as breeding unicorn goats and searching for mermaids in the Pacific Ocean.

One striking theme in several chapters is the evaluation of the acts of reading and writing as magical practice. The members of the Lovecraftian Order treated the reading of Lovecraft's works as a magical performance, especially enacted before sleeping so that vivid dreams could be seen (Woodman). For Kenneth Grant, a writer has supernatural powers in putting fancies into words, like a magician looking through reality into higher dimensions informed by extraterrestrial entities (Giudice). Entire books were written by some post-Soviet authors like Vladimir Dolokhov, Vadim Gurganov, Andrei Kainarov, and Rita Vetrova for whom writing constituted a magical practice during which "lines fall on paper like fiery tracer bullet bursts from the heart, and they call up an even greater ecstasy" (276, quoted in Zorya).

In the concluding chapter, Bernd-Christian Otto, as one of the editors of the volume, summarizes all the case studies based on his own arguments. First, Otto adopts three perspectives in the discussion of the case studies depending on the dominance of the informing side in the magic-fiction relationship. Since it is a significantly nuanced categorisation, many studies are repetitive for the sake of his arguments and are included into more than one category simultaneously. Otto also traces the historical evolution of this correlation and rightly holds the cruciality of the rise of the fiction genre in Western cultural history as an account for the increasing number of magical practices.

For Otto, fictionalization provided practitioners with self-protection through pseudepigraphy, self-legitimization, and self-traditionalization to raise the worth of their practices.

Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination is a commendably well-composed collection of case studies for the scholars of magic, ritual practices, fictional narratology, and other disciplines whose academic interests lie in the scholarly study of magic. However, except for a few authors who clarify their purpose in using the term “West” or “Western,” the problematic nature of the term is not addressed when speaking about “Western esotericism.” That said, Jewish and Islamic discourses are also absent from the treatment of magic-fiction relations. Nevertheless, in a broader sense, the collection is rich with cultural-historical data that aids the observance of the emergence and conditions enabling this development, and helps map the power and usage of magical knowledge in fictional and factual discourses. It may serve as a powerful pioneer in conceptualising magic-fiction interrelation on an interdisciplinary level from the prism of religious, literary, and anthropological studies.

Khanim Garayeva
garayevak@gmail.com

Jens Schlieter. *What Is It Like To Be Dead: Near-Death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxxii + 344 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19088-884-8. \$36.95.

The last half-century has seen near-death narratives become almost quotidian, expressed through written memoirs, the establishment of focused websites such as the International Association of Near Death Studies (IANDS), and even a collection of TedX talks.¹ Most of the research posits itself firmly in one of two camps: either a medical reductionist approach, which insists that near-death experiences are the result of physiological changes in the brain occurring during the death process, or an expansionist viewpoint, which argues that reductionism cannot account for many of the commonly reported traits and suggests that a nonlocal consciousness, one that is not confined to a specific space such as the brain, might account for similar traits frequently reported by near-death experiencers.

In the midst of this debate, Jens Schlieter's monograph, *What Is It Like To Be Dead: Near-Death Experiences, Christianity, and the Occult*, takes a determinedly constructivist position, a detailed historical approach that seeks to explain the escalating increase in reported accounts of near-death experiences, a trajectory that he believes began in the early modern period. Schlieter's primary argument is that near-death narratives are a form of existential "religious discourse" (xv) that "cannot be separated from the individual's former conscious (or unconscious) reflection on death, the afterlife, and the soul" (xx). Although he concedes that the consequent narrative structures of the experiences may accurately describe the events, Schlieter argues that such accounts should not be viewed at face value, but are the products of the unique history of Western Christian religious tradition

1. International Association of Near-Death Studies, <https://iands.org>. One example of a TedX talk is Joseph Geraci, "The Near-Death Phenomenon." Filmed September 2013 at TedX Wilmington. 13:56. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzSa5IX0mqA>

combined with six evolving trends: (a) the increased institutionalization of biomedical practices including successful revival of technically deceased people; (b) the greater acceptance of psychedelics; (c) a heightened focus on individual religious experiences; (d) the continuation of spiritualist, esoteric, paranormal and occult traditions and their intersections with “New Age” spirituality; (e) the popular success of Indian yogic traditions; and (f) the favorable reception of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in the 1930s (xvii).

Schlieter argues his thesis in five parts. In Part One, he contends that modern narratives—including those collected by Dr. Raymond Moody, who is popularly believed to have reinvigorated interest in near-death experiences with his bestselling work, *Life After Life* (1975)—display clear religious origins and function as religious approaches to the existential problem of facing mortality. Four “meta-cultures” are affected by these accounts: the Christian, gnostic-esoteric, and the spiritualist-occult, all of which are religiously based; and the Naturalist, which incorporates the views of science, philosophy, and psychology in actively denying that anything other-worldly is indicated. Schlieter maintains that all four meta-cultures are implicated in the rise of reported near-death experiences.

In Part Two, Schlieter questions the viewpoint that narratives drawn from medieval visions echo the same themes present in contemporary near-death accounts. He suggests that this is not the case; there is a gap in the historical research between 1300 and 1975 (46), and it is “post-Moodian beliefs” (67) that have colored current and historical interpretations of near-death narratives. Schlieter chronologically examines Western autobiographical near-death narratives as examples of the introduction of different strands of death discourse. For example, starting with Michel de Montaignes’ account written in 1580, Schlieter notes a transition from “an overly religious otherworldly journey [to a] biographical and worldly perspective” (55). The writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) are seen to reflect both accepted aspects of Christian metaculture and the introduction of gnostic-esoteric and spiritualist-occult currents.

The early nineteenth century introduced the first near-death types of narratives that appeared to be generated by psychedelic drugs (opium, hashish). There is an extensive section on Theosophy, astral travel, and South Asian yoga, all of which Schlieter believes merged with psychedelic experiences, to introduce the expectation that autoscopic events would “certainly reappear at the hour of death” (133). The European reception of Walter Evans-Wentz’ (1878-1965) 1927 translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is seen as playing “a central role for the emerging belief of cross-cultural elements of near-death experiences and especially encouraged individuals to report out-of-body experiences” (153). These different currents were consolidated into near-death discourses between the 1930s and 1970s, which then also show the influences of Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, Timothy Leary, and Stanislav Grof.

Part Three hypothesizes that the increasing medicalization of death, including dying in isolation at hospitals or hospice rather than at home, is “mirrored in a critical discourse on the uncomfortable dehumanizing anonymity of dying in institutions” (228). As resuscitation protocols—including those for coma patients—were advancing, the question of when someone is actually considered deceased became more existentially and medically complicated. At the same time, institutional changes in Christian, primarily Protestant, churches led to an increased emphasis on autonomous spiritual experiences. All these changes led to the rise of a cultural trend marked by a search for authenticity in life and the “‘imperative’ of individual experience” (xxviii).

In Part Four, Schlieter’s “aim [is] to show that the reports bear witness to the fact that the ... memoirs are—in the way they are formed and reported—embedded in social communities and the collective, communicative memory” (xxix). Regarding this section as an excursus, he postulates that a “death-x-pulse” (derived from a Freudian “wake up call”) that consists of “a sudden trigger within consciousness that brings forth the possibility of its own nonexistence, that is, death” is responsible for “at least a number of near-death narratives” (261). The

dying consciousness will then search internally for memories, metaphors and religious beliefs to contextualize this moment of existential crisis.

Finally, Part Five argues that common features of near-death experiences—such as a tunnel, a life review, and an out-of-body-experience—have evolved over time and reflect changes in the cultural landscape. Schlieter suggests that the “experiencers themselves encourage a religious reading of their experiences” (295), which relates to a human need to search for a meaning or an understanding of a purpose behind the anomalous occurrence. The result is, Schlieter avers, that people do find themselves transformed, thus validating the religious episteme of the narratives. As he concludes, “near-death experiences are religious experiences par excellence” (311).

Schlieter’s scholarly monograph is extraordinarily detailed, with a tremendous range of theoretical and historical source materials. It is dense and thought-provoking, and meant for a knowledgeable audience. Schlieter is at his strongest when he notes the temporal interweaving of cultural movements and academic discourses, and on elements of narratives as reflective of historico-cultural trends. To truly understand his argument, a broad knowledge of the historicity of post-modern spiritual trends, the cognitive model of religious experiences, narrative theory and current near-death experience research is very helpful.

The excursus of Part Four thus presents as the weakest section of the work. Schlieter’s hypothesis that memories and narrative theory mechanisms explain the accounts of the experiences becomes commingled with the experiences themselves. Assuming a reductionist viewpoint, which only permits physiological explanations based on an encased consciousness, Schlieter argues that, during impending death, consciousness “refers to its own history, its existence as embodied consciousness, from an already detached perspective” (271). Having created its own narrative, consciousness then reawakes in the recovered near-death experiencer and proceeds to modify the recollection: “We should count with a revision process that will start immediately after the experience and will usually come to a close only when

the narrative configuration through internal and external retellings of what had happened and experienced has achieved a standardized form” (282). That is, the actual near-death experience *only* exists as a narrative.

This reasoning presents several issues with regard to near-death experiences. First, as noted, it is dependent upon a reductionist perspective; an expansionist viewpoint would accept the literal account of the event even while allowing for future revisions during retellings. Second, most of the actual memoirs are strictly descriptive and do not use metaphors. The only time memories arise in a narrative is if there has been a life review, which is somewhat rare; most research suggests life reviews occur in approximately thirteen percent of reported near-death experiences.² Third, Schlieter’s hypothesis cannot explain the consistency among narratives across cultures, religions, time and even different age groups. For example, while arguing that the frequent near-death experience trait of moving through a dark “tunnel” to a light arises due to the increasingly common use of train travel in Britain, Schlieter does not address the fact that this trait also was (and still is) often present in the near-death narratives of non-Western cultures for which train travel was not quotidian. That is, a dark space with a light at the end is commonly reported in indigenous and other non-Western narratives.³ Consequently, the experience precedes the advent of the metaphor and, while the meme might affect the telling of the narrative, it does not explain the universality of the “tunnel” experience.

The most significant concern is Schlieter’s failure to distinguish near-death experience from other anomalous death experiences.⁴ For example, Schlieter

2. Bruce Greyson, “Near-Death Experiences,” in *Mind Beyond Brain: Buddhism, Science and the Paranormal*, by David E. Presti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 22–42, 35.

3. See, for example, Gregory Shushan, *Near Death Experiences in Indigenous Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

4. At least three forms of anomalous death-related experiences may be identified: near-death, empathetic-death, and coincidental-death. In the latter two cases, the person experiencing the event does not die and is not in fear of dying. In an empathetic-death occurrence, the experiencer has a near-death like experience in which they seem to accompany a dying person, reporting characteristics of near-death experiences even though they were in no danger of dying themselves and did not

mentions the Society for Psychical Research (145) with respect to deathbed coincidences, in which someone becomes aware of another person's passing through a weird, coincident event such as a dream, a stopped clock, or a vision of the person. However, while deathbed coincidences might assume culturally relative expression, they clearly cannot be relegated to a physicalist or a purely constructivist perspective. In a related fashion, Schlieter regards psychedelically induced experiences as producing similar visions and feelings as near-death events although there is substantial data to indicate that there are significant qualitative differences.⁵

Such oversights are probably due to the rapidly growing body of research on anomalous death experiences and, as such, should not detract from the book's strengths. Professor Schlieter has written an erudite and fascinating Western historical study that sheds light on the cultural interpretations of these personally transformative events. His knowledge of comparative philosophy and religious studies theory is inspiring. *What Is It Like To Be Dead* is well worth space on the bookshelf of any religious studies scholar.

Antoinette M. von dem Hagen
Toni.vdhagen@gmail.com

know that the dying person was passing. The coincidental-death experience is akin to the deathbed coincidences reported by the Society for Psychical Research. See von dem Hagen, "The Classification of Death-Related Experiences: A Novel Approach to the Spectrum of Near-Death, Coincidental-Death and Empathetic-Death Experiences" (MA thesis, Rice University, 2021).

5. von dem Hagen, 86. Pim van Lommel, et al., "Near-Death Experiences in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands," *The Lancet* 358, no. 9298 (2001): 2044.

