MIMISBRUNNR

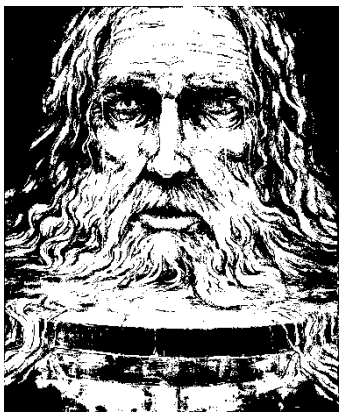
THE WELL OF MIMIR

Assorted Essays by:

COLLIN CLEARY

MIMISBRUNNR

THE WELL OF MIMIR



Assorted Essays by:

COLLIN CLEARY

Introduction to Vedanta 6
Part I, The Isha Upanishad 6
Part II, The Katha Upanishad 14
Part III, The Katha Upanishad Continued 26
Part IV, The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 39
The Metaphysics of Indo-European Tripartition 49
Part I 49
Part II, Tripartition in Human Society, Psychology and Physiology 53
Part III, Tripartition in Animals and Nature in General 63
Part IV, Tripartition in Human Thought and Language 70
Part V, Tripartition and the Gunas 75
Part VI, F.J.W. Schelling and Indo-European tripartition 80
An Esoteric Commentary on the Volsung Saga 92
Part I 92
Part II, ... 104
Part III 113
Part IV 118
Part V 127
Ancestral Being 134
Part I 134
Part II 146
Part III 159
Part IV 169
What is Odinism? 175
Part I, Odin the Philosopher 175
Part II, The Allfather 181
Part III, the Odinic and the Faustian 186
Part IV, Odinism is an Esoteric Path 195

Some Thoughts on Yule 210
Ricardo Duchesne's the Uniqueness of Western Civilization 219
Part I 219
Part II 233
Part III 244
Part IV 262
Part V 272
Becoming Who We Are 283
Leftist Eurocentrism and the Destiny of the West 283
Wagner's Place in the Germanic Tradition 290
Part I 290
Part II, The Story of Der Ring Des Nibelungen 306
Part III, Wagner's Use of Source Materials for The Ring 315
Part IV, Wotan and the Faustian West 325
Part V, The One-Eyed God 333
Part VI, Das Rheingold and Die WalkÛre 342
Part VII, Siegfried and Gotterdamerung 350
Part VIII, Gelassenheit 361
How To Know If You Have Had A Mystical Experience 368
Evola's Nietzschean Ethic 379
A Code of Conduct for the Higher Man in Kali Yuga 379

INTRODUCTION TO VEDANTA

PART I, THE ISHA UPANISHAD

In this series of self-contained essays, I will offer an introduction to Vedanta, the philosophy of the Upanishads, through brief commentaries on individual Upanishads. These essays are geared toward individuals drawn to the path of Traditionalism – and especially the Left-Hand Path of Evolian Traditionalism. They place Vedanta in the context of Tradition. Further, they make clear the relevance of this path for those of us who are not just in revolt against the modern world, but who wish to live the ideal of "self-overcoming" – an ideal for all ages.

I will begin with some brief historical remarks for the uninitiated.

The literature of Hinduism is divided into two categories: shruti, that which is "heard," and smriti, that which is "remembered." Texts which are shruti are believed to be divinely inspired – "heard," in others words, as a revelation of the divine. The earliest shruti texts are the Vedas (from vid-, knowledge), some portions of which have been dated to 6,000 B.C. Much of the content of the Vedas is what we would call "mythology," and it is quite close in some respects to the lore of other Indo-European peoples. The religious spirit of the Vedas is, to borrow the language of Nietzsche, "life affirming." In a sense, it is not yet truly Indian. The chief gods of the Vedas include Varuna, Indra, Agni, Rudra, and Vishnu.

The Vedas are ceremonial texts containing chants that were to be performed by priests (Brahmins) in conjunction with sacrifices. In a real sense, the Brahmins "fed" the gods with their sacrifices. In theory, if the rituals were performed properly, the priests could get whatever they wished. After a while, the obvious was realized: that the Brahmins were, in fact, manipulating the gods. And a daring conclusion was drawn: the Brahmins are more powerful than the gods. As a consequence, the significance of the Brahmins and their sacrifices became greatly magnified. The result was the Brahmanas, a collection of mostly rather tedious treatises on ritual.

Incorporated into the end of the Brahmanas, however, are a series of esoteric texts called the Aranyakas or "forest treatises." It is with these

texts that what we think of as "Indian philosophy" really begins. These are speculative treatises about the relation of man to the cosmos. One of the central ideas developed here is the perennial macrocosm-microcosm correspondence. Both are governed by Dharma (the eternal form, pattern, or order of the cosmos), and man is an image of the cosmos.

The Aranyakas are followed by the Upanishads (the earliest ca. 900 BC), from shad, "sit," and upani, "close in."[1] [5] One who is initiated into this teaching sits close to a teacher, because what is being revealed is esoteric; it is not for the many. This esoteric doctrine is, further, a "close-in" understanding of the Vedas. In effect, the Upanishads constitute an esoteric commentary on the true or inner meaning of the Vedas. Hence, the philosophy of the Upanishads is referred to as Vedanta: literally, "the end (the point) of the Vedas." The Upanishads are also regarded as shruti, as divinely inspired. One should not assume, however, that the Upanishads constitute a "later" reflection on the meaning of the Vedas. It is possible, instead, that the wisdom they convey is much older than the texts themselves, possibly even contemporaneous with that of the Vedas (or older). What is offered to us in the Upanishads may be, in part, the written record of a very ancient, primordial teaching that was at one time communicated in oral form alone.

The Isha Upanishad

This text is a good place to begin, one reason being that it is quite short. Isha means "Lord," and immediately we must ask who, or what, is the "Lord"? The first verse begins "The Lord is enshrined in the hearts of all."[2] [6] And then: "The Lord is the supreme reality." Either of these statements seems like it could be found in a Christian text, and Western readers will be continually tempted to understand some passages here, and in other Upanishads, as carrying a familiar theological meaning. As we will soon see, however, this will lead us astray.

The two statements just quoted are deceptively simple. On closer inspection, there is a significant tension between them, which spurs us to think "close in." To say that the Lord is "enshrined in the hearts of all" seems to suggest that the divine is immanent: that he/it resides within

us. Yet we are told the Lord is "the supreme reality." And we are accustomed to thinking that whatever qualifies as the "supreme reality" must certainly transcend me, or whatever is within me.

Acknowledging this tension, a few lines later we are told "He is within all, and he transcends all." This is a classic Vedantic formulation, and it is also a perennial mystical idea: the ultimate reality is beyond traditional oppositions. In this case, the ultimate reality is both transcendent and immanent. Of course, this also means that one can say that it is neither immanent nor transcendent. If we claim the ultimate reality is transcendent we will be told "no, not this"; and if we conclude it is immanent we will hear "not that either." To assert that it is both requires us, essentially, to think beyond traditional categories, and even beyond traditional logic, for we normally regard transcendence and immanence as irreconcilable opposites. Mysticism always requires this sort of "dialectic," which transcends oppositions. We find such an approach in both East and West. In the West, notably in figures like Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa.

However, instead of going on to explore the "theory" of the supreme reality as both transcendent and immanent, the text immediately presents us with a way or a practice: "Covet nothing. All belongs to the Lord. Thus working may you live a hundred years. Thus alone will you work in real freedom." Human beings tend to covet possessions and pleasures. Here we are being told that we may have none of these, not truly – nothing may belong to us, for all belongs to the Lord. So what is the use of coveting?

Human beings, however, covet much more than pleasures and possessions. They covet their thoughts and preoccupations as well – things that may even torment us, but which we cannot give up. Many men even covet suffering. None of this, however, truly belongs to us. The text is enjoining us to become detached from the finite – whatever that may be. Of course, we resist this: it certainly seems that much does belong to me – not just my possessions, but my past, my transgressions, my achievements, and much more. And the self that holds onto these seems quite incorrigible: it will not give them up. In truth, the Upanishads – here

and elsewhere – ask that we move beyond this self, to quite another one. The way consists not in training the self to be free of covetousness, but in detaching oneself from one's self.

Indeed, having just asked us to covet nothing, the text now introduces the idea of a self beyond the familiar one. This is Atman. In Sanskrit, this word carries the meaning of "essence," "soul," and also "breath." It derives from a Proto-Indo-European root meaning "breath," from which also derives (among many other examples) Modern German atmen, "to breathe." "Atman" is one of a number of Indo-European terms denoting soul or spirit which also mean "breath" or are derived from roots having to do with "breath." These include Latin spiritus and anima, and Greek pneuma and psyche. There is much worth exploring here, but such matters are beyond the scope of this essay.

"Atman" is often left untranslated, but I prefer the approach of Eknath Easwaran and others, who translate it as "the Self," with capital the s. Here, we are very obviously distinguishing between one "self," which I normally think of as "me," and which does such things as covet, and a "higher" Self which is quite distinct from me. Still, the language of "Self" irresistibly suggests that it is still somehow "me" that is being spoken of. This ambiguity and the confusion it generates are essential elements in our path to the wisdom of Vedanta.

We might feel wary about the introduction of this "Self," and skeptical that it even exists. So immediately upon introducing the term, the text warns us "Those who deny the Self are born again, blind to the Self, enveloped in darkness, utterly devoid of love for the Lord." In other words, those who deny the self will not escape the wheel of rebirth, of reincarnation. They will achieve neither liberation nor enlightenment. But what is the relation of "the Self" and "the Lord"?

We are subsequently told:

"The Self is one."

"Without the Self, never could life exist."

"The Self seems to move, but is ever still. He seems far away but it ever near."

And then, the line quoted earlier: "He [the Self] is within all, and he transcends all."

But if the Self is within all, and this "all" belongs to the Lord, we begin to form the suspicion that it is not two things that are being talked about here, but one. Is the Self the same thing as the Lord? This supposition is vindicated by the very next verse: "Those who see all creatures in themselves and themselves in all creatures know no fear. Those who see all creatures in themselves and themselves in all creatures know no grief. How can the multiplicity of life delude the one who sees its unity?"

This suggests clearly that all things are one: there is no difference, fundamentally between myself and all else. I am all, and all is me; the Self is all, and all is the Self. And "The Self is one," we are told. Of course, questions abound. In what way am I one with all things (or vice versa)? Because this does not seem in any way obviously true. And didn't we establish that "the Self" is not "me," the self I am familiar with? We will see that Vedanta offers answers to these questions, as the teaching unfolds. For now, let us just understand that when the text speaks of men seeing "all creatures in themselves and themselves in all creatures," the "self" that is referred to is our true self, the Self. It is all right if, for the moment, this remains somewhat vague.

Most men, of course, never come to see all in themselves, and themselves in all. Instead, the Isha Upanishad speaks of most men as following two wrongheaded paths. The text states, "In dark night live those for whom the world without alone is real; in night darker still, for whom the world within alone is real." The first leads to a "life of action," which is unsurprising since we associate the man who believes only in a world "out there," with the "man of action." But the text tells us that the second path leads to "a life of meditation." This is surprising, because we expect "meditation" to be presented as something positive. Here, however, it seems to mean something like navel-gazing detachment from the world. The world-deniers meditate in solipsistic detachment.

So, what is the right path? It consists in combining action and meditation: "Those who combine action with meditation cross the sea of death through action and enter into immortality through the practice of

meditation. So have we heard from the wise." But what does this mean? Essentially, it means that life itself must become a meditation. Instead of withdrawing from life, we turn our daily acts, no matter how small and insignificant, into meditations. In other words, we turn our daily acts into opportunities for "mindfulness," to use a word currently popular, and which can help us, in spite of its limitations. Through this practice, every profane action can become sacred.

To quote some relevant words of Karlfried, Graf von Dürckheim:

Let us suppose, for instance, that a letter has to be posted in a pillar-box [i.e., a mailbox] a hundred yards away. If the mouth of the pillar-box is all we see in the mind's eye, then the hundred strides we take towards it are wasted. But if a man is on the Way as a human being and filled with the sense of all that this implies, then even this short walk, providing he maintains the right attitude and posture, can serve to put him to rights and renew himself from the well of inner essence.[iiii] [7]

Essentially, the Isha Upanishad is proposing something very much like the "fourth way" of the Gurdjieff teaching. The other three "ways" are those of the fakir, the monk, and the yogi, all of whom have adopted a "practice" that separates them from the world. What the Isha Upanishad proposes instead is engagement with the world, as in the Gurdjieffian "fourth way." This approach is also a key element in what Evola and others term "the Left-Hand Path."

The twin errors of the "life of action" and the "life of meditation" are offered in the text as parallel to a metaphysical error:

In dark night live those for whom the Lord is transcendent only; in night darker still, for whom he is immanent only. But those for whom he is transcendent and immanent cross the sea of death with the immanent and enter into immortality with the transcendent. So have we heard from the wise.

The error of considering the Lord as transcendent only is of a piece with the way of the man who lives the "life of action": it is thoroughly "extraverted." In so far as the Lord is believed in, He is a "thing out there." But an even worse error, so the text makes clear, is to think that the Lord

is a "thing in here," as the man who leads "the life of meditation" might fall into thinking. And if this latter error is taken to a dangerous extreme, might it amount to thinking I am the Lord?

Now, we will see that in a certain sense "I am the Lord" is precisely the message of Vedanta. But the proper understanding of this message is difficult to come by – it is a spiritual achievement that winds up being something more than a purely theoretical understanding. Truly I am the Lord, but not the "I" with which I normally deal, and which I normally think of as "me." The Lord, again, is the Self – but this Self is something very different from that mundane "I" or "self." As we have already said, the understanding of the Self is only faintly approached in this Upanishad. We are left hungering for greater understanding of this teaching. Rest assured, it may come. (Then again, it may not.)

For now, let us consider a final point about the parallelism between the life of action/life of meditation, and the metaphysics of the Lord as transcendent/metaphysics of the Lord as immanent. How exactly do we reach the intellectual achievement of thinking the Lord as both transcendent and immanent? As we have said, this "paradoxical thinking" is part and parcel of perennial mysticism – and it seems quite beyond the capacity of human thought. There is a simple answer here, however – one that is also incredibly difficult for most to accept.

The way to understand the Self/Lord as both transcendent and immanent lies in walking the path that combines action with meditation. If we overcome, in ourselves, the "out there" and the "in here" (the transcendent and immanent) we realize the true nature of the Self. Not in the sense of understanding an "idea" of the Self, but in the sense of actualizing in ourselves (i.e., becoming) the Self that is both transcendent and immanent. In other words, the way to understanding the Self is a way, not a thought or a theory. The way of understanding the Self lies in not understanding.

Notes

[1] [8] It should be noted that the foregoing historical account greatly simplifies some matters. In the eyes of many scholars, it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads.

[2] [9] The translation I am using is by Eknath Easwaran, The Upanishads (Tomales, Cal.: Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, 2007). This translation takes some liberties, but it is extremely readable. Because we are dealing with short texts, with easily-found lines and verses, I have not footnoted every quotation.

[3] [10] Karlfried, Graf von Dürckheim, The Way of Transformation: Daily Life as Spiritual Transformation, trans. Ruth Lewinnek and P.L. Travers (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 16.

PART II, THE KATHA UPANISHAD

The Katha Upanishad tells the story of a boy named Nachiketa whose father, Vajasravasa, decides to curry the favor of the gods by giving away his possessions. However, it seems that he was rather selective in what he gave up, only parting with things that were now useless to him. Nachiketa, who is quite pious, sees through his father's insincerity: "What merit is there," the boy asks, "in giving away cows that are too old to give milk?" This question, from a mere child, wounds Vajasravasa's pride. Foolishly, Nachiketa persists: "To whom will you offer me?" he asks. Vajasravasa ignores the question at first, but when Nachiketa repeats it his father answers angrily, "To death I give you!"

In most traditional stories we find that words have real consequences and cannot easily be taken back. Thus, Nachiketa has now literally been offered up to Yama, the god of death. He leaves home and journeys to Yama, as all must go to meet death: "Like corn mortals ripen and fall; like corn they come up again." Needless to say, this journey puts Nachiketa in distress, and "distress" is the meaning of *katha*. As we will see, however, the boy's greater distress is in *not knowing the true meaning of death* – a distress we all suffer. When Nachiketa arrives at death's abode, he finds that Yama is away on business (as death frequently is). So, the boy remains in the land of the dead for three days, awaiting the god's return. When Yama finally arrives, he offers Nachiketa three wishes for each day he waited.

First, Nachiketa asks that his father's anger be appeased. Then, he asks for instruction in "the fire sacrifice." Yama teaches him this, and we are told that this sacrifice (to Agni, the fire god) is an act of worshipping "the fire from which the universe evolves." This is, of course, a perennial symbol, which we find in the West in the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who described the cosmos as "an ever-living fire." Fire is the energy that is simultaneously creative and destructive; from this energy, all things arise, and pass away.

Yama tells Nachiketa that those who perform the fire sacrifice, and also discharge the "triple duties" of studying scripture, practicing ritual worship, and giving aid to the poor, will "shake off the dread noose of

death and transcend sorrow to enjoy the world of heaven." Of course, in the context of Hinduism, "death" actually means *rebirth*, or reincarnation. Death means being born again in another body, subject to another round of sorrows. He who "shakes off the dread noose of death" will escape the wheel of rebirth, and achieve a state of transcendent, eternal bliss.

Julius Evola has theorized that reincarnation is merely a myth or "exoteric doctrine," and not a part of esoteric Hinduism. I think we should be skeptical of this: the texts generally accepted as the "esoteric" doctrines of Hinduism abound in claims regarding reincarnation. Evola is inclined to dismiss these claims as insincere, apparently since he himself cannot believe in reincarnation. My own sentiments are not unlike Evola's: I am unpersuaded that reincarnation is a reality. However, even if the texts are entirely sincere in their commitment to a theory of the transmigration of souls, and even if we are not persuaded by that theory, this need not be an impediment to our profiting from Vedanta. This is because the Upanishads offer a path of self-overcoming, which has the power to alter the soul of the practitioner while *he still lives*. The promise of escape from rebirth, once this body expires, may be regarded as, in effect, a bonus. And we may treat it *as if* it is a myth, or a noble lie – even if the authors of the Upanishads did not intend it as such.

[5]

Tibetan representation of Yama

In any case, note that when Yama assures Nachiketa that the performance of these duties will allow him to "shake off the dread noose of death," *the god is actually teaching Nachiketa a way to escape his power*. There is a catch, however: Yama tells the boy that those who carry out the "triple duty" must be "conscious of its full meaning" in order to win release. Here the text rejects, in effect, the empty ritualism practiced by Nachiketa's father, and countless others: one cannot attain salvation merely by going through the motions. Ritual is only valuable when performed *with understanding*. Such understanding is, of course, the province of the few – and thus so is salvation.

Now Nachiketa asks Yama for his third gift: "When a person dies, there arises this doubt: 'he still exists,' say some, 'he does not' say others. I want you to teach me the truth." This is an odd request, for it reveals that in spite of Nachiketa's piety, he still harbors fundamental doubts. Yama's reaction to this request is surprising: he begs Nachiketa to take back his wish! Ask for anything, money, power, love – but not this. Here we encounter a traditional Indian teaching: the gods resist giving up the truth. They resist the one who wishes to know. Wisdom must usually be attained by force – but, in this case, it is available through the benevolence of the god. For Nachiketa responds to Yama's suggestion that he choose some more earthly satisfaction by saying, "These pleasures last but until tomorrow." And so Yama realizes that the boy is a worthy student, and begins to teach.

Wisdom, Yama tells him, leads to "Self-realization." Ignorance estranges a man from his "real Self." Readers will recall from my commentary on the Isha Upanishad [2], that "Self" is a translation of *Atman*, and that here we are encountering the concept of a truer or higher Self that exists beyond the mundane self or ego, which I normally think of as "me." I do not know this Self, and coming to know it is the way that is taught by Vedanta. This Self is not just my own inner essence, for it is identical with the "supreme reality." These ideas are approached in the Isha Upanishad, but not by any means fully explored. We must see if the Katha Upanishad offers us more.

Yama teaches that the ignorant believe "I am my body; when my body dies, I die." This is because the ignorant have never heard of the Self. Here we find that Yama has, in effect, already offered an answer to Nachiketa: yes, we do live after death. Only the body dies; the Self is immortal. Of course, such an answer is deceptively simple. As I have mentioned, this Self is me, my true Self – and yet it is very clearly *not me*; not the me I know. In a sense the answer to Nachiketa's question is *yes and no*. No, because normally when people ask "do I live on after death?" they are referring to their finite and familiar self, with all its idiosyncrasies. This self does not live on; the Self does. Depending on how you look at it, this is a disappointing answer – or it is an uplifting one. Truly, it offers hope not just in the afterlife, but in *this* life – but only if somehow we can transmute the leaden weight that is the finite self into the gold that is the Self.

Few are aware of the existence of the Self, Yama says; fewer still dedicate their lives to its "realization." Here one sees immediately that this teaching does not merely provide information about what happens after death; it does not merely reassure us that we have some kind of Self or soul that will live on. No, it offers a path to the *realization* of this Self while one still exists in this body. Clearly, if *everyone* lived on after death as "the Self," such a path would be unnecessary. But the truth is that immortality, as the Self, is not guaranteed. It must be won, and won in this lifetime. Again, one almost suspects that the teaching of survival after death is a myth, intended to spur one on to follow the path of Self-realization in this life.

So, how does one "realize" the Self? Immediately, our lone wolf followers of the Left-Hand Path are in for disappointment. "Blessed are they who, through an illumined teacher, attain to Self-realization," Yama says. This is another traditional Indian doctrine: the necessity of a *guru*, or teacher. Those who wish to walk the path must find one who has made his way further along it. Such a teacher can help the student stay on the path, for there are many distractions and wrong turns – uncountably many. For example, there is both wrong theory and wrong practice. Without the help of a qualified teacher, the aspirant may waste years and never attain

his aim. Worse yet, there are positive *dangers* along the path, and the one who proceeds without a guide may fall prey to them.

"Those who see themselves in all and all in themselves," says Yama (in language that recalls the Isha Upanishad) can help others to Self-realization. You cannot get there through "the intellect," he teaches Nachiketa. For the mind and its categories are preoccupied with duality: things are *this*, and *not that*, the mind says. It is the function of the intellect to pigeonhole. And the supreme duality the intellect respects is the divide between subject and object. But the Self is beyond subject and object. (We expect it to be the subject, or "true subject," for after all it is *the Self* – but we will learn that it is neither subject nor object, perhaps because it is both.)

Nor can we get to the Self through "logic and scholarship"; through book-learning and reasoning. Thus, the way to the Self is not through texts and theories and inferences about them. And this applies to the Upanishads as well! So why should we not set this book down, or why should you not simply stop reading this article immediately? The reason is that presumably you do not have a teacher to provide you with a *practice*. It is in practice that we find the way to the Self. Until you have something like this in your life, texts such as the Upanishads, or this commentary, can be useful *in pointing the way to the path*. They can also be useful for one walking the path, as a reminder of why he walks it.

Now, Yama gives us a hint as to this practice when he says that "The wise, realizing through meditation the timeless Self, beyond all perception, hidden in the cave of the heart, leave pain and pleasure far behind." As Guénon points out, the "cave of the heart" is a traditional expression, and essentially it refers to the center. When we are told that the Self is "hidden in the cave of the heart," we are to understand that it is at the very center of our being – indeed, it *is* the center of our being. This identification of the Self with the heart is not merely symbolic, however. There is an esoteric science that locates the center of consciousness in the heart (or in the region of the heart), and esoteric practices for shifting one's sense of personal identity from the head to the heart.[1] [6]

Yama now introduces Nachketa to one such practice:

I will give you the Word all the scriptures glorify, all spiritual disciplines express, to attain which aspirants lead a life of sense-restraint and self-naughting. It is OM. This symbol of the Godhead is the highest. Realizing it one finds complete fulfillment of all one's longings. It is of the greatest support to all seekers. When OM reverberates unceasingly within the heart, that one is indeed blessed and deeply loved as one who is the Self.

Now, this word "OM" is exactly the sound which the reader may have heard yogis sometimes repeatedly intone in their meditations: "OM! OM! OM!" Throughout the whole of the Indian tradition, this word has enormous significance, and multiple meanings. Let us note, first of all, that it is called a *mantra*. This word is supposed to derive from the root *man-*, "mind" or "to think," and *–tra*, meaning "a tool." "Tool of the mind" is the meaning suggested. And this seems to support the standard Western understanding of a mantra as a "meditation device": a meaningless sound used as an aid for meditation; for somehow focusing the mind, or altering one's state of consciousness. We should be cautious about such a "mentalistic" understanding, however, for "mantra" can also have the sense of "magic word" or "magic formula" (one finds the term used this way, for example, in episodes of the *Mahabharata*).

Thus, we must be open to the possibility that OM may also be a "word of power" that can effect real change (not just change in one's temporary "state of mind"). It is sometimes said that OM is the sound that the universe makes. This is of a piece with the Indian theory that the universe is composed of "vibrations" (a theory that is particularly developed in Kashmir Shaivism). To experience the vibratory power of OM one must actually have the experience of pronouncing it – and I advise the reader to set this essay aside for a moment and take up this practice, at least briefly, following the instructions offered in the next paragraph.

Although OM seems like a monosyllabic word, in the Indian tradition it is analyzed into three syllables: A-U-M (thus "OM" is sometimes written as "AUM"). OM should be pronounced as a very long sound (requiring a great intake of breath). It begins at the back of the throat as a long "A" (rhymes with "thaw"). Slowly, one narrows the opening of the mouth so that this "A" becomes a deep "U" (an "oo" sound). As the lips close, the

sound becomes "MMMM." One then stops, and the sound that follows is the *silence* with which OM ends. If OM has been performed correctly, this silence will be striking. After a brief pause, one intones OM again – and again. As we will see in a moment, these teachings invest the three syllables of OM, and the silence that surrounds OM, with a complex meaning.

When OM is repeatedly intoned (usually in a relaxed position, with the eyes closed, and in a quiet place), the practitioner *will* experience an altered state of consciousness – this much is guaranteed. How the practitioner interprets this state will, of course, depend upon the person. However, even a skeptic who pronounces the word properly will experience some noticeable change, which he may simply interpret as "calm," or "relaxation." He will probably also notice a cessation of thoughts while pronouncing the word, and a temporary increase in sensitivity to sensory stimuli once the practice is completed. A particularly sensitive person may report that during the practice there is a diminishment in the sense of personal identity, and of the distinction between the self and the sound of the mantra: it is as if, for a time, one simply *becomes* the sound.

Now, recall the Self that is "hidden in the cave of the heart." The effect of OM is to open this cave, and to disclose the Self. As the text says, "When OM reverberates unceasingly within the heart, that one is indeed blessed and deeply loved as one who is the Self." The vibration of OM "awakens" the Self in its hiding place, and the result is the "identification" of oneself with the Self. The reason I have placed "identification" in quotes is that we must avoid at all costs the error of imagining that oneself and the Self are two distinct things. The image of the Self "awakening" is closer to the mark: deep within the core of one's being (the "cave of the heart") the Self stirs and a "shift" in identity takes place; one becomes the Self. At least for a moment or two. This metaphysical transformation can be endlessly analyzed, and multiple images and analogies used to try and communicate the theory. Up to a point, all such attempts are useful. Ultimately, however, the only true realization arises from the *practice* just discussed. And the results of this practice cannot be fully communicated as theory.

I have mentioned that one must avoid the error of imagining that oneself and the Self are two separate things, and there are other errors one must avoid also. I said earlier that OM is the sound the universe makes: the vibration that is the universe in its continual manifestation. But how does this square with the idea that OM discloses the Self, hidden in the cave of the heart? Surely, we might say, the Self and the Being of the universe are two distinct things. In fact, Vedanta teaches precisely that this is *not* the case. Here we must introduce a major concept, not mentioned so far: *Brahman*. We may gloss this as "Being itself"; "Ultimate Reality."

My readers may be surprised that I have only now introduced this term, for they might have heard that Vedanta in a nutshell is "Atman = Brahman." But if this equation holds, then it does not matter with which term we begin. Confusion regarding this equation *almost always* arises from covertly or unconsciously treating Atman and Brahman as distinct things that must somehow be "got together." In fact, these are two names for the same thing. Thus, OM discloses the Self, which is "Being itself" / "Ultimate Reality." "Brahman" comes from a root, *brh-*, meaning "to grow, expand, swell." Brahman is the continual manifestation – the being – of the universe, growing, expanding swelling. It is thus traditionally understood as the transcendent, inexpressible source from which all comes. Yet, here again we may open ourselves to error.

We must not consider Brahman "one thing," and the universe "another." The universe is the expression of Brahman – its manifestation. Now, there is a certain interpretation of Vedanta which suggests that the universe, as manifestation of Brahman, is "unreal." This is a mistake: the universe is most certainly *there*, and one has to wonder why anyone would think that Brahman would manifest the *false* (where the unreal is the false). It would be truer to say that, as the underlying reality of the universe, Brahman is in some sense a *more fundamental* being. Even this, however, is problematic. If Brahman is unmanifest Being, then in a sense we must understand it as inchoate and potential. Brahman's actualization is precisely in manifesting itself as the universe – as every single thing that is. Thus, while it makes sense to distinguish between the universe and its inexhaustible source, it is equally sensible to say that the

universe *is* Brahman: it is Brahman manifesting itself – unfolding what it is.

Now let us circle back to OM, and take stock of where we have been. When we pronounce "OM" we open the center of our being, the cave of the heart, and shift our sense of identity away from the finite self or ego, which dances around the periphery, and toward our essential being. This essential being, this Self (Atman), is stirred and awakened in the saying of "OM." This Self, our own essence, is the essential Being of the universe itself, of the very source of all: it is what all things *are*. Thus, in the saying of "OM" we awaken and identify with our own essential being, and simultaneously the Being of all that exists.

But here is the crucial point: this saying of "OM" is not the utterance of a "formula," or a "thought," or a definable "word." Instead, this saying is the expression of Brahman-Atman itself. It is not "symbolic" of Brahman-Atman, in the way that other words are symbolic or "refer" to things. Instead, OM *is* this growing, expanding, swelling vibratory Being of the universe itself. This is the root reason why OM is a "magic word." It is a "word of power" because, again, this "word" does not "refer to" Being; when it is said, Being speaks.

However, as I have already mentioned, OM is a "word" with multiple meanings. So that, in addition, to its function of speaking Being directly, and its power to transform the identity of the practitioner (in a practice that must be performed repeatedly), it has also been invested with symbolic significance. Essentially, we are informed by the sacred texts that OM is both a practice and a teaching: a ritual and a lesson. Recall that those who perform a ritual "must be conscious of its full meaning." In saying "OM," and performing the practice already described, we may simultaneously be intellectually aware of its metaphysical significance. And we should be – for the path to awakening must engage *all* levels of our being: the intellectual, feeling, and bodily centers.

Specifically, it is the syllables of OM, referred to earlier, which are understood to impart a teaching. This information, however, is not present in the Katha Upanishad. Instead, one must look to the Mandukya Upanishad and other texts. In brief: the syllable "A" signifies waking

consciousness, aware of and captivated by gross bodily forms. "U" signifies the consciousness we possess in dreams. In dreaming, we are in one sense "unconscious," and in another perfectly "conscious." When I dream, I am unaware of, or unconscious of the world "out there." However, I am quite conscious of the dream world. But what is that? Within the dream, I take the content of the dream as "other." Indeed (except in the rare case of so-called "lucid dreams") I take it as "real." In truth, however, the subject-object duality I experience in dreams is an illusion: the dream is actually a product of my own mind. One part of me creates a dream and presents it to another part, who unwittingly takes it as "other." The truth, however, is that I and the dream are one.

The "M" of OM signifies dreamless sleep. In this state I may also speak of myself as in some sense "conscious": my consciousness, my subjectivity, my mind (whatever term we use) *goes on* – because indeed my life goes on, and in a real sense life (of whatever kind) *is* consciousness, subjectivity, mind. And yet the state of dreamless sleep is seemingly unique in that it is *consciousness without an object*; consciousness without an other.

We may sum up the whole point of Vedanta and Yoga in term of this scheme of A-U-M. The point is to bring A into M: *to go through waking consciousness, waking life, with the experience that there is no other*. What must be realized is that the dream state is a *symbol* of the true nature of life: in effect, the phenomenon of dreaming is a nightly discourse on the true meaning of our existence. But few have the wits to see this.

As it is in the dream, so it is in life. I imagine that I am experiencing an other, but the other is in fact my own creation. I and the dream are one. Typically, the ego fails to realize that its other is itself. And, indeed, "the ego" as such *cannot* realize this. What is required is a teaching and a practice that shift us radically beyond ego, and to the "realization" (which is, again, not an intellectual theorizing) that the Self is my being, and that all that exists is its creation. The entire universe is the manifestation of this Self. Therefore, the universe is "my" manifestation; the universe is "me." I and the universe are one. (At this point the reader should

understand that “my” and “me” are placed in quotes because we are not talking about the familiar, finite, idiosyncratic self that usually utters “my” and “me.”)

All of this, furthermore – this expression of the Self, this universe that plays before me as an “other” but is not really an other – arises from an unfathomable ground, an inexhaustible source that transcends manifestation. This is what is signified by the “fourth syllable” of OM: the silence that surround “Aaaaa-uuuuu-mmmmm.”

In the next installment of this series, I will continue my discussion of the Katha Upanishad.

Notes

[1] [7] For some hints, see Julius Evola, Introduction to Magic (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2001), 42-43, with special attention to footnote 16 on p. 43.

PART III, THE KATHA UPANISHAD CONTINUED

In the last installment of this series, we saw that the Katha Upanishad tells the story of Nachiketa, a boy who is tutored by Yama, the god of death. The boy makes a request of Yama, which at first the god does not want to grant: "When a person dies, there arises this doubt: 'he still exists,' say some, 'he does not' say others. I want you to teach me the truth." But Yama soon realizes that Nachiketa is a worthy student, and begins to teach.

Yama tells him that the ignorant believe "I am my body; when my body dies, I die." This is because the ignorant have never heard of the Self (*Atman*). Only the body dies; the Self, the essence of our being, is immortal. Few are aware of the existence of the Self, Yama says; fewer still dedicate their lives to its "realization."

So, how does one realize the Self? Not through "the intellect," nor through "logic and scholarship," but only through *practice*.

Now, Yama gives us a hint as to this practice when he says that "[t]he wise, realizing through meditation the timeless Self, beyond all perception, hidden in the cave of the heart, leave pain and pleasure far behind." And he teaches Nachiketa the use of the mantra *OM*. This is a "word of power" that can effect real change in the practitioner, awakening him to the Self. The effect of OM is to open "the cave of the heart," and to disclose the Self.

As we have seen, this Self is something quite different – infinitely different, in fact – from what I normally think of as "myself." Consider the terms Yama uses to describe it: "The all-knowing Self was never born, nor will it die. Beyond cause and effect, this Self is eternal and immutable. When the body dies, the Self does not die." Then, he utters words which should remind us of the Bhagavad-Gita (the subject of a future essay): "If the slayer believes that he can kill or the slain believes that he can be killed, neither knows the truth. The eternal Self slays not, nor is ever slain." This description makes the Self seem almost exactly like God – and yet probably everyone coming to this essay already knows that the

teaching of the Upanishads is that "you are that!" (*tat tvam asi*); you are the Self, you are God.

Those who have read the earlier installments of this series will understand what a grave error it would be to feel any sense of *pride* in such a claim. I am truly the Self, but that identity subsists beneath all the layers of falsehood and limitation that constitute what I generally think that "I" am. And it is somewhere in these layers of falsehood and limitation that pride is felt. Truly, I am God – and yet I most certainly am *not* God. The part of "me" that can experience its identity with God is one I barely know at all.

This point has to continually be kept in mind – for several reasons, not just to avoid falling into a false pride that would only reinforce one's ignorance of the Self. For instance, it is quite possible to read Vedanta as an atheist philosophy. If I am God, and everything else is God, then we might as well say that *there is no God* – or that the sense of "God" here is so completely different from how we normally use the word that some other word should be chosen. This was the reaction that many had to Spinoza's philosophy. William Boulting may have famously referred to Spinoza as "God-intoxicated," but the philosopher's identification of God with nature led many to declare that he might as well be an atheist. And this response makes a great deal of sense: if God is declared to be the world itself, then we might as well say that we have dispensed with God entirely.

We *want* (or perhaps *need*) God to be something "external," to which we can appeal. The teaching that we ourselves are the ultimate source of all can therefore seem more than a bit disappointing. The key to overcoming this "problem" with the teaching of Vedanta consists in really coming to grips with the mystery of my identity, of what or who I am. Truly, the Self is my essence, but it is still a mystery – as great a mystery as any "external" or transcendent God. Vedanta disappoints some of us in withdrawing the idea of such a God. But true understanding of its teaching leads to the paradoxical realization that immanent within me is something transcendent and God-like; that, in other words, *inside me there is something outside me*.

In the depths of my being – which are, in the end, unfathomable – lies the Self. We can say that the Self, therefore, is "inside me." Yet it lies entirely *outside* my conscious awareness, and outside the sphere of what I identify as "me" or "I." This Self is "me" in the sense that it is my true essence or true being, but it is just as remote and mysterious as the external God posited by conventional religion. Obviously, one key to reaching this level of understanding lies in continually and rigorously questioning the limits of myself, and where I draw the line between "me" and "not me," and "inside me" and "outside me."[1] [5] Near the end of the Katha Upanishad we are told, "There are two selves, the separate ego and the indivisible *Atman*. When one rises above *I* and *me* and *mine*, the *Atman* is revealed as one's real Self." Once the conventional thought patterns are overcome, one will understand that coming to "realize" the Self within us is as serious and pious a matter as yearning for identity with a transcendent God. As Gustav Meyrink wrote, "If you want to pray, pray to your invisible Self: it is the only God who can answer your prayers."[2] [6]

Of course, in the latter case (which is identical to what Evola classifies as "mysticism") the aspirant never gets beyond the stage of what Hegel called the "unhappy consciousness": perpetually yearning for the infinitely-distant divinity, never reaching it. Vedanta presents us with different prospects. As remote as the Self may seem, the truth is that *we are already one with it*. Thus, the path of enlightenment in Vedanta is not one of trying to get two distinct things together: the soul of the aspirant and the transcendent God/Self. Rather, the path consists in working to realize that one already is the Self. This is not an intellectual realization, as I have already pointed out. It is a realization in the sense of "making real." The "theory" of Vedanta can be conveyed in one sentence: *tat tvam asi*. Yet simply to imbibe this sentence is not, truly, to understand.

"Hidden in the heart of every creature exists the Self, subtler than the subtlest," Yama teaches Nachiketa. Here we learn that it is not just human beings that are identical with the Self, but all other creatures as well. What is the fundamental difference between us and those other creatures? Quite simply, it is that we have the potential to realize our identity with the Self, whereas other beings do not. Of course, in the vast

majority of people this potential is not only very small, it goes entirely unactualized. This raises an interesting question: why is it that some choose this path, and others do not?

Of course, matters are even more complicated than this question would imply. Many who choose the path quit along the way, or never achieve their aim. And most of those who never try the path have also never even heard of it (and so cannot be faulted for not trying). What explains these individual differences? The answer given by the Katha Upanishad is something close to the Christian conception of divine grace. Yama tells us, "The Self can be attained only by those whom the Self chooses. Verily unto them does the Self reveal himself."

The language of this passage should be understood as deliberately figurative. While it is easy to understand the Self as not unlike God, we must always be on guard against falling into the trap of thinking of the Self as a disembodied deity. In fact, the Self is always and everywhere embodied – expressing itself as this body and that. Some of these bodies, however, "wake up" and realize that they are the Self embodied. Yama tells us that these have been "chosen" by the Self, but I suspect that this is a poetic way of emphasizing that the reason why some wake up and others do not is ultimately an unfathomable mystery. This requires some explanation.

On one level, the insistence that the Self "chooses" is forced on the author of this Upanishad by a logic similar to that which led Christian theologians to insist that God created the universe as an unnecessitated act of grace. If the Self is All – equivalent to *Brahman*, the ultimate source (see the previous installment of this series) – then there is absolutely nothing else that could cause or necessitate the Self's "actions." Therefore, the author insists that when the Self "wakes up" in and through an individual, this is the Self's "choice." But a completely uncaused and unconditioned "choice" is basically no different from a miracle. In short, what the text really conveys is that the reason some manifestations of the Self wake up and others do not is a matter that is completely beyond understanding.

The passage just discussed is preceded by one which also has the effect of reinforcing the image of the Self as a Godlike being who acts in various ways. Yama says, "Though one sits in meditation in a particular place, the Self within can exercise his influence far away. Though still, he moves everything everywhere." This passage immediately reminds us of Aristotle's doctrine of God as "unmoved mover": though God himself is entirely unmoved and uncaused, he moves all else. And, incidentally, he moves all else simply *by being who he is*: a purely self-aware mind, which all other beings strive to imitate (always unconsciously, save for the philosophers, who consciously strive to "awaken").

This passage also calls us back to the topic of meditation, which Yama has taught us as a practice for the realization of the Self. When I meditate, my body is always, of course, confined to a particular place. But in meditation, employing the mantra OM, in theory I may "realize" (again, "make real") my identity with the Self. In that state I am, like Aristotle's unmoved mover, awake to who I am. But what does the passage mean when it says that the Self can "exercise his influence far away"? I believe that this carries both a metaphysical meaning – and a *magical* one.

The metaphysical meaning is simply this: In meditation, achieving oneness with the Self, my true being, I simultaneously achieve oneness with all other things. This is because the Self, as we have seen, is not simply hidden in *my* heart, but is at the heart of all other beings. Thus, in achieving identity with the Self, I achieve identity with all else that exists. This is the case even though I remain in one place, and to an outside observer I am still physically confined to my body. At a metaphysical level – which *always* transcends the information available to us from sense experience – I am both present in the space in which I meditate, and present everywhere else at the same time, in the heart of all that exists.

The *magical* teaching hinted at in this passage is that the precondition for effecting magical change in the world is the achievement of unity with the Self. Once I have realized that identity, then it becomes theoretically possible to effect change in other things, even from a great distance, without any mundane physical medium acting as connector. Why? For the very simple (and yet not so simple) reason that in achieving oneness

with the Self, I *become* the heart of all things. (A later passage asks, "Who is the One in all? Know One, know all.") I may then be able to effect changes in those things "from within," as it were. (Again, this is what we may say is theoretically possible.)

We are told, further, that when "the wise" realize the Self, they are "formless in the midst of forms, changeless in the midst of change, omnipresent and supreme, they go beyond sorrow." Certainly, there is the suggestion here that in identity with the Self, our ability to exercise "influence far away" is due to the achievement of *formlessness*. All "forms" are manifestations of the Self, which is in itself formless. The Self "in-forms" itself as the various things in existence. Thus, in identity with the Self, the formless, we may form or reform ourselves and other things in various ways. This is at least offered as a possibility, which may be realized by only a very few.

It is important to note that the attainment of magical powers is not the purpose of the path offered by Vedanta. The traditional Indian teaching on this matter is that along the path one may (or may not) develop what are called *siddhis*, special powers. However, these pose a terrible danger. Some individuals will, on acquiring these abilities, conclude that they have arrived at enlightenment, and cease to work. Others, inevitably, will invest their egos in these siddhis, believing that their attainment means that they have become great and powerful men. They may even use these powers for material indulgence of various kinds (e.g., acquiring wealth, or seducing others). Thus, the attainment of siddhis can constitute an enormous trap – and a test. Such a development comes along at an advanced stage, when the aspirant believes (falsely) that he has transcended most forms of temptation. The history of "spirituality" is filled with examples of individuals who achieved some degree of awakening, and with it certain powers, and then immediately set themselves up as "gurus." Their attainment, of course, was incomplete, and their influence on others usually baleful.

What can keep us on the path and help us to avoid falling into such traps? Yama tells Nachiketa, "The Self cannot be known by anyone who desists not from unrighteous ways, controls not the senses, stills not the mind,

and practices not meditation." Here we have a teaching very similar to the path offered by the Buddha. We are enjoined to follow a *moral* path – to desist from "unrighteous ways" – probably not as an end-in-itself, but because the *unrighteous* path encourages the attachment of the ego to ephemeral things.

Thus, keeping ourselves free of such sins as greed and envy promotes a state of detachment in which we may more easily identify ourselves with the Self rather than with the ego, which always covets this thing or that. In sum, the righteous path is offered as a way to live in the world – while simultaneously practicing the spiritual disciplines of controlling the senses, stilling the mind, and practicing meditation. Note that since meditation is offered as a third item, distinct from the other two, the clear message seems to be that we must practice control of the senses and of the mind as we go about our daily lives, and not just when we sit in meditation.

Only those men who follow this path of detachment, we are told, "can know the omnipresent Self, whose glory sweeps away the rituals of the priest and the prowess of the warrior and puts death itself to death." This is a passage pregnant with significance. First, we find here yet another suggestion in this Upanishad of a critical appraisal of the ritualism of the *Brahmins*. We might think of this as the "Protestant" element in Vedanta, for we are very clearly being told that salvation (the putting of death itself to death) can be found only through the state of one's own soul, not through the incense and mutterings and motions of the priests. The man who has attained unity with the Self, the passage makes clear, soars above the priestly caste – and above the *Kshatriyas*, the warriors, as well. Who is this man, then? He is, in a sense, an *outcast*. There is thus a curious commonality between the very lowest human element, and the highest. Both are outside caste. The one because he is less than truly human, the other because he is more. As Aristotle famously said, "Whoever does not partake of politics is either a beast or a god."

The next section of the text deals specifically with the issue of control of the senses. It contains an image that is one of the most famous in the

Upanishads, and must also remind us of Greek philosophy. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Know the Self as lord of the chariot, the body as the chariot itself, the discriminating intellect as the charioteer, and the mind as reins. The senses, say the wise, are the horses; selfish desires are the roads they travel. When the Self is confused with the body, mind, and senses, they point out, he seems to enjoy pleasure and suffer sorrow. When a person lacks discrimination and his mind is undisciplined, the senses run hither and thither like wild horses. But they obey the rein like trained horses when one has discrimination and has made the mind one-pointed. Those who lack discrimination, with little control over their thoughts and far from pure, reach not the pure state of immortality but wander from death to death; but those who have discrimination, with a still mind and a pure heart, reach journey's end, never again to fall into the jaws of death. With a discriminating intellect as charioteer and a trained mind as reins, they attain the supreme goal of life, to be united with the Lord of Love.

As many have recognized, this image is very similar to the analogy of the chariot employed by Plato in the *Phaedrus* (246a–254e). The difference is that Plato's image is simpler: the charioteer represents intellect; one of the two horses, the light one, represents the spirited element (*thumos*); and the dark horse represents appetite or desire. The image from the Katha Upanishad is more complex, but the lesson it teaches is fairly simple. The key error the text warns us about is that of confusing the Self with the body. And the solution to this is the practice of *discrimination* (*viveka*).

[7]

The god Krishna acts as Prince Arjuna's charioteer in the Battle of Kurukshetra.

While the passage seems to be focused entirely on the control of the senses, control of the mind is included here as well. In order to avoid falling into the error of confusing the Self with the body, one must continually discriminate between the two. But in order to do this, the mind itself must be disciplined; it must be "one-pointed." This image suggests a mind directed on only one thing. And that one thing, of course, must be the Self. A later passage tells us, in the context of mentioning one-pointedness again: "There is no one but the Self. Who sees multiplicity but not the one indivisible Self must wander on and on from death to death."

But how does one direct one's mind in this way? One answer is through frequent study of the scriptures. But there is another teaching here as well, another kind of "one-pointedness." This consists in disciplining the mind simply *to see* all that comes before it. One might assume that we

are already doing this, but that is not the case. Normally, the senses pull us this way and that – as the horses in the image are pulled along the roads representing selfish desires. In other words, normally we are absorbed in being controlled by our senses and our desires, and do not *see* or register those senses and desires for what they are, and how they control us.

At a fundamental level, "discrimination" involves creating a division between a watching self, and all that which comes before it – whether that is the sensible objects around me, or my own body, or the thoughts in my mind. All must be seen. (A later passage states, "Those who know the Self as enjoyer of the honey from the flowers of the senses, ever present within, ruler of time, go beyond fear. For this Self is supreme!") When this all-seeing is attained, when I see all and identify with nothing, then in fact I will have identified with the Self. (The Self, we are told later on, is "pure consciousness in all who are conscious.") I will be living a meditation: all of reality plays before me, as if it were my dream. Indeed, it is my dream, but only when I am the Self.

Following this passage, we find the first occurrence of the word *Brahman* in the text:

Brahman is the First Cause and last refuge. *Brahman*, the hidden Self in everyone, does not shine forth. He is revealed only to those who keep their minds one-pointed on the Lord of Love and thus develop a superconscious manner of knowing. Meditation enables them to go deeper and deeper into consciousness, from the world of words to the world of thoughts, then beyond thoughts to wisdom in the Self.

Again, there is much here of significance. First, the usual Vedantic identification of the Self (*Atman*) with *Brahman* appears: *Brahman* is "the hidden Self in everyone." This hidden Self, we are being told, is identical with the source (the "First Cause") of all being: in my innermost essence I am identical with the mysterious source of the universe itself, which is beyond the capacity of our senses to perceive, and beyond the capacity of words to define. Again, the virtues of meditation are extolled as a path to the realization of this identity. And we note – here and in the passage

about the chariot – the use of the phrase "Lord of Love" to refer to the Self.

Why this particular choice of words? In all probability, this alludes to the traditional teaching that all love is, in fact, love of the infinite. In life we yearn for this object and that, always thinking that with the acquisition of the next we will finally be satisfied. And always we are disappointed. Our yearning, in fact, is infinite and can only be satisfied by an infinite object. The only "love" that may satisfy us is love of being itself; and only in identity with the whole of being can this love be consummated. It is in this sense that the Self is the "Lord of Love": it is he who commands our love, and is the only one who can satisfy it (though most are completely unaware of this).

This passage is immediately followed by one of the most famous in all literature, East and West: "Get up! Wake up! Seek the guidance of an illumined teacher and realize the Self. Sharp like a razor's edge, the sages say, is the path, difficult to traverse." The author seems to cry aloud to us: "Get up!" (i.e., get off your lazy, ignorant, covetous rump); "Wake up!" It is as if the author is telling us, "Enough theory. Enough description of the path. Now you must *act!* Act now, or go on your way, for more discussion is useless."

Here we reach the crucial juncture in all introductions to "spiritual paths": at a certain point, talk must end, and the aspirant must begin the hard work of the path, which consists in something more than listening to pretty speeches. It is at this juncture, in fact, that many will be lost. Many are attracted by "spirituality." They will listen to and feel uplifted by lectures on detachment and "mindfulness." But the actual work of learning discrimination, in the sense described earlier, and of disciplining the mind and passions, demands a toughness and a dedication of which few are capable. Many are called, but few are chosen. This path is indeed like a razor's edge. It requires delicate balance, and it will inflict *pain*.

Much of the rest of the Katha Upanishad is devoted to elaborating, in rapturous poetic language, on how the Self=*Brahman* is the source of all, even of the gods. (And thus, to achieve identity with the Self places one

above the gods.[3] [8]) There is much repetition of themes already discussed, but this is typical of "mystical" texts, which often introduce multiple ways of speaking about that which cannot be spoken about; "talking around," as it were, that which cannot be said. And the Katha Upanishad is a classic of this type of literature – indeed, a classic of world literature itself, on a par with any of the classical texts of ancient Western philosophy.

The Upanishad ends with some tantalizing, and obscure, suggestions regarding the physical application of its teaching. We are told that "When all the knots that strangle the heart are loosened, the mortal becomes immortal. This sums up the teaching of the scriptures." So far so good: we have here, it seems, another figurative use of "heart." But in the very next passage we find language that *must* be taken literally: "From the heart there radiate a hundred and one vital tracks. One of them rises to the crown of the head. This way leads to immortality, the others to death." This is an unmistakable reference to the doctrine of Kundalini yoga, in which a central channel or artery (*shushumna*) rises up the spine, through the heart center (or *chakra*) to the center at the crown of the head. The object of this yoga is to awaken the Kundalini energy at the base of the spine, and to cause it to rise up *shushumna* "through" the chakras, and to the chakra at the crown (*sahasrara*), which results in an experience of mystical ecstasy: the identification with the Source.

The next passage very curiously refers to the Self as "not larger than the thumb," and concealed within the heart. We are enjoined to draw him "out of the physical sheath." The clear suggestion is that not all the references to the Self as "hidden in the hearts of all" can be taken as figurative (as I suggested in the last installment). Indeed, we find here the traditional teaching that the center of one's being is *literally* in the heart (or, at least in the region of the heart). The practice of meditation taught by the Katha Upanishad has as its goal to awaken the Self concealed in the heart. Somehow, this physical location is the passageway into another metaphysical reality: the reality of the Self. It is as if the heart is – quite literally – a secret passage into unity with the Source, and with all. One suspects that there is much that is not being said here; much that is being concealed.[4] [9]

Yama must have revealed some doctrines to Nachiketa that are not recorded here. In the end, all we are told is that "Nachiketa learned from the god of death the whole discipline of meditation. Freeing himself from all separateness, he won immortality in *Brahman*. So blessed is everyone who knows the Self."

Notes

[1] [10] For more information on this problem, see my essay "On Being and Waking" in TYR, Vol. 5, forthcoming.

[2] [11] See Julius Evola and the UR Group, Introduction to Magic, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2001), p. 40.

[3] [12] "The only truly immortal being is the awakened man. Stars and gods disappear; he alone endures and can achieve anything he wants. There is no God above him." See Introduction to Magic, p. 40.

[4] [13] For some treatment of this topic of work on the heart center, see Introduction to Magic, pp. 41-44.

PART IV, THE BRIHADARANYAKA UPANISHAD

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is quite long, and we can only scratch the surface here. In truth, even the shortest of the Upanishads could justify a long commentary. The texts of Vedanta are a whole, each of the parts of which reflects the whole in miniature. In other words, within each text one may find the whole teaching. This does not mean, of course, that the whole teaching is explicitly stated. Rather, one will find that to truly understand the full significance of any one statement in the Upanishads, we must situate it within the context of the entire teaching.

"Brihadaranyaka" means "of the great forest." Aranyaka means "of the forest" or "of the wilderness." The Aranyakas are understood to be a type of ancient Hindu literature, along with the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, and the Upanishads. In fact, the distinction between these categories is often murky at best, and some Arayankas are included within the Upanishads (e.g., the text that is our present subject), and vice versa. Such distinctions need not distract us, but it is worthwhile to ask why this text, and others like it, are "of the forest." One theory, which is simple and plausible (and has the added advantage of being rather Romantic) is that the texts were meant to be read and discussed in the forest – in other words, outside of the social milieu of towns and cities, and in secret. The meaning of "Upanishad" (discussed in the first part of this series) is "sit close in." So, we visualize a small group of students venturing out into the forest, to sit close in around their guru and hear the teaching meant only for the few.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is one of the oldest texts of Hindu mysticism – probably composed between 900 and 600 BC. Tradition has it that the author was Yajnavalkya, who was probably an actual historical figure, living from the eighth to the seventh century. Yajnavalkya is the principal speaker in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, which begins as a dialogue between himself and his wife Maitreyi. What the text does not tell us is that Maitreyi is regarded in the Indian tradition as a philosopher in her own right. Aside from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, she is mentioned in several other sources (including the Mahabharata, where, however, she is said never to have married).

Like the Katha Upanishad's dialogue between Yama and Nachiketa, the dialogue of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad begins with the problem of escaping death, and with the recognition that material attachments are worthless. The occasion for the conversation is Yajnavalkya's farewell to his wife. In traditional India, it was often the custom that once men had established themselves in the world with a wife, family, and property, they would abandon all of this in middle age to seek wisdom. Sometimes this took the form of leaving civilization entirely, and retreating into the wilderness (which may be one of the reasons for the title "Of the Great Forest").

The Upanishad, therefore, begins with the final conversation between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, and he wants to impart to her some important words of wisdom. These concern the concept of "the Self" (*Atman*), which we have already discussed extensively in the earlier installments of this series. The Self is our true, inner essence. It is our real identity, as opposed to the false identity we construct over time and refer to as "I" and "me." And because this Self is impersonal, it is actually the same in all of us: Each individual person is a kind of inflection or specification of the underlying Self, which is One and eternal.

In a famous passage, Yajnavalkya states:

As a lump of salt thrown in water dissolves and cannot be taken out again, though wherever we taste the water it is salty, even so, beloved, the separate self dissolves in the sea of pure consciousness, infinite and immortal. Separateness arises from identifying the Self with the body, which is made up of the elements; when this physical identification dissolves, there can be no more separate self. This is what I want to tell you, beloved.

Our sense of separateness arises from ignorance (*avidya*) and lack of practice in discrimination (*viveka*). The path to realization of the Self involves discriminating the Self from what it is not. Indeed, in terms of the intellectual understanding of the nature of the Self, the path is almost entirely *negative*: never identifying what the Self *is* (for it is beyond words), only what it *is not*. The chief error men make, as the passage indicates, is in thinking that their true Self is their body, or that it is

located somewhere within that body. Yajnavalkya reminds us that that body is made up of "the elements" – and to those elements it will return, when the body dies. Along with it, the false, finite, and separate self dies as well: all that we commonly think of as "me."

Maiteryi is perplexed by this teaching. But in fact, Yajnavalkya has not only taught her the essence of Vedanta, he has also taught her the means to overcome the grief she feels at his departure. The Self is one, without distinction. Thus, "my Self" is not something distinct from "your Self." In knowing what I truly am, I know what you truly are. In loving my Self, in yearning to realize identity with it, I love you as well – I love what you truly are; your real being. As I noted in the last installment of this series, the traditional teaching about love is that all love is, in fact, love of the infinite. In life we yearn for one object or another, and whether we attain those objects or not, we are always disappointed. We always yearn for more. Our longing is infinite, and so it can only be satisfied by an infinite object: the Self.

The love that Maitreyi feels for Yajnavalkya is, in reality, a desire for the Self. But when Yajnavalkya leaves, he does not take the Self with him. The Self is here, there, and everywhere. And most important, it is within Maitreyi, as it is in all of us. Therefore, Yajnavalkya's ultimate message to Maitreyi seems to be that truly loving him would be loving the Self that is already within her, and through which the two of them are one. True devotion to me, he seems to be saying, is love of the Self – so seek the Self within you, as we all must. And if you seek that Self, then in reality we will never be parted. Through the Self, we will always be together.

Once Yajnavalkya leaves Maitreyi, his travels take him to Janaka, the King of Videha, with whom he also has a dialogue. Janaka asks him, "Who is that Self?" Yajnavalkya responds:

The Self, pure awareness, shines as the light within the heart, surrounded by the senses. Only seeming to think, seeming to move, the Self neither sleeps nor wakes nor dreams.

Here, once again, we are told that the Self lies within us, at our core (in the heart). It is "pure awareness," but what does it mean to say that it is

"surrounded by the senses"? And why speak of the Self as "seeming" to think or move? The inescapable conclusion is that Yajnavalkya understands the Self to take on or manifest a finite form. This form – the individual human being – undergoes an array of sensory experiences of a particular character, which always have finite objects. "The individual," who is the garment assumed by the Self, takes these experiences as its own. Meanwhile, the Self exists at the center of this outcropping of individuality, a pure awareness untouched by the sensory experience we naïvely assume to be the only awareness possible.

Having expressed itself as an individual human being, the Self "seems" to think and to move. In reality, only the finite expression of the Self, almost always completely ignorant of its true nature, does this thinking and moving. That finite individual experiences itself as sleeping, waking, and dreaming. Yajnavalkya speaks further of the Self "taking on a body," and thus seeming to assume the body's frailties. But the Self is unaffected, and undergoes no alteration in its state of being. It is, again, pure awareness: always aware behind or beneath what we call waking, sleeping – and even aware in what we call dreamless sleep.

Obviously, this type of awareness is something radically different from the awareness to which we are accustomed, even when we believe that we are awake, alert, and focused. It is easy to see why this must be the case, since we define awareness in contrast to obliviousness, waking in contrast to sleeping. But in a being for whom obliviousness and sleep are impossible, what can awareness or wakefulness truly mean? This is a state we may never understand intellectually – but we may approach it through practice, the importance of which I discussed in the last installment of this series. I have also argued elsewhere that when we attempt to understand the "waking" exhibited by the Self, we find that this waking shades off into being. (See my essay "On Waking and Being" in *TYB*, Vol. 5, forthcoming.)

Yajnavalkya goes on to tell us that the human being has just two states: the state of being in "this world," and the state of being "in the other world." This is clearly a way of emphasizing the fundamental duality in human nature. Ordinarily, I experience the state of being in this world –

in this body, surrounded by physical objects of which I am aware with my senses, experiencing the thoughts and feelings of my finite individuality. Simultaneously, however, I exist in another world that transcends the finitude and suffering of this world. I exist in this other world in virtue of the fact that I am the Self. Indeed, since we know that the Self is what I truly am, we may conclude that that "other world" is the truer one; the one I actually belong in.

In life, we may be afforded "glimpses" of the other world: moments in which we identify with the Self. As occurs repeatedly in the Upanishads, the text now employs the contrast between waking and dreaming as a way to help us understand the state of being at one with the Self. Yajnavalkya tells us, in fact, that dreaming is an "intermediate state" between being in this world and being in the other. The dream state gives a clue as to our true nature, by affording a vantage point from which we can see, in a certain way, *both* this world and the other world. In the dream,

there are no chariots, no horses drawing them or roads on which to travel, but he [the dreamer] makes up his own chariots, horses, and roads. In that state there are no joys or pleasures, but he makes up his own joys and pleasures. In that state there are no lotus ponds, no lakes, no rivers, but he makes up his own lotus ponds, lakes, and rivers. It is he who makes up all these from the impressions of his past or waking life.

What we dream of does not exist; we "make these things up." Accordingly, when we dream we are like a god. But our dreams exhibit one great limitation: They are not *entirely* our creation; they are simply a re-creation or re-organization of material we have picked up through the senses during our waking life. Thus, I may dream that I meet a person I knew at one time, who is long dead. Or I may dream of a ten-foot tall onion. Certainly, I have never seen such a thing – but I have seen onions, and I have seen things that actually are ten feet tall. The imagination always creates out of pre-existing material.

Of course, it is not entirely accurate to say that "I" make up the dream, or that "my" imagination does anything. For when I experience the dream (except in very, very rare instances of so-called "lucid dreaming")

I take it to be real, and I am wholly unaware that "I" have created it. In truth, *I have not* – at least not the "I" with which I am familiar. Some deeper element in me is actually the creator of the dream. Western psychology calls this "the unconscious," which is not a particularly helpful term (it might as well be glossed as "something unknown of which we're not aware"). For Vedanta, our realization of the existence of this "dream maker," existing deep within us, is an important clue to the realization of the Self.

When we dream, two things occur. First, I witness the dream and take it for real; becoming caught up in the dream narrative. Often, I will be completely surprised when I wake up and realize I was only dreaming. But there is a second, simultaneous process that unfolds. That "consciousness" that is deeper than my mundane "I," that made the dream and presented it to me, *watches me while I experience the dream*. This is the Self. The "me" that experiences the dream, the me that is normally entirely caught up in the vicissitudes of waking life, is, as we have seen, a finite form assumed by the Self. Thus, in the dream, the Self watches itself – its embodiment as a finite human being – sensing, feeling, and reacting to a world that is its own creation.

And now a shocking thought occurs to us, like a thunderbolt rending the sky: Could it be that life is just the same as the dream? Could waking life be the creation of the Self as well? I imagine that I am experiencing an other, but the other is in fact my own creation, where the true "my" belongs to the Self. And throughout all the experiences that we take as "other" and involve ourselves in, whether in waking or dreaming, the Self remains unmoved:

He is not affected by anything because he is detached and free; and after wandering here and there in the state of dreaming, enjoying pleasures and seeing good and evil, he returns to the state from which he began.

And then, in a passage that was important for Schopenhauer:

As a man in the arms of his beloved is not aware of what is without and what is within, so a person in union with the Self is not aware of what is without and what is within, for in that unitive state all desires find their

perfect fulfillment. There is no other desire that needs to be fulfilled, and one goes beyond sorrow.

This passage makes it sound as if when in union with the Self one loses consciousness in a kind of ecstatic rapture. In a way, this is true – but in another way it is decidedly *not* true. If we understand consciousness to be defined by duality, with the chief duality being subject and object, then union with the Self transcends consciousness. Yet there is another, "higher" conception of consciousness, which is state of awareness (or, perhaps, state of being) which has, in fact, transcended duality. One can achieve glimpses of this in mystical experiences, and certain kinds of drug experiences. But it is not a state of nullity, or unconsciousness. Rather, it is a state of *heightened* consciousness, in which one *experiences* the unity of the all (as opposed to merely thinking it).

The text makes perfectly clear that duality is transcended in union with the Self:

In that unitive state there is neither father nor mother, neither worlds nor gods nor even scriptures. In that state there is neither thief nor slayer, neither low caste nor high, neither monk nor ascetic. The Self is beyond good and evil, beyond all the suffering of the human heart.

This is, of course, an extremely daring passage, for it openly states that in the "unitive state," the social distinctions so extraordinarily important to us in ordinary life are cancelled. And the distinction between "good and evil" is treated here (as it usually is in Eastern mysticism) as a social construct, which is left behind upon awakening. This passage is quite dangerous, for it has the potential to be very badly misunderstood. Westerners will invariably conclude that it means we should, upon achieving this realization, *behave* as if there is no difference between thief and slayer, no difference between caste, and no difference between "good" and "evil."

But what Indian mysticism teaches is something far more subtle than this. The man who achieves realization is still a man. In so far as he acts in the world, he must recognize the reality of all sorts of distinctions, social and natural. To take an obvious example, if a man has achieved the

"unitive state," does that mean that he can now lie down with cobras and expect not to be harmed? Of course not. If he did, he would certainly die. For however a man himself may have changed, the world outside him has not.

Contrary to how it is often portrayed, Vedanta does not teach that that outside world doesn't exist. And no matter what higher state we may have reached, so long as we are embodied we still live in that very real world, which demands that we respect distinctions of all sorts. All that has changed is that, inside ourselves, we are able to see how all of these distinctions are expressions of an underlying unity – the One, the All, the Self – and that ultimately there is no distinction between ourselves and that unity. The "differentiated" type of man (to use an expression of Evola's) lives in two worlds, while he remains alive. As the text states, "The human being has two states of consciousness: one in this world, and the other in the next." While he lives and acts in the worldly world, he must abide by its rules.

Having explained to us how the unitive state transcends duality, Yajnavalkya now treats the issue of the sort of "consciousness" that has been achieved in that state. Recall that earlier I said that some passages seem to imply that in identity with the Self, we pass into a rapture of unconsciousness. I argued that it would be closer to the mark to see the unitive state as a higher or heightened form of consciousness. I also alluded to the fact that the account of consciousness or "waking" given in Vedanta shades off into "being" – in other words, in the end there is no distinction between "knowing" and "being," when in the unitive state. (And, once more, I will direct the reader to my article on this subject, in the forthcoming *TYR*, Vol. 5, which bases its arguments on traditions quite independent of Vedanta.) We now come to a very mysterious passage in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in which Yajnavalkya seems to deal precisely with this issue:

In that unitive state one sees without seeing, for there is nothing separate from him; smells without smelling, for there is nothing separate from him; tastes without tasting, for there is nothing separate from him; speaks without speaking, for there is nothing separate from him; hears

without hearing, for there is nothing separate from him; touches without touching, for there is nothing separate from him; thinks without thinking, for there is nothing separate from him; knows without knowing, for there is nothing separate from him.

This passage is a classic example of the sort of "logic of contradiction" that mysticism so often displays. To understand the passage, keep squarely in mind that in the "unitive state" there is *no difference* between you and the Self; you *are* the Self. So, the passage doesn't merely describe what *you* will experience in the unitive state; it describes the state of the Self. Bear in mind, also, that the Self is All: the Self is the being of all things, and indistinguishable from Brahman, the eternal source of all that is.

Now, note that the passage continually emphasizes the "consciousness" of the Self, while seeming to undermine that consciousness at the same time: so, the Self "smells without smelling," "knows without knowing," and so on. The "consciousness" of the Self, as I have argued, transcends the ordinary understanding of consciousness as characterized by duality. Normally, if I smell there is an object, separate from me, *that* I smell; if I see, there is a separate object *that* I see, and so on. Thus, the text states:

Where there is separateness, one sees another, smells another, tastes another, speaks to another, hears another, touches another, thinks of another, knows another.

But the Self has no objects separate from itself; it is All. So, logically, how can it smell or see? Instead of claiming that it cannot, and that it is "unconscious," the text emphatically insists again and again that the Self *is* conscious: that it *does* smell, see, hear, think, and so on. But how does it? What kind of consciousness is this? The answer is that in the Self, the distinction between knowing and being has been overcome, so that the Self's knowing the all just is its *being* the all. Yajnavalkya states:

But where there is unity, one without a second, that is the world of Brahman. This is the supreme goal of life, the supreme treasure, the supreme joy. Those who do not seek this supreme goal live on but a fraction of this joy.

The unity of the Self or the all (identical with Brahman) is not a static unity. It is an active state in which *what is* continually comes forth to manifestation. This activity, the continual blossoming of being, is pure joy. It is the life and experience of the Self. Our joy comes in realizing identity with this all and experiencing the continual manifestation of being in all its forms as the creative expression of myself (the Self). In this identity, one knows all – because one experiences one's identity with all. It is possible to approach this idea theoretically (in my forthcoming *TYR* article I approach it, partly, through Aristotle's dictum "actual knowledge is always identical with its object"). Ultimately, however, only an experience acquired through diligent *practice* can lead to understanding these very strange and edifying ideas.

THE METAPHYSICS OF INDO-EUROPEAN TRIPARTITION

PART I

Author's Note:

This essay was originally written almost exactly thirteen years ago. I have withheld it from publication for all these years, because I considered the ideas in it a bit too speculative and daring. I believe, however, that those ideas are too interesting to be withheld indefinitely. In the hope that others may profit from them, I have decided that the time has come to publish this essay. I must emphasize, however, that these ideas are indeed highly speculative, and that the theory expounded herein remains a work in progress.

1. Introduction: Dumézil's Tripartite Scheme

The most eminent scholar in the field of Indo-European studies is the late Georges Dumézil of the College de France. Dumézil's contribution to this rather small field can be boiled down to two things: (a) he noticed that all Indo-European cultures exhibited a fundamental tripartite structure; and (b) he found that structure codified in the mythology of each Indo-European people. I will first simply describe this tripartition and then offer some examples of it. This topic is already familiar to many of my readers.

At the top of the Indo-European society is what Dumézil calls the first function. This embodies twin aspects: a juridical aspect and a sacerdotal aspect. It deals with the administration of justice, and with religion. This is sometimes, therefore, called the "priest-king" or "priest-jurist" function. The second function is the warrior or military class, which serves to protect the society as a whole and to make war on its enemies. The third function incorporates all those occupied with the production or supply of goods, services, and food. Thus, this class incorporates all merchants, farmers, tradesmen, skilled laborers, etc.

As to which function actually rules in Indo-European society, this is a complex question. In one way, it seems obvious that the first function rules. It plays an organizing, structuring role in society. Because it

includes a juridical aspect, it is involved with the comprehension and application of abstract laws. Furthermore, since it also involves a religious aspect, it is the first function that provides the society access to the divine, the highest authority of all. However, in most Indo-European societies, it is from the warrior, or second function class, that rulers were derived. This is the case with the Indian Kshatriya, for example.

So which rules, the first function or the second function? The problem is easily solved by looking to Plato's description in the *Republic* of the traditional timarchic society. The timarchy is a society ruled by members of the warrior class, who are educated and advised by members of the first function, or priestly class. This makes the warriors *de facto* rulers, but since the priests are making the laws, and serving as final authority, one could also contend that in real sense it is the first function that rules. The timarchy is, in fact, the form taken by most traditional Indo-European societies.

Let me now give some specific examples of tripartition in Indo-European cultures, and in Indo-European myth. In India we find three chief castes: *brahmins* (priests), *kshatriyas* (soldiers), and *vaishyas* (producers). A fourth caste, the *sudras* are simply the servants of the others. The twin aspects of the first function are represented by the gods Varuna and Mitra. The second function is represented by the powerful and bellicose god Indra. The third function is represented by the twin Asvins.

Moving very far away indeed, we find among the Celts the *Druids* (who were priests and jurists), the *flaith* (who were a military aristocracy), and the *bo airig*, which literally means "free men owning cattle." Among the Germanic tribes we find a similar social tripartition, and similar gods. Odin and Tyr represent, respectively, the religious and juridical aspects of sovereignty. Like Varuna, Odin is portrayed as a wily magician. Like Mitra, Tyr is contract personified. Thor, who corresponds quite clearly to Indra, is the god of the warrior. Freyr and Freya represent the third function. It should be noted, in this regard, that anything having to do with production or fecundity is associated with the third function. Hence, Freyr and Freya, gods of sensuality, are third-functional gods. In the Roman pantheon, we have Jupiter (first function), Mars (second

function), and Quirinius (third function). In Iran we find the Amesa-Spentas, aspects of the Good Lord Ahura Mazda. These include Asa and Vohu Manah, who represent cosmic order and morality and are thus first function deities. Xsathra is might or power, and thus is associated with the second function. Armaiti, Haurvatat, and Amerutat are patrons of, respectively, the earth, health, and immortality, and thus seem to be represent third function characteristics.

Tripartition is encoded in Indo-European myth in other ways as well. In one Scythian myth, for example, the gods send mankind four items: a chalice, a sword, a yoke, and a plow. The chalice is clearly a ritual object, representing the sacerdotal first function. The sword is obviously an object of war and thus is associated with the second function. The yoke and plow are for tilling the soil, and so are third function objects. In Irish legend, the Tuatha de Danaan were supposed to have had four great treasures. The first was the Stone of Destiny, which served in coronations. The second and third were the invincible sword of Lugh of the Long Arm, and a magic spear (these two together represent the second function). The fourth was the Cauldron of the Dagda, which was a kind of horn of plenty.

Tripartition is at the core of the *Iliad*. What gets the Trojan War started in the first place is the competition among the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite over which one Paris will choose as most beautiful. To ply him, Hera offers him sovereignty (first function); Athena offers him military prowess (second function); and Aphrodite offers him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world (third function). In choosing Aphrodite, and Helen, Paris dooms his nation by usurping the natural order of things: for the Indo-Europeans sovereignty and chivalry must always go before sensuality.

Having given a brief sketch of Indo-European tripartition, I am now going to argue that our ancestors were right to think that tripartition is more than just a social structure. The three functions are actually reflections of a deeper, tripartite metaphysics, and every level of reality exhibits this structure. Before I begin to argue for this, however, I want to very briefly touch on three points. First of all, I am *not* going to be arguing that “all

things come in threes." What I am dealing with here is a special *form* of threefold structure, not just triadicity as such. My procedure will be inductive. I will present numerous examples of aspects of reality structured analogously to the Indo-European social system. In sections seven and eight I will offer purely abstract accounts of the nature of these principles, prescinding from any specific application of them.

Second, I will not deal with the question of *how* the ancient Indo-Europeans could have possessed this advanced knowledge. I will assume I do not need to convince my readers that it is possible that our distant ancestors knew more, not less than we do.

Finally, it is inevitable that some will object to my procedure here by charging that the Indo-Europeans were simply trying to justify their social structure by "reading it into" the very structure of the cosmos. This objection will be voiced especially by those who object to features of Indo-European ideology that are "politically incorrect": e.g., patriarchy, aristocracy, militarism, and, my favorite -ism of all, what Jacques Derrida called "phallologocentricism." It is, of course, possible that the Indo-Europeans could simply have read their social structure into the heavens, but we need to at least consider that it might have been the other way around — that they might have read this structure in the heavens, and then built their society around it. But this objection is really beside the point, for the examples of tripartition I shall present here are mostly my own observations, my own application of the Indo-European categories to other regions of the real.

PART II, TRIPARTITION IN HUMAN SOCIETY, PSYCHOLOGY AND PHYSIOLOGY

1. The Tripartite Human Soul

To begin, the Indo-Europeans traditionally believed that society must be structured in three parts or "functions" because people themselves exhibit three basic soul-types.

Students of Greek philosophy will realize that this is exactly Plato's view. In the *Republic*, Plato divides his ideal city into three classes: the philosophers, the guardians or warriors, and the producers. This corresponds precisely to Indo-European tripartition, with philosopher-kings taking the place of priest-jurists. But in the *Republic* Plato makes this political point only in order to make a psychological point. He argues that each human soul exhibits this tripartite structure.

In our souls there is a guiding element — an element that controls, that says yea or nay, that talks "sense" into us when emotions go astray. This element is both concerned with rules, with order, with logic, and with what we call spirituality. It thus corresponds to the juridical-sacerdotal function of Indo-European society. We also have what Plato calls a "spirited" (not to be confused with "spiritual") element which beats wildly in the breast whenever one's body or one's honor is threatened. It pushes us to fight, sometimes foolishly. This obviously corresponds to the guardian or warrior (second function) element. Finally, we have what Plato calls the "appetitive" or "desiring" part of the soul. This is the part of us that hungers after physical goods: food, sex, sensual pleasures of all kinds, money, treasure, real estate, etc. Virtue, for Plato, is present in a soul when these three elements exist harmoniously, with the harmony largely imposed by the control of the first, or rational function.

2. The Three Human Types

Plato's other psychological point is that people differ in terms of the proportions of these elements in their individual souls. To put it simply, some people naturally tend toward being intellectual or spiritual. Others are predominantly spirited, aggressive, concerned with things such as competition, honor, and glory. Still others are predominantly appetitive,

with concerns that typically do not rise above the level of physical, sensual satisfaction, or material gain.

In short, for Plato and for the Indo-Europeans, there are natural rulers and priests, natural warriors, and natural producers and businessmen. Society, for the Indo-Europeans must exhibit a tripartite structure because human beings themselves fall into such a grouping. Incidentally, Plato considered most of humanity as falling within the third, appetitive class, and this is why he opposed democracy. Rule by "the majority" inevitably means rule by those who are not primarily reasonable, spiritual, or honorable, but rather those primarily concerned with personal gain, and with the moment.

3. The Somatotypes and Temperamental Types

[2]

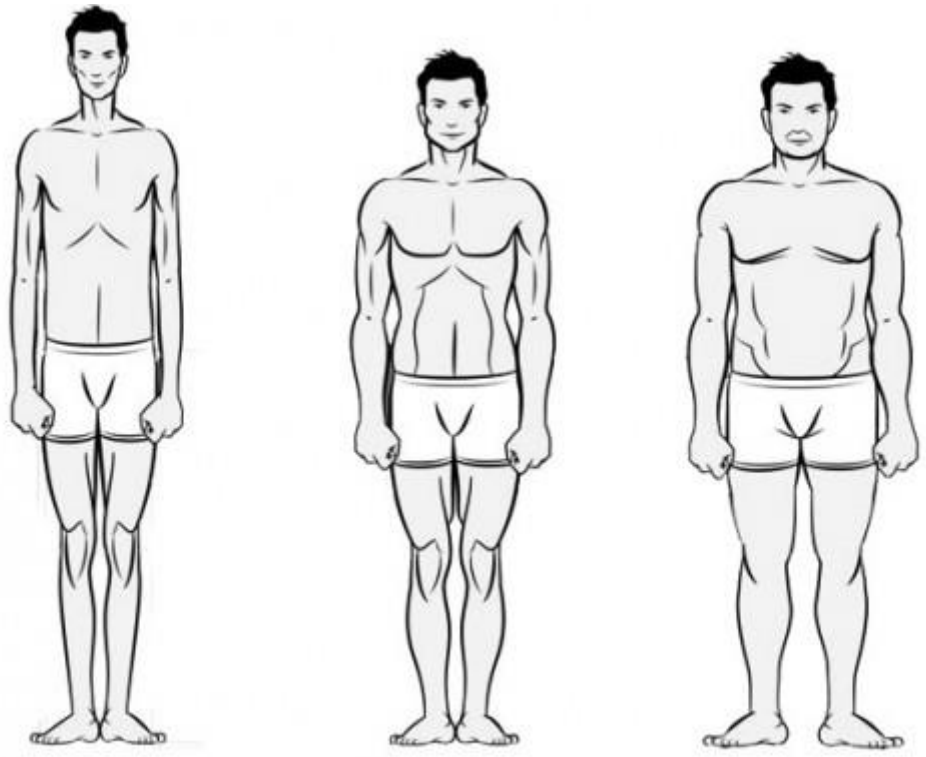
William Herbert Sheldon

So, what we have seen so far is that Indo-European tripartition provides us with a psychology in terms of which we can understand the dynamics of our individual soul, and in terms of which we can categorize and understand ourselves and others. However, tripartition is not just present in the soul but in the body as well. In what follows I will be drawing on the work of the psychologist W. H. Sheldon, whose work has been declared "discredited" today (all of his books are out of print),

because it commits the unpardonable sin of suggesting that biology shapes our destiny.[1]

Sheldon distinguishes between three physical types or "morphs," and three types of temperament, or "tonias." The morphs will be familiar to many of you: they are the ectomorph, the mesomorph, and the endomorph.[2] (The literal meaning of these names will discussed in section four, below.)

The ectomorph is typically thin, perhaps somewhat fragile and delicate. Linearity predominates. There is little body fat and little muscularity. The temperament typically exhibited by the ecotomorph is *cerebrotonic*. He is often introverted, often completely absorbed in his own thought processes. Most schizophrenics exhibit an ectomorphic build. The cerebretonic tends toward nervous, obsessive behavior, and is often highly gifted in theoretical pursuits. I need not point out what we have all observed in our lives: that "brainiacs" and "science geeks" tend to be thin, lanky, and nervous. But this type, attracted as he is to the abstract and to the rational, may also be attracted to the spiritual and to the mystical.



[3]

The mesomorph is typically broad-shouldered, with a narrow waist, giving him a triangular appearance. He is naturally well-proportioned. Like the ectomorph, he tends to have little body fat, but unlike the ectomorph his musculature is pronounced. He is a natural athlete, with a body built for conflict and competition. Temperamentally, Sheldon calls him *somatotonic*. This is an action-oriented temperament. The somatotonic is a warrior, seeking competition, striving, victory, and glory of all kinds. Such individuals tend toward extroversion. They want to *do* things, rather than sit and think about them. They tend toward insensitivity, and even sometimes brutality. They want to lead, but they also make fanatical followers if they encounter someone they esteem more highly than themselves.

The endomorph is oval-shaped, often tending toward obesity. He is the diametrical opposite of the ectomorph. In geometric terms, he is round rather than straight. What muscularity he may have is very often hidden under fat. The endomorph is *viscerotonic* or "gut dominant." One proponent of Sheldon's theories notes that for viscerotonics "love of physical comfort, eating, polite ceremony, company, and sleep are prominent characteristics." He is characterized by "softness of body and of mind."[3] This "softness of mind" manifests itself in a tendency toward passivity, complacency, indiscriminate amiability, joviality, and an unwillingness or inability to make firm judgments or draw firm distinctions.

It should be obvious that these three body and temperamental types correspond to the three Indo-European functions. The ectomorph and cerebretonic is the intellect, the abstract reasoner, the judge, as well as the mystic. The mesomorph and somatotonic is the natural warrior. The endomorph and viscerotonic is naturally inclined toward production, consumption, and sensual satisfaction. Sheldon's description of the three temperaments can be considered as a supplement to Plato's discussion of the rational, spirited, and appetitive types. In the distinction of the three "morphs" associated with these types we find a physical expression of tripartition, which is particularly remarkable.

4. The Significance of the Mesomorph

What is especially interesting here is the "middle position," on both physical and spiritual levels, occupied by the mesomorph-somatotonic. Like the ecotomorph, he is lean. Like the endomorph he is bulky. But his bulky leanness is a muscular one. He lacks the fat of the endomorph, but unlike the ecotomorph his musculature is tends to be visible.

In Plato's esoteric teaching — reported in fragmentary fashion by Aristotle and others — the great philosopher distinguishes between two ultimate, metaphysical principles which he calls the One and the Indefinite Dyad. The One is conceived as measure, order, proportion. The Dyad is conceived as the twin principles of the Great and the Small. One can easily map the three morphs onto these categories, with the mesomorph representing a mean between extremes. He is the perfectly measured, ordered, proportional type. It is in the hopes of approximating to his form that millions of dollars are spent every year on gym memberships. The endomorph and the ecotomorph are, respectively, the Great and the Small. It is as if the endomorph has too much of something and the ectomorph too little.

There is another, more important way in which the mesomorph-somatotonic is a "mean" between the other two. The ecotomorph tends toward the abstract, the cerebral, and the intellectual. The endomorph-viscerotonic is the opposite: inclining toward sensuality, physicality, and mindless oblivion. In Platonic-Aristotelian terms, one is closer to the Formal, Ideal realm, the other to the material. Arguably, both lead problematic existences. The mesomorph, on the other hand, is a happy mean between the two. He is unquestionably physical, and delights in his physicality. But unlike the endomorph his physicality is not that of self-indulgence and sensuality. The mesomorph uses his physicality to pursue ideals. These range from trivial goals, like winning a game, or making a score, to more weighty matters, like defending honor, vanquishing a threat to oneself or one's people, or defending the defenseless.

The mesomorph-somatotonic thus possesses the idealism of the ectomorph, but without his tendency toward otherworldliness and self-

obsession. He possesses the physicality of the endomorph, but without his tendency toward pleasure-seeking and passivity. It is essentially for this reason that ancient peoples, especially the Indo-Europeans regarded this type as the ideal human being. They erected statues to him, wrote epic poems and sagas about him, and in general worshipped him as the closest a human being could come to the divine. (I shall return to this point when I discuss tripartition in Tantrism.)

The triangular torso of the mesomorph (often called the "V-shape") is also interesting. Isn't it fascinating that this type, which is a kind of balance of the other two, approximates to a "triangular" form, and that this form is found so appealing?

5. The Bodily Organs

If we look at the arrangement of the human body, we find four primary systems aligned along its central axis, the spine. These are the brain, the heart, the guts, and the genitals. In Traditional thought, these are the physical expression of the three functions: the brain representing, of course, the first function. The spiritedness of the second function has long been associated with the region of the heart. The term in Plato that is translated "spirit" is *thumos*, which was conceived as a physical part of the body, located in the region of the heart. The guts and genitals clearly represent the third function. It is interesting, furthermore, that the heart occupies roughly a middle position between brain and genitals, just as the mesomorph-somatotonic is the mean between the other two types.

A hard "yang quality" characterizes the organs associated with the first and second functions. A soft "yin quality" is typical of organs associated with the third function. Specifically, the organs of the abdominal cavity are not only soft themselves, they are also the least protected by bone. Any hardening of these organs signifies disease. The head, on the other hand, an area associated with the first function, is one of the hardest parts of the body. Hard, crystalline structures are also to be found within the brain itself, in the pineal gland.[4] With the second function are associated the body's largest and most visibly apparent muscles, in which "hardness" is a sign of power. We use the term "getting hard" to describe the process of perfecting these muscles, which are so necessary to attack

and defense. Though the sex organs are associated with the third function, in the male they have, at least part of the time, the hard, yang quality. This is thanks to the male sexual anatomy's interaction with the circulatory system, which is a second function system, as I shall shortly discuss.

6. Ayurvedic Doshas and Sexual Types

The foregoing physical and temperamental typology was developed extensively by ancient Indo-European peoples, utilizing a very different vocabulary, of course. The best example of this is to be found in the ancient Indian system of Ayurvedic medicine. This material has been popularized in recent years in a number of best-selling books, particularly those by Deepak Chopra (about whom we should otherwise adopt a healthy skepticism). The system depends upon a division of human beings into three types, called *doshas*: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. These are conceived as forces operating in the body.

Just as in Plato's tripartitite image of the soul, we have all three types in us, but in most people one dosha predominates. A Vata type is thin and lanky, with a tendency toward worry and self-obsession. He is also imaginative, introspective, and often intellectual. In other words, ecotomorphic-cerebretonic. What is particularly fascinating here is that Ayurveda conceives Vata dosha as "leading" the other doshas. Deepak Chopra actually refers to Vata as "king" of the doshas.[5] The Pitta type is muscular and well-proportioned, aggressive, commanding, and determined. In other words, the "warrior" type; the mesomorph-somatotonic. The Kapha type has a tendency toward obesity, good humor, complacency, and mental laziness. Obviously, the endomorph-viscerotonic.

This tripartition was noticed by the Indians even in the area of sex. The *Ananga Ranga*, an Indian sex manual of uncertain date (though definitely composed in the last millenium) divides men into three sexual types: the Shasha or Hare-man, the Vrishabha or Bull-man, and the Ashwa or Stallion-man. I will begin with the Bull-man. He is known, the *Anaga Ranga* claims, by a phallus or lingam nine finger widths in length. So far as I can figure out, this corresponds approximately to the Kinsey

average. According to the text, this man's body is "robust, like that of a tortoise; his chest is fleshy, his belly hard, and the frogs [i.e., triceps] of his upper arms are turned so as to be brought in front." In short, he is a classic mesomorph. The text informs us that his disposition is "cruel and violent, restless and irascible, and his Kama-salila [i.e., semen] is ever ready."[6] The Stallion-man has a lingam approximately twelve finger widths long. He is large-framed. The text tells us that he is "reckless in spirit, passionate and covetous, gluttonous, volatile, lazy, and full of sleep."[7] Clearly this is the endomorph-viscerotonic type, corresponding to the Indo-European third function.

I have saved the Hare-man for last, because here the correspondence is not as precise. The text tells us that his lingam is about sixth finger widths long. "His figure is short and spare, but well-proportioned in shape and make . . . his face is round . . . He is of a quiet disposition; he does good for virtue's sake; he looks forward to making a name; he is humble in demeanor . . ."[8] Nothing here about being thin, lanky, and introspective. But the adjective "spare" suggests leanness. Also his doing good "for virtue's sake" suggests the classic cerebretonic focus on principle. Note, by the way, how the Bull-man or mesomorph is the precise mathematical mean between the the Hare-man and the Stallion-man. The Hare-man is six fingers long, the Bull-man nine, and the Stallion man twelve. Nine is a very significant number in the Indo-European traditions, particularly the Germanic tradition.

7. Paracelsus

[4]

Paracelsus

We find something strikingly similar to these tripartitite Indian physiological distinctions in the works of the sixteenth-century German physician and alchemist Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, called Paracelsus. There is a kind of Indo-European spirit at work in this thinker, for he insists on moving from the quadripartite system of elements (Earth, Air, Fire, and Water — which is, arguably, originally a Near-Eastern and non-Indo-European conception) to the tripartite system of Sulphur, Mercury, and Salt. But it is not the sheer threeness of this system that is intriguing, but rather its exact correspondence to the triple Indo-European functions.

In his *Opus Paramirum* (1530-1), Paracelsus writes, "The first thing the physician should know is that man is composed of three substances."[9] It is Mercury, Sulphur, and Salt, he says, which combine to make a body. "In order to make things visible, Nature must be compelled to show itself . . . Take a piece of wood. It is body. Now burn it. The flammable part is the Sulphur, the smoke is the Mercury, and the ash the Salt."[10] As one commentator notes, "He used these terms to denote principles of constitution, representing organization (Sulphur), mass (Salt), and activity (Mercury), all varieties of the specific forms achieved by the immanent intelligences and semina of matter."[11] The correspondence

to the Indo-European system is thus as follows: Sulphur, the organizing principle = First Function; Mercury, the active, volatile principle = Second Function; and Salt, the principle of sheer mass or matter = Third Function.

Notes

[1] Even libraries are tossing out Sheldon's books. Copies are still floating around, but often for a hefty price. See especially the following works: The Varieties of Human Physique (New York: Harper, 1940); The Varieties of Temperament (New York: Harper, 1942); Atlas of Men: Guide for Somatotyping the Adult Male at All Ages (New York: Gramercy Publishing, 1954).

[2] Sheldon's terminology lives on in health and fitness circles – especially in bodybuilding.

[3] Robert S. De Ropp, The Master Game (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968), 116.

[4] These points are to be found in Wolfang Schad, Man and Mammals: Toward a Biology of Form, trans. Carroll Scherer (Garden City, New York: Waldorf Press, 1977), 17.

[5] Deepak Chopra, Perfect Health (New York: Harmony Books, 1991), 36.

[6] Kalayana Malla, Ananga Ranga, trans. F.F. Arbuthnot and Richard F. Burton (New York: Medical Press, 1964), 16

[7] Ibid., 16. It is interesting to note that Shiva, the embodiment of the third function Tamas principle in the Indian theory of gunas, is called "lord of sleep." More on this later.

[8] Ibid, 15.

[9] Paracelsus, Essential Readings, ed. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books), 76.

[10] Ibid., 78.

[11] Ibid., 28.

PART III, TRIPARTITION IN ANIMALS AND NATURE IN GENERAL

Tripartition in Animals

1. Schad's Three Systems

So far I have been applying Indo-European tripartition to the human realm, to political and societal order, to individual and group psychology, to physiognomy, to anatomy, and to sexuality. I am now going to move to a higher level of abstraction, to the nature of the mammalian organism in general. In the remarks which follow, I shall be drawing chiefly on the work of the scientists and followers of anthroposophy Wolfgang Schad and Henri Bortoft.

Schad identifies three fundamental functional processes in the mammalian organism: the nerve-sense system, the respiratory-circulatory system, and the metabolic-limb system. In terms of Indo-European tripartition, the correspondences are fairly obvious. The nerve-sense system functions to guide the body. It thus corresponds to the first function. (Recall that the ecotomorph, who I identified with the first function, was described in terms of temperament as cerebretonic, or nervous system dominant.) The respiratory-circulatory system corresponds to the second function. It is a helpful coincidence that in translations of Plato, we use the term "spirited" to describe the guardians or warriors, who are said to possess "spirit." The ancient Indo-Europeans believed that their warriors were literally *inspired*. Warrior types are also notorious for inhaling and puffing up their chests as a form of display designed to intimidate other males. Thus, there is a natural association between the second function, the warrior, and the respiratory-circulatory system. But much more significant is the fact that the circulatory system is where we find the body's chief guardians: the white blood cells which serve to attack invaders.

This leaves us with the metabolic-limb system. There is, again, a natural association between metabolism and the Indo-European third function. The third function in Indo-European society is the provider function; it includes all that is concerned with the making or growing of food. The two organs of the body that most closely represent the different aspects

of the third function (which are complex) are the stomach and the genitals. (Recall that the endomorph, who I identified with the third function, is frequently characterized by a protuberant stomach, and a tendency toward gluttony.) The "negative character" of the third function (which I shall discuss in detail later on) is exemplified in the action of the digestive organs, which cancel the identity of foreign matter and convert it into the body's own substance.

2. Rodents, Ungulates, and Carnivores

In the human being, Schad's three systems exist in a state of equilibrium. In other mammals, however, these systems exist in such a way that one dominates over the others. Schad claims that the rodents (beavers, gophers, lemmings, mice, moles, rats, squirrels, etc.) emphasize the nerve-sense system. One can see this not only in their frenetic, nervous activity (similar to that of the human ectomorph-cerebretonic), but also in the fact that their heads are much larger and more developed than are their limbs. The ungulates (buffalo, camels, cows, deer, goats, horses, pigs, etc.) emphasize the metabolic-limb system. This is reflected in their large size. In particular, their stomachs are usually very large, and their limbs are also elongated and massive. Like the human endomorph-viscerotonic, they tend to be passive, slow-moving, and love to eat.

The carnivores (cats, wolfs, dolphins, badgers, weasels, etc.) emphasize the respiratory-circulatory system, which Bortoft describes, significantly, as "intermediate between the other two [systems]."[1] He writes, "In their *well-proportioned form*, in which no one part of the body is accentuated over any other, as well as in their intermediate size, they represent *an active balance* between the two extremes of the rodent and the ungulate."[2] This description corresponds *exactly* to my treatment of the human mesomorph-somatotonic. The carnivores, like the warriors of the second function, are, of course, characterized by a predatory nature. And who are the *de facto* rulers of the animal kingdom? The carnivores, of course.

Schad has some fascinating things to say about the lives these three types of mammal lead, and about their special relationship to death. The rodent, he says, "lives unwillingly" and "dies gladly." Its hyperkinetic,

nervous life seems to make it weary of existence, and it usually dies easily and without a struggle. The extreme case of this would be that of the lemming. The ungulate, by contrast, "lives gladly" and "dies unwillingly." The ungulate dies hard. It is often difficult to finish off, and thrashes and protests loudly. When faced with an actual or potential threat, the rodent's usual reaction is flight; the ungulate's is "quiet avoidance." On the other hand, the carnivore attacks. "It exposes itself equally to life or death. With death as well as life it has an active relationship." Later, he tells us that the carnivore, "Accepts equally the possibility of life or death."[3] In human terms, this strange combination of heroism and resignation is typical, of course, of the warrior as classically conceived.

3. Anatomical Examples: Teeth and Bone

We can find tripartition even on a much more concrete level, reflected in the design of individual body parts. Take the teeth, for example: the incisors, canines, and molars. Schad shows us that the rodents accentuate the incisors, the carnivores the canines, and the ungulates the molars. Each accentuates the type of teeth it needs for its form of life. But in the human being, these three types are developed equally, because we can eat, and subsist on, all of the foods eaten by rodents, carnivores, and ungulates.

This simple fact points us to matters of great significance concerning the place of man in the universe; his cosmic role, if you will. Not only do human beings possess all three types of tooth, equally developed, but, as I also mentioned, in the human being all three bodily systems (nerve-sense, respiratory-circulatory, and metabolic-limb) are balanced, with no one dominating over the others. What does this signify? In the traditional, Indo-European concept of kingship, the king, although he comes from one caste, was actually said to embody all three of the functions. Now, what I would argue is that man is to nature as the king is to his realm. Like the king, who embodies all aspects of his realm within his person, man embodies all aspects of nature. Man is rodent, carnivore, and ungulate all in one. Man is the microcosm. If he can be said to be "king of nature," his kingship is a stewardship. His role is not to be a tyrant, not to pillage his realm, but to work within it almost as a gardener works within

a garden: making sure the soil is capable of supporting growth, planting the seeds in a sensible way, guiding the growth of his plants, and, of course, uprooting weeds and killing pests.

As a further anatomical example of tripartition, consider the three types of bone cell. The osteoblasts synthesize new bone, and repair existing bone by taking calcium from the blood and creating bone matrices. The osteocytes maintain the bone strength. Finally, the osteoclasts dissolve bone into the blood in order to break down and reassimilate old bone structures. What we have here is a positive, organizing mechanism, a preserving mechanism, and a negative, destroying mechanism. As one author points out, these correspond closely to the trinity of Hindu gods, Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva.[4] As we shall see later on, these three gods are conceived as the embodiment of forces which correspond exactly to the three Indo-European functions.

4. Microscopic Life

Now, as yet I do not have anything to say about groups of animals other than the mammals. Nor do I have anything to say about plants. These are areas for further reflection. I will, however, say something about the most primal form of life, the single cell and micro-organism.

There are various kinds of cells, with different structures, but in the basic structure of every cell we can see tripartition. The nucleus, from which the rest of the cell takes its marching orders, would seem to correspond to the first function. The cell membrane, which surrounds the cell, protecting it, would be the second function. Finally, the mitochondria, and other structures, which break down and assimilate food molecules to provide energy for the cell, would seem to represent the third function.

Again using human beings as an example, our bodies begin as microscopic, tripartitite organisms. After roughly three weeks, the human embryo develops into a sphere consisting of sixty cells called a blastula. The blastula folds in on itself and develops three basic structures, the ectoderm, the mesoderm, and the endoderm. Out of the ectoderm will develop the body's outer covering, the epidermis, as well as the brain and nervous system. The ectomorph is simply someone in

whom this component predominates. The mesoderm develops into the muscles, bones, respiratory, and circulatory system, and is the salient feature of the mesomorph. Finally, the endoderm, which predominates in the endomorph, develops into the digestive system, as well as the lining of the respiratory system and alimentary canal.

If one looks at the structure of the original blastula, one finds that the incipient ectoderm and endoderm are run together, to form the outer layer of the blastula. The mesoderm is the inner core. This suggests the tie between the polar opposites of the first function and third function. In some sense, these exist on a continuum. The ancients recognized this, which is why Plato spoke of his Indefinite Dyad as the Great and the Small. Similarly, the two extremes which oppose the mean in Aristotle's doctrine of the virtues are conceived of as on a continuum. Even later, when the ectoderm and endoderm are more fully differentiated, these two are still visibly present on a continuum. And the mesoderm still dwells at the core of the organism, within the outer shell formed by the ectoderm and endoderm.

That the mesoderm is to be found *within* the other two, rather than on the continuum along with them, is highly significant. It reflects the special character of the second function: its apartness, its status as mediating between the other functions. Furthermore, because in the second function the other two are harmonized and actualized (a point which I shall return to later on), the second function is, in a certain way, the "inner truth" of the others. The position of the mesoderm as inner core is this inner truth expressed physically.

Tripartition in the Physical World in General

1. The Macrocosm

The most abstract level we will consider will be existence as such. But before we reach that level, let us look first simply at our physical world, and then at the physical constituents of that world. Again, this is an area in which much speculation is possible, and here I can only offer a few suggestions.

A commensensical threefold division our world would be that of the earth, the sky and atmosphere, and the heavens beyond. On the earth we find liquid and solid, oceans and continents. The earth is the source of plenty, of sustenance. On this level of reality, it is therefore the third function. The co-presence of liquid and solid represents the co-presence in the third function of chaos ("the waters" are a perennial symbol of the force of chaos), and abundance; indefiniteness, and definite fecundity. The sky hovers over the earth. The atmosphere surrounds and protects it. The sky has often represented a male force, and the earth the feminine. In the Germanic system, the sky corresponds to Tyr, the earth to Ing. Both are male gods, but Tyr is of the Aesir, Ing of the Vanir. Accordingly, I would say that the sky and atmosphere represent the second function. It is also helpful that, as I have shown, the second function is associated with inspiration, in the literal sense; with air and respiration. The first function is represented by the heavenly bodies, especially the sun, which exercise an influence on the earth from above, an influence scientists are only just beginning to understand. The sun is also a perennial symbol of the first function. It appears in Plato's Republic as a symbol of the ideal. As I shall discuss shortly, the sun also plays this role in Indian thought.

2. Physics

Einstein's equation E=mc2 describes the physical universe in terms of energy, mass, and light. As we shall see, in Indian philosophy the Indo-European first function is identified with light, the third function with mass, and the second, mediating function with energy. Mass or matter in contemporary physics is depicted as an "atomic whirpool," just as, in metaphysical terms, the third function is often identified with chaos, or with the Heraclitean "flux." We may also note that all atoms after hydrogen are tripartite, composed of positive protons, negative electrons, and neutrally-charged neutrons. The negative electron exhibits the indeterminacy and "flux" aspect normally associated with the third function. Electrons are thought to always be moving (in the classical model, orbiting the nucleus), so that it is impossible to exactly pinpoint their position.

PART IV. TRIPARTITION IN HUMAN THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

1. Universal, Particular, and Individual

Before we turn to the level of the purely ideal and transcendent, our highest level of abstraction, I will speak briefly about how tripartition displays itself in the way in which we attempt to embody the ideal in thought and language.

First of all, there are three fundamental types of noun: the universal, the particular, and the singular. We speak of "the wolf" as a genus (or of "wolfness"), and we speak of "wolves" or "a wolf," and we speak of singular or individual wolfs (e.g. "Fenris"). The universal represents the third function in that it is a potentially boundless, and, for that reason, indefinite reality. It is not without character, but its character is not to be a determinate individual. The particular represents the first function: it is the universal made more specific and definite. The universal is an indefinite potential for multiple existence. The particular realizes the universal's potential for instantiation. But although "a wolf" is an existent, "a wolf" is a "a wolf" is "a wolf," etc. It is a generic, and thus still in some sense indefinite existence. The singular, the individual, which would be a unique not a generic wolf, is truly actual existence. Like the mesomorph's relation to the ecotomorph and endomorph, it mediates between universal and particular. It is a particular existence raised to the level of fully concrete actuality, in and through the realization of some, but not all, the facets of the universal itself.

2. Perceptual Judgment: Identity, Difference, and Ground

In perceptual and all other forms of judgment, three concepts predominate: identity, difference, and the ground. We say that things are the same or other, and we say this in the awareness of some ground or basis for identification or distinction. For example, two men are the same, or different in respect of height, which is the ground. Here, identity represents the first function which unites, equates, makes one. Difference represents the third function which divides and breaks up (this will become more clear when I discuss the Indian *gunas* in a

moment). The ground represents the second function, mediating, again, between the two. It represents a stalwart constant in the play of identities and differences. Like the warrior class, it provides the very condition under which men, or anything, can be associated together, or held apart.

3. The Syllogism

In logic, we distinguish between three basic types of argument or syllogism: the categorical, hypothetical, and disjunctive. The categorical allows us to associate concepts or apply concepts to particular cases. Here is an example:

All princes are Kshatriyas.
All Kshatriyas are warriors.
Therefore, all princes are warriors.

This argument moves entirely within the realm of the ideal or abstract, associating categories of things. Or take this example:

All princes are Kshatriyas.
Arjuna is a prince.
Therefore, Arjuna is a Kshatriya.

This argument subsumes a particular under a universal. It reverses the ontological order of things. Existence is a realization of the universal in the world, as a particular instance. The categorical argument "returns" the instance to the universal. Both forms of thought (moving from abstract category to abstract category, and subsuming particulars under universals) are characteristic of the cerebration of the first function.

An example of a disjunctive syllogism would be this:

Arjuna is either at home or he has gone hunting.
He is not at home.
Therefore he has gone hunting.

This form of argument depends upon sharp distinction — upon excluding possibilities, one from another. It thus exhibits the dividing, sundering aspect of the third function.

A hypothetical syllogism looks like this:

If Arjuna discovers his son is dead, then he shall seek revenge.
Arjuna has discovered that his son is dead.
Therefore, he shall seek revenge.

The hypothetical proposition is purposeful, action-oriented, and consequential. It expresses the consequences that will follow if an antecedent condition is satisfied. A hypothetical syllogism does not simply subsume a particular under a universal, it tells us something we may expect of the world. It is interesting to note that all categorical syllogisms can be converted into hypothetical syllogisms. For example:

All princes are Kshatriyas.
Arjuna is a prince.
Therefore, Arjuna is a Kshatriya.

becomes

If someone is a prince, then he is a Kshatriya.
Arjuna is a prince.
Therefore, Arjuna is a Kshatriya.

Notice the subtle difference the conversion makes. It now seems to say, "If you discover that someone is a prince, then you may know that they are a Kshatriya, so take care, for Arjuna, who is a prince . . . " etc. The hypothetical is a worldly, dynamic argument, and thus it represents the second function.[1]

Looking specifically at the categorical syllogism, it consists of major, minor, and middle terms. Taking the same argument —

All princes are Kshatriyas.
Arjuna is a prince.
Therefore, Arjuna is a Kshatriya.

— "Kshatriya" is the minor term, "Arjuna" is the major term, and "prince" is the middle term. The minor term is the broadest category within the argument, the most abstract of the universals named within it. Accordingly, following my identification of the universal with the third function, the minor term represents the third function also. The major term gives specificity to the minor term: it names a specific something

that belongs to the minor term (the universal). Accordingly, because of this role as a specifier or identifier, the major term represents the first function. The middle links the minor and major, since it is present in both premises. Because of this mediating function, which I have already discussed in other contexts, the middle term seems to correspond to the second function.

There is also, in general, an oft-noted tendency in our thinking to group things into three. (This may be universal, but I suspect it may be more prevalent among Indo-European peoples.) Children are taught their "A-B-Cs," for example, not their "A-B-C-Ds." Most people have three names: a first, a middle, and a last. Our stories and fables abound in threes: three bears, three brothers, three wishes, three witches, three ugly stepsisters, three beans, three bends in the road, etc. Many sayings or rhymes have three parts: "Jack be nimble! Jack be quick! Jack jump over the candlestick!"; "I scream! You scream! We all scream for ice cream!"; "Liar, Liar, pants on fire!"; "No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks"; "Hip! Hip! Hurrah!"; "Of the people, by the people, for the people"; "Snap, Crackle, Pop," etc. Indo-European myth is full of threes. In Norse myth there are three wells, three roots, three Norns, three brothers (Odin, Vili, and Ve), three offspring of Loki, etc. The Greeks had three fates, three graces, a three-faced goddess (Hecate), a three-headed wolf (Cerberus), etc. Most of the Indo-European traditions also tell of a battle between a hero and a three headed monster. Suffice it to say that just as the world exhibits the fundamental triplicity I have described, so our minds may be set up in such a way to order even the most trivial things into threefold patterns.

See also my article "The Gifts of Odin and His Brothers" in *What is a Rune? And Other Essays* (San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2015) for a discussion of the fundamental threefold structure of the human spirit.

Note

1. There is some basis for saying that the hypothetical form "mediates" between the categorical and disjunctive. Examine the three forms laid bare:

Categorical Disjunctive Hypothetical (Modus Ponens)

P are Q P v Q P > Q
R is P -P P
R is Q Q Q

Note how in the hypothetical form, P and Q are first brought together (as in the categorical argument) through implication ("P implies Q") then separated (as in the disjunctive argument), but not opposed.

PART V, TRIPARTITION AND THE GUNAS

1. The Emergence of the Gunas from Brahman

We are obviously dealing with three principles which manifest themselves in different forms. These principles have the status of Platonic ideas: transcendent forms which we may approach through their various expressions in the world. But can we express the three principles in the abstract?

The most obvious place to look is to the Indo-European philosophical and mystical traditions. Here we are in luck, for there is much to draw on. As you might expect, the Indian tradition is the richest source. The ancient Aryans explicitly recognized and discussed exactly what I have argued for in this paper: that all things exhibit the same tripartite structure.

What I am referring to specifically is the ancient doctrine of the gunas. Guna means something like "quality," and it may also have meant "part of a whole." Guna thus is the same concept referred to in German philosophy as a "moment." A moment is a part of a whole separable only in thought. The gunas are three moments of Being, which we may talk about separately, but which cannot actually exist in separation.

The gunas originate out of Brahman, which is the Absolute or Transcendent Immensity existing beyond all creation. I understand Brahman as the "ground of Being." What is the ground against which existence or creation itself becomes present? This is Brahman. For this reason, it is sometimes spoken of as nothingness. Brahman is indeed nothing, but it is an actual nothingness: it must be actual in order to be the ground against which the figure of creation appears.

Through the power of Maya or Illusion, movement appears in this transcendent immensity of nothingness. This movement has, of necessity, three and only three forms: centripetal, centrifugal, and revolving (movement around in one place). As Alain Danielou points out, "this triad pervades all things and appears in all aspects of the universe, physical as well as conceptual."[1]

2. Sattva, Tamas, and Rajas

The centripetal force of attraction creates cohesion, or coming together. The Hindus call it Sattva or "existence," for all existence is a coming together or holding together. Sattva is thus the principle of oneness, having a binding or preserving function. It is pictured as light, and as the Sun. It is associated with intelligence, and with dream. It should be obvious that this is the first of the Indo-European functions. Sattva is embodied in the god Vishnu, the "all-pervader."

The centrifugal force is the opposite of Sattva. It is not a force of attraction, but of repulsion. It is not a force of cohesion, but of dispersion, annihilation, and return into the Immensity. It prevents concentration. This force is called Tamas, darkness or inertia. Tamas is obscurity, because where there is dispersion there is dispersion of energy, and hence the absence of light. Accordingly, because of this association with chaos, darkness, and dis-unity, it is the third function. The god Rudra embodies Tamas. He is also called Shiva, the destroyer and lord of sleep. Tamas or Shiva is thought to be the inner nature of all things, since all things arise out of disintegration, only then to disintegrate themselves. Like Sattva, Tamas is associated with sleep, only this time it is dreamless sleep — a sleep without form or image.

The balance of Sattva and Tamas gives rise to a third, Rajas. In cosmology, this is the revolving, circular motion (which, incidentally, the Greeks associated with perfection). Rajas means "activity." It is the source of all the different forms and kinds in creation. All rhythmic motion — the type of motion exhibited by life — comes from Rajas. Unlike Sattva and Tamas, Rajas is not linked with sleep, but with waking awareness. Sattva is associated with form or intelligence, Tamas with mass or matter, and Rajas with energy. These associations correspond closely to Paracelsus's sulphur, salt, and mercury. Interestingly, Rajas is thought to be embodied in Brahma, which is the nominative, masculine singular of Brahman: i.e., the personification of Brahman. Rajas is obviously the Indo-European second function.

Danielou notes that, "One or the other of the three tendencies predominates in each sort of thing, in each kind of being."[2] We saw this in human beings, in the tendency of some men to be rational or spiritual,

others spirited, and others appetitive. Precisely this doctrine of human types is to be found in Tantric psychology. According to Tantra, men belong to Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. Only the former two are fit to take up spiritual practices.

3. The Divya, Vira, and Pashu

The Tamas (third function) man is called Pashu, which means "animal." Pashu comes from "pac," to bind. The Pashu is bound by animal urges — hunger, sex, comfort, greed — as well as by social convention. (This is, by the way, precisely how the Greeks regarded the appetitive man: they saw him as more of an animal; as not fully human.) Tantrism holds that in the present age, which is called the Kali Yuga, the Pashu type predominates.

The Sattva (first function) man is called Divya, a "divine being." Like the Pashu, he is in some sense not human, because he is more than human. This man follows an inner path, detaching himself from the world. The Divya is very rare in the Kali Yuga.

The Rajas (second function) man is called Vira. This word comes from the Indo-European root vir- from which we get the words virile and virtue. The vira is a fully actualized human being: a manly, heroic being. There are right hand viras and left hand viras. The right hand vira is heroic but uncritical. He fights for ideals he has barely examined, and puts himself in the service of authority which he never questions. In fact, with the right hand vira, submission to authority and the unthinking performance of duty are considered supreme virtues.

The left hand vira may begin in this state, but, like the Divya, he follows an inner path. He may be compared to the Chinese Taoist ideal of the "scholar warrior." Julius Evola writes, "Ascending from lower levels to higher, viras are subject to increasingly fewer limitations and ties."[3] The vira reaches a point beyond good and evil, where he becomes autonomous in the literal sense of giving a law unto himself. The ideal for the left-hand vira, and thus the human ideal as such, is independence, self-sufficiency, wholeness, and detachment. These are characteristics we find again in the Greek tradition, in Aristotle's concept of God, the Unmoved Mover. The ideal man for Aristotle, approaches as close as

possible to the qualities of the Unmoved Mover. In Tantra, the ideal man is he who most fully embodies Brahma, the embodiment of Rajas.

The fact that the word "virtue" is derived from the same root as vira is very significant. First of all, it suggests an unexpected connection between virility and virtue, or between masculinity and virtue. The obvious conclusion to draw is that the ancients regarded the virtues as masculine attainments. This is confirmed if we turn to Aristotle. The Greek word normally translated into the Latin virtue is *arete*, which is perhaps best translated as "excellence." In his *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses the nature of the virtuous man, and nowhere relates his observations to woman. Furthermore, Aristotle conceives of virtue as a mean between two extremes. For example, courage is a mean between cowardice and rashness. The Indian vira — who, I have argued, is the mesomorphic, somatotonic warrior type — is a kind of mean between the divya and the pashu. Indeed, whatever is analogous to the Indo-European second function occupies a middle position between the other two functions. If we look at a list of Aristotle's virtues, his means between extremes, it amounts to a description of the vira. My suspicion is that the two extremes opposed to the mean will also consistently describe the characteristics of the divya and the pashu.

Those in whom Tamas predominates, the Pashus, worship ghosts and spirits (Bhuta and Preta). Those in whom Sattva predominates, the Divyas, worship Deva. Those in whom Rajas predominates, the viras, worship genii (Yaksha), and the anti-gods (Asura). This last fact is exceedingly interesting, for the term Asura is cognate with Old Norse aesir, which is the name of the group of principle first and second function gods in the Germanic tradition: Odin, Thor, Tyr, etc.

According to Tantra, Tamas is actually the path to enlightenment. But despite the fact that he is a creature of Tamas, the Pashu cannot take advantage of it. Tamas is annihilation and disunity. Recall that it is also associated with deep, dreamless sleep. The way to enlightenment, to the realization of the ultimate ground of all things, the transcendent Immensity of Brahman, is through annihilation of multiplicity. On the plane of action, the vira annihilates with his sword. The left hand vira

turns this power inward, and annihilates the play of multiplicity within his own soul. He attempts to achieve a state like that of dreamless sleep, only in a waking state, within his control. Hence the use of meditation, and practices designed to achieve total mastery over the body, such as the various forms of yoga and martial arts.

But both the external world of things and the internal world of thoughts and images has been constituted out of Sattva, the centripetal force. Anything that goes contrary to Sattva goes contrary to the world itself, and to the creator's intention. "The aim of any creator is to prevent a realization which would destroy his creation," Danielou notes. "This is why [it is said that] 'the Soul [the Atman, the true self] is not within the reach of the weak.' It has to be conquered by going against all the forces of nature, all the laws of creation."[4] Thus, he who seeks enlightenment must become a warrior against all of creation, indeed against the gods themselves. This is why the man most suited to the quest for enlightenment must be the man who answers to the description of the left-hand vira – at least this is the case in the Kali Yuga.

Notes

[1] Alain Danielou, The Myths and Gods of India (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1991), 22.

[2] Ibid., 27.

[3] Julius Evola, The Yoga of Power, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1992), 55.

[4] Danielou, 33.

PART VI, F.J.W. SCHELLING AND INDO-EUROPEAN TRIPARTITION

1. Schelling's Influences: The Christian Trinity and Jacob Boehme

I turn, finally, to a different Indo-European tradition, that of German Idealism of the 19th century. I include this material so as to show the perennial character of Indo-European thought. One could argue that the entire history of Western (and Indian) philosophy is a long, unconscious attempt to recollect the wisdom known "directly" by our Indo-European ancestors.

Remarkably, in the late philosophy of F. W. J. Schelling, who was an old school chum of Hoelderlin and Hegel, we find a doctrine that corresponds exactly to the ancient Aryan theory of the gunas. This is despite the fact that Schelling had, so far as we know, little knowledge of Indian philosophy. He wrote at a time when details of Indian thought were just becoming known to European intellectuals. The esoteric details of the gunas were almost certainly not known by Schelling, yet he writes as if he is translating them into the language of Idealist philosophy.

Specifically, I refer to Schelling's *Potenzlehre*, or doctrine of Potencies, which he developed throughout his career, but which fully flowered only in his late, so-called "philosophy of mythology." In order to fully understand this doctrine, one must explore its antecedents in the Western mystical tradition. First of all, Schelling, Hegel, and the German philosophers in general were fascinated by the mystery of the Christian Trinity. There is a case to be made that what we know as "the Trinity" is in large measure not an original, Near Eastern conception but actually a result of the "germanization" of Christianity, developed after our ancient heathen ancestors converted. The idea of three "persons" in one corresponds roughly to the Aryan notion of the oneness of the three gunas in Brahman. Without going into too much detail, I would suggest that the Father corresponds to the Indo-European first function, the Son to the third function, and the Holy Spirit to the second function. In this, I am influenced by Hegel, who treated the Father as the logos, or Absolute Idea, the Son as Nature, and the Holy Spirit as man, who is the unity of logos and nature, or God and animal.[1]

The immediate mystical influence on Schelling was the German Jacob Boehme, who conceived of all of reality as possessing a threefold structure. Consider the following quote from Boehme:

Now thus the eternal light, and the virtue of the light, or the heavenly paradise, moveth in the eternal darkness; and the darkness cannot comprehend the light; for they are two [separate] Principles; and the darkness longeth after the light, because the spirit beholdeth itself therein, and because the divine virtue is manifested in it. But though it hath not comprehended the divine virtue and light, yet it hath continually with great lust lifted up itself towards it, till it hath kindled the root of the fire in itself, from the beams of the light of God; and there arose the Third Principle, out of the dark matrix, by the speculating of the virtue [or potency] of God.[2]

There are thus three principles, one of light, one of darkness, and one that reconciles. Boehme conceives the three principles dwelling as one within what he calls the *Ungrund*: the transcendent, ungraspable ground of all being which is itself ungrounded, because there is nothing beyond it which could provide a further ground. Again, we have a correspondence to the indwelling of the gunas within Brahman. Boehme conceives of his three principles as pervading all of reality.[3] Man, he asserts, is the true actualization of the three principles. Because of the co-presence of the three principles in man, he has the potential for understanding the whole of creation.

2. The Three Potencies

Turning now to Schelling, he writes of three Potencies, which he conceives as both principles or ideals, and as volitional agencies. Schelling has a peculiar, algebraical way of referring to the Potencies as -A or A1, +A or A2, and A3. I shall abandon this usage, and do further violence to Schelling's terminology by referring to the first potency as the third, the second as the first, and the third as the second. This is so as to bring out the correlation to the Indo-European functions. My presentation will not, however, do violence to Schelling's meaning.

Schelling conceives of a primordial time in which the three potencies existed by themselves, before they expressed themselves as a world of objects. He furthermore sees the potencies as aspects of the Absolute — the equivalent of Brahman in his philosophy.

The Third Potency Schelling conceives as a pure, indefinite possibility of being (*das sein Koennende*). It is a kind of primal "being-in-itself," which is indefinite, unlimited, and negative. It possesses, he claims, a pure power of self-negation. It can cancel or throw off whatever it is and become anything else. It has no fixed identity. Philosophical parallels include the Heraclitan flux, and Anaximander's *apeiron*. It corresponds roughly to the Chinese Yin, and is thus the feminine principle. Schelling also conceives this Potency as pure subjectivity. The Third Potency is obviously equivalent to Indian Tamas.

The First Potency is a principle of order and objectivity. It is the opposite of the Third Potency: specific, lawful, definite, distinct. It is the principle of identity, and of differentiation. The First Potency is pure being, as opposed to the pure possibility of being. Its function is to place "boundaries" around the chaos that is the Third Potency and to bring definite entities into existence. Whereas the Third Potency is *das sein Koennende*, "the possibly being," the First Potency is *das sein Muessende*, "the must being." The Third Potency is "being-in-itself," but the First Potency is "being-outside-itself," because the boundaries provided by the First Potency are outside of it, placed around another. It is thus a male principle, equivalent to Chinese Yang, and Indian Sattva. The reason for this is simple: it is the nature of the female to generate in herself, the nature of the male to generate in another (thus, "being-outside-itself"). Because the First Potency is pure objectivity and not subjectivity, it does not possess a will of its own, which is one of the facets of a subject.

These two Potencies cannot co-exist because they are total opposites. Without them, there can be no world. So something else must function to bring them together. Enter what I am calling the Second Potency, merely in order to identify it with the Indo-European second function. Again, whatever corresponds to the second function constitutes a kind of mean

between the first and third functions. Thus, the Second Potency must possess objective being (like the First Potency), but with the possibility of change (like the Third Potency). To put this in a different way, the Second Potency must be something definite, but it must also be free.

The Third Potency is pure subjectivity, and the First Potency is pure objectivity, so somehow the Second Potency will unite subject and object. This fact is significant, for Schelling conceives the Absolute as the "indifference point" beyond subject and object. There is an exact correspondence here, again, to the Indian theory of the gunas. The vira is the man in whom Rajas predominates, and the personification of Rajas is Brahma. Thus, it is the vira who is in a unique position to reach Brahman itself through a transformation of his own nature. In Schelling, the Second Potency, which corresponds to Rajas, is the togetherness of subject and object, while the Absolute, which corresponds to Brahman, is the transcendence of subject and object. It is as if the Second Potency is the Absolute "turned inside out," and vice versa. The implication seems to be that he who is identified with the Second Potency, or Rajas, can raise himself to the Absolute, or Brahman, through a kind of heroic Gestalt switch.

Whereas the First Potency is "being outside itself," and the Third Potency is "being in itself," the Second Potency is "being with itself." This choice of words suggests that in the Second Potency there is a kind of wholeness, fulfillment, reconciliation, and self-sufficiency.[4] Schelling further notes that whereas the Third Potency is the Unlimited, and the First Potency is the Limiting, the Second Potency is the "purely self-limiting." Here again, we see a metaphysical anticipation of the vira. I said earlier that the vira reaches a point where he becomes autonomous in the literal sense of giving a law unto himself. This is self-limitation in its highest form. The vira is autonomous, independent, self-sufficient, and whole, just as is the primal Second Potency. The Third Potency is "the possibly being," the First Potency is "the must being," and the Second Potency is *das sein Sollende*, "the should being." *Sollen* means "should," and thus in the Second Potency an ethical or idealistic dimension comes to presence. This is predictable, since the Second Potency manifests itself on the human level as the "spirited" man.

If we may speak of the Third Potency as matter or the material element, and the First Potency as form, then what is the Second Potency? Again, since it constitutes a kind of middle between the other two, in some sense the Second Potency must be a union of matter and form. I am reminded here of Hegel's theory of the three types of art: symbolic, classical, and romantic. The symbolic is art that is overly formal, stylized, and constrained. He uses Egyptian art as an example. Romantic art is all about soaring emotions and heaving bosoms: art that has lost all restraint. Here, form is broken or exceeded by an excess of content; by unconstrained feeling. Classical art occupies a middle position, a perfect unity of form and material. And what does Hegel use as an example of classical art? The Greek sculptures of gods and athletes, of course. In other words, mesomorphs: second function bodies ruled by Rajas, or the Schellingian Second Potency. In whatever occupies the second function position, there is a near-perfect complement of form and matter, reason and emotion, centripetal and centrifugal forces, etc.

The Second Potency is thus the primal, perfect union of form and matter. It is the Platonic form of a god (and it bears repeating that the Greeks used the mesomorph, the perfect human union of form and matter, to represent their gods), whereas the First Potency and Second Potency are mere forces (like Empedocles's "love" and "strife"). The Second Potency is the timeless union of the other two Potencies. When the three Potencies externalize themselves in creation, the timeless relationship between them expresses itself temporally. The world is simply the bringing together and separating of the First Potency and the Third Potency, Sattva and Tamas, extended in time. The ultimate agent of this process in the world is the vira, the second function man, who is both preserver and destroyer. Edward Allen Beach, writing of Schelling's Potenzlehre, states that "[the Second Potency] is…the [Aristotelian] final cause or purpose toward which the whole ideal organism of the universe is striving."[5]

3. The Anti-Potencies

Schelling calls the three Potencies taken together "the figure of being." But the story does not end here, for Schelling says that the account so far

is one of pure essences only. How, exactly, does a concrete, spatio-temporal world come into being out these Potencies? I spoke just a moment ago of the Potencies externalizing themselves in creation. But how does this take place? Schelling's answer to this is very obscure.

He begins by noting that it seems like the natural order of things that the Third Potency should subordinate itself to the First Potency: that matter should allow itself to become informed. But this is not how it always happens. We can see this all around us. If the Third Potency, in all of its expressions, gave itself up to the First Potency continually and without resistance, then all material objects would be perfect expressions of their forms. There would be no ugliness, no defect, no deformity. But since this is not the case, the relationship between the Third Potency and the First Potency must be more complicated than we have let on.

Because the Third Potency is pure possibility of being, it can pretty much do as it pleases! Within this Potency is a duality: it is a potentiality to give birth to existence, to be fruitful, but it is also a potentiality to negate all potentialities, to say no to everything. It thus always has within it the possibility of rebelling against its role as the matrix, or mother, of all of creation. In doing so, it becomes resistant to the order, form, definiteness, reason, and rule of the First Potency. Its obscurity increases, and becomes impenetrable. Schelling calls this perverted form of the Third Potency "B." I shall call it "the anti-Third." Schelling's anti-Third is exactly analogous to Jakob Boehme's "sour": a negating, inward-turning, egoistic power.

As a result of the transformation of the Third Potency into the anti-Third, the First Potency is made subordinate to it. This indicates the great power of the Third Potency: in simply closing itself to the First Potency or resisting it, it subverts the natural role of the First Potency and throws it into a state of disequilibrium. Recall that the Third Potency is subjectivity and the First Potency objectivity. In being rejected by the Third Potency, the First Potency is thrown back on itself, and thus develops subjectivity.[6] Whereas, like Ouranos, it had once enjoyed unconscious bliss in the arms of Gaea, it now comes to consciousness — but only when castrated. It turns inward. And when it conceives itself, it conceives itself

solely as directed toward the bringing about the submission of the anti-Third.

To continue the masculine-feminine parallel, the anti-Third finds its human representative in modern, "liberated" woman (in the extreme, in the "man hater," who may go so far as to entirely abjure the love of men, and to suppress the desire to be penetrated). What the First Potency becomes as a result of the anti-Third's coming into being is the modern male, who is preoccupied with the physical conquest of woman, considering it the essence of manliness. He is, indeed, an entirely physical being.

A perfect illustration of this dynamic is to be found in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, which charts the course of two love affairs. The first, between Ursula Brangwen and Rupert Birkin, illustrates the natural relationship between the Third Potency and the First Potency. Ursula is a "natural woman," who longs to be possessed by Birkin. Birkin, for his part, is drawn to Ursula, but refuses to give himself to her completely, desiring an experience of something higher than carnal love. In short, he has something of the vira in him. The other couple are Gudrun Brangwen, Ursula's sister, and Gerald Crich, Rupert's best friend. Gudrun is the anti-Third incarnate. She yearns for something, but will not identify herself with anything. She drifts from interest to interest, place to place. She spurns Gerald's desire, and humiliates him, saying at one point "You are so insistent, and there is so little grace in you, so little fineness. You are so crude. You break me — you only waste me — it is horrible to me."[7] Naturally, Gerald is obsessed with her, and responds to these words by making violent love to her, and then later trying to strangle the life out of her. Gerald is the entirely physical being I spoke of; the perversion of the First Potency. He is a mine-owner who (like Clifford in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) totally immerses himself in the hard world of machines and production plans. He prides himself on his brutal physicality, and, unlike Rupert, is preoccupied by sex.

Now, note that the First Potency corresponds to the first function, which corresponds, in terms of human types, to the ecotomorph-cerebretonic. Thus, what is peculiar about the change produced in the First Potency by

the anti-Third is that the First Potency becomes, in a way, its own opposite. In human terms, the cerebretonic, the man who "lives in his head," comes to think that he ought to be his opposite: the physical man, the sensualist, the "stud." What we are talking about is, in essence, a divya (or potential divya) who secretly yearns to be a pashu. But such a man, though he may think of nothing but the sexual possession of women, never succeeds in truly or totally possessing a woman, because his obsession is in fact unmasculine and, ultimately, repellent to women. It is the detached and aloof, spiritually virile male who proves most attractive. It is to him that woman wishes truly to surrender. Enter the vira, and the Second Potency.

We find the relationship between the Second Potency and the two anti-Potencies represented in the medieval Germanic *Nibelungenlied*. King Gunther of Burgundy sets his sights on the Amazon-like Brunhild, but to win her hand in marriage he must submit to trial by combat. If he loses, Brunhild takes his life. Brunhild represents the anti-Third, which has become actively hostile and even deadly to the First, or male, Potency. Gunther, who represents the emasculated First Potency, cannot defeat Brunhild, and so he enlists the aid of Siegfried. As a warrior hero, Siegfried represents, of course, the Second Potency. Rendering himself invisible, Siegfried secretly acts on Gunther's behalf, and wins Brunhild's hand for his king. Afterwards, however, Brunhild refuses to yield to Gunther in the marriage bed, and so Siegfried is called in again to pass himself off as Gunther and force her to submit. When he succeeds, she cries, "I shall no longer resist your noble love. I have discovered that you know how to master women."[8]

One curious problem here has to do with what sex to assign to the Second Potency. If the First Potency is "male" and the Third Potency is "female," what is the Second Potency? I have characterized it as mediating between the other two, so is it somehow androgynous? Given that I have identified the Second Potency with the Second Function, with the mesomorphic-somatotonic warrior figure, this seems an absurd suggestion — until one takes a look at Indo-European mythological representations of the warrior. There one finds abundant evidence that the warrior was regarded as having both masculine and feminine

characteristics. For example, Thor appears in drag, as does Herakles. (From the sixteenth century on, artistic representations of Herakles have most often depicted him in women's clothing.) The figure of Arjuna in the *Mahabharata* is also depicted as androgynous. Exactly why the warrior or vira should be seen in this way must have to do with his important metaphysical role, discussed earlier, as one who can pass between the opposites of subject and object, form and matter, masculine and feminine to achieve oneness with the Absolute or Brahman. The name Percival (or Parzival) means "pierce the valley." He is the one who goes beyond opposites (between the "mountains") to the One.

Unlike the First Potency and the Third Potency, according to Schelling the Second Potency does not undergo a change; it remains constant. But, Schelling contends, it cannot be fully realized unless the other two Potencies have completed their development. Thus, due to the inversion, or perversion of the First Potency and the Third Potency, the Second Potency is no longer the timeless balance of the Limited and the Unlimited. In Beach's words, the Second Potency takes on the status of a "future condition" yet to be achieved.[9] In other words, the unity of Limited and Unlimited becomes a goal or an ideal endpoint. Schelling believes that this is the end toward which all of history is moving. But Schelling's historical conception, like Hegel's, is Christianized and linear. Beach notes that "Schelling sees the whole tendency of world history subsequent to the Creation as being precisely to bring the inverted first potency into submission, to change [the anti-Third] back into [the positive, Third Potency]."[10]

4. Implications of Schelling's Theory

If we jettison Schelling's linear view of history and replace it with a traditional Indo-European, cyclical model of historical change, what results is a conception of the anti-Third and the First Potency continually evolving toward unity, which is to say, continually giving rise to the realization of the Second Potency. After the zenith of the Second Potency

is achieved, there is a period in which the other two Potencies normalize: when the anti-Third becomes the "natural" Third Potency, and the First Potency regains its status as the objective, informing agent. But then this is followed by a decline, in which the two Potencies become perverted again, and the Second Potency seemingly withdraws, only to arise again later, and so on.

From the conflict and gradual reconciliation of the First Potency and the Third Potency, a world comes into being. Schelling thinks that his account of the conflict of the anti-Potencies is not an account of abstract essences. When the Third Potency rebels against its nature as receiver of form, it becomes the material element itself, for matter is just precisely whatever has the nature of receiving and resisting form.

To put this in human terms, the world is perpetually giving birth to the vira, but the vira is born in conflict. The conditions necessary to give rise to the vira are conflict and disharmony. It is in the crucible of unrest, war, and disunity that the vira arises — and rises to the occasion. In challenging and overcoming these conditions, those who can be viras realize their vira nature, and impose order upon chaos. But this "golden age" cannot last, and disorder and disharmony eventually return — and so on, *ad infinitum*.

Such a view of history is pregnant with philosophical consequences. For example, the so-called "problem of evil" is solved. Evil — conflict, war, disorder, disharmony, etc. — exists simply in order to bring the vira, the embodiment of God in the world, into being.

We have also answered the question, "why is there something rather than nothing?" The nothing that is the Ground of Being is Brahman. From Brahman a world constituted by the three gunas or Potencies comes into being. The highest actuality in this world is achieved by the highest living thing in the world, which is the human vira. He is the human expression of Brahma, and as such he may, through a transformation of himself, "turn creation back on itself" and achieve oneness with Brahman, the basis of existence as such. Thus, there is no "something rather than nothing," for the something is the nothing unconscious of itself.

General Conclusion

As I announced at the beginning of this series, my procedure in this essay has been inductive. I began by laying out the tripartite structure of Indo-European society, and then argued that other parts of the natural world exhibit an analogous structure: the human soul itself, human body types, human anatomy, the anatomy of individual organs or systems, the human embryo, the mammals, the single cell, the macroscopic world, the microscopic world of the atom, and the structure of human thought and logic. I believe that these analogies are plausible. In some cases, particularly the analogies between human types and mammal types, the analogies are very precise and striking.

Having seen the same structures repeating themselves throughout different aspects of reality, I then asked if there was a way to lay bare the nature of these structures and speak of them in the abstract – to know them "in themselves and by themselves." Rather than striking off on my own, I looked first to Tradition, and found exactly the account I was looking for in the Indian theory of the gunas. We can see there that the Indians noticed the same repetition of tripartite structure I have spoken of. In the course of explaining the gunas, I had occasion to return to the topic of human types, and I developed some suggestions for how we might make use of them in order to work out a theory of history, and an understanding of the purpose of existence itself.

I also gave an account of Schelling's *Potenzlehre*. This served two functions. First, it showed how an even more abstract account of the three principles may be given. Second, its remarkable correspondence to the Indian theory of the gunas seems to indicate that consciousness of the three principles is perennial. I mean this in connection with the Hermetic idea of the "perennial philosophy." If an idea keeps showing up in different philosophical or mystical systems, especially if there is little or no contact between the authors of those systems, I take this as *prima facie* evidence of its truth.

Now, it might be objected that I have simply "read" this tripartite scheme into different things, but that one could equally well find twoness and fourness and fiveness in things as well. This objection misses the point,

for, as I said at the beginning, I am not looking for sheer threeness, but rather a specific type of threeness. Secondly, the objection seems disingenuous in light of what I believe are the truly remarkable analogies I have brought to light here. Ultimately, my argument for the truth of the principles, and the reliability of the principles as guides to understanding the world, is pragmatic. I believe I have shown that seeing the world in terms of these three structures *works*. It opens things up to us; it allows us to better organize, categorize, and analyze things, and to see their relationships. Furthermore, it leads to truly profound reflections upon the nature of existence as a whole.

Notes

[1] Hegel did not actually say that Spirit is a unity of logos and nature, or God and animal, but this is an implication of his ideas, and corresponds exactly to the Greek philosophical view, which strongly influenced Hegel.

[2] Jacob Boehme, Concerning the Three Principles of the Divine Essence, trans. John Sparrow, 1648 (London: John M. Watkins, 1910), VII: 25; p. 100.

[3] "And no place or position can be conceived or found where the spirit of the tri-unity is not present, and in every being . . . ", Boehme, Six Theosophic Points, trans. John Rolleston Earle (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), I:21; pp. 18-19.

[4] A small application of this principle is to be found in the eating habits of the middle-position carnivores. Whereas the rodents subsist primarily on starches, fats, and oils, and the ungulates on cellulose, the carnivores subsist on protein; i.e., on food similar to their own bodily material. See Schad, Man and Mammals, 32.

[5] Edward Allen Beach, The Potencies of Gods (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 126.

[6] This is reminiscent of the master-slave dialectic in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: subjugated by the master, the slave turns inward and gives birth to Geist.

[7] D. H. Lawrence, Women in Love (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 434.

[8] Nibelungenlied, trans. Helen M. Mustard, in Medieval Epics (New York: Modern Library, 1963), 282.

[9] Beach, 136.

[10] Ibid., 134.

AN ESOTERIC COMMENTARY ON THE VOLSUNG SAGA

PART I

The purpose of this essay is to offer an account of the hidden meaning of the *Volsung Saga* (*Völsunga saga*). In drawing out this meaning, I will approach the saga from a Traditionalist standpoint, broadly speaking; i.e., from the standpoint of Guénon and Evola. I will touch on some details concerning the relation of the saga to other sources, but I do not aim to provide anything like the sort of account a historian or philologist might give.

Some introductory remarks are necessary concerning the sources, and my methodology. The *Volsung Saga* is a late thirteenth-century Icelandic prose account of the clan of the Volsungs, which includes the heroes Sigmund and Sigurd.[1] [3] Its sequel is *Ragnar Lothbrok's Saga* (*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*), and in the only extant manuscript of the *Volsung Saga* the text is followed directly by the saga of Ragnar. (I will also have a few things to say in this essay about that saga as well.) We know that the *Volsung Saga* is based on older sources. Significant parts of it draw upon material in the Codex Regius, which was compiled earlier in the thirteenth century. Snorri Sturluson, in his *Prose Edda* (compiled ca. 1220), includes a summary of most elements of the Sigurd story, and quotes material found in the Codex Regius.

However, the stories of the Volsungs must be considerably older. The Ramsund carving in Sweden depicts episodes from the life of Sigurd, and it is thought to have been carved around the year 1030. We must also mention *Beowulf*, which includes the story of Sigmund ("Sigemund the Wælsing"), though in this version he is the dragon-slayer, not Sigurd. The manuscript of *Beowulf* was produced between 975 and 1025. We can safely assume that these stories had to have been circulating for a very long time before anyone thought to carve them in stone, or to incorporate them into *Beowulf* and any other texts. It is impossible to say when they had their origin, as the first versions were undoubtedly oral. Suffice it to say that we are dealing with a tradition that is centuries older than the first texts that give an account of it.

As Jackson Crawford has stated:

Seen in a wider context that takes in both their ancient roots and the widespread and long-lasting fame of their heroes, [the *Volsung Saga* and *Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*] stand out not as the sources of a mythical tradition but as the culmination of it. The Saga of the Volsungs, in particular, is the masterpiece of an author who inherited a magnificent and deep-rooted set of conflicting but related traditions, and made from them a sweeping story that has become one of the longest-enduring and most influential sagas.[2] [4]

Part of the problem with dating the sources of the *Volsung Saga* is that, as Crawford states, the text weaves together a number of stories that often seem loosely related. Some of these stories may be older than others, and have very distinct origins. It is likely that connections between them were made prior to the composition of the thirteenth-century saga, and it is, of course, possible that they were always connected in the minds of poets. Many elements from the *Volsung Saga* are to be found, as already noted, in the poems of the Codex Regius and in Snorri's *Prose Edda*. What is missing from those sources, however, is most of the stories recounted in the *Volsung Saga* concerning the generations of Volsungs prior to Sigurd. Still, it seems likely that those stories were circulating in other forms, now mostly lost to us, long prior to their usage by the anonymous author of the saga. As already noted, *Beowulf* features Sigmund, father of Sigurd, though it makes the father the dragon-slayer. It is possible that there were other, older versions of Sigmund's story in which he was also depicted as a dragon-slayer – and also possible that originally the stories of Sigmund and Sigurd had little or no relation. Connecting them may have been the inspiration of some later poet who could have transferred characteristics from one hero to the other.

Parts of the *Volsung Saga* seem to simply be digressions, and some parts contradict others! For example, in one chapter the tree that grows in Volsung's hall is an oak, in another chapter it's an apple tree. The saga also gives two conflicting accounts of the meeting of Sigurd and Brynhild. In addition, there are plot difficulties that strongly suggest that the saga

writer is weaving together tales that have little connection. A good example of this is the story of Sinfjotli [5], son of Sigmund. After considerable dramatic build-up (including his conception as a result of the incest of Sigmund and Signy, his lycanthropy, etc.) he meets an anti-climactic end, and does nothing much (plot-wise) to pave the way for Sigurd, the apotheosis of the Volsungs. (Wagner was thus wise, in his version of the story, to swap Sinfjotli with Sigurd/Siegfried and make the latter the product of the incestuous union.[3] [6])

All of these considerations seem to count against any approach to the *Volsung Saga* which would interpret it *as a whole* – as one, unitary tale – and offer an account of its hidden meaning. Nevertheless, that is just the approach I will take here, and it is not hard to justify it. First of all, I have already raised the possibility that these seemingly disparate and loosely-connected tales had been connected in the minds of poets for a very long time. In fact, it is possible that *all* the basic plot elements of the saga were in place from the beginning, at least in germinal form. The fact that some parts seem almost like separate, standalone stories could be due to the fact that elements of the original plot were extracted and elaborated upon individually by many generations of poets.

A second consideration is that even if the writer of the *Volsung Saga* wove together separate, only loosely-related tales, it is still true that this writer had literary intentions in combining the stories in the way that he did. We have to avoid the temptation of thinking that this saga is simply a handy compilation of stories. It is easy to fall into thinking about it this way, because we have no idea who the saga writer was. We thus tend not to think of him as an individual author, with his own perspective and intentions, but rather as a mere "anonymous compiler" of traditional stories. This could well be as big a mistake as thinking that Wagner – whose *Ring* weaves together the *Volsung Saga* with the *Nibelungenlied* and the stories of the gods in the Eddas – was merely grafting together different stories and had no message of his own. Thus, even if the *Volsung Saga* presents a patchwork of older tales, it is still entirely possible – indeed, it is likely – that the author created this tapestry because he saw deep connections between the stories, and had some meaning to

communicate. It is the purpose of this essay to bring out that meaning – which I will argue is perennial or Traditional.

Finally, it must be mentioned that interpreting *all* texts as unitary wholes is a sound, hermeneutical methodology. Some texts only seem fragmentary on a first reading. On a deeper level, however, they exhibit unity. We would completely miss that unity if we never questioned whether our initial impression of the text might be superficial. In other words, if there really is a deeper unity to a text we are guaranteed to miss it if we don't even try looking for it. Therefore, we have to try the experiment of reading every text, even the most seemingly disjointed, *as if* it is a whole, with a unity of underlying meaning. If that meaning is there, then hopefully this approach will uncover it. Of course, we must also work against the temptation to read meaning into texts where it is not present. In the case of texts like the *Volsung Saga*, familiarity with multiple sources from the same tradition, with the cultural context, and with perennial mythological and symbolic forms can help us both to recognize meaning, and to avoid implausible interpretations. This is a balancing act, and it is far from being an exact science.

Hopefully, the result of the present investigation will be to reveal that the *Volsung Saga* is a text rich with esoteric significance. I hope to shed light on significant parts of the text – though some elements may remain mysterious. And I assume I do not need to convince my readers that this investigation is worthwhile. In the cycle of Volsung tales we have the greatest heroic legends of the Germanic tradition. It is here, as many have recognized, that we find vitally important clues to the values and character of the Germanic peoples. And it is here, I will maintain, that we find veiled indications of esoteric teachings of a highly sophisticated nature. Finally, as all readers of the saga will discover, the text – even when taken on a superficial level – is exciting, endlessly imaginative, and often unsettlingly twisted and macabre.

The divisions of my commentary follow the chapter divisions in most editions of the text.[4] [7]

1. Concerning Sigi, a son of Odin

The clan of the Volsungs are not referred to by that name from the very beginning. It takes its name from one of its greatest exemplars, who we will meet later on. The story of the clan begins with Sigi, whose father is Odin – so we may actually say that Odin is the first Volsung (what this name means, or may mean, will be discussed later). Now, we know that this god is crafty, and does everything for an ulterior motive. His two chief concerns are acquiring wisdom, and building an army of the dead that will fight by his side at Ragnarok. (These concerns are not unrelated, of course, since the wisdom Odin acquires can help him in the final battle.) We may thus assume that Odin's purpose in siring Sigi is to create another warrior whom he can later "harvest" (to use Jackson Crawford's term) for his army in Valhalla.[5] [8]

What we will find, however, is that Odin's actual plans are far more elaborate. With the Volsungs, he aims to create an entire clan of super-warriors, each generation of which is (in most cases) greater and stronger than the previous. In order to accomplish this, of course, selective breeding is necessary. The most dramatic instance in which this becomes a plot element is the incestuous union of the Volsung twins, Sigmund and Signy, which produces the hero Sinfjotli. As I will discuss in a later installment, the apparent rationale for this union (which must, I will argue, be credited to the crafty Odin) is the desire to produce a "pure" Volsung, without any admixture from outside the clan. In the case of the first Volsung, Sigi, we are given absolutely no information about the mother on whom Odin sired this boy. Thus, we are left with the impression that Sigi may be – just possibly – a "hypostasis" of Odin; another "pure Volsung," the one who, armed with an undiluted heritage from the god himself, sires the rest of the clan.

With such parentage, one would expect great things of Sigi – but, at least at first glance, the character seems disappointing. Sigi has a friend named Skathi who is considered "powerful and great." However, the text tells us that of the two, Sigi was more powerful and "from a better family" (hardly surprising, given his father). Note, however, that the text does not call Sigi "great" (*mikill*). One day Sigi goes hunting with Skathi's slave,

Brethi, who was as "talented and accomplished as many men who were considered his betters, and perhaps even more so than some such men."[6] [9] The result of the hunt is that Brethi kills more animals than Sigi, and more desirable ones as well. Enraged at being outshone by a slave, Sigi murders Brethi and conceals his body in a snowdrift.

Later that evening, Sigi compounds the crime by lying about it, saying that he lost track of Brethi in the forest and has no idea where he is. Skathi distrusts him, however, and his men go searching for Brethi and soon uncover his body. Sigi then receives the ultimate punishment for his crime. He is outlawed, cast out of society: "he could not remain at home with his father any longer."[7] [10] This is an interesting comment, for one would expect that Odin might have appeared, sired Sigi, and gone on his way. Instead, Sigi has apparently been living with Odin. Where? Probably not in Valhalla, since Sigi has to be living among men in order to be outlawed. Or could it be that Sigi has been fostered by a man? (Fosterage is a recurring theme in the saga.)

In any case, Odin does not abandon Sigi as a result of this shameful crime. Instead, it seems to strengthen their bond. The text tells us that Odin travelled with Sigi "a long way," after the latter was commanded to leave his land. Their travels together end when they reach "some warships" – presumably a gift from Odin to Sigi. Indeed, when they part, Odin bestows an entire army on Sigi, who is "victorious in many battles." Eventually, Sigi gains a kingdom for himself: "Hunland." He "marries well" and achieves renown as a great king and mighty warrior. He and his wife have a son named Rerir who was "already a large and accomplished man at a young age." The size, strength, and virility of the Volsungs are frequently mentioned in the saga, and, as noted already, they seem to increase with each subsequent generation.

Let us now address some of the peculiarities in the story of Sigi. To be "outlawed" is to be placed outside the bounds of society – its rules, mores, and of course, its protection. In essence, however, the practice of outlawing a man really consists in recognizing, officially, a status he has already chosen through his own deeds. The man who murders another member of his society, for example, has actually chosen outlawry – he

has chosen to live outside society's rules. What is significant about Sigi's story is that it is not just his murder of the slave that breaks society's covenants. Everything that leads up to it is also "outside the law," or outside the norm.

Consider: Sigi not only goes hunting, alone, with a slave, he does so with another's man's slave. This is quite peculiar. Sigi, a free man who is "powerful" and of high birth, goes hunting with one of the lowliest members of society, who is not his to command. What is even stranger is that Brethi, the slave, is not there merely to carry Sigi's weapons and help him bring home the kill. They are actually hunting *partners*, and Sigi, at least, sees them as competing. But such a relationship is one that is normally found among men who are social *equals*. Within the bounds of the society, these men are anything but. Keep in mind, however, that the story has them both stepping outside those bounds: they enter into the forest, into the wild, to go hunting. In the Indo-European tradition, the forest represents all that which is outside the social world. For example, as Kris Kershaw notes, the Sanskrit term usually translated "forest," *aranya*, actually means what is "other than the village."[8] [11] (The Aranyakas, which are Hindu esoteric texts, derive their name from this term.)

Symbolically, Sigi and Brethi thus step outside the constraints of social norms. In the forest, as hunting partners, they are no longer free man and slave. Stripped, temporarily, of these social roles, the only thing that sets them apart is their skill at the primal, masculine activity with which they are engaged. And it is the slave who shows himself to be the better man! This too, of course, is contrary to what is "the norm." We expect the free man, the powerful warrior, to be the better hunter. But the social roles do not reflect reality in this case: the "slave" is in fact master. Removed from the boundaries of society's laws, alone in the forest, Sigi attempts to reassert his superiority in the only way he can: by killing Brethi.

Note that he does not chastise him or remind him that he is only a slave – for this would be a weak and artificial way of asserting superiority. Sigi knows that Brethi has proved himself better at the manly art of coping in

the wildness that lies outside society – and Brethi *knows* that he knows this. To respond to Brethi by diminishing him, by reminding him of his social position, would be a craven form of compensation, and an appeal to the rules of the social world that has, in effect, been invalidated by the results of the hunt. Under the circumstances, killing Brethi is an honest, and manly response – if a bit of an overreaction (beating him up might have been sufficient). As an attempt to assert his natural superiority over Brethi, Sigi's act is quite effective: Brethi may out-hunt Sigi, but Sigi can kill Brethi. In the end, Sigi *does* prove himself to be the more powerful man. Of course, in so doing, he removes any possibility that he can reenter the society that he and Brethi had left.

Now, we must assume that everything that happens to Sigi is probably somehow orchestrated by Odin. Why, then, does Odin allow his son to be placed in this situation, and to act the way that he does? Why does he bring Sigi to the ignominious fate of becoming an outlaw?

First of all, it must be said that Odin does not typically *make* anyone do anything. Instead, it is their own characters that typically make them do what they do. So, a better way of seeing the situation is that Odin places Sigi in this set of circumstances (or allows him to be placed) knowing that Sigi's character will likely produce this sort of outcome. In short, Odin knows that in order for Sigi to fulfill his destiny, he must become outlawed. And the particular circumstances of his outlawry are significant as well. Remember that Odin is breeding a clan of super-warriors whom he can harvest for his army of the Einherjar. Such a race cannot prove itself within the constraints of society – it must break those constraints. Thus, Sigi, the first of the Volsung line, is placed in a primal situation in which social norms are first invalidated (the slave appears as "master") and then completely rejected (Sigi murders Brethi).

Ultimately, the male warrior spirit always displays itself outside society, or on its margins. Even when men are fighting to defend their own society against outsiders, the fight happens essentially in a state of nature: There is no social authority governing the two sides in their confrontation, and all the rules that normally constrain man's aggression are cancelled. Of course, in addition to warriors who fight to defend their tribe, we also

have the phenomenon of rogue "warriors," such as pirates, bandits, raiders, and gangs of all kinds. In the world of the Germanic tribes, such activities were not frowned upon, so long as these men did not victimize their own tribe and kin. Indeed, the act of raiding other tribes or slaughtering and robbing strangers was admired and served to enhance reputations. (This was also true of other Indo-European societies, including the archaic Greeks.[9] [12]) We will encounter a dramatic instance of this later in the saga, when we come to the adventures of Sigmund and Sinfjotli.

Thus, there is a duality to the figure of the warrior. His prowess can be channeled into a force for protecting the tribe and preserving social order. On the other hand, if his prowess is not so channeled, it becomes a force of destruction. The latter way of life, which detaches the warrior from a social role of protection, is always powerfully attractive to men. When the warrior acts as protector of the tribe, he is essentially acting as protector of women and children, and thus as a servant of nature. But the human spirit – especially the male spirit – is characterized by the desire to disengage from natural ends and to create something noble and beautiful *for its own sake* – something that may be wholly impractical, and do nothing to advance survival and procreation. As D. H. Lawrence once wrote, "the desire of the human male is to build a world: not 'to build a world for you, dear': but to build up out of his own self and his own belief and his own effort something wonderful."[10] [13]

Since men find fulfillment in the role of warrior, there is thus always the possibility that they may choose to pursue that way of life for its own sake, rather than for the good of the tribe. In other words, what often begins as Dumezil's "second function" of protection becomes a way of life unto itself, with its own values quite distinct from those of the village (which the warrior may, indeed, come to scorn). In this case, the warrior judges himself not in terms of whether he is effective in protecting the tribe, but whether he has achieved honor within the warrior band, through demonstrating his prowess and loyalty (to the band, not the tribe). It is obvious that the modern conception of the warrior, who is solely concerned with "defense" and with "peace-keeping," is a degraded form. It is yet another illustration of the "feminized" nature of modernity, in

which masculine, warrior virtues are only allowed expression when they are placed in the service of the womanly values of comfort, safety, and security.

In the ancient world, it must again be emphasized, both types of warrior were admired: the one who acts as protector of the tribe, and the one who acts independently, even as a force of pure destruction. The former was seen as "of the village," and the latter, of course, as "of the forest."[11] [14] One strongly suspects that our (male) ancestors had greater admiration for the warriors who moved outside society, fighting and conquering for its own sake. And there is good reason for this. It is such men who, very often, found *new* tribes, new kingdoms – who make of themselves new kings, whereas the other type of warrior, the tribal protector, fights only to preserve what already exists, which he did not create, and always in the service of someone else.

Odin is the god of both types of men: He is the god of armies pledged to defend their tribe, as well as god of brigands, raiders, ruffians, bandits, and outlaws of all kinds (just like the Indian Rudra, and the Greek Hermes).[12] [15] As the greatest of all warrior bands, Odin's Einherjar serves as a paradigm against which all others are judged, and with which the Germanic warrior bands identified, seeing themselves as already dead and as one with their ancestors. But which sort of warriors are the Einherjar? They are loyal to no tribe. They are loyal only to each other – to the warrior band – and to Odin. And they live only to fight with each other on a daily basis, and eventually, to fight at Ragnarok. Thus, they most closely resemble the second sort of warriors described above: those that live independently of the tribe, devoted solely to the warrior life itself and the warrior code. (And the fact that the Einherjar were regarded as the ideal, as the paradigm of the warrior band itself, confirms my claim earlier that it is the second sort of warrior who was most admired, not the "protector of the tribe.")

Of course, one might object that the Einherjar are recruited by Odin precisely as a *protective* force: an army that will protect him, and the tribe of the gods, against the forces of evil that will be unleashed in the final battle. However, this is simply not the case. First of all, Odin has

heard the prophecy of the Volva and knows that he and the other gods will die in Ragnarok. Odin does not recruit an army to try to *prevent* this. He recruits an army because failing to fight is not an option. (And Odin's resistance, utilizing the forces of the Einherjar, is itself something that is prophesied.) This is something that many will find difficult to understand, because modern people do not understand the concept of *honor*.

Ragnarok is really a battle between the forces of honor and a degenerate, monstrous, multi-form dishonor. Thus, Odin and his Einherjar are moved by the values of the second type of warrior I described earlier – the one who pursues the warrior way of life (which includes devotion to honor) for its own sake, and not with the end of "protection" in mind. At the final battle, Odin, the gods, and the Einherjar will face an array of monsters sired by the dishonorable Loki, all described as the epitome of treachery and evil. This includes the Midgard-serpent, who is described at one point as "honorless."[13] [16]

And fighting those creatures will be Sigi, alongside many other powerful warriors. Again, Odin's purpose in creating Sigi is to give rise to the greatest of all warrior clans. Of course, Odin only seeks greatness for Sigi so that he may, at some later point, end his life and call him to Valhalla, where he will take his place as a useful member of the Einherjar. In order to make Sigi truly great among men, and worthy of a place at the table in Valhalla, Odin must remove him from society. Sigi must cease being a warrior in the service of an existing social order, and become his own master, a lone wolf who will go on to create his own world. Outlawed, returned to the state of nature, Sigi must constitute a new honor and a new code – a code disconnected from the social role of warrior as "protector."

As we shall see, it will not be long before Odin calls Sigi to Valhalla . . .

Notes

[1] [17] I have anglicized most Old Norse names and terms herein, avoiding special characters like þ, ð, dh, đ, etc.

[2] [18] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017)

[3] [19] *Wagner also alludes to the forest adventures involving Sigmund and Sinfjotli, but in his version it involves Wotan and Sigmund, who are father and son. See my book Wagner's Ring and the Germanic Tradition, forthcoming from Counter-Currents Publishing.*

[4] [20] *The chapter titles herein quote the translation by Jackson Crawford. This is the translation quoted throughout.*

[5] [21] *Crawford, xi.*

[6] [22] *Crawford, 1.*

[7] [23] *Crawford, 1.*

[8] [24] *Kris Kershaw, The One-Eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-) Germanic Männerbünde (Washington, DC: Journal of Indo-European Studies monograph no. 36), 111.*

[9] [25] *See Kershaw, 16.*

[10] [26] *D. H. Lawrence, Fantasia of the Unconscious (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18.*

[11] [27] *Kershaw, 108-109.*

[12] [28] *Kershaw, 36.*

[13] [29] *Voluspa 54; The Poetic Edda, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2015), 12.*

PART II,

Chapter Two: Concerning Rerir and His Son Volsung

In the previous chapter, we saw that Sigi, the son of Odin, is the first step in the god's master plan: the creation of a new race of super-warriors, who will come to be known as the clan of the Volsungs. In order to become a truly great warrior, Sigi must transgress man's laws and remove himself from society – entering the wilderness where he will live as his own master and create a world of his own. Thus, Sigi is outlawed for killing a slave who had outshined him in hunting. I argued in the last installment that Odin either orchestrates this event, or allows it to happen (it comes to the same thing). Once Sigi has been banished, Odin repeatedly rewards him. He accompanies Sigi on raids, gives him an army and ships, and makes him victorious in battle. Sigi is able to claim a kingdom for himself. He marries well and his wife gives him a son named Rerir, who "was already a large and accomplished man at a young age."

But we know that Odin is a fickle god. He raises men up only to abandon them later. This is all very deliberate on the god's part: He is building an army of the dead in Valhalla, the Einherjar. And for this purpose, he needs the best warriors. Thus, he favors certain promising men (in this case, actually sires one), and nurtures them, insuring that they receive training and experience that will mold them into formidable fighters. And he provides them with the means to advance from one victory to another, accumulating ever greater glory. Then, just when these men feel assured that they are invincible and always to be favored by the god, Odin turns on them – he allows them to be killed so that, having reached their peak, they may join his army in Valhalla.

And this is just what happens with Sigi in Chapter Two. Sigi grows old. He acquires many enemies, as all great men must. Finally, however, he is betrayed by men he had trusted: his own brothers-in-law. These men ambush Sigi and murder him and his retinue. As we will see, there are certain elements in the *Volsung Saga* that appear a number of times. One of these is betrayal by kin. This will occur again, much more famously, in the story of Sigurd, and elsewhere in the saga.

Upon his father's death, Rerir claims the kingdom as his own and then raises an army to seek vengeance against his uncles. Now, what the text has to say here is interesting. We are told that Rerir does this because "they had betrayed him so severely that their kinship was now invalid."[1] [4] This clearly implies that killing kin was considered taboo (as I noted in Part One, raiding and murder were considered permissible by the Germanic tribes, so long as the victims were not one's own kin, or members of one's tribe). In this case, however, Rerir simply decides on the authority of his own judgment to lift this particular moral prohibition. Once more, we see a Volsung transgressing a significant moral and social rule. We are then told that Rerir did not stop until he had killed all his relatives who were complicit in the murder of Sigi. And, to reinforce the shocking nature of this transgression, the text says that he did this "even though such a slaughter of near relatives had until then been unheard of in every way."[2] [5] This transgression of moral norms, sometimes taking genuinely horrific forms, is a recurring characteristic of the Volsungs throughout the entire saga.

Despite this, Rerir becomes "an even greater man than his father had been."[3] [6] In other words, he is rewarded for the slaughter of his relatives. Once again, we sense the hand of Odin at work. But all is not entirely well with Rerir. Though he has all his father's and his uncles' lands and riches, and a wife who is worthy of him, somehow he and his Queen cannot conceive a child. We are told that they pray repeatedly to the gods to grant them a son. Frigg hears their prayer and then informs Odin, "who was not in any doubt about how to help."[4] [7] He summons Hljod, one of his Valkyries and the daughter of the giant Hrimnir, and gives her a magic apple. Turning into a crow, she flies off to Rerir's kingdom and finds the King sitting on a burial mound. She drops the apple in his lap, and somehow Rerir knows what he should do with it. He returns home to the Queen and then he eats some of the apple. A short time later, the queen is pregnant. (Presumably, they had intercourse after Rerir ate the apple.)

There is more here than meets the eye in this quaint tale. First of all, let us ask which one of the pair is infertile, Rerir or his Queen. The text provides us with an answer to this question, if we read between the lines.

When the apple arrives, Rerir is depicted as sitting on a howe, a burial mound. It is a well-known fact that our ancestors practiced the custom of sitting on a howe in order to increase fertility.[5] [8] Since Rerir is doing this, the suggestion is that he believes that he is responsible for the couple's inability to conceive. Further, the text states clearly that Rerir is the one who eats of the apple.[6] [9]

Now, why would Rerir believe that he is the one who is infertile? Here we must infer, which is not difficult, the criteria by which such matters would have been decided in the time of the saga. In cases where the man was potent and the couple could not conceive, the woman would be assumed responsible, as there was no knowledge of "sperm count." The only conceivable circumstance in which the couple would think the man responsible is if he were impotent. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Rerir sits on the howe to try and restore his potency, and that when he eats the magic apple, this is accomplished.

But this is obviously a very strange situation. How does Rerir's impotence serve Odin's ultimate purpose of seeing the Volsung clan increase and flourish? Obviously Rerir's condition is completely at odds with Odin's aims – and so we sense, perhaps, the intervention of some other, contrary force in the matter. Could Rerir's impotence be a punishment visited on him by one of the other gods? Recall that the text tells us that Frigg hears the prayers of Rerir and his Queen. It does not say that they pray to her. Indeed, it would be much more natural for them to have prayed to Freyja, who was a goddess of fertility and to whom mortals often appealed when increased fertility was desired.[7] [10] A further oddity is that Frigg does not help the couple herself with her own magical powers, but instead informs Odin. The god then does not go himself to bring help to Rerir, but sends a loyal Valkyrie disguised as a crow. (In many other cases in the saga, he intervenes in events personally and directly.)

One possible hypothesis is that Rerir has been rendered impotent as punishment for the slaughter of his mother's family. It is possible (though this is pure speculation) that it is indeed Frigg who has punished him in this way.[8] [11] After all, surely Rerir's crime would have offended Frigg, who is goddess of hearth, home, and familial bonds – and, by implication,

goddess of the conventional morality that supports these (an aspect of her character that is artfully portrayed by Wagner in the *Ring*). If this is true, why does she tell Odin? To gloat, perhaps? In any case, Odin's response can certainly be interpreted as subterfuge, a way of getting around Frigg and not incurring her wrath: again, he sends the Valkyrie Hljod in disguise to deliver the apple, rather than going himself.

Regardless, whether or not this theory is correct, we do feel the need of an explanation for Rerir's impotence, since it is obviously so contrary to Odin's plans. However, there is another, somewhat simpler hypothesis: perhaps Odin himself makes Rerir impotent because the god wants to inject his own seed, as it were, once more into the bloodline, to further strengthen it. Perhaps this is what is delivered in the apple. Eating it, Rerir impregnates his Queen with Odin's seed, not his own. (In a later installment of this series, I will argue that something like this occurs again at the wedding feast of Signy and Siggeir, when Odin appears and plunges a sword into the tree Barnstokk.)

What occurs next in the story is equally peculiar. The Queen becomes pregnant, but the pregnancy lasts "an unusually long time."[9] [12] In fact, the text tells us a little later that it lasts for six years! Unusual births and strange gestations are relatively common in myth and folklore. In the *Mahabharata*, Queen Gandhari's pregnancy lasts an unusually long time. Hearing that Queen Kunti has given birth to the Pandavas, Gandhari begins beating her abdomen until a kind of grey ball emerges out of her. The sage Vyasa divides the ball into 101 parts, and then places the fragments into 101 earthenware jars, where they grow into Duryodhana and his 99 brothers and one sister.

These long gestations clearly suggest that something very special is growing – something great, something that takes a great deal of time. This is certainly true in the case of Rerir's Queen, for she gives birth to Volsung, the character from which the entire clan takes its name. When he emerges from the womb, he is "already very big."[10] [13] We are told, further, that he kisses his mother before she expires from the ordeal – something that would only seem possible if he had already attained a degree of mature awareness. Meanwhile, Rerir is away in battle. He

becomes sick and dies of an illness, though he had "intended to join Odin," the text says.[11] [14] (Only men who die violently may join the Einherjar in Valhalla.) Though Odin has lost a Volsung, Rerir's son will be ample compensation.[12] [15]

There is a general scholarly consensus that the name "Volsung" means "stallion phallus." Jackson Crawford buries this odd and somewhat embarrassing fact in a footnote:

Old Norse names ending in *–ung* are typically designations for families and not for individuals, so it is likely that the original name of the individual Volsung was *Volsi*, and that his name was extended later to match the name of the family named for him. This is supported by the fact that his son Sig(e)mund is called a *Wælsing* (= Old Norse Volsung) in *Beowulf*, as well as simply "son of *Wæls*," an Old English cognate of the Old Norse *Volsi*. The name *Volsi* occurs in one place in Old Norse literature, in a story about the Norwegian king Ólaf Tryggvason in the manuscript *Flateyjarbók*. There, the name is applied to a stallion's preserved phallus that is worshipped by a pagan family. "Phallus," perhaps specifically "stallion's phallus" may well be the name's original meaning (the same root is found in other words for cylindrical objects), and the name of Volsung and his family might then have evoked the virility of a stallion.[13] [16]

The juxtaposition of Rerir with Volsung could not be more striking: the impotent father is followed by his diametrical opposite, the son called "stallion phallus." And Volsung certainly is virile: he produces eleven children. Ten of these are sons, and there is one daughter. The eldest son, Sigmund, is also the twin of the daughter, Signy.[14] [17] (The other children are not named in the story.) The saga writer tells us that Sigmund and Signy were the "foremost" and "most beautiful in every way" of Volsung's children, but that "All of Volsung's children were great."[15] [18]

The proliferation of males also seems to be an expression of Volsung's virility. We might ask (since this is likely a work of pure fiction), why not eleven sons and no daughter? It is significant that this daughter is the very first female Volsung – and we would not go wrong in assuming that

she comes into the world to serve a very special purpose (a purpose, of course, that suits Odin's plans). Those already familiar with the events of the saga, of course, know that this one daughter is necessary to produce the next generation of Volsungs.

In addition to sexual virility, Volsung is an all-around paragon of masculine virtue. "He grew big and strong at a young age, and he was very bold in every kind of deed that requires manliness and courage. He became a very great warrior, and he was victorious in his battles."[16] [19] We have already seen Sigi and Rerir described in similar terms. As I noted in the last installment, each generation of Volsung seems to be bigger, stronger, braver, and more virile than the last. Thus, the text informs us that Volsung's children were "the greatest of all those mentioned in the ancient sagas, the greatest in wisdom and in all sports and all kinds of combat."[17] [20]

Stephen Flowers notes that in the sagas generally, it is often later generations of a family that exhibit real greatness.[18] [21] This also makes sense in terms of the complex and mysterious Germanic conception of "the soul." If one can acquire more than one *fylgja* ("guardian spirit"), which strengthens the *kynfylgja* (the *fylgja* of one's clan), and if the *hamingja* ("luck") is fed by heroic deeds, then clearly *something builds or grows* across several generations. (See Part Two of my essay "Ancestral Being [22]" for more information on these concepts.) The members of the clan are the unfolding of *what the clan is* – the flowering of its potentialities. The full flower of the Volsungs, of course, is Sigurd, who is not only the bravest and strongest of warriors, but so tall that when he walks through a field of full-grown rye, "the bottom point of his scabbard would touch the top of the plants."[19] [23]

The mother of Volsung's children is none other than the Valkyrie Hljod, who had delivered the magic apple to Rerir. She is "sent" by her father, the giant Hrimnir, to wed Volsung once he reaches maturity. There is something oddly "incestuous" about this union, given that the Valkyrie had facilitated the conception of Volsung, and is much older than him. As we have seen, when Hljod delivered the apple she was acting under the orders of Odin. It is hard to believe that that is not also the case in this

instance. Yes, it is her father who sends her – but all fathers "give away" their daughters. It is highly unlikely that Hrimnir sends her to Volsung for any other reason than that Odin has requested it. So, what we have in the case of the Volsung-Hljod match is a man who is very probably a child of Odin (recall that the apple may deliver Odin's "seed") marrying a Valkyrie, who happens to be the daughter of a giant. It is clear that with this match, Odin aims to produce beings even greater than Volsung. It is also plausible to suppose (though the text does not give any indication of this) that Hljod may also have been sent to play the role of teacher to Volsung – initiating him into secret knowledge held only by the gods and the giants. Later in the text, Brynhild plays such a role to Sigurd.

In any case, after establishing himself in the world as a great King and father of a large brood, Volsung builds a "magnificent hall" around an immense tree whose branches weave about the beams of the roof. In the present chapter, it is described as an oak, whereas in the following chapter it becomes an apple tree. This could reflect the Icelanders' use of "oak" (*eik*) as a general term for tree, or the saga writer's reliance on different sources. The more symbolically "authentic" choice is clearly the apple tree, for we have seen an apple playing a major role already in the continuation of the Volsung clan. The name of the tree is Barnstokk, which can be translated "child tree" or "family tree."[20] [24] All of this obviously points to the conclusion that the tree represents the Volsung clan itself.

H. R. Ellis Davidson notes that "we have here an example of the 'guardian tree,' such as used to stand beside many a house in Sweden and Denmark, and which was associated with the 'luck' of the family."[21] [25] She then cites some actual historical examples of houses built around trees. However, this was by no means a common practice (so far as we know), so this detail in the saga is striking and cries out for interpretation.

Symbolically, a tree contained within a hall represents the constraint or confinement of the natural by what is human or social. In Volsung's eyes, building the hall around the tree is likely an act of protection – of safeguarding his clan, as represented by the tree and its fruit. But what we find in the next chapter is that just as the tree is confined by the hall,

its branches entangled in the beams, so has Volsung entangled his family within social ties of a highly undesirable nature. Specifically, he has married his daughter off to another king, a man she does not love and who is treacherous and dishonorable. And all of this was arranged, no doubt, with the same sort of good intentions with which he confined the tree: to safeguard his family by forming an alliance, keeping the peace, and insuring Signy's future. As we shall see, however, Odin has different plans . . .

Notes

[1] [26] *The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 2.*

[2] [27] *Crawford, 2.*

[3] [28] *Crawford, 2.*

[4] [29] *Crawford, 2.*

[5] [30] *See H. R. Ellis Davidson, The Road To Hel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 105-111.*

[6] [31] *As R. G. Finch notes, "no other translation seems possible." See Finch, The Saga of the Volsungs (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965), 3 (footnote 2).*

[7] [32] *I am aware that some scholars theorize that at some remote time, Frigg and Freyja were actually one goddess, but by the time the sources of the saga were composed, these were definitely distinct figures.*

[8] [33] *In Greek myth, Hera (who shares many characteristics with Frigg) curses Priapus with impotence whenever he actually tries to put his erection to real use.*

[9] [34] *Crawford, 3.*

[10] [35] *Crawford, 3.*

[11] [36] *Crawford, 3.*

[12] [37] *This sequence of events lends some support to the hypothesis that Odin deliberately renders Rerir impotent and transmits his own seed to Rerir's Queen by means of the apple. Perhaps this King, who manages to die in his bed, was not so great after all.*

[13] [38] *Crawford, x. Other scholars agree. Mindy McLeod and Bernard Mees note that volsi is slang for "penis," derived from vǫlr, meaning "rod." This is in turn related to Modern Norwegian volse "thick, long muscle, thick figure," Icelandic*

völstur "cylinder," dialectal Swedish volster "bulge," Old High German wulst "bulge," and the English dialectal word weal meaning "penis." See McLeod and Mees, Runic Amulets and Magic Objects (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Press, 2006), 104. For information on the story in Flateyjarbók see the Wikipedia entry on Völsa þáttr [39].

[14] [40] Sigmund literally means "victory protection" and Signy means "new victory." It is my view that an analysis of the names in the saga does not reveal much.

[15] [41] Crawford, 3.

[16] [42] Crawford, 3.

[17] [43] Crawford, 3.

[18] [44] See Stephen E. Flowers, Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation (Smithfield, Tx.: Rûna-Raven, 2011), 70.

[19] [45] Crawford, 41.

[20] [46] Crawford, xi.

[21] [47] H. R. Ellis Davidson, "The Sword at the Wedding," Folklore 71:1 (March 1960): 1-18; 4.

PART III

Chapter Three: The Marriage of Siggeir to Signy, Volsung's Daughter

In our last installment, we met Volsung ("stallion phallus"), who becomes a great King and sires eleven children: the twin brother and sister Sigmund and Signy, and nine brothers (who go unnamed). Volsung builds a "magnificent hall" around an immense apple tree whose branches weave about the beams of the roof. The name of the tree is Barnstokk, which can be translated as "child tree" or "family tree." Obviously, it represents the Volsung clan itself.

In Volsung's eyes, building the hall around the tree is likely an act of protection – of safeguarding the clan, as represented by the tree and its fruit. But what we find in Chapter Three is that just as the tree is confined by the hall, its branches entangled in the beams, so has Volsung entangled his family within social ties of an unfortunate nature. Specifically, he intends to marry his daughter Signy off to Siggeir, King of Götaland, a man she "was not eager to marry." Nevertheless, her father insists that it is "advisable" that she marry Siggeir. In other words, Volsung's intentions are to secure his family and Kingdom by forming an alliance. Signy acquiesces, "as she did in all matters concerning her."[1] [5]

For the wedding feast, Volsung invites Siggeir and his men to the great hall, where the celebration takes place around the apple tree. Suddenly, a stranger walks into the revels. "He had a spotted cloak draped over himself, he was barefoot, and he had linen pants tied to his legs. He had a wide-brimmed hat on his head, and he was very tall, elderly, and had only one eye." Needless to say, this is Odin (though the text says "no one knew who he was"). From his cloak he draws a sword and plunges it into the tree trunk "up to the hilt." Odin then says, "Whoever draws this sword out of the tree trunk will receive the sword as a gift from me, and he will say truly that he never held a better sword in his hand than this one."[2] [6] The old man then swiftly leaves the hall.

Of course, we are immediately reminded of the Arthurian "sword in the stone" motif. However, in Arthurian legend, the sword signifies the right to rule: He who can pull the sword from the stone is the "true king." Here,

nothing like this is intended. The one who can pull the sword from the tree is simply the intended recipient of a very good sword indeed. We suspect, however, that much more may be going on here. Surely the crafty Odin cannot be offering a gift with no strings attached . . .

All the men try to pull the sword from the tree, but they take turns based on social rank. While we, the readers, surmise that the sword is intended for a *specific* person (and only for him), the characters in the story clearly believe that more than one person might have the strength to free the sword. Thinking it would be better that such a sword wind up in the hands of a well-born man, the higher-ranking men try first. After a number of those men try and fail, it is Sigmund's turn (recall that he is Volsung's son and Signy's twin). Sigmund pulls the sword out of the tree with ease: "it came out in his hands as if it had sat there loose for him."[3] [7]

Sigmund's feat clearly frustrates expectations of what "ought to be," where those expectations are based entirely on social conventions concerning status. Once again, the saga depicts one of the Volsung heroes (and we will shortly see Sigmund develop into a great hero indeed) somehow breaking social convention or stepping outside its bounds – and, once more, it is at the instigation of Odin. The god has enchanted the sword so that it is not the "highest ranking" man who wins it, but rather the man who is the *best* – who deserves the sword through nature, not convention. But there is a further level here as well, for Sigmund's winning the sword is intended to undermine, in a sense, yet another socially-sanctioned arrangement: the marriage of Signy and Siggeir.

After Sigmund pulls the sword from the tree, Siggeir is barely able to conceal his rage and envy. "King Siggeir offered to buy the sword from Sigmund for three times its weight in gold." However, Siggeir responds, "You could have taken this sword from the tree as easily as I did, if it had been meant for you. But now, because it came to me, you will never receive it from my hand, even if you offer me all the gold you own." This only enrages Siggeir further, for he suspects that he is being mocked. However, "because he was a man of underhanded character," he

pretends as if he is unphased by Sigmund's refusal. The text tells us that that very evening, Siggeir began plotting his revenge.[4] [8]

Why is Siggeir so enraged by Sigmund winning the sword? Is it just because he covets such a great prize? H. R. Ellis Davidson mentions the Scandinavian custom of plunging a sword into a tree or post in wedding celebrations. She notes that "in Norway there was a custom surviving into recent times for the bridegroom to plunge his sword into the roof beam, to test the 'luck' of the marriage by the depth of the scar made."[5] [9] The sexual connotations of this are obvious. Davidson also suggests that the sword represents the "luck" (*hamingja*) of the family itself. It is possible that Siggeir is entirely aware of this symbolic significance of the sword, "and that its possession would symbolize the 'luck' which would come to him with his bride, and the successful continuation of his own line in the sons to be born of the marriage."[6] [10] According to convention, it really *should* be Siggeir for whom the sword was intended. When it becomes clear that this is not the case, he feels grievously insulted.

All of this seems reasonable, and we can expand upon it. Davidson also invokes Tacitus, who mentions that among the Germans it was the custom that the bride gave her groom "some weapon." The bride, too, received weapons from her husband (among other gifts), and she was expected to hand all these wedding gifts "on to her children, unimpaired and in worthy state, which her daughters-in-law may receive and which may be handed on again to grandchildren." Certainly, the motif of a weapon being safeguarded by women and passed down to later generations is one of the most important elements in the plot of the *Volsung Saga*. Tacitus tells us also that the exchange of these wedding gifts was considered "their greatest bond, these their sacred rites, these their marriage divinities."[7] [11]

Given all of this, it seems clear that when Odin appears at the wedding with his sword, in effect he is *providing Signy's wedding gift to her husband*. (It is natural that Odin should perform this function, since he is, after all, Signy's great-great grandfather and the progenitor of the entire clan – although the others present are unaware of this.) When Sigmund proves to be the only one capable of receiving the sword by pulling it from

Barnstokk, this effectively identifies him as Signy's husband! Of course, this analysis of the situation further supports Davidson's claim that Siggeir's rage is due to his understanding of the symbolic meaning of the sword, and of Sigmund's possession of it. Those who know what is to come in the saga know that Sigmund will become Signy's husband – not in the eyes of society and social convention, but in the eye of Odin. The incest of Signy and Sigmund, which, as we will see, Odin brings about through an elaborate manipulation of events, is the necessary condition for producing the next generation of the Volsung clan.

Throughout this essay I have repeatedly claimed that one of the key features of the saga is that in order for the Volsung clan to flourish and multiply, Odin and its members must continually violate conventional standards of morality and social order. The incest of Sigmund and Signy is certainly the most notorious example of this – although, arguably, greater and even more shocking examples are to come.

We have seen that the first step Odin takes toward making this incest possible involves a violation of the conventions surrounding weddings and their celebration. It is he who appears as an unannounced and uninvited guest with – as I have argued – the bridal gift intended for Signy's husband. And it is Odin who, through his magic, manipulates the moment so that Siggeir, Signy's husband according to law and convention, impotently struggles to win the sword, but fails. Odin's plan is for the Volsungs to bear further fruit through Signy – but not with the participation of the loathsome Siggeir. Instead, Odin signals his displeasure with King Volsung's plan to marry his daughter off to an inferior man, and symbolically declares the winner of the sword, her twin brother Sigmund, as her true husband. In the eyes of the law, Signy and Siggeir are already man and wife by the time Odin appears in the hall (presumably the wedding preceded the feast), but we will see that their marriage is a calamity, and that none of their children survive.

In terms of the significance of the sword, we must also bear in mind Davidson's theory that the sword represents the "luck" of the clan. Of course, Odin is the progenitor of the clan itself, who continually manipulates it to his own purposes. We must therefore also consider the

possibility that, through the sword, Odin is transmitting his own "luck" to Sigmund, and thereby once again is in effect inserting his own "seed" into the Volsung bloodline.[8] [12] But why manipulate matters so that it is the twins, Sigmund and Signy, who continue the clan through incest? Why not arrange things so that Signy winds up with a worthy man of another clan – someone who is brave and true, unlike the weak and conniving Siggeir? And if incest *must* be involved, why does Odin have Signy commit incest with Sigmund, rather than with one of the other nine brothers? Obviously, it is key that Signy and Sigmund are *twins*. Odin's clear intention is to produce as pure a Volsung as possible, through the intercourse of the most closely related male and female of the clan. The obvious intention is that a pure Volsung will be a *super-Volsung*, the greatest member of the clan yet.

We will see that this intention is only partially realized. But there is a great deal to be covered in the story, before we reach the notorious episode of the incest of the twins. And some of the episodes to come are among the most gruesome and fascinating of the entire saga. . . .

Notes

[1] [13] The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 4.

[2] [14] Crawford, 4.

[3] [15] Crawford, 5.

[4] [16] Crawford, 5.

[5] [17] H. R. Ellis Davidson, "The Sword at the Wedding," Folklore 71:1 (March 1960): 1-18; 3.

[6] [18] Davidson, 5.

[7] [19] Tacitus' Germany, trans. Herbert W. Benario (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 72.

[8] [20] On the sword as carrier of "luck," see also Stephen E. Flowers, Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation (Smithfield, TX: Rûna-Raven, 2011), 94ff.

PART IV

In our last installment, we saw how King Volsung marries his daughter Signy off to the loathsome King Siggeir of Götaland, a man she "was not eager to marry." Into the wedding feast marches a man who can be none other than the god Odin in his guise as the Wanderer. From his cloak he draws a sword and plunges it into Barnstokk, the tree growing in the middle of the hall (which symbolizes the Volsung clan itself). Whoever can pull the sword from the tree wins it as a gift. Only Sigmund, Signy's twin, is able to perform this feat. He thus earns the everlasting enmity of Siggeir, who believes the sword should be his. I argued previously that this is because the sword offered at a wedding traditionally represented the "luck" of the family, and was intended for the bridegroom. Thus, when only Signy's brother can free the sword, it seems that Odin is signaling that he is Signy's rightful husband. Most readers will already be aware that, sure enough, it is through the incest of Signy and Sigmund that the Volsung line continues – and that this is all part of Odin's plan.

Chapter 4. Siggeir Invites Volsung to Join Him

After Sigmund refuses to sell the sword to Siggeir, the latter begins plotting his revenge that very night – and the text tells us that he also consummates his marriage to Signy. The following morning the weather is good and Siggeir announces that he is returning home immediately. Volsung perceives that Siggeir desperately wishes to depart the feast. But Signy goes to her father, and makes one last, desperate attempt to free herself from Siggeir. Jackson Crawford translates her words to Volsung as follows:

I don't want to go away with King Siggeir. There is nothing in my heart that smiles for him. And I know, thanks to my gift of second sight which is common in our family, that this decision will cause a disaster for us if you won't change your mind immediately.

The words concerning "second sight" deserve a closer look. In Old Norse, the line reads *veit ek af framvísi minni ok af kynfylgju várri*. This might be more literally translated as "I know from my foreknowledge and from the fetch of our kin [*kynfylgja*]." The *fylgja* is one of the more complex and mysterious aspects of the Germanic pagan worldview. (See my essay

"Ancestral Being [6].") It is often referred to as a "guardian spirit," which is something of an oversimplification, but helpful up to a point. The lore seems to suggest that there are *fylgjur* of individual men, and ones associated with entire clans are families – this is the concept of the *kynfylgja* ("fetch" of the kin).

This *kynfylgja* can sometimes become attached to a single individual who, as it were, carries the guardian spirit of the entire family. The strong suggestion here in Chapter Four is that the *kynfylgja* of the Volsungs has attached itself to Signy, with whom it communicates. This makes perfect sense, for we know that it is through Signy – specifically through her incest with Sigmund – that the clan will continue. Later we will see, as Stephen Flowers has discussed in detail, how the *kynfylgja* (or *hamingja–kynfylgja*, for the two concepts are hard to disentangle) is passed to later generations of the Volsungs by means of the sword won by Sigmund.[1] [7]

In any case, Volsung ignores Signy's words of warning. This is entirely predictable. It is virtually axiomatic in the Icelandic sagas that women's prophecies always turn out to be true, and that they are always ignored or misinterpreted by men. It is also predictable that Volsung's answer to her appeals entirely to social convention. Throughout the parts of this commentary I have repeatedly claimed that one of the key features of the saga is that in order for the Volsung clan to flourish and multiply, Odin and its members must continually transgress conventional standards of morality and social order. (The incest of Sigmund and Signy is only the most notorious example of this.)

It was Volsung's concern with establishing conventional social ties – an "advisable" alliance with Siggeir – and his lack of concern for his daughter's own feelings that has gotten his entire family into this mess. This may seem at first glance like a projection, on my part, of modern values onto our pre-modern ancestors. Yes, it is quite true that arranged marriages were common. Yet it is also true that one of the things that makes Western culture unique – and this is especially true of the culture of Northern Europe, dating to pre-modern times – is that the wishes of the parties to marriage, including those of women, *were* taken into consideration.[2] [8] Thus, during the time in which the saga was written,

the reaction of readers to Signy's forced and unwanted marriage would have been very much like our own.

Appealing, once again, to social convention, Volsung tells his daughter that if she were to break her marriage vows to Siggeir it would bring shame upon the family, especially since Siggeir is innocent of wrongdoing. All trust would be lost between the parties, and Siggeir would pay the Volsungs back with hostility. Thus, "the only proper thing for us to do is to honor our end of the agreement."[3] [9] This is not by any means a simple conflict, and I do not mean to suggest anything as facile as an outright rejection of social convention in favor of "the heart." The points that Volsung makes are entirely valid. There is thus a genuine and, it seems, irreconcilable conflict here. And this is a theme we find in many of the sagas and traditional stories: characters who are bound by oaths or ties to do things that cause harm or unhappiness to the undeserving. We will see this problem reappear later in the saga. In the present case, Odin has already, in effect, cut this Gordian knot with his sword: Sigmund's winning of that sword will ultimately result in the breaking of Signy and Siggeir's marriage, the destruction of Siggeir's clan, and the continuation of the Volsungs.

Before Siggeir sails home with his bride, he invites Volsung and his sons to visit him in three months' time in Götaland. He suggests that Volsung bring with him as many warriors as he wishes "who would do him credit with their company."[4] [10] Siggeir explains that he issues this invitation to make up for leaving the wedding feast so abruptly, which was considered bad form. Volsung accepts his invitation – oblivious, it seems, to the inevitable trap the reader knows is coming.

Chapter 5. Concerning the Treachery of King Siggeir

Three months later, travelling in three ships, Volsung, his sons, and their men arrive at Götaland late at night. They are met by Signy, who asks to speak with her father and brothers in private. She tells them that they are walking into an ambush, and that Siggeir has assembled a mighty army. She begs them to sail back, gather a larger force, and then return and wreak vengeance on Siggeir. Unsurprisingly, Volsung refuses to do this, since to flee would be dishonorable. This is certainly a questionable

decision, however. Volsung and his men have not yet been engaged in battle. Instead, they have been forewarned that battle is forthcoming. What would be the shame, at this point, in withdrawing temporarily in order to assemble a larger force, if they fully intend to return and fight? Volsung's decision is not particularly sensible, and will result in his destruction, and the destruction of almost his entire family. The words he uses to justify his decision are, nevertheless, eloquent and also somewhat surprising.

To begin with, Volsung says, "Everyone will say that I swore, *while still in my mother's womb*, that I would never flee in fear from iron nor from fire, and I have kept that oath all of my days until now – and why would I not keep it in my old age?"[5] [11] Recall that Volsung was "already very big" when he was born. Indeed, the birth killed his mother, and he kissed her before she died. As I noted in my commentary on Chapter Two, this indicates that Volsung is born with a degree of mature awareness. Thus, the saga's writer may mean it literally when he tells us that Volsung swore this oath in his mother's womb. Again and again, we will see that members of this clan are more than merely human (no surprise, given that Odin is the clan's progenitor). Of course, the idea that he swore this oath in the womb could also be taken as a poetic way of underscoring the fact that such an ethos, and the instincts it gives rise to, are part of Volsung's heritage: so deeply engrained in him that they existed in his character prior to any conscious choice.

"Everyone will die someday," Volsung goes on to say, "and no one can escape death when his time has come. I say that we will not flee but will do everything we can in the boldest way. . . . It will never be said that I fled, nor that I begged for peace."[6] [12] He also reminds Signy that he has never lost a battle. She weeps and begs not to be sent back to King Siggeir, but Volsung commands her to go, and to stay with her husband regardless of what happens to them.

The following morning, Volsung and his men rise and prepare for battle. It is not long before Siggeir's army arrives and the fighting begins. With the exaggeration typical of the sagas, we are told that "it is said that on this day, King Volsung and his sons went all the way through the ranks of

King Siggeir's army eight times, cutting with weapons in both hands." But what we are told next is genuinely strange: "when they were preparing one more such assault, King Volsung fell dead in the middle of his own troops."[7] [13] The saga contains not one word about the manner of the death. Was it by sword, or axe, or spear? Nothing is said.

Furthermore, the text makes clear that he is "in the middle of his own troops," while they were preparing another assault – in other words, during a lull in the fighting. Did Volsung receive a wound earlier from which he now succumbs? Nothing like this is mentioned. All we are are told is that, suddenly, he "fell dead." Could this sudden death be at the hands, in fact, of Odin? Does Volsung abruptly fall dead once Odin's favor is withdrawn from him? Certainly it is true that the death of Volsung will be necessary to advance the subsequent events of the story – events leading to the next phase in Odin's plans to breed the perfect warrior. In the battle that follows Volsung's death, all his men are killed, except for his ten sons. It is at this point that the events of the saga become genuinely dark and macabre, and a gloom hangs over the story. This mood will last until the birth of Sigurd in Chapter Thirteen.

Signy receives word of her father's death and the defeat of his army. Privately, she speaks with Siggeir and makes a strange request. She asks that he not kill her brothers immediately, but instead hold them prisoner, in chains. "I recall that it is said that 'An eye loves what it lingers on,'" she says, apparently trying to appeal to Siggeir's sadistic nature. He responds that she is foolish to ask that her brothers suffer more than if they were simply executed. But he happily grants her request, admitting that he will enjoy prolonging their torment. Just what, we wonder, does Siggeir have in store for them?

Though he must have had at his disposal stocks, a jail, and possibly even a dungeon, Siggeir invents a novel way to bond the brothers and hold them captive. They are taken out into the forest, ordered to lie down next to each other, and a huge tree trunk is laid over their legs, so that they are pinned to the ground. At midnight on the first evening of their captivity, "an old she-wolf, huge and ugly" arrives and eats one of the brothers, devouring him completely. Now, I will go ahead and reveal that

in the last line of this chapter, we are told, "Some say that this wolf was the mother of King Siggeir, and that she had taken a wolf's form by the use of magic and sorcery."[8] [14]

The saga's writer frequently uses a construction like "some say" when introducing particularly fantastic elements in the story. But the likelihood is that Siggeir does have some connection to this she-wolf. It seems probable that he holds the brothers prisoner out in the forest precisely because he knows that the she-wolf will visit them. In any case, this is the first instance of shape-shifting in the saga – several more will follow. We are told nothing else about the mother of Siggeir, and we are suspicious that, here again, we somehow find the hand of Odin at work. Consider: Why a wolf, rather than, say, a brown bear (which are plentiful in Sweden, the setting of the story)? The wolf, of course, is associated with Odin. I will return to this point later.

Signy learns, through a trusted servant, that one of her brothers has been devoured. However, she is powerless to come to their aid. On each of the following nights, the she-wolf returns and devours another brother. Soon, nine are dead and only Sigmund remains. Signy is frantic, but she devises a clever plan. Before the tenth night falls, she sends her servant to Sigmund with a pot of honey. The servant is told to spread the honey over Sigmund's face and to leave some in his mouth.

That night, the she-wolf comes for Sigmund. She sniffs him, notices the honey, then begins licking it off his face. When she sticks her tongue into his mouth, Sigmund summons up his courage and bites down hard on the wolf's tongue, holding onto it with all his strength. The wolf tries desperately to get loose. She tries bracing her paws against the trunk and pushes so hard on it that it breaks into pieces – thus freeing Sigmund, but still he does not let go. Finally, the wolf pulls against Sigmund with such force that her tongue is torn out at the root, and she dies on the spot.

This passage has always reminded me of an episode in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, where Zarathustra comes upon a shepherd who is choking to death on a snake. As the shepherd slept by the roadside, a large, black snake had crawled down his throat and bit into his flesh. Zarathustra

commands him, “Bite! Bite its head off! Bite” The shepherd does so, and there follows a famous passage:

Far away he spewed the head of the snake – and he jumped up. No longer shepherd, no longer human – one changed, radiant, laughing! Never yet on earth has a human being laughed as he laughed! O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter; and now a thirst gnaws at me, a longing that never grows still. My longing for this laughter gnaws at me; oh, how do I bear to go on living! And how could I bear to die now![9] [15]

The shepherd is choking, it seems, on evil – an evil that would consume him, unless he consumes it first. (Nietzsche does not offer an explicit interpretation of the meaning of the snake, though clearly it is malevolent.)[10] [16] The shepherd is transformed by the experience. Does something similar happen with Sigmund? It seems highly likely that this ordeal represents a rite of passage. In a famous episode we will cover in a future installment, Sigurd kills the dragon Fafnir and eats part of his heart, thereby acquiring some of the dragon’s power. Does Sigmund acquire some of the wolf’s power by biting off its tongue? Perhaps. What is clear is that this daring feat is part of his development into the sort of hero Odin would have for his Einherjar.

In fact, before we leave Chapter Four, let us consider the subterranean way Odin has operated throughout this whole grisly episode. Why did nine brothers have to be eliminated? The answer is that it is Odin’s plan to force Sigmund and Signy together so that, I have argued, they can breed a pure Volsung, the perfect warrior. As we will see, what brings brother and sister to incest is *not* simply the desire to continue their clan. Instead, they want to produce a child strong enough to aid them in their plan to seek revenge against Siggeir. If some of the other brothers had been left alive, they could have banded together to go after Siggeir, and there would have been no necessity to produce a new Volsung. (Indeed, as we will see, *still others* must be eliminated before Signy is finally forced to consider the option of incest!)

All of this – the sword intended for Sigmund, the envy of Siggeir, the death of Volsung (who mysteriously “falls dead”), the deaths of the nine

brothers – is part of the plan orchestrated by Odin. The killing of the nine brothers exhibits the same sort of cunning we find in the story of Odin's winning the poetic mead (recounted in Snorri's *Edda*). Specifically, I mean the episode in which Odin causes the death of Baugi's nine thralls so that the giant will hire him to mow his hay, in return for one sip of the mead. We must also consider that the death of the brothers is not only by means of a wolf, an animal associated with Odin, but a werewolf. (Werewolves will appear again later, in a famous episode involving Sigmund and his son Sinfiotli.) We are told that Siggeir's old mother is a sorceress who shape-shifts into wolfen form – undoubtedly using the same techniques of *seidhr* known to Odin.[11] [17] Does she act at Odin's behest, wittingly or unwittingly? Here we can only speculate, as the text says nothing other than what has already been mentioned. What is very clear in the story, however, is that little happens that is not somehow directly or indirectly contrived by the god.

In our next installment we will see Sigmund and Signy's plan for revenge unfold – and we will see that, of the two, it is Signy who is the coldest and most ruthless of the surviving Volsungs.

Notes

[1] [18] *See Stephen E. Flowers, Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation (Smithfield, Tx.: Rûna-Raven, 2011).*

[2] [19] *See Chapter Nine of Kevin Macdonald, Cultural Insurrections (Atlanta: The Occidental Press, 2007).*

[3] [20] *The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 5.*

[4] [21] *Crawford, 6.*

[5] [22] *Crawford, 6. Emphasis added.*

[6] [23] *Crawford, 6.*

[7] [24] *Crawford, 7.*

[8] [25] *Crawford, 8. See note 10 for a more literal translation of part of this line.*

[9] [26] *Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 160.*

[10][27] *Possibly it represents "slave morality."*

[11][28] *The text does not mention seidhr. Instead, it states that Siggeir changes her shape by means of tröllskapar (trolls' lore) fjölkynngi (sorcery; literally "much magic"). However, in Chapter Seven, Signy enlists the aid of a shape-shifting witch who is literally referred to as a seiðkona (seidhr-woman).*

PART V

In our last installment, we saw that after Sigmund pulls the sword from the tree Barnstokk, Siggeir (who has just married Sigmund's sister, Signy) offers to buy it from him. When Sigmund refuses, Siggeir immediately begins plotting revenge. On a pretext, he takes Signy and leaves the wedding feast early, inviting Volsung and his ten sons to visit him in Götaland. Three months later, travelling in three ships, Volsung, his sons, and their men arrive at Götaland late at night. They are met by Signy, who warns them that they are walking into an ambush, and that Siggeir has assembled a mighty army. Unsurprisingly, Volsung refuses to flee, saying that it would be dishonorable. In the ensuing battle, Volsung suddenly and inexplicably "falls dead" in the middle of his troops. His ten sons are taken prisoner by Siggeir and pinned under a great tree trunk in a dark part of the forest. For the next nine nights, Siggeir's mother, who has taken the form of "an old she-wolf, huge and ugly," eats one of the brothers, until only Sigmund is left. Before the tenth night falls, Signy sends a servant to Sigmund, who spreads honey over Sigmund's face and in his mouth. That night, the she-wolf approaches Sigmund, sniffs him, and begins licking the honey off his face. When she sticks her tongue into his mouth, Sigmund bites down hard. The wolf struggles so fiercely her tongue is torn out at the root, and she dies on the spot. In all of this we see the hand of Odin at work, even in the sudden death of Volsung. Why did nine brothers have to be killed? As we will now see, the answer is that it is Odin's plan to force Sigmund and Signy together so that they can breed a *pure* Volsung, the perfect warrior.

Chapter 6. How Sigmund Killed the Sons of Siggeir

When the wolf struggles to free herself from Sigmund, she manages to shatter the tree trunk under which Sigmund is pinned, freeing him. Sigmund ventures deeper into the forest and hides out. Anxious to learn whether he is living or dead, Signy dispatches a messenger who manages to find Sigmund, and to get the entire story from him. Then Signy herself ventures into the dark forest and meets secretly with her brother. They plot revenge, and Signy suggests that Sigmund build himself a turf house in the forest and continue to hide there. Turf houses were built by piling

earth over a wood-frame roof, which provided effective insulation. Sometimes they were actually built into hillsides (which we imagine may have been the case with the house Sigmund builds, as it would have provided effective camouflage). The saga writer would have been quite familiar with turf houses, as they were very common in Iceland, and were to be found in Norway as well.

Years now pass, during which Signy makes clandestine visits to Sigmund, bringing him whatever he needs. For his part, Siggeir believes that all the Volsungs are dead. In these intervening years, Siggeir and Signy also have two sons. When the eldest turns ten, Signy sends him into the forest to live with Siggeir. Brother and sister have agreed, you see, that Sigmund needs the aid of another male in order to exact his revenge upon Siggeir. He intends to raise the boy to help him in his plan. (How the boy's absence will be explained to Siggeir is never discussed.)

When Signy's son arrives at Sigmund's turf house, deep in the forest, it is already late in the day. Sigmund greets him warmly and puts the boy to work making bread. The boy's task is to take flour from a bag and make dough, while Sigmund steps out to gather firewood. However, when Sigmund returns, he finds that the boy has not even begun his task. The boys says, "I didn't dare touch the flour bag, because there's something alive in there."[1] [6] As we will see, there is indeed a poisonous snake in the bag. And it will become clear that this is no accident: Sigmund has placed the snake there as a test. It is a test which, in Sigmund's eyes, this boy has clearly failed.

Sigmund therefore suspects that the boy might not be brave enough to assist him in his plans. When he meets with Signy again he tells her that "he didn't feel like a man was near him, no matter how near the boy was."[2] [7] In other words, the boy is fundamentally *argr*, the Old Norse term for "unmanly." This is no surprise, as he is the son of the jealous and treacherous Siggeir. What comes next always shocks readers. "Then kill him," Signy advises. "He doesn't need to live any longer."[3] [8] And Sigmund does just that. Winter passes, and during the winter after that, Signy sends her younger son to Sigmund. Here the saga writer tells us that "there is no reason to dwell on that story for long," since the same

thing happens all over again. In other words, the younger boy is put to the same test, and fails it just as his brother did, proving himself insufficiently manly. Once again, Sigmund kills the boy "at the request of Signy." (How the deaths of these children are explained to their father, Siggeir, is never discussed.)

Now, one should be careful not to draw any sweeping conclusions from this about the qualities of Viking motherhood! As I noted in earlier parts of this essay, a major theme of the saga is that the Volsungs continually transgress moral and social norms. Remember that, with the Volsungs, Odin is breeding a clan of super-warriors whom he can harvest for his army of the dead. Such a race cannot prove itself within the constraints of society – it must break those constraints. Again and again, we therefore find the Volsungs being placed in situations where they not only break moral conventions but seem to exhibit a pronounced lack of ordinary human feeling. This includes a number of crimes committed against blood relations. In Chapter Two, for example, Rerir slaughters his uncles. The text makes clear that this would have been considered a great transgression, as shocking to our ancestors as it is to us: The saga writer tells us that Rerir did this "even though such a slaughter of near relatives had until then been unheard of in every way."[4] [9] And here, in Chapter Six, we find Signy complicit in the murder of her own children, perhaps the least forgivable of all crimes. We will see in Chapter Thirty-Eight, however, that Gudrun, the widow of Sigurd, will surpass Signy in heartlessness: She will behead her own children.

Chapter 7. The Origin of Sinfjotli

The murder of the two children leaves Sigmund without any obvious candidates for the male accomplice he will need in order to carry out the Volsungs' vengeance on Siggeir. Pondering this problem, Signy hits upon a solution when she is visited by what translators usually render as a "very powerful witch" (as does Crawford) or "sorceress" (as does R. G. Finch). The Old Norse word is *seiðkona*, or "*seidhr*-woman," a practitioner of the type of magic known as *seidhr*, which may have involved "shamanic" elements, including trance states. Signy asks the *seiðkona* "to change shapes" with her. In Old Norse, the term is *skipta*

hǫmum, where *skipta* means (among other things) "to change, or shift." *Hǫmum* is the dative plural of *hamr*: "shape or form." Thus, *skipta hǫmum* is literally "to shapeshift."

Hamr is a significant term in the Norse conception of human nature. Literally, it means "skin," and can denote the outward shape of the person. However, it was thought that an individual could possess more than one *hamr*, and some of these could be "projected" in order to act at a distance – as a "double" of the individual, or in some other form (e.g., an animal form).[5] [10] For instance, in the *Ynglinga Saga* (Chapter Seven) Snorri Sturluson writes, "Odin shifted shape [*Óðinn skipti hǫmum*]. At those times his body lay as though he were asleep or dead, and he then became a bird or a beast, a fish or a serpent, and went in the blink of an eye to far-off lands on his own or other men's errands." What Signy requests of the *seiðkona*, however, is that they exchange their outer *hamr*, or appearance. (Interestingly, the witch's initial reply to her request is "that's for you to decide," as if she is reluctant – though she grants Signy's wish.)

In the form of Signy, the witch goes to King Siggeir and stays by his side, going to bed with him at night. Siggeir suspects nothing. Meanwhile, in the form of the witch (who is described as quite beautiful), Signy goes to her brother in the forest. When she arrives, she claims to be lost. Sigmund invites her in, saying that he would not deny hospitality to a woman travelling on her own. He offers Signy a meal and, as they eat together, "Sigmund's eyes were often drawn to the woman," and he begins to desire her powerfully. After the meal, he boldly tells her that he wants them to share one bed that evening. "She said nothing against this," the saga writer tells us, "and Sigmund laid her down on his bed three nights in a row."[6] [11] The pattern of lying with a woman for three nights is often found in Norse literature. In *Rigsthula* the god Rig (Heimdall) lies for three nights with each of the women with whom he sires the three classes of thralls, freemen, and nobles. In Snorri's account of Odin's theft of the poetic mead, he lies for three nights with the giantess Gunlod, who guards the mead. According to some theories, the

product of their union is the god Bragi. In any case, the "three nights" formula seems to guarantee conception.

Sigmund has no suspicion whatever that the beautiful woman he slept with is Signy. After the three nights have passed, Signy returns home and exchanges shapes with the witch again. If she has any misgivings about having lain with her own brother, the saga does not mention it. This incest is, needless to say, yet another instance in which the Volsungs transgress basic moral conventions, seemingly without any feelings of hesitation or remorse, and it is probably the most notorious episode in the saga (and the one thing that most people remember about Wagner's *Die Walküre*). Months later, Signy gives birth to a boy, whom she names Sinfjotli.

There is some debate about the etymology of this name. R. G. Finch writes that "[t]he name probably means 'he of the ash- (literally 'cinder') gold fetter,' and is thus a kenning for wolf, though *–fjotli* may be a variant of Germanic **fetulæ*, 'spotted,' *sin–* being a later addition for alliterative purposes (in OE [i.e., in *Beowulf*] he is called simply 'Fitela'. . .) and his name could thus reflect his incestuous origin."[7] [12] If, indeed, the name does mean something like "he of the wolf," then we may wonder whether in some way Sinfjotli owes some of his prowess to the wolf-tongue bitten off by Sigmund, and possibly ingested. (Though this is pure speculation – and, as speculation, probably goes a bit far.)

In keeping with the pattern we have seen before, Sinfjotli is described as another superb specimen of Volsung manhood: "he proved to be big and strong and good-looking, and very much of the Volsung type."[8] [13] When he turns ten, Signy resolves to send him to live with Sigmund in the forest. Before doing so, however, she decides to test Sinfjotli. We are told that before sending her doomed children to Sigmund (i.e., the sons she had with Siggeir), Signy had sewed their sleeves to the skin of their arms. "They had taken it badly," the saga writer tells us. This is surely something of an understatement – and also an indication that they were likely to fail Sigmund's test as well. Now Signy does the same thing to Sinfjotli, sewing his sleeves to his arms – but then she rips the shirt from his body, tearing his flesh! Sinfjotli does not react. "Volsung wouldn't have thought much of such an injury," she says to herself.[9] [14]

When Sinfjotli arrives at Sigmund's hut, immediately he is put to the test we've seen before: Sinfjotli is asked to make bread while Sigmund gathers firewood, thus leaving him alone. When Sigmund returns, Sinfjotli, unlike his ill-fated half-brothers, is almost finished making the bread. Cautiously, Sigmund asks him if he found anything unusual in the flour bag. Sinfjotli responds that he had the suspicion that something was alive in the flour when he started making the dough, but says, "I kneaded it down, whatever it was." Sigmund is delighted, but tells him, "You can't eat this bread tonight. You've ground down a huge poisonous serpent in it." (We should note that, at this point, Sigmund has no idea that Sinfjotli is his son.)

The chapter ends with the sagaman telling us that while Sigmund was so strong he could eat poison without being killed, Sinfjotli could not do so. However, he can withstand poison falling on his skin. This small detail breaks a pattern we have seen so far: Usually, each new generation of the Volsung clan is stronger than the last. Sinfjotli, however, is not as strong as Sigmund – and his inability to ingest poison will, in fact, prove his undoing. Sinfjotli, indeed, is a rather disappointing character, and constitutes (as we shall see) a kind of puzzling dead-end in the saga – puzzling because of his origins in the notorious incest of brother and sister, and the implication that he is a *pure* Volsung. We expect great things of him, but he doesn't deliver.

This flaw in the narrative structure of the story may reflect the fact that the saga writer is weaving together a number of different stories, which themselves existed in multiple variations. Wagner was certainly wise, in his revision of the story, to make Sigurd the product of the incest, and to drop the character of Sinfjtoli entirely. In the saga it is Sigurd, Sigmund's second son, who will prove greater than his father. And one cannot help but see his most famous deed, the killing of the dragon Fafnir, foreshadowed in Sinfjotli's killing of the "huge" (but, of course, much smaller) serpent in the bag of flour.

Sinfjotli has survived the initiation rite his half-brothers failed, at the price of their lives. In the next chapter, we will see that Sinfotli's initiation continues, as Sigmund takes his son into the wilderness, to learn how to

kill men. In one of the saga's most famous episodes, Sigmund and Sinfjotli become *werewolves*, terrorizing the land. In this we will find echoes of the mysterious, half-forgotten initiation rites of the men who dedicate themselves to Odin, "leader of an army of ecstatic wolf-warriors."[10] [15]

Notes

[1] [16] *The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2017), 9.*

[2] [17] *Crawford, 9.*

[3] [18] *Crawford, 9.*

[4] [19] *Crawford, 2.*

[5] [20] *See Claude Lecouteux, The Return of the Dead, trans. John E. Graham (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2009), 169-170.*

[6] [21] *Crawford, 9.*

[7] [22] *See Finch, The Saga of the Volsungs (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965), 9-10, footnote.*

[8] [23] *Crawford, 10.*

[9] [24] *Crawford, 10.*

[10] [25] *See Kris Kershaw, The One-Eyed God: Odin and the (Indo-) Germanic Männerbünde (Washington, D.C.: Journal of Indo-European Studies monograph No. 36), 8.*

ANCESTRAL BEING

PART I

1. Introduction

This essay presents an "ontology of the individual." The theory is new, though it has very old roots. "Ontology" is the branch of philosophy that studies being-as-such, or "being as being," as Aristotle expressed it.[1] [5] My argument is that the being of an individual person is bound up with that individual's relation to his family or clan. Although we can speak about relations to family members both living and dead, my focus is upon the individual's indebtedness to the past. In other words, my argument deals with how the being of an individual is shaped by *what is inherited*. Additionally, one could argue that the being of an individual is constituted through the individual's relation to his race or *ethny*, which is essentially a large "extended family" of genetically similar people. However, that will have to be a subject for a future essay. The argument here will concern itself exclusively with familial or *clannic* relations, in just the conventional sense in which we already understand them. ("Clannic" is the term I shall use here, rather than "clannish," which has negative connotations.)

To speak of an individual's being is to speak of *what he is*. Normally, we think of a man's being as more or less confined within the space occupied by the individual person we see with our eyes. This is thinking of being as "inside your skin," as Alan Watts would put it. The ontology of the individual offered here requires us to rethink this simplistic idea – and to realize that it is not a "commonsense" perspective, as one might suppose, but really a quintessentially modern way of looking at things. If the being of the individual is bound up with the past, then what "I am" extends beyond the confines of my perceptible body, both in space and in time. We will see that coming to terms with this idea requires us to completely rethink not just our way of considering individual being, but even our conception of what is real.

I will present three different approaches to these issues. The first is purely philosophical, grounded in the neo-Hegelian metaphysics I have

discussed in other essays.[2] [6] The purpose of this first approach is to prepare the ground: to make the reader ready for the reception of some ideas that will seem exceedingly strange to modern sensibilities. The intention of this first approach is not unlike that of Gurdjieff in *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*: "To destroy, mercilessly and without any compromise whatever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world."[3] [7] Readers who find these sections difficult or "too philosophical" are advised to persevere, for there is light at the end.

The second approach is from the standpoint of the Germanic tradition. Here I will draw upon some of the most imaginative and reliable scholarship dealing with the Germanic treatment of the past, and of the past as living within the individual through what Stephen E. Flowers has called the "*hamingja–fylgja* complex." The third approach is scientific, though some will likely call it "pseudo-scientific," for I shall be drawing upon the theories of renegade biologist Rupert Sheldrake. His theory of "morphogenetic fields" provides us with a plausible (though highly controversial) scientific interpretation of the traditional Germanic beliefs concerning the heritability of the *hamingja* and *fylgja*.

Neither the scientific nor the philosophical approach is offered as a "validation" of Germanic tradition, which is presented here as a source of truth in its own right. In fact, each of the three approaches is a source of truth, and they illuminate each other. That these approaches "agree," up to a point, is certainly something that I find significant. The essay concludes with some reflections on how the recognition of our clannic or ancestral being shaped our ancestors' lives and self-conception, and how it ought to shape ours.

2. Metaphysics

Everything is related to everything else. This is the point from which we will begin. It is one of the basic claims of neo-Hegelian philosophy, and it is easily understood.

Pick any object near you and begin to consider its relatedness to other things. Suppose it is a coffee cup. First of all, it is *your* cup – that is one of

its relations. And it is clearly related to the saucer it sits on. And to the liquid it contains, which it was crafted to contain. Your coffee comes from Kenya, so the cup is related to Kenya, and to Africa, and to the Africans that harvested the coffee. Your cup is porcelain, so it is related – distantly – to China. And to Marco Polo, who was the first European to mention porcelain in print. You bought the cup in San Francisco, so it is related to that place as well. There is a chip on the base, caused when your dog's tail knocked the cup to the floor. So, the cup is related to the dog, and to Germany, since the dog is a German shepherd. And the cup is related to wolves, since what caused the chip was the result of a long evolutionary process that began with wolves.

We could consider *negative* relations as well. For example, the cup is porcelain and *not* metal, thus it is not capable of some of the properties of metal cups (e.g., attracting magnets). The cup is not conscious, thus it is not *aware* of any of these relations – and this gives us some of the reasons it is the way it is; why, for example, you can drink from it but cannot have a conversation with it. The cup is yours, and *not* your neighbor's – and so on.

Needless to say, given enough knowledge, insight, and imagination, we could go on this way indefinitely, listing ways in which the cup is related – negatively and positively – to other things. This would be a task we could never actually complete, since in one way or another the cup is related to *everything* else that exists – every other cup, every other person, every blade of grass, every grain of sand. And each of those things is, in turn, related to the cup and to all other things that exist. Everything, in fact, is related to everything else. The world is not like a bag of ball bearings: separate and unconnected bits. The world is more like an organism, in which everything is connected to everything else and each thing is what it is in terms of its place in the whole. We live within a vast network of relations, in which all things are connected in countless ways.

This position has several interesting implications. Let us first consider the question of the identity of individual things. Since everything is related to everything else, and since a thing's relations are all characteristics of it, aspects of what it is, a *complete* account of the being of one thing would

have to include an account of its relations to all other things. In other words, to *fully* know one thing, we would have to know everything (a point that was realized by Plato).

This conclusion seems troublesome enough, but the understanding of relations I have set out actually calls into question the very *thinghood* of the thing. We are accustomed to thinking of the world as a collection of independent and separate things, and the things as just what we perceive with our five senses. But the above metaphysics suggests that the "things" of our experience are not independent at all, since their being is enmeshed in countless relations and dependencies. Does this mean that they are not, in some sense, "things"? But what exactly is a thing? In a certain sense, this is the oldest question in philosophy.

Philosophy began in the West with an attempt to identify what *truly is* – or, as we might put it, what is a *real thing*. Interestingly, right from the beginning there were no philosophers at all who claimed that things are just those perceptible units that we commonly think of as "things." In fact, that was universally acknowledged as the standpoint that had to be *transcended* by the love of wisdom. Various reasons were given for why the "things" of our experience lacked thinghood: they were reducible to some plastic substance or substances (e.g., the four elements) out of which they were made, and which outlasted them; they were "copies" of ideal objects on which they depended for their being, and which outlasted them; they were composed out of tiny, invisible things (e.g. atoms) which were the *real* things because, again, they outlasted the "things" made out of them; they were changing and incomplete, and so therefore had only a kind of illusory being, since whatever is a genuine thing would be stable and complete; and so on.

These treatments of the idea of "thinghood" span from Thales to Plato, and were in a certain fashion "synthesized" in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle, who for the first time made explicit that the problem at issue is precisely the problem of "thinghood" (in Greek, *ousia*, usually translated as "substance"). Whatever the differences between these positions, we can see that they share certain assumptions about thinghood: that whatever is a *true* thing is irreducible to something else, unchanging,

complete, eternal, and also absolutely self-sufficient and independent (dependent on nothing else for its being). The problem of thinghood is treated throughout the history of philosophy – indeed, one can say that it is not just the starting point of philosophy, but its central theme. The problem of thinghood was solved by Hegel (with a little help from Spinoza).

To make a very long story short, Hegel shows that, on one level, it would seem that *there are no (true) things*. This may be the conclusion to which the reader himself has already arrived. After all, what could possibly be irreducible, unchanging, complete, eternal, and absolutely self-sufficient? As we have already seen, and as Hegel famously emphasizes, everything is related to everything else; everything is dependent on myriad other things; each thing is merely a point in a vast web of relations. But, in truth, this means that really the universe is *one*, or that it is a *whole*. "Everything is related to everything else" means that everything is *connected* to everything else: out of many, one. And this is arguably the central teaching of Hegel's philosophy.

The only thing that fits all the characteristics of "thinghood" already discussed is the universe itself, considered as a one or a whole. It is irreducible to anything else, and absolutely without any dependency on anything, *for there is nothing else*. It is complete (it lacks nothing), for it contains everything. Indeed, it is infinite, since nothing else exists to limit it (to make it finite). And the whole, finally, is unchanging and eternal: change occurs *within it*, and it itself is just the organic totality of all process and all change and all relation. Thus, in a sense, the whole itself, in its ceaseless cycles, does not change. As Heraclitus says of the world, "Changing, it rests" (it was not without good reason that he was known as "the Riddler").

The whole for Hegel is "the Absolute" (known under the form of religious representation, he says, as "God" – a detail that need not distract us). Further, "the true is the whole," Hegel tells us in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is knowledge of the whole that is the "wisdom" sought by philosophy (the "love of wisdom") – a point that was understood long before Hegel; it is to be found already in Plato. Hegel refers to

"knowledge of the whole" as "Absolute Knowledge," meaning knowledge of the Absolute. They mean the same thing. However the idea is expressed, this knowledge sought by the philosopher is extremely elusive and mysterious.

How exactly are we to know the whole? Can we "define" it? Classically, definition consists in first locating something within the larger class or genus to which it belongs, then identifying the characteristics that distinguish it from other members of the same genus. But the whole/the universe/the one/the Absolute (however we describe it) does not belong to a larger or wider genus: there is *only one* whole, and it encompasses all genera, all classes, all individuals. Thus it cannot, strictly speaking, be defined. The whole cannot even be compared to anything else, for, again, there is nothing else like it. All comparisons are made between things *within* the whole. It is even questionable whether our languages are at all up to the task of speaking about the whole. After all, they were developed to deal with objects and situations within the whole, not the whole itself.

Our ancestors also saw the universe as one, and saw everything as related to everything else – though supporting this point would be beyond the scope of the present essay. To an extent, Hegel's philosophy can be understood as a modern re-appropriation of very ancient beliefs. Among other things, it must be recognized that this is the metaphysics that underlies the belief in "correspondences" and "sympathies" in nature, which was central to the pagan, polytheist worldview (and survived well into the Christian era). "Wisdom" consists somehow in knowing all these relations – how all things come together as one. To have this total knowledge would be to know everything that is, was, and will be.[4] [8]

In my essay "What is Odinism? [9]" I wrote that, "It is extraordinary that the chief god of the Germanic peoples is characterized principally by his ceaseless striving for wisdom. Odin, in fact, is a philosopher in the literal sense – a lover of wisdom."[5] [10] And wisdom, again, is classically understood to be "knowledge of the whole." Odin and the Odinist seek this absolute knowledge. Yet we are still faced with the mystery of how – or whether – this knowledge is even possible. It is tempting to think that it may only be possible to a god – but such defeatism is unacceptable to

an Odinist (who indeed strives *to be a god*; to be Odin). Might the runes, won by Odin through his self-sacrifice on the World Tree, be a symbolic language giving us an esoteric account of the whole? I have suggested something like this elsewhere,[6] [11] and it is an idea to which I intend to return in future essays.

As I have argued, knowledge of the whole would give us knowledge of the one, true thing or individual that exists. But it would also allow us to account for the being of everything *within* the whole: all that "commonsense" believes to be a "thing" and an "individual." The first and most fundamental way in which knowledge of the whole allows us to speak of "things" involves *inverting* our familiar ways of speaking – something that is actually characteristic of philosophy in general. For commonsense, the whole is "abstract," while things within the whole (men, trees, rocks, paramecia, etc.) are "concrete" individuals. But in terms of the metaphysics I have outlined here, the whole is, in fact, *the only genuine concrete*, while that which commonsense calls "concretes" are *abstracted* from the whole. In other words, the commonsense "individual" only has its being and its intelligibility as embedded within the network of relations that is the whole. In taking these "things" as concrete and individual, commonsense actually abstracts them from the larger context in which they have being and meaning. In short, the truth is the exact *reverse* of commonsense: the "things" of our experience are the abstractions, while the whole that is the object of philosophical knowledge is the only concrete.

What I have said about the "things" of our experience applies, of course, to us as well: to what we think of as human "individuals." Ultimately, to understand a single human being, he must be understood in terms of the entire network of relations that is the whole. However, for the purposes of this essay, I am going to focus *specifically* on the relation of the human individual to a smaller whole within the whole: the ancestral, clannic whole of which he is a part.

3. Time and Being

The being of the human individual is, in large measure, constituted through the past: through who and what has gone before him. I am the

result of countless prior events, and so too is my situation. The world I take as my own is not of my making, and my options for realizing myself were not created by me. I owe everything to what has gone before. This is obviously true in many senses. For example, each individual can be seen as a product of history – or we can see history as culminating in each individual. It comes to the same thing. For the purposes of this essay, however, we are concerned narrowly with the past that *lives inside* each of us, in the form of what I will call our "ensouling inheritance."

I want to avoid limiting myself through the use of the term "genetic inheritance," though what I am speaking about certainly includes this. And "genetic inheritance," in fact, is a good place to begin. If the reader has any knowledge of the degree to which our bodies and minds are "determined" by genes, he can immediately see the truth of the claim that we are constituted by a past that "lives inside us." (Some of the best evidence for this comes from studies of identical twins, which I will touch on briefly in a later section of this essay.) Our physical and psychic being bears within it literal traces of the physical and psychic being of those of our clan who have gone before.

Again, however, the topic under discussion cannot be reduced to genetics. One reason is that we must be open to the very different manner in which our ancestors believed we bear an inheritance within us. They conceived this primarily through the idea of the *fylgja*, which I will discuss much later. For the moment I will simply say that it would be a gross distortion to understand the *fylgja* merely as the way our ancestors conceived things before they had access to the science of genetics. To speak of "ensouling inheritance" comprises *all* the factors which shape or form us – and this is not limited, I will argue, to genetics. In this conception of "ensouling inheritance," I am drawing, in part, on the Aristotelian conception of the "soul" (*psyche*) as that which in-forms or lends form to the body. (And in speaking of multiple "souls" which inform us, he is not far off from the understanding of "soul" held by our Northern ancestors.)

In truth, the being of the individual (x) is at the intersection of past *and* future:

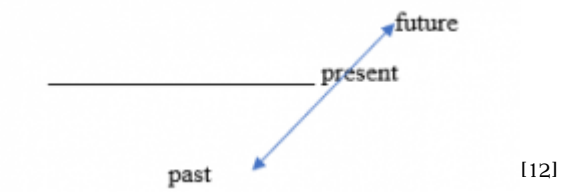
Past <————————X————————> Future

As I have already said, I am a result of what has gone before, in many senses. In me live traces of beings who pre-existed me. But stretching out before me is the future, and my being is bound up with it as well. To a great extent, I live my life in anticipation of the future. I make decisions based on what I think the future may bring, should bring, and should not bring. Societies also make decisions based on anticipation of the future.

In addition, we must consider the role of offspring in conceptualizing the future. We are a continuation of the past in that we are a continuation of the family or clan, and we see our children as a continuation of us. We give part of our being to our children; part of us lives inside them. If I have a child, what I am comes to include "being a father." This does not merely amount to taking on a new role: it is a fundamental alteration in my being. Part of my being is now externalized in another: I, myself, am *in* this child. My own being is mingled with that other, who is now part of what I am. This is why parents are so invested in their children – and why the loss of a child is such a shattering event. The child is part of the being of the parent – and a promise of that being extending into the future.

We have seen that in considering the being of the individual – what he is – we find that it is bound up with the past and future in multiple ways. But if we are considering the ways in which the being of the individual is bound up with the clan, then there is yet another dimension that must be considered, and should already be obvious. In terms of what I am, there is also my relation to my "extended family." In the broadest sense, this includes my relations to others within my *ethny*. But in narrower terms, there is my relation to other living members of my clan, aside from parents and children: brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins, and so on. Parents and grandparents, while they live, are nevertheless aspects of the part of our being that has to do with pastness. Even while they live, they come before us. Similarly, though the child lives alongside us in the present, the relation to the child is, in a sense, a relation to futurity.

In sum, we can speak of our clannic or ancestral being in terms of two planes, one of which stretches future-past, the other of which is a "horizontal" plane that involves our relations to others in our clan/family.



[12]

Those relations along the plane of "presentness" are, again, relations to individuals living alongside us, with whom we share our "ensouling inheritance." Thus, we can think of them as sharing "traces" of our being. This fact is encountered all the time in ordinary experience when we notice physical and behavioral commonalities with relatives. In these instances, we are noticing that, in certain respects, we *are* them, or that we are the same.

Now, earlier I discussed a metaphysical view that holds, contrary to "commonsense," that the whole is not "abstract," nor is the individual "concrete." Rather, the whole is the *only* concrete, and the individual is an abstraction from it. If we apply the same metaphysics to clannic relations, we are drawn to a surprising conclusion: the "beings" with which we have to deal are clans and *ethnies*, not individuals. In other words, the true concretes appear to be clans and *ethnies*, and individuals are "abstracted" from these. (There is another side to this, however, which I will consider in a moment.) This is because when we come to consider the being of the individual in relation to his clan or *ethny*, we realize that he is what he is only in and through that relation.

Thus, the diagram given earlier . . .

<————————-X————————->

. . . should be interpreted as saying what it literally seems to be saying: that the individual (x) is a point on a line continuing forwards and backwards. It is the line that is primary, not the point on the line.

As I noted earlier, our normal perspective is to think of the being of the individual as somehow contained within the individual's physical space. We are accustomed to think in terms of what we regard as discrete units,

and generally to take the world as consisting of such units. But the perspective I have put forth asks us to question this. We have seen that when I delve into the question of my being, I leave behind what I normally take to be the physical limits of myself. I wind up understanding my being in terms of my relations to others who are distinct from me yet (and here is the whole point) *not distinct from me*. On one way of looking at things, the clan appears to have primacy over the individual. The individual, again, is a point on the line, on the continuum. The individual is a perpetuation of the clan, and his being is derived from his membership in the clan. On the other hand, the clan only has its existence through the individuals that make it up.

What is fascinating about the clan is that it constitutes a kind of universal; a "concrete universal," as Hegel might put it. It is a self-specifying nature or kind. We speak of "the Joneses," but we only know the clan/family through the characteristics manifest by the members. Those members form a unity: first, because they all belong to the same clan; second, because they will exhibit certain characteristic traits (though these may sometimes skip a generation); third, because they are responding to or developing from a set of conditions or circumstances that are, at least to a degree, unique to their clan. Yet there is never a point, except in the most remarkable cases, where we can abstract away a "nature" and say, "This is what Jonesism consists in"; this is the "essence," or key characteristic of this family. "Jonesism," as a reality, is something unfolding over time, through the coming into being of new variations on Jonesism; i.e., new Joneses. It thus really depends upon one's focus whether one says that it is the clan or the individual that is primary. In a way, it is both, though I would say that the clan has the greater claim. And this can at least partly be justified on the basis of how individuals who live in awareness of their clan membership have responded to it – especially our Northern European ancestors.

Notes

[1] For more information on ontology, see my essay "Heidegger: An Introduction for Anti-Modernists" in What is a Rune? and Other Essays, ed. Greg Johnson

(San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2015). In this and other essays, I have capitalized the B in being to indicate when I am referring to being-as-such. I have not followed that practice in the present essay since most of the time I am speaking not of being-as-such, but of the being unique to the human individual.

[2] [16] See principally "The Stones Cry Out: Cave Art and the Origins of the Human Spirit [17]" in What is a Rune? [15]; and "What is Odinism? [9]" in TYR: Myth, Culture Tradition, Vol. 4 [18] (Atlanta: Ultra, 2014); and "On Being and Waking" in TYR, Vol. 5, forthcoming.

[3] [19] G. I. Gurdjieff, Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson (London: Penguin, 1999), unpaginated front matter.

[4] [20] There is a great deal more to Hegelian philosophy than I am discussing here. Hegel actually believed that it was possible to "define" the whole, though in a very unusual sense. In his Logic he begins with literal nothingness and "deduces" (using what is called "dialectic") the structure of the whole itself in terms of a system of concepts, each of which is a "provisional definition" of the whole, or Absolute. I do not follow Hegel in all details. I merely take from him what I find useful, though I take a good deal. This is why I describe some of the ideas I have put forward as "neo-Hegelian," rather than "Hegelian."

[5] [21] TYR, Vol. 4.

[6] [22] See my essay "What is a Rune? [23]" in the volume of the same name. See also "Philosophical Notes on the Runes" in Cleary, Summoning the Gods [24], ed. Greg Johnson (San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2011).

PART II

4. Tradition

Having now discussed the clannic being of the individual purely in philosophical terms, I now turn to a consideration of the treatment of this idea in the Germanic tradition.

The first thing we must note is what can be called the "primacy of the past" in that tradition. One of the best discussions of this is to be found in Paul Bauschatz's seminal study *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture*, published in 1982. Bauschatz argues that within the Germanic worldview, the past is considered to be primary, with the present understood as deriving from and "feeding" the past. The future is hardly considered at all, at least in metaphysical terms. This early Germanic view of time is fundamentally different from ours. And where the conception of time is different, I would argue that *everything else* must be different as well. In other words, because the way in which time is conceived is so fundamental to a worldview, we must concede that if our ancestors understood time in a different way, then in a real sense they lived in a different world.[1] [5] If this point is unclear now, it will likely become more understandable as I develop the argument of this section.[2] [6]

What accounts for how we have fallen away from the view of time held by our ancestors – for why we live in a fundamentally different world? After all, it might be argued that deep down we are the same people, and deep within us we carry the potential to see the world exactly as our ancestors did. This is true – and elsewhere I have argued that the worldview of a people flows from its *nature*, which is heritable.[3] [7] And yet, while that potential remains dormant within us (and can be reawakened), the fact is that right now it is *merely* potential: we do live in a very different world from our ancestors, and think in fundamentally different ways. In large measure, it is Christianity that is responsible for the shift away from the traditional Germanic view of time. Specifically, as I shall discuss in more detail later, Christianity replaces the Germanic "primacy of the past" with a focus upon futurity. Before developing that point, however, I must sketch in some more details of Bauschatz's account.

Bauschatz argues persuasively that the traditional Germanic metaphysics divides reality essentially into the past and the non-past. The non-past, moreover, is understood mainly as what is "turning into" the past. Here we may note that the name of the Norn Verðandi, often glossed superficially as "the present," is the present participle of the Old Norse verb *verða*, meaning "to become." However, this word is ultimately derived from an Indo-European root meaning "to turn." Thus, what is becoming is somehow what is "turning." We can get the sense of this when we realize that becoming can often be seen as "turning into": the child turns into a man, the caterpillar into a butterfly, the apprentice into a master, and so on.

Our inclination is to see this as a *past* form turning into a *future* form that was already anticipated. But obviously all "turning" happens in the present, and from the Germanic standpoint what is occurring is that a *present* form is turning into a *past* one, and being replaced by another, which will in turn pass away. Another, even more striking way to put this is that the present *just is* that which feeds the past. The present, in other words, is a dynamic process – "presentness" or "presenting" – in which a form presents itself, takes a stand, and then passes away, to be replaced by another. We are reminded of Anaximander's famous words (the first extant quotation in Greek philosophy): "The things that are perish into the things from which they come to be, according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time."[4] [8]

The past is thus continually growing, as our deeds fill it.[5] [9] And, indeed, it is pictured as a container: as the well of Urðr, the first of the three Norns, the one who represents the past. Urðr governs the "working out" of the past into the present: how past forms or deeds shape the present.[6] [10] The past functions to shape all that "turns" or "turns into" in the present. And pastness – past events, actions, precedents – serve as, in effect, "laws" that govern what may become. One sees the application of this metaphysics in, among other things, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of "common law" or judicial precedent.

The Old English equivalent of Urðr is *Wyrd*, sometimes treated as a kind of force or primal mechanism that affects events. Urðr is, it would appear, both the "keeper" of the past, as well as "fate" or "destiny." This makes perfect sense, as it is precisely the past that fates, shapes, and destines the present. In this context, the sources also make mention of the *ørlǫg*. While I would translate this literally as "primal law" (with Old Norse *ør-* roughly equivalent to German, Danish, and Norwegian *ur-*, "proto-, primitive, original"), it is sometimes glossed, rather confusingly, as "fate" or "destiny," just like Urðr/Wyrd. But we may simply see *ørlǫg* as another way of speaking of the function of the accumulated past as "primal law" governing the unfolding or turning of the present.

As in much of mythology, certain concepts have blended together – and we will see this again in the case of *hamingja* and *fylgja*. Indeed, Bauschatz argues that the three wells of Norse myth are actually one well, the primary identity of which is the well of Urðr. (He invokes the well-known mythological phenomenon of multiplication of one thing into threes, many examples of which are to be found in Norse mythology: e.g., the brothers Oðinn, Vili, and Vé, who Edred Thorsson has argued are three aspects of one god.[7] [11]) Bauschatz's hypothesis about the identity of the wells makes conceptual sense: the well of the past (Urðr's well) is most certainly a well of wisdom. This is true even though the "well of wisdom" is usually identified as the separate well of Mímir, from which Oðinn drinks at the price of an eye. The identification of the two wells makes even more sense if Mímir has something to do with *memory* (as is theorized by Rudolf Simek and others[8] [12]).

Regardless of whether Bauschatz is correct, it certainly makes philosophical sense to conceive the well of the past as a well of wisdom, since wisdom is a knowledge of *sources*. Aristotle writes in the *Metaphysics*: "all men suppose what is called wisdom [*sophia*] to deal with the first causes [*aitia*] and the sources [*archai*] of things" (981b28). The Greek *archē* (pl. *archai*) meant "source" or "origin" in the sense of "beginning," but could also refer to the origin or head of a body of water. The Old Norse equivalent of this term is *brunnr* (as in Urðarbrunnr, Mímisbrunnr), which carries much the same range of meanings: well,

spring, source, in both literal and figurative senses. Thus, as Bauschatz points out, we should not think of these wells as, in effect, cisterns into which we dip a cup and drink (which is the usual image). Rather, the wells of Urðr and Mímir are springs, ever flowing.[9] [13]

Bauschatz also emphasizes that the past must be understood as nutritive.[10] [14] After all, it is with the water of the Well of Urðr that the Norns nourish Yggdrasil. The spring/well flows into the present, nourishing the present: nourishing Yggdrasil and informing our lives and deeds; shaping what we are. Meanwhile, our deeds flow into the spring/well. It is continually being fed by the present, as the present recedes into the past. The cycle is simply this: the present nourishes/expands the past, and the past nourishes/expands the present.

It is obvious that this worldview is actually quite foreign to our own. We think of the past as over and done with. Our orientation is toward a present that we think has "overcome" the past, and toward a conceivably "better" future that we are trying to reach by slogging through the (usually dissatisfying) present. The idea of "overcoming" the past is a key component in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and in the modern, progressivist worldview: both see the past as darkness steadily being overcome by the light. By contrast, the Germanic worldview holds that in a meaningful sense the past is not "over with": in actuality, it is *continually present*, shaping what comes to be. The more we moderns live in denial of the shaping power of the past, the more we are at its mercy, as I shall discuss later.

5. *Hamingja* and *Fylgja*

Having now discussed the basic metaphysics underlying the Germanic view of time, we must now apply these principles to the focus of this essay: the being of the individual, understood as shaped by membership in his clan. There is a great deal about this in the Germanic sources, much of it centering around what we may call, following Stephen Flowers, the "*hamingja–fylgja* complex."[11] [15] The reason Flowers uses this construction is that while it is probable that these were once distinct concepts, over time they blended together so that it is now rather difficult

to clearly mark the difference between the two.[12] [16] The *hamingja* and *fylgja* are "parts" of the Germanic "soul." (My use of "scare quotes" is meant to caution the reader: these are not "parts" in any conventional sense, nor is it unproblematic to use the loaded term "soul" to refer to the beliefs of our ancestors.)

Flowers offers a threefold description of the *hamingja*[13] [17]:

(a) It is a shape-changing force, which acts on the *hamr* (literally "skin"): to create a form (form in the sense of Greek *morphē*, a shape, as in "morphology" and "metamorphosis"). Claude Lecouteux writes of the *hamr*: "In the old texts, it is the inner shape that determines outside appearance. It so happens that a person could have several of these shapes. . . . Expressed here is the fundamental idea that man is not restricted to his body."[14] [18] Simek theorizes that *hamingja* is derived from **ham-gengja*, those who could let their *hamr* "walk" (i.e., project their *hamr*).

(b) The "luck" or "fortune" of the individual.

(c) "Guardian spirit."

One difference between the *hamingja* and the *fylgja* is that the former can be "projected," while the latter cannot be – it remains attached to an individual.[15] [19] The *hamingja* thus seems to be a kind of a fluid, magical force. It is with respect to the second and third aspects above that the *hamingja* and *fylgja* are hard to distinguish. One acquires *hamingja* through deeds of a particular kind – especially deeds of honor.[16] [20] It is thus the same thing as a kind of personal power, which may be increased. Hamingja can also be passed down from an ancestor.[17] [21] Indeed, it can be passed down through an object that belonged to an ancestor – as in the case of the sword Gram, which conveys the *hamingja* of Sigmund to his son Sigurðr.[18] [22] What complicates matters is that the *fylgja* also seems to be something that can be passed on. Indeed, Flowers' entire book *Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation* is devoted to the topic of "rebirth" through the inheritance of the *hamingja–fylgja* (thus he argues that Sigurðr is the rebirth of Sigmund).[19] [23]

The *fylgja* is also conceived as a guardian spirit. The word itself is formed from the Old Norse verb *fylgja*, meaning "to follow" or "to accompany" (from Proto-Germanic **fulgijanǫ*, "to follow," from which comes Old English *folġian*, which gives us modern English "follow"). Thus, the *fylgja* is a being that follows or accompanies. In the lore, it often takes the form of a woman – indeed, sometimes a gigantic woman clad in armor (the *fulgjukona*; thus suggesting to Hilda Ellis Davidson that there is a link here to the concept of the *valkyrja*[20] [24]). At other times, the *fylgja* takes the form of an animal, usually one representing the type of person one is (a noble man, for example, will have a noble animal *fylgja* such as a bear, wolf, or eagle).

Dying men are sometimes able to see the *fylgja* in its female form. And individuals gifted with second sight are able to see the animal *fylgja*. Davidson cites the following example from *Þáttr Þorsteins Uxafóts* in the *Flateyjarbók*:

It happened one day that Þorsteinn came to Krossavík as he often did. The householder's father, Geitir, sat on the dais and muttered into his cloak. Now when the boy entered the hall, he came in with a great rush, as children usually do. He slipped on the floor of the hall, and when Geitir saw this, he burst out laughing. . . . The boy went up to Geitir and said: "Why did it seem funny to you when I fell just now?" Geitir answered: "Because in truth I could see what you did not." "What was that?" asked Þorsteinn. "I will tell you. When you came into the hall a white bear-cub followed you, and ran along the floor in front of you. Now when he saw me, he stood still; but you were going rather fast, and you fell over him – and it is my belief that you are not the son of Krum and Þorgunna, but must be of greater family."[21] [25]

This example seems to suggest, interestingly, that the animal form of the *fylgja* may "grow" with the individual: little boy, little bear cub; presumably full-grown man, full-grown bear. And if this is the case, then the suggestion is that the *fylgja* is just the individual. In other words, the *fylgja* is the individual appearing *under another aspect* – and not a distinct "thing" that the individual "has."[22] [26] This may seem puzzling, but as I noted earlier in this essay, both a philosophical understanding of

personal identity, and one drawn from the Germanic lore, challenge us to rethink our idea of who and what we are. Again, I am not simply this "thing," inside this skin, endowed exclusively with traits perceptible to the five senses. Indeed, as we saw in discussing the concept of the *hamr*, a man can have several "skins." But if the individual is not distinct from his *fylgja*, then how can the *fylgja* be passed on? Why doesn't the *fylgja* die with the individual? To explore these mysteries, let's turn once again to Aristotle, who can give us invaluable assistance.

When we see the *fylgja*, what we are seeing is the *essence* of the individual – where "essence" is the Latinate translation of Aristotle's *to ti ēn einai*, literally "the what it is to be." This essence is *what the individual is* (thus, Þorsteinn's essence is a bear). Further, we are compelled to say that the individual and his essence are not distinct, since if they were, that would mean that the individual is *not* what he is.[23] [27] This is entirely correct – and yet in another, equally meaningful sense we can say that the individual and his essence *are* distinct. To see this, set aside, for just one moment, how one's essence can be a bear and consider a simpler, and very Aristotelian example: the essence of Socrates is to be a rational animal. Since this expresses what Socrates *is*, Socrates and his essence are one. Yet, it is also the essence of Plato to be a rational animal – and also the essence of Xenophon, Alcibiades, Critias, and all other human beings. So, Socrates *both is and is not* identical with his essence. Exactly the same may be said of Þorsteinn and the *fylgja* that expresses his essence: it *is* him, yet it is not, for it may also be or become the *fylgja* of his son, or some other descendent.

Claude Lecouteux writes:

[The examples from the sources] suggest that human beings have corresponding selves, perhaps doubles, in the otherworld and that communication is possible because there is really no border between that world and this. "The living body," writes Régis Boyer, "would be only the material, visible intervention of a reality whose true essence would be in the kingdom of the dead, and which helps and follows each individual. The soul, here [in this world], would be a reflection." This is one more proof that we take part as a microcosm in the life of the

macrocosm, the world of the spirits, the dead, the ancestors, because the *fylgja* does not vanish with the disappearance of the one to whom it is attached and does not die out with a family.[24] [28]

But we must also address the specific issue of why the *fylgja* appears as an animal or as a woman. Lecouteux tells us, again, "we take part as a microcosm in the life of the macrocosm." This is true in many senses. For one thing, man recapitulates in himself the animal – in a literal sense. Gestating in the womb, human embryos go through stages that suggest the recapitulation of pre-human structures: e.g., a "fish-stage" in which the embryo exhibits gill-like slits.[25] [29] Aristotle in *De Anima* speaks of a "vegetable soul" and an "animal soul" in the human being, which recapitulate functions found in plants (nutrition, growth) and animals (sensation, locomotion) – alongside the "rational soul," which only human beings possess. In my essay "The Stones Cry Out: Cave Art and the Origin of the Human Species [30]," I suggested that we have been aware of this for millennia.[26] [31]

This is yet another example of the influence of the past on the present. Thus, it is not unreasonable to think that certain individuals have an "animal nature" archetypally like that of a specific animal. This nature is the "essence" of the individual. Again, it is both one with him and not one: capable of being "passed." It exists all the time "with" the individual, "following" him. It is not perceptible in "this world," because it belongs to another. But since, as Lecouteux observes, there is "really no border" between that world and this, then there is no gulf between the individual and his *fylgja*. This "essence" is not a separate "thing" (though, as we have seen, it can be perceived under certain circumstances as if it were a distinct thing). Rather, it is the individual seen under another aspect.

Further, it is reasonable to treat the female form of the *fylgja* in a similar manner. Perhaps just as the animal form may "grow" over time (e.g., from bear cub to adult bear), it makes sense to think that the *fulgjukona* would mature along with the individual. Man, again, is the microcosm reflecting in his being the macrocosm. Since I am what I am in relation to (among other things) the animal and to the female, in a sense I "have an animal in me," and I "have a woman in me." C. G. Jung writes that:

the whole nature of the human male presupposes woman, both physically and spiritually. His system is tuned into woman from the start, just as it is prepared for a quite definite world where there is water, light, air, salt, carbohydrates, etc. *The form of the world into which he is born is already inborn in him as a virtual image.* Likewise parents, wife, children, birth, and death are inborn in him as virtual images, as psychic aptitudes. These a priori categories have by nature a collective character; they are images of parents, wife, and children in general. . . . They are, in a sense, the deposits of all our ancestral experiences.[27] [32]

My being is formed (pre-formed, really) in relation to "the Animal" and to "the Woman." This may seem to imply some kind of relation to Platonic ideas, but what the Germanic lore actually suggests is this: Just as the individual is truly individual and not an abstract idea of "individuality," so *his* "Animal" and *his* "Woman" are individual; they are archetypal, but not "abstract." Archetypes are not abstractions: Achilles is an individual, not the abstraction "the Hero."[28] [33] But the lore also suggests, quite mysteriously (and quite unlike Jung's views) that these archetypes exist in a parallel world, and that they are not "virtual images" of some kind, but rather "beings" endowed with agency. Edred Thorsson has also drawn on Jung in discussing the *fylgja*, specifically Jung's theory of the "anima/animus."[29] [34] These are reasonable speculations. However, I should admit that I know of no evidence in the Germanic sources which suggests that women have a male *fylgja*.

To make matters even more complicated, our sources indicate that one's *fylgja* is not limited to the aforementioned aspects (the animal and the female). Also, we are not limited to one and only one *fylgja*. In fact, the lore suggests that a man can acquire multiple *fylgjur*.[30] [35] One distinction we must make – which is especially important for the topic of this essay – is between the *mannfylgja* and the *kynfylgja* (or *atterfylgja*). As the name implies, the *mannfylgja* is the *fylgja* of an individual person; by contrast the *kynfylgja* belongs to the kin, clan, or family.[31] [36] A man may possess both, in fact. He can have his own *fylgja*, and also be the carrier of his family's *fylgja*. The *kynfylgja* seems to become attached to an individual, and is capable of being transferred.[32] [37] Further, the two

are bound up with each other: the more *fylgjur* a man acquires, the more powerful his *kynfylgja* becomes.[33] [38]

There is no evidence from our sources that the animal *fylgja* survives the death of the individual, but the female *fylgja* – the supernatural woman guardian – does. The *hamingja* and/or *fylgja* is generally (but not always) passed along when a child is named after a dead relative, an event known as the *nafnfestr*.[34] [39] The *hamingja–fylgja* could also be passed along in other ways, and we have already noted how in the *Volsunga Saga* it is passed by means of a sword.[35] [40] In any case, the *hamingja–fylgja* is passed down within a clan, and this makes perfect sense: the "soul" would have a natural proclivity for its own kind.[36] [41]

It is interesting to note, however, that in the sources it is often later generations of a family that exhibit real greatness.[37] [42] The best-known example of this is in the *Volsunga Saga*: it is Sigurðr who represents the perfection or consummation of the Volsung clan. This also makes sense: if one can acquire multiple *fylgjur*, which strengthens the *kynfylgja*, and if the *hamingja* is fed by heroic deeds, then clearly *something builds or grows* across several generations.

The role of individuals as "carriers" of the *kynfylgja* strongly suggests the philosophical conclusions arrived at independently in the earlier sections of this essay: the clan can be thought of as the true being, of which the individual person is a moment or an expression. The clan has no concrete existence without its members. But those members are the unfolding of *what the clan is* – the progressive self-specification of the clan's being, the flowering of its potentialities. The *kynfylgja* is obviously a way of concretizing this clannic being, which gets "transferred" from individual to individual, and "strengthened."

Aside from this, the *hamingja–fylgja* conception strongly indicates the importance pre-modern Germanic peoples placed on inheritance. Many thousands of years ago, human beings recognized that they inherit a wealth of traits, including behavioral characteristics. In general, we see in the Germanic sources a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the complex issue of inheritance – a recognition of our great debt to the past. No doubt some moderns will express surprise that our ancestors

could have had this without a knowledge of genetics. But this is ridiculous. The phenomenon of inheritance was well-known to them; they simply lacked the modern (and quite possibly incomplete) theory of the mechanism of inheritance. Indeed, it is clear that they understood the importance of inheritance better than we do. We are only just now rediscovering the role of inheritance in making us who we are, as we continue to shake off the pernicious Enlightenment myth of the "blank slate."

Notes

[1] [43] For a discussion of the concept of "world," see my essay "The Ninefold [44]" in What is a Rune? and Other Essays [45], ed. Greg Johnson (San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2015).

[2] [46] I have already explored the idea that we live in a fundamentally "different world" from our ancestors in three essays: "What is a Rune? [47]", "The Fourfold [48]," and "The Ninefold." All are collected in What is a Rune? [45]

[3] [49] See my essay "Ásatrú and the Political [50]" in What is a Rune?

[4] [51] A Presocratics Reader, Second Edition, ed. Patricia Curd (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2011), p. 17.

[5] [52] Paul Bauschatz, The Well and the Tree (Amherst, Ma.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), pp. 15-16.

[6] [53] Bauschatz, ibid., p. 11.

[7] [54] See Edred Thorsson, Runelore (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1987), p. 179.

[8] [55] Rudolf Simek, Dictionary of Northern Mythology, trans. Angela Hall (Rochester, Ny: D. S. Brewer, 2000), p. 216. Also Thorsson, ibid., p. 180.

[9] [56] Bauschatz, ibid., pp. 18-19.

[10] [57] Bauschatz, ibid., pp. 18-19.

[11] [58] See Stephen E. Flowers, Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation (Smithfield, Tx.: Rûna-Raven, 2011), p. 47.

[12] [59] On this, see Flowers, ibid., p. 52; also see H. R. Ellis Davidson, The Road To Hel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 130.

[13] [60] *Flowers, ibid., p. 50.*

[14] [61] *Claude Lecouteux, The Return of the Dead, trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2009), p. 169.*

[15] [62] *See Davidson, ibid., p. 130.*

[16] [63] *See Flowers, ibid., p. 52.*

[17] [64] *Flowers, ibid., p. 52.*

[18] [65] *See Flowers, ibid., pp. 94ff.*

[19] [66] *Flowers' book is a reprint of his M.A. thesis. See also Lecouteux, who quotes the author of the Poem of Helgi: "Once upon a time it was thought that men were reborn. . . . It was said that Helgi and Sigrun lived again" (Lecouteux, ibid., p. 163).*

[20] [67] *Davidson, ibid., p. 135.*

[21] [68] *Davidson, ibid., p. 127.*

[22] [69] *Flowers writes that "the fylgja as well as the hamingja must not be thought of as forms, but rather as aspects of the 'spiritual' essence itself, which was originally equated with the procreative power and potency of a man" (Flowers, ibid., p. 53).*

[23] [70] *For the general argument sketched here, see Aristotle's Metaphysics, Book Zeta.*

[24] [71] *Lecouteux, ibid., p. 167. Quoting Boyer, "Hamr, Fylgja, Hugr: L'Ame pour les anciens Scandinaves," Heimdall 33 (1981), pp. 5-10. Italics added, as well as material in square brackets. Earlier in the same text, Lecouteux compares the fylgja to the Egyptian ka and the Greek eidolon (pp. 163-164). Davidson (p. 130) refers to the fylgja as the "shadowy double."*

[25] [72] *Rupert Sheldrake, The Presence of the Past (Rochester, Vt.: Park Street Press, 1988), pp. 15-16.*

[26] [73] *The essay appears in What is a Rune?*

[27] [74] *Quoted in Sheldrake, ibid., p. 251. Italics added.*

[28] [75] *For more information on this point, see my discussion of Vico's distinction between imaginative and intelligible universals in "What is a Rune?" in the volume of the same name.*

[29] [76] *Thorsson, ibid., pp. 172-173.*

[30] [77] *See Flowers, ibid., p. 55. See also Lecouteux, ibid., p. 166.*

[31] [78] *See for example the Volsunga Saga Chapter 4, in which Signy is warned against marrying Siggeir by her kynfylgja.*

[32] [79] *See Flowers, ibid., p. 53; Davidson, ibid., p. 131.*

[33] [80] *Flowers, ibid., p. 53.*

[34] [81] *Lecouteux, ibid., p. 162. Lecouteux also notes (p. 163) that a child who is not given the name of a dead relative can be vulnerable to an illness known as elsk.*

[35] [82] *See also Davidson, ibid., p. 132.*

[36] [83] *Although the hamingja–fylgja passes within a clan, it appears it may pass between individuals who are not actual blood relations. Davidson (p. 132) cites an example of a hamingja passing from a man to his son-in-law.*

[37] [84] *Flowers, ibid., p. 70.*

PART III

6. The Presence of the Past: A View from the Margins of Science

Some of the above remarks might suggest that we should interpret the Germanic *hamingja–fylgja* teaching as a mythic, symbolic, or even superstitious way of understanding the phenomenon of inheritance – something our ancestors relied upon because they did not have the modern science of genetics. Indeed, we must deal with the fact that our ancestors believed in the "inheritance of acquired characteristics." Flowers cites an example from the *Svarfdæla Saga* of a baby who is born with a scar in just the same spot where his father had been wounded.[1] [5] Surely this is the sort of thing that has been thoroughly refuted by modern science.

I wish to challenge such assumptions, however. We must remain open to the possibility that our ancestors were describing phenomena that had a literal existence. Our ancestors had an elaborate understanding of the psyche, much more complex and interesting than ours. It was also a sophisticated understanding that, as I've shown, calls into question our modern idea of the atomic individual. Their beliefs deserve serious consideration, though the topic of the "Germanic soul" requires a much more extensive treatment than I can give in this essay. In the present section, I will set forth some reasons to think that our ancestors were describing real phenomena, drawing on the work of biologist Rupert Sheldrake.

Sheldrake is very much a renegade in scientific circles. His credentials, however, are impeccable: he has a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Cambridge and is the author of more than eighty scientific essays and ten books. However, Sheldrake is often dismissed as a proponent of pseudo-science. It would be an understatement to say that his theories are controversial. In 1981, the journal *Nature* published a review of Sheldrake's book *A New Science of Life* with the subtle title "A Book for Burning?" Since then, Sheldrake has been almost completely ostracized by the scientific community and cannot find a university position. When academics receive such abuse, it almost always means that they are on

to something. And Sheldrake certainly does present a thought-provoking case for his views.

I should emphasize that I am not a biologist and so less than fully qualified to undertake a discussion of Sheldrake's theories. As a non-specialist, my observation is that his arguments establishing that there are serious problems with orthodox biological theory are often somewhat more convincing than the alternative theories he proposes. Nevertheless, he offers us some persuasive reasons to entertain those theories. I should also emphasize that "nothing is riding" on the account that follows. In other words, the theory of clannic being developed in this essay does not stand or fall based on the evidence I will cull from Sheldrake. As I emphasized at the outset, the three approaches presented in this essay – the philosophical, the traditional, and the scientific – complement each other; no one of them is offered as authoritative or as validating the others.

To begin: My major source for Sheldrake's views is his 1988 book *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature*.[2] [6] The theory advanced in that book concerns the causal influence of the past on the present, in the form of what Sheldrake calls "morphogenetic fields." "Morphogenetic" derives from Greek *morphē* (form) and *genesis*, so that "morphogenetic" means what is responsible for generating or creating form. Essentially, Sheldrake proposes that the physical structure of organisms – their form – is shaped by non-physical fields that exist across time, shaping generation after generation. These fields, however, are not eternal Platonic ideas: they can be altered over time, as a result of circumstances that change the behavior of organisms.

In part, Sheldrake proposes this theory because (as he argues at length) genes alone cannot account for why organisms organize their bodies in the way they do. Contrary to what most people (including most biologists) think, "morphogenesis" is still a mystery.[3] [7] We are all familiar with the language of "genetic programming," which is a shorthand way of saying "organisms take the forms they do because somehow genes code for those forms." We use such shorthand because we assume that someone somewhere has the full answer to exactly how this takes place. But

Sheldrake exposes this as a myth: biologists are not exactly sure how organic forms are "programmed" by genes. Sheldrake points out that this sort of language is really no different from talk of a "conatus" or an "entelechy," which was rightly rejected long ago by biologists as explaining nothing.[4] [8] The language of "programming" is, of course, drawn from computers and is really thus a metaphor. But it is such a familiar, oft-repeated metaphor that we have come to take it literally, and to accept it uncritically.

Biology can link certain traits of organisms to genes, but Sheldrake argues that the gene theory cannot explain why organisms exhibit their characteristic forms or structures. One reason is that the different parts of our body contain the exact same genes. Sheldrake writes:

If the [postulated] genetic program were carried in the genes, then all the cells of the body would be programmed identically, because in general they contain exactly the same genes. The cells of your arms and legs, for example, are genetically identical. Moreover, these limbs contain exactly the same kinds of protein molecules, as well as chemically identical bone, cartilage, and so forth. Yet they have different shapes. Clearly, the genes alone cannot explain these differences. They must depend on something else: on formative influences which act differently in different organs and tissues as they develop. These influences cannot be inside the genes; they extend over entire tissues and organs. At this stage the concept of the genetic program fades out, and is replaced by vague statements about "complex spatio-temporal patterns of physico-chemical activity not yet fully understood," or "mechanisms as yet obscure."[5] [9]

Sheldrake offers many surprising illustrations drawn from natural history to support his basic skepticism about the claim that genes can explain organic forms and structures. He also deploys a number of brilliant rhetorical devices, the most effective of which is probably the following argument from analogy:

Morphogenesis is generally supposed to happen automatically in a manner as yet obscure through the self-assembling processes of [material constituents such as certain molecules]. It is as if the delivery of

the right building materials and machinery to plots of ground resulted in the spontaneous growth of houses of just the right form.[6] [10]

As further evidence for the poverty of the "genetic programming" hypothesis, one might also mention the surprising results of studies on human twins – which are, of course, directly relevant to our major issue, that of human heredity. Studies of identical twins separated at birth and raised apart without any contact until adulthood show remarkable similarities, even in areas such as political views, religiosity, and sexual orientation. All of these may plausibly be explained via genetic propensities. But what are we to do with cases like the following?

Among the identical twins included in the famous Minnesota Twin Family Study[7] [11] were Jim Lewis and Jim Springer, who were raised apart from the age of four weeks, and reunited at age 39 without ever having met before. It was found that both worked as security guards, smoked Salem cigarettes, drove Chevys, and had been married twice – the first time both men married women named Linda, then subsequently both married women named Betty. Both also had sons they named James Allen. They vacationed at the same Florida beach, had dogs named Toy, and had woodworking workshops in their garages.

Any one – or two, or three – of these items could be chalked up to coincidence. But not the whole picture. And it is probable that something is at work here other than genetics. In fact, it is absurd to think that there are genes for driving Chevys, smoking Salems, marrying women named Linda and Betty, and naming one's son James Allen. Of course, it must be acknowledged that the popular idea of "genes for" is simplistic, and scientists frequently point this out. In other words, finding genetic propensities is not a matter of looking for, say, a single gene "for alcoholism," or "for being gay," and so on.[8] [12] But when we grant this, it still seems wildly implausible that even a constellation of genetic factors predisposed the two Jims to some of these common traits. It is reasonable to suppose that there may have been some other connection between the two, that it was maintained after their separation, and that it continued to affect them. Whatever that connection was, it was certainly not of the mundane variety, since, as noted, the twins had no

personal contact until well after these common traits had been established.

Instead of "genetic programming," Sheldrake proposes that the organization and development of organisms is governed by *morphogenetic fields*, which are not physical objects in any familiar sense, but rather "regions of influence."[9] [13] Naïve materialists will respond to such a claim with skepticism. However, it is important to note that physicists graduated beyond materialism a long time ago, and that they theorize regularly about phenomena that are not "material" or "physical" in any conventional sense. The public, and many non-physicists in the scientific community, remain mired in an outdated materialism, long ago discredited.[10] [14] The phenomenon of gravitation provides a simple example that may help overcome some skepticism about the non-material nature of Sheldrake's morphogenetic fields. Gravitational fields, the existence of which is universally accepted, are "regions of influence" (to use Sheldrake's term) that are associated with physical objects. However, they are not themselves "physical objects," though their influence does extend through space.

Similarly, morphogenetic fields exist in space, just insofar as living things grow and organize themselves "within" these fields. Morphogenetic fields are extended in time, however, in a way that individual living things are not: they exist across generations of living things. They contain, as Sheldrake puts it, "a built-in memory."[11] [15] These fields "remember" the actions or behavior of the organisms governed by them, and then pass some of this memory along to later organisms of the same type. Sheldrake uses the term "morphic resonance" to describe the process by which the past becomes present in those later generations.[12] [16]

The hypothesis of morphic resonance is not intended to replace the gene theory as an explanation of morphogenesis, but to supplement it and to provide an explanation of phenomena for which genes alone cannot account. Sheldrake writes that the hypothesis of morphogenetic fields:

provides a different interpretation for the role of genes. It suggests that they do what they are known to do: namely to code information for the sequence of chemical building blocks in RNA and protein molecules. But

it does not project onto the genes the ability to organize the whole organism. Rather, it looks for these hereditary organizing principles in fields that are inherited non-materially.[13] [17]

Sheldrake supports his theory using a number of striking examples. Some are intended to support the claim that the physical structure of organisms cannot be accounted for solely by genes. The reader is referred to Sheldrake's *Presence of the Past* for these examples, of which there are many. Another group of examples suggests that information is transmitted across generations in ways that have no obvious material explanation. In one such example, the second generation of the same group of rats was shown to make it through a maze more rapidly and easily than the first – even though there was no opportunity for the first generation to educate their young about the maze. Another experiment showed that people are able to guess, a statistically significant percentage of the time, which words are actual words in a dead or obscure language, of which they have no prior knowledge, and which are invented.[14] [18] A further example concerned blue tits in the United Kingdom that learned to pry the tops off of milk bottles left on doorsteps and to drink from them. Once the phenomenon was discovered in one group of tits, scientists were able to establish that it rapidly spread throughout Europe, almost as if the tits were phoning each other up and passing on the instructions. In this example, it was not only subsequent generations that acquired the behavior, but also contemporaneous members of the same species living in different locations.

All these examples, and others, suggest that once organisms of a certain type acquire new behaviors or abilities and thoroughly automatize them, a change can occur in the "form" of the organism (Sheldrake's morphogenetic field) that is then passed down to later generations in a manner that seems to exclude any material form of transmission. For instance, the experiment concerning language described above suggests that once a group of human beings becomes thoroughly immersed in a certain language, "traces" of this imprint themselves on the human morphogenetic field, and become the unconscious possession of subsequent generations of human beings, even in very different *ethnies*.

Thus, Sheldrake proposes not only that there are morphogenetic fields for individual species, but that the structure of these fields results from changes to previous similar organisms.[15] [19] It is thus obvious that there is no conflict between his theory and the basic idea of evolution, since morphogenetic fields change and evolve. Needless to say, however, Sheldrake's theory strongly conflicts with orthodox neo-Darwinism, since it supports the inheritance of acquired characteristics (so-called "Lamarckism"). However, it is interesting to note that Darwin himself actually believed in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, and saw no conflict with his theory of natural selection. In fact, as Sheldrake discusses, there is substantial evidence for Lamarckism, and its rejection by today's scientists is more a matter of dogma than anything else.

Matters are a little more complicated, however, than "one field per species." In a manner that must call to mind Plato's "hierarchy of forms," Sheldrake believes in nested hierarchies of fields, and fields within fields. That this should be the case is intuitively obvious, simply from the way we classify species. Thus, it makes sense to believe in a human field and a cat field, but also in a mammal field which organizes both humans and cats in certain characteristic, common ways. Each individual organism, therefore, would participate (yet again, an echo of Plato!) in multiple fields.[16] [20]

The example of the experiment involving language, and certain other elements of the foregoing, may have reminded the reader of C. G. Jung's theory of the "collective unconscious." Sheldrake does indeed draw this parallel himself.[17] [21] He also cites Jung's student Marie Louise von Franz, who suggested that there was more than one collective unconscious. Famously, Freud had dealt with only the personal unconscious, whereas Jung postulated an unconscious common to all of humanity, which expressed itself in the form of "archetypes." Von Franz's suggestion was that within this collective, the universal unconscious, were nested levels: a group unconscious of specific nations, tribes, clans, and families.[18] [22]

In drawing on von Franz's ideas, Sheldrake is suggesting that there may be incorporeal morphogenetic fields not only for species and subspecies,

but even for human families. It is here that we see how Sheldrake's ideas are directly relevant to understanding the traditional, Germanic lore about "the soul." Sheldrake's theory gives us a way of conceptualizing, scientifically, the traditional teaching on the *hamingja–fylgja* complex. Again, I must emphasize that I am *not* suggesting that somehow science validates tradition. Nevertheless, it is interesting that a scientist has arrived independently at conclusions that seem to support the traditional teaching.

Like the morphogenetic field, the *hamingja-fylgja* has an affinity for similar organisms (in this case, members of the same clan). And, again, Sheldrake admits the possibility that there may be "family fields." Further, just as tradition teaches that we may have multiple *hamingjur-fylgjur*, so Sheldrake says we have multiple, nested fields. Further, just as the *hamingja-fylgja* is "fed" by actions and changes over time, bequeathing the past to later generations, Sheldrake's fields function in the exact same way. Sheldrake's theory also validates the inheritance of acquired characteristics, which we have seen was a traditional belief. In a larger sense, Sheldrake's theory emphasizes the primacy of the past, and its formative effect on the present – just as we find in the Germanic tradition. As we have noted, for our ancestors the past is, paradoxically, ever-present, continuing to influence and shape what comes to be. Sheldrake suggests that we should "think of the past as pressed up, as it were, against the present, and as potentially present everywhere. The morphic influences of past organisms may simply be *present* to subsequent similar organisms."[19] [23]

Sheldrake's theories, of course, raise at least as many questions as they purport to answer. Nevertheless, they offer an extremely thought-provoking challenge to mainstream biology and its outdated mechanistic-materialist approach. One major problem morphic resonance does not seem to be able to answer is how fields come into being. We have seen that Sheldrake argues that fields are changed by the behavior of organisms of similar type. But how do those fields arise in the first place? Where do they come from? Sheldrake does suggest an answer to this: "Perhaps [fields] do not come *from* anywhere, but somehow arise spontaneously. Perhaps they are organized by some

'higher' kind of field."[20] [24] In my essay "The Stones Cry Out: Cave Art and the Origin of the Human Spirit [25]," I have suggested a similar hypothesis: that new organisms and new behaviors are the result of a special kind of "spontaneity." However, I provide a metaphysical theory of how such spontaneity is intelligible as an expression of the process by which the universe moves toward its ultimate *telos* or goal. See that essay for more information.

Notes

[1] [26] See Stephen E. Flowers, Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation (Smithfield, Tx.: Rûna-Raven, 2011), p. 66.

[2] [27] This volume was reissued with revisions in 2011. In this essay, however, I have relied on the text of the original edition.

[3] [28] Rupert Sheldrake, The Presence of the Past (Rochester, Vt.: Park Street Press, 1988), p. 72.

[4] [29] Sheldrake, ibid., p. 87.

[5] [30] Sheldrake, ibid., p. 86.

[6] [31] Sheldrake, ibid., p. 91.

[7] [32] See Nancy L. Segal, Born Together – Reared Apart: The Landmark Minnesota Twins Study (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[8] [33] See Sheldrake, ibid., p. 90.

[9] [34] Sheldrake, ibid., p. 78.

[10] [35] Sheldrake writes, "Although [the theory of morphogenetic fields] seems mysterious, the conventional theories seem no less so when we stand back and look at the remarkable assumptions they embody. The hypothesis of formative causation is not a bizarre metaphysical speculation that contrasts with a hard, empirical, down-to-earth theory of mechanism. The mechanistic theory depends on assumptions that are, if anything, more metaphysical than the idea of formative causation" (p. 112). Indeed, one of the virtues of Sheldrake's book is that he exposes the problematic and outdated metaphysical assumptions behind much of modern science. Mechanistic views have been dominant since at least the time of Descartes, yet the metaphor of "mechanism" cannot make sense out of much of the science done since then. Yet, the metaphor persists with the public and much of the scientific community – who often do not even recognize it as a metaphor. Similarly,

Sheldrake also demonstrates how a "Platonic" understanding of eternal and immutable "natural laws" is also an inadequate metaphor, and one which is at odds with the idea of an evolving cosmos.

[11] [36] *Sheldrake, ibid., p. 317.*

[12] [37] *See Sheldrake, ibid., p. xix.*

[13] [38] *Sheldrake, ibid., p. 90.*

[14] [39] *For example, test subjects who had no knowledge of Hebrew were shown a list of actual Hebrew words, into which had been mixed made-up words that still looked plausibly like Hebrew. Subjects were able to discern which were the real words at a rate that suggested something more than chance was at work.*

[15] [40] *Sheldrake, ibid., p. 108.*

[16] [41] *Though there are parallels between Platonic forms and morphogenetic fields, it is important to reiterate that they are quite different, since morphogenetic fields can change over time. In The Presence of the Past, Sheldrake is actually quite concerned to combat Platonism in science, especially as it shows itself in the concept of eternal and immutable "laws of nature."*

[17] [42] *Sheldrake, ibid., p. 222, and elsewhere.*

[18] [43] *Sheldrake, p. 252. See von Franz's essay "The Transformed Berserk: Unification of Psychic Opposites," in Human Survival and Consciousness Evolution, ed. Stanislav Grof (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988). This essay is also interesting because it tells the story of the fifteenth-century Swiss hermit Nicholas of Flüe who, despite being a Christian ascetic, had a vision that seems to have been of the god Odin.*

[19] [44] *Sheldrake, ibid., p. 112.*

[20] [45] *Sheldrake, ibid., p. 114. See also Chapter 18.*

PART IV

7. Concluding Reflections

I turn now to some thoughts on how the foregoing treatment of the influence of the past on the present ought to affect our own present, when we finish this essay and return to the real world.

It is a well-known fact that our ancestors acted with awareness of membership in the clan: trying to be worthy of their own ancestors, and not to disgrace them. But they also tried to *surpass* them. And in doing so they strove to be known *as individuals* – not just as "members of the clan." They wanted their names to be remembered for all time, and their deeds to be celebrated. This suggests a fundamental tension – a real tension, not just a "philosophical problem." The tension is between acting as a member of the clan – acting as a continuation of clannic being – and at the same time acting so as to individuate oneself, to distinguish oneself from the clan.

It is this *striving for individuality* that really sets us apart from other peoples.[1] [5] Others are content to efface their individuality and to merely be continuations of clan or caste. Insofar as they are exemplary, they are exemplary members of caste: perfect conformists to a pre-ordained standard. One sees this pattern in India and in the Far East, in China, and in Japan. The Japanese culture of the samurai has much in it to admire, but ultimately the exemplary samurai was one who effaced himself as a perfect servant of his lord. There are no "sagas" of samurai. One finds traces in the East of something like a saga literature, of something celebrating individual achievement and heroism, exactly where one would expect to find it: in the oldest Aryan epics and heroic literature. But it is still nothing like what one finds in Europe, where there are innumerable examples of this celebration of the individual in the traditions of both the North and South. It is present in Greek epic poetry, mythology, and tragedy. However, one finds many more examples in Northern Europe, especially in the saga literature of the Norse.

It is obvious that, on one level, when individual members of a clan strive to distinguish themselves, this may strengthen the clan, making it more powerful, more secure, and more likely to continue. Clans gain power

and security through the actions of individuals, when those actions lead to success. And women are attracted to men who strive to distinguish themselves. But this striving cannot be reduced simply to a strategy for advancing one's clan, let alone for passing along one's genes. First, and most obviously, many of the ways in which men have sought to distinguish themselves are suicidally dangerous. In the past, men have been willing to die over affairs of honor that seem trivial to us today. They chose short and glorious lives over long lives and many children. They were also willing to risk ostracism – even by their own family – when heroism demanded it.

Second, we cannot dismiss the *self-understanding* of our heroic ancestors. When they considered what they were doing and why they were doing it, they thought in terms of the *story* that would be told about their deeds – how their deeds would add to the hoard of the past, and make for a great tale. The theory that, despite this, they were *really* acting to advance their reproductive fitness and that of their relatives is a just-so story advanced by flat-souled moderns who cannot conceive of any motives beyond survival, security, and continuance. (See the aforementioned essay "The Stones Cry Out [6]" for a critique of such evolutionary "explanations.")

To think in terms of the story that may be told about our deeds is the same thing as thinking about the saga – to imagine that our lives will be the material for a saga. "Saga" is an Old Norse noun related to the verb *segja*, "to say." The saga is literally "what is said." There is a great similarity here to Greek *logos*, which also literally means "that which is said" and can be translated as "story" or "account." It is related to the verb *legein*, which means "to say" (or "to gather," "to count," or "to reckon"). With *logos*, we have to distinguish between *what* is said and the *saying*, for *logos* can have the sense of "order, reason, or argument," which is then said (expressed), and can be said in multiple ways. In Heraclitus we find the suggestion of a *logos*, a speech, which must conform to an objective *logos*, or order.

In the case of "saga," what is said is also distinct from the saying. When we speak of the saga of some particular person (the saga of Sigurðr, for

example), we could mean either a specific text or we can mean a story that can be expressed in different texts, or different sayings. This distinction is not unlike that between words and meanings, where the same meaning can be expressed by different words (cat/*Katze*/*chat*/*pisica*/*kissa*, etc.), both written and spoken. We can speak, therefore, of the life of an individual as a saga that unfolds over time – regardless of whether that life ever becomes the subject of a written or spoken saga. And we can situate that life within a larger saga that is the unfolding of the being of the clan itself. So that, in other words, "saga" can become another word for the clannic being that unfolds over time, as each individual in the clan comes into existence and adds something to the being of the clan. We are, each of us, living in a saga: continuing the story of the clan, acting from what has been loaded into the past, and acting anew, making our own additions to the hoard of the past.

However, where saga means a written or spoken account or story, we must note the obvious: that only the stories of certain individuals or clans will be worthy of becoming immortalized as sagas composed by poets. It can be said with some confidence that our ancestors – the best of them – sought to live lives that would become immortalized in sagas. And some of them sought to "complete" the saga-being of the clan by producing its crowning achievement. Each individual acts a part in his clan saga. Each of us has no choice but to receive the past. The only choice comes in how we respond to it. We can either be a pawn, merely manipulated by what has gone before, or we can respond heroically.

Flowers writes:

To the individual who might be unconscious of his genealogical heritage, and who has not actualized the power potentially residing in his [*kynfylgja*], the forces of "fate" seem to compel certain actions and situations. Therefore, the *fylgja* is said to have a will of its own. However, once the individual becomes conscious of the past, and integrates himself into the power . . . of his [*kynfylgja*] through deeds of honor or through acquisition of numinous knowledge, or through particular rites of transformation, or a combination of any of these elements, then it

becomes somewhat more evident that the "being" which seems to be other than himself is actually the sum total of all that he is, and all that he has done.[2] [7]

In other words, our *kynfylgja* is our being; it is what we are. My clannic being is my own being. However, as Flowers makes clear, unless a man has *owned* this being, it may appear as something alien, or even as an intolerable burden.[3] [8] The hero is one who responds to what fate has marked out: meeting it honorably or in some sense *using* it as a vehicle for surpassing what has gone before, including what the ancestors have done. It is only the man who responds heroically, in full consciousness of the fact that his life is a story, who is worthy of having his story sung, or written down.

In my essay "The Fourfold [9]" I wrote the following:

In concepts, in language, we create a new world that expresses the Being of the world around us, as well as the world within us. It is as if we are the beings who want to capture and preserve all that is through our conceptual capacity – to snatch it out of the fleeting moment and away from change and decay, and preserve it in the amber of our words. Heidegger quotes Rainer Maria Rilke: "*We are the bees of the invisible*. We ceaselessly gather the honey of the visible, to store it up in the great golden beehive of the Invisible."[4] [10]

The sagas composed by our Northern ancestors are probably the finest testament to this human tendency. They have their parallels in other traditions, as I said earlier, but here we find the highest expression of the human desire to pluck the life of the individual out of the passage of fleeting time and to preserve it. It is this will to *create* the eternal that probably constitutes the central feature of humanity – the finest flowering of which is to be found in the West. As Bauschatz notes, the Germanic tradition emphasizes the lack of permanence in this universe: even the gods and the world tree Yggdrasil will pass away. Everything is going to end. This is an inherently tragic view of life,[5] [11] and it makes the Germanic attempt to preserve the past in story – which is really the attempt to create the eternal – all the more poignant.

While I live, I am never complete. My life cannot be truly defined or understood, as it is still unfolding. Any new event or action has the potential to completely overturn whatever might be my (or someone else's) interpretation of what my life is "about." Thus, my life is only truly knowable when it is *over*. But, of course, this means it is not I who will do the final knowing or interpreting. It will be done by others. Thus, what I am is partially to be defined by what others take me to be, or to have been. I live toward a future when my life will be a complete object and will be (I hope) celebrated. I live – or can live – in conscious awareness that what I am doing is continually adding layers to a story that will be told. I can made decisions on this basis, carrying always a conception of what is "worthy of me," in the sense of what is in keeping with the character I wish to create. I can take action consciously with the idea in mind of adding to the store of what I have done to insure that I will be known, and known for the right things.

How different is the life of modern man, who has no knowledge of the past and is therefore controlled by it (while imagining he has transcended it). He lives for "the moment," not for the eternal. Rather than seeking to be something, he wants above all not to be "pinned down" or "limited." Thus, he seeks to be nothing. And he gets his wish, for instead of living a life always in awareness of death, and shaping himself accordingly, he fears death most of all and strives to live a life that is long and safe – and thus without distinction. He is replaceable, and he is forgotten. Despite being equipped with technology beyond the dreams of the science fiction of yesteryear, he is essentially reduced to a subhuman level of existence that alternates between the animal and the vegetative.

By contrast, the man who aspires to greatness at all times *lives toward death*, as the consummating moment of life itself. I will close with some final words from Paul Bauschatz:

For all men, clearly, the most significant moment of existence comes at the instant of death, the point at which man joins existence beyond this world. The wise man prepares himself for this instant when his individual life and the power of *wyrd* will be in closest conjunction; he attempts to place his life most directly in the main current of the flow of *wyrd*. He

must act in accordance with prescribed codes of conduct received from the past; by so doing, he will protect his reputation and insure himself good fame. His actions will be governed by what he knows; therefore the wise man seeks to discover all he can. The force of past events, which surges so meaningfully into present life, offers him some information about the nature of *wyrd* itself, but man, as he lives within the realm of the tree, fails in knowing the past fully. As he values himself, however, he will strive to learn. He will attempt to associate himself directly with all he knows to be good and wise. By so doing, he will place himself in the most auspicious light so that he will die well; the moment of death is the moment of greatest significance in all of ordinary life.[6] [12]

Notes

[1] [13] See Ricardo Duchesne, The Uniqueness of Western Civilization (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011). And see my review, anthologized in North American New Right 2 [14], ed. Greg Johnson (San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2018).

[2] [15] Stephen E. Flowers, Sigurðr: Rebirth and the Rites of Transformation (Smithfield, Tx.: Rûna-Raven, 2011), p. 56.

[3] [16] My essay "Are We Free? [17]" argues that it is the sum total of the factors that "determine" us that makes us who we are, and that only by "willing our determination" can we be truly free. The essay is included in What is a Rune? and Other Essays [18], ed. Greg Johnson (San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2015).

[4] [19] Italics in original. In Rilke's original text, the first sentence in the quote is in his native German. The second sentence is in French. "The Fourfold" appears in What is a Rune?

[5] [20] Paul Bauschatz, The Well and the Tree (Amherst, Ma.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), p. xi.

[6] [21] Bauschatz, ibid., pp. 28-29.

WHAT IS ODINISM?

PART I, ODIN THE PHILOSOPHER

Editor's Note:

This is part one of a four-part essay that first appeared in *Tyr: Myth, Culture, Tradition,* [2] vol. 4. [2]

This essay is dedicated to Edred Thorsson.

Edred Thorsson has stated that Odinism[1] [3] is not the path of one who worships Odin, but who strives to *become* him:

[The] active Odian does not so much seek to worship an external god-form of Ódhinn as he does him-*Self* to embody and to develop the Self-concept and consciousness given by *the god*. Whereas other religious cults turn outward to the objective manifestation of the particular god, the cult of Ódhinn turns inward and seeks a deification of the Self. The Odian does not worship his god – he becomes his god.[2] [4]

So the Odinist emulates Odin, but in what respect? Obviously not in all. Odin is a multifaceted figure, as indicated by the countless names applied to him in the literature (Allfather, Delight of Frigg, Lord of the Æsir, Enemy of the Wolf, Worker of Evil, Lord of the Undead, Concealer, Wanderer, etc.).

To learn what it means to be an Odinist, we must identify Odin's essential features – those that not only make him unique, but that explain or unify (in one fashion or other) all of his myriad characteristics. Quite simply, Odin's key feature is his ceaseless quest for knowledge. Closely connected with this is his striving for power. But these are so tightly linked they are almost corollaries of each other. Greater knowledge – increased insight into the nature of the universe and its secrets – brings with it an increase in the ability to manipulate and to control all manner of things. So that, as the saying goes, knowledge *is* power. (Wagner was very perceptive in making the pursuit of knowledge and power the central feature of his Wotan.[3] [5])

A number of the legends concerning Odin depict his attempts to uncover the secrets of the universe, and thus attain wisdom. First, I must mention

Odin's relation to the god Mímir. Rudolf Simek notes that "Mímir probably means 'the rememberer, the wise one' and is etymologically related to Latin *memor* [remembering, unforgetting]."[4] [6] Mímir, along with the god Hœnir, was given to the Vanir as a hostage. Though Hœnir was renowned for his wisdom, the Vanir discovered that he had nothing to say unless advised by Mímir. Enraged, they decapitated Mímir and returned his head to Odin, who kept the severed head alive through magic and acquired "hidden lore" from it.[5] [7] This story raises interesting philosophical questions about the relationship between wisdom and memory. As Plato recognized, the attainment of wisdom involves *recollection* of eternal forms, patterns, or laws in nature. For Plato, these are present innately in the mind of the knower and must be "recollected," in the sense of brought to conscious awareness. But we can also speak of the "recollection" of eternal truths simply in the sense of the recovery or return to them.

Mímir's Well (Mímisbrunnr) lies underneath one of the roots of the world tree Yggdrasill. Whoever drinks from its waters gains wisdom, but before Odin is allowed to drink he must sacrifice one of his eyes. (Later I will discuss the significance of Odin's sacrifice, and the problem it creates for Odin – and for ourselves.) Mention must also be made of the fact that Odin sought special powers and insights through the practice of *seiðr* (a form of sorcery) even though, for reasons that remain obscure, it was considered *ergi*, unmanly. Further, we must consider Odin's theft of the poetic mead from the etins (giants). The mead itself was brewed from the blood of Kvasir, who was created by the combined saliva of the Æsir and the Vanir. Like Mímir, Kvasir was reputed to be extremely wise, but unfortunately (or, perhaps, fortunately) he ran afoul of some dwarfs who killed him and brewed mead from his blood, only to have the precious substance – the source of poetic inspiration – fall into the hands of the etins. To make a long story short, Odin transformed himself into a serpent and slithered into the mountain in which the mead was concealed. He then gulped down all of the mead, which was held in three vessels, and flew back to Asgard as an eagle, where he regurgitated the mead for the use of the Æsir (and mankind – since it is said that some of the mead dribbled onto the earth during Odin's flight).

Again and again we find Odin searching for wisdom and power in one way or another. And he is willing to do so at all costs, recklessly breaking all the bonds of convention and prudence. He tears one of his eyes from his own head. He is willing to engage in "unmanly" practices to acquire the powers of sorcery. And, as Thorsson points out, he gains access to the mountain that conceals the mead of poetic inspiration via "cunning and oath-breaking," in his guise as Bölverkr (Worker of Evil).[6] [8]

But surely the most significant and dramatic of all the stories recounting Odin's quest for wisdom is the tale in *Hávamál* of how he won the runes:

I know that I hung on a windy tree
nine long nights,
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
myself to myself,
on that tree of which no man knows
from where its roots run.

No bread did they give me nor a drink from a horn,
downwards I peered;
I took up the runes, screaming I took them,
then I fell back from there.[7] [9]

Odin hangs himself on Yggdrasill for nine nights, wounded by a spear, starving, sacrificing *myself to myself* – so the text states enigmatically. And he is rewarded for his suffering by the discovery of the runes. It is not surprising that many have seen in this a shamanic vision quest.[8] [10] It would seem that Odin's thirst for wisdom knows no bounds at all.

We tend, nevertheless, to take these familiar stories of the god for granted, without reflecting on how genuinely surprising they are. Odin, after all, is the chief god of the Æsir. He is the Allfather, who created the known universe out of the corpse of Ymir, shaping things according to his own design. *And yet he does not know*. Nor is he all-powerful. He must work to discover the secrets of the universe he helped give form to. And he is vulnerable. The figure of Odin stands in sharp contrast to other "chief gods" of divine pantheons. He is a far cry from Zeus, for example, whose knowledge and power are seemingly unlimited. In the Germanic

system, it is Hermes/Mercury who is the chief god. This is actually quite extraordinary.

It is extraordinary that the chief god of the Germanic peoples is characterized principally by his ceaseless striving for wisdom. Odin, in fact, is a philosopher in the literal sense – a lover of wisdom. Odin is a god, but he is definitely not *God*: he is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Indeed, one way to understand Odin and what motivates him is to say that he is striving to become God.

And so now we have arrived at a more concrete understanding of exactly what it means to be an Odinist. As Thorsson says, the Odinist (or Odian) strives to become Odin. And that means, essentially, to strive to know: to make the search for wisdom the ruling passion of one's life. To become as "divinely mad" as Odin was in his quest to unlock the secrets of the universe, at any price.

But we now know something else as well: to follow Odin means, in effect, to strive to become "God": supreme, all-knowing, and all-powerful (what I will describe later on, following Thorsson and others, as "the Self"). And if we seriously undertake this challenge and reject the idea, as Odin clearly did, that there need be any limits to our quest for wisdom, then we must realize that in principle *our goal is to surpass Odin himself*. Odin is our guide, our guru. But the pupil may surpass the master. To set our sights any lower is, in fact, to fail to be true Odinists.

No, we most definitely do not worship Odin.

Gustav Meyrink writes (in passages excerpted in Julius Evola's *Introduction to Magic*):

The only truly immortal being is the *awakened* man. Stars and gods disappear; he alone endures and can achieve anything he wants. There is no God above him. It is not without reason that our way has been called a *pagan way*. That which a religious man believes about God is nothing but a *state* that he himself could achieve, if he could only believe in himself. But he obtusely sets up obstacles over which he dares not jump. He creates an image of worship, instead of transforming himself into it. If

you want to pray, pray to your invisible Self: it is the only God who can answer your prayers.[9] [11]

And somewhere Meister Eckhart states that "Man's last and highest leave-taking is leaving God for God." I will amend this as follows: the Odinist must leave god for "God." Not to worship God, of course, but to *become* him – for this is the goal of the Odian quest.[10] [12] Our goal, like Odin's, must be divinization. We must be like Wagner's Siegfried, who shatters the old man's spear and ends his reign, crying:

Ha, rapturous glow!
Radiant gleam!
The pathway lies open,
Shining before me. –
To bathe in the fire!
To find the bride in the flames![11] [13]

Do you see this as hubris? As sacrilege? As impiety? Then the Odinist path is not for you. On this path, the very first thing that must be left behind is piety.

Notes

[1] [14] Edred Thorsson prefers the terms "Odianism" and "Odian" to "Odinism" and "Odinist." The reason for this is that "Odinism" has long been used as a synonym simply for Ásatrú. However, by "Odianism" Thorsson means a particular path to which not all Ásatrúar will be called. (Also, certain academics have made a spurious distinction between "Odinism" and "Ásatrú," claiming that the former is somehow politicized, whereas the latter is not.) I prefer the less cumbersome "Odinism" to "Odianism," so I will simply stipulate that in this essay my use of "Odinism" is identical to what Thorsson means by "Odianism."

[2] [15] Edred Thorsson, Runelore: A Handbook of Esoteric Runology (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1987), 179. I will discuss the concept of "the Self" at length in Section Four.

[3] [16] See my essay "Wagner's Place in the Germanic Tradition" in Greg Johnson, ed., Our Wagner: The North American New Right Bicentennial Symposium (San Francisco: Counter-Currents, forthcoming in 2014).

[4] [17] Rudolf Simek, Dictionary of Northern Mythology (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer), 216.

[5] [18] *See Edred Thorsson's account in Runelore, 180.*

[6] [19] *Runelore, 193.*

[7] [20] *The Poetic Edda, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 34.*

[8] [21] *On Odin as shaman see, for example, Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 379-87.*

[9] [22] *See Julius Evola and the UR Group, Introduction to Magic, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2001), 40.*

[10] [23] *In speaking of "God" I am not drawing upon any particular religious tradition. Still less am I saying that Odinists should be monotheists – for again, I am not saying that we must worship this God. I would assert, however, that the idea of a supreme, all powerful being is perennial, and that the human mind is so constituted as to conceive of it. It appears not just in monotheistic traditions but in polytheistic traditions as well. For example, in the Vedanta of the ancient Aryans we find the idea of a supreme power that is greater than the gods, of which the gods may be mere inflections. And further this supreme power is said to be identical to our innermost selves. We also find the latter point in the medieval German mystics.*

[11] [24] *Siegfried, Act 3, Scene 2. The translation is in Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion, ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, libretti translated by Stewart Spencer (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 264.*

PART II, THE ALLFATHER

The idea that the Odinist must strive not just to become Odin but to surpass him – to seek to realize an ideal of perfect knowledge and supremacy – is obviously a very provocative one. And my readers will want to know exactly how this path is followed. But first, I want to further explore the curious fact named above: that the Allfather, the chief god of the Germanic peoples, is a seeker of wisdom. What we will find is that this gives us a key that can unlock three things: the nature and purpose of the cosmos itself, the nature of the Germanic peoples, and the cosmic role or mission of the Odinist. The first and third of these issues will be explored in this section. The second will be discussed in the section that follows.

Let us briefly review the Germanic creation story, as it has come down to us in Snorri's *Prose Edda*. It can be divided into three ages or stages: the elemental age, the age of the Titans (drawing this term, of course, from a parallel stage in the Greek creation myth), and the age of the gods.

In the beginning, all that existed were two elemental realms: Muspelheim in the south, filled with fire, and Niflheim in the north, an ice realm. These two elements, fire and ice, are impersonal and unconscious. Snorri tells us that there are inhabitants of these realms, but apparently they are not conscious beings. The fire giant Surtr lives in Muspelheim, but arguably the chief characteristic of the giants is their lack of consciousness. In Niflheim, all that is to be found are countless venomous serpents. Between these two realms is Ginnungagap, a void whose name has been interpreted as "yawning gap," but – more interestingly – as a "space filled with magical powers."[1] [3] The icy rivers of Niflheim (filled with the "yeasty venom" of the serpents) flow into Ginnungagap, where the ice is struck by fiery sparks from Muspelheim.

The result of this interaction between opposites is the coming into being of the Titans of Germanic mythology: the monstrous, unconscious, haphazardly-produced beings that precede the gods. The frost giant Ymir – father of the other frost giants – is first to be created. He survives by drinking the milk of Audumla the cow (who also somehow or other appears on the scene). From under Ymir's left arm grow a "man and a

woman," and one of his feet begets a son with the other. Audumla draws sustenance from licking a salty ice block. But as she licks away the ice, the block forms into "a man" called Búri, "handsome and tall and strong." As I note in my essay "The Ninefold [4]," it is extremely important that *humanoid* forms – so far, Ymir, the Frost Giants, and Búri – keep appearing haphazardly, without any intelligence seeming to guide the process.[2] [5] It is very much as if the human is the inexorable *telos* (the end or goal) of creation.

Búri gives rise to a son, Borr, who weds Bestla, daughter of a giant. They are the parents of the brothers Odin, Vili, and Vé. And it is with them that humanoid consciousness first appears, along with humanoid form.[3] [6] Now the stage is set for the end of the age of the Titans, and its disordered production of monstrosities and abortive humanoids. Odin, Vili, and Vé slay Ymir, drag his body into the center of Ginnungagap, and from his dismembered remains they construct a cosmos, where before there had been little more than chaos. (Greek *kosmos* means "orderly arrangement," related to the verb *kosmein*, "to arrange or put in order"; also "to establish a regime.") In the center of everything the gods build Midgard, a realm for the human beings who they create out of two trees, Ask and Embla. And the gods also build a world for themselves in the heavens: Asgard. Bifröst, the rainbow bridge, links the realm of the gods to the earth.

There is more to the account, of course, but the foregoing is all that need be told for the purposes of the present essay. It is important to note that Odin and his brothers (who Thorsson argues may actually be aspects of Odin[4] [7]) do not create everything; this is no creation *ex nihilo*. Not only does Odin not create the *matter* out of which he forms the universe – Ymir's corpse – there are entities in the universe that he does not form at all (some of which pre-exist him, and continue to exist after his seizure of power, such as the Frost Giants). The most significant feature of the universe that is not created by Odin is Yggdrasill. There is no mention in any of the sources of Yggdrasill having been created by him.[5] [8] And it does not make sense to think that Odin created the three Norns (Urth, Verdandi, and Skuld) who weave his destiny, as they do the destiny of all other beings. It also makes little sense to think that he created the Völva

(the Seeress) whom he consults in *Völuspá*. If he created her, why does he need to seek her counsel? Why wouldn't he know what she knows? (Her words, in fact, imply that she remembers the time prior to the coming of Odin and the other gods.) And if he had created Mímir and Mímir's Well, why would he need to ask after their wisdom? Why would he need to give up an eye to gain wisdom from something that he himself had conceived and fashioned? The Allfather is, in truth, not literally father of all. And a pattern has now emerged: in general Odin seeks wisdom from primeval sources he did not himself create.

But let us now step back and consider this account as a whole, and try to discern the *worldview* that it conveys in mythic form. Unlike some "creator gods," Odin does not pre-exist the natural world. Instead, he *arises out of* the natural world. Though he himself is fully conscious, with a consciously-directed will (indeed, he is the first being to possess these characteristics) he and everything that precedes him arises as a result of purely unconscious, undirected natural forces. And having come into being, he turns upon nature and says a gigantic "No!" to it, slaying the primal first being and re-fashioning the natural world according to his own consciously-chosen and willed design. In short, through a series of events that happen by purely natural necessity, not choice, nature gives rise to a being who *negates* nature. Odin's actions, on the other hand, are not necessitated. They are chosen with full consciousness – a consciousness that simply did not exist prior to him.

Looking at the process of creation as a whole, from its beginning in fire and ice to the slaying of Ymir, it would appear that the *telos* of the natural world is the coming into being of an *unnatural* being who negates nature as-it-is and re-fashions it according to his own ideas of law and order. And who then seemingly devotes his existence to wresting nature's secrets from her.

The irresistible conclusion that suggests itself is that the coming into being of Odin and his refashioning of the cosmos – *and his search for wisdom* – is part of the unfolding "plan" of existence itself. (That there is such a "plan" is revealed in the prophecy of the Völva.)

Nature gives rise to a conscious being who, as a free agent, is a vehicle of the further unfolding and development of nature itself. The monstrous age of the Titans – an age with few laws and no consciousness – is canceled and, through the agency of Odin, the universe proliferates according to consciously-conceived ideals and laws. Odin imposes his order not just one time – but in his continual governance of things, decreeing of laws, and manipulation of events (as we see, for example, in the *Völsungasaga*). In doing so, he searches for wisdom that would guide him. This search is itself part of the "plan" of nature – an intrinsic element in the development of the cosmos.

Now, at this point one is tempted to draw an obvious conclusion: Odin actually represents humanity. We are, after all, the being who arises out of nature, yet negates the nature that we find, in order to refashion it according to our plans and ideals. But it is not just power over nature that human beings seek, but knowledge and wisdom as well. We seek knowledge that would help us improve our lot in life – but like Odin, we also seek it, and seek it passionately, *for its own sake*. We may then argue – again, taking Odin to represent the human spirit – that the coming into being of humanity is a part of nature's process of self-completion. Nature is transformed and re-organized through man's labor, and the plans and ideals we put into it. Further – and this point is absolutely crucial – through the production of a species that yearns (like Odin) to know everything in heaven and on earth, nature achieves consciousness of itself. In other words, nature reveals itself as a process, an unfolding of myriad forms, which issues in a very special sort of natural-supernatural being (man) who, through his relentless quest for knowledge and self-knowledge, holds up a mirror to nature itself.

The foregoing, again, is an attempt to discern the import of the Germanic mythic material – to express its underlying "philosophy." It cannot be emphasized enough that what is so unusual about this mythology is that it makes the highest being in the universe – nature's highest, most exalted production, as it were – a being who seeks wisdom. What is this telling us about the Germanic *Weltanschauung*? It is saying that the universe achieves consummation and completion through *being comprehended*. Thorsson writes: "*Wōdhanaz* [Odin] should be clear

enough by now as that which integrates the many into a conscious whole *and describes this entire process*."[6] [9]

We are all Odin, it seems. Or at least those of us who are lovers of wisdom. And thus we can now see that Odinism is much more than one path among others. Odinism – the search for wisdom – is the path of divinization. It is the highest of all the "forms" in the universe, and the one that comprehends all others. Anyone who pursues wisdom ceaselessly, fearlessly, and uncompromisingly, forsaking all else (including piety, reputation, and personal safety), is an Odinist, whether he realizes it or not. *And it is to give rise to such men that the universe exists at all.*

The above account is certainly an exalted one. But it is incomplete in one crucial respect, as I will explain in the next section.

Notes

[1] [10] See Jan De Vries, Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 167.

[2] [11] By "humanoid" I mean having human-like shape or approximating to the human. Ymir, the Frost Giants, and Búri are humanoid, not human. See my essay "The Ninefold [4]" in What is a Rune? And Other Essays (San Francisco: Counter-Currents, forthcoming).

[3] [12] I have discussed the character of the three brothers extensively in my essay "The Gifts of Ódhinn and His Brothers [13]," in What is a Rune? And Other Essays.

[4] [14] Runelore, 179.

[5] [15] The Prose Edda does mention that trees were created from Ymir's hair. But there is no specific mention of Yggdrasill having been created thus. Given the significance of the World Tree, if it had been created out of Ymir's remains one would think that Snorri would have mentioned this.

[6] [16] Runelore, 196. My italics.

PART III, THE ODINIC AND THE FAUSTIAN

Let us return to the story of Mímir's Well, and Odin's sacrifice of an eye. What does this loss signify? As Wagner recognized, it means that while Odin gains wisdom, he also becomes half blind.[1] [3] On a literal level, this is obvious. But what is it that he becomes blind to, and what is it he is able now to "see," once he drinks from Mímir's Well? Very simply, the drink opens Odin's eye to eternal truths – hidden truths – that are not available through ordinary, sensory experience.

Of course, it is in fact his *mind's eye* that is opened to these truths.

The "vision" that the drink gives him turns him *inward*, toward the things that can only be known by the mind. But the loss of one of his literal eyes signifies that in the process he loses half of his *outward* vision: his vision of the world at his own feet, so to speak. His consciousness is now divided between an enthralling world of eternal verities – with which Odin, the seeker of wisdom, desires to thoroughly involve himself – and the "external" world of finite particulars, which he now perceives with about half the acuity that he had before he took his famous sip from the well.

Now, what does this story have to teach us? The turn "inward," the opening of the eyes of the mind to the realm of truths that only the mind can know, is the source of much that is great. It is the source of scientific and philosophical speculation. But it is bought at the price of the partial disconnection from the world. The lover of wisdom is always in danger of failing to see much that is plainly in front of him. There is always the danger, for example, that he may be misled by theories or ideals that are divorced from reality. For example, instead of acting as the steward of nature, he may be seized by delusions masquerading as grand ideals, which lead him to pervert or violate nature. (This lesson is absolutely crucial to Wagner's interpretation of Wotan/Odin.[2] [4]) He may become bewitched by implausible theories about the perfectibility of man, and set about trying to radically change human nature, and society.

Now we begin to see that what the figure of Odin really represents is not so much man *per se* but Western man, more specifically Northern European man – with all his great virtues, and his great faults. This is who we are, like it or not. Oswald Spengler's understanding of Northern

European man as "Faustian" (which I have discussed in a number of other essays) is quite useful here – both for illuminating the nature of Odin, and our own nature (which comes to the same thing).

In his two-volume work *The Decline of the West* (1918-1923) Spengler argues that each civilization is characterized by a distinctively different spirit. According to Spengler, the prime symbol that reveals the soul of Faustian man is "pure and limitless space":

Far apart as may seem the Christian hymnology of the south and the Eddas of the still heathen north, they are alike in the implicit space-endlessness of prosody, rhythmic syntax and imagery. Read the *Dies Irae* together with the Völuspá, which is little earlier; there is the same adamantine will to overcome and break all resistances of the visible.[3] [5]

Further, he states that "the Faustian is an existence which *is led* with a deep consciousness and introspection of the ego, and a resolutely personal culture evidenced in memoirs, reflections, retrospects and prospects and conscience."[4] [6] What characterizes the Faustian soul, then, is a kind of duality. On the one hand it is given to solemn inwardness; to looking within, and finding the answers within our own individual conscience (Odin's "inward vision"). But this goes together with an outward-striving will that, in multiple forms, yearns for the infinite.

One commentator (John Farrenkopf) expounds upon Spengler's conception of the Faustian as follows:

The architecture of the Gothic cathedral expresses the Faustian will to conquer the heavens; Western symphonic music conveys the Faustian urge to conjure up a dynamic, transcendent, infinite space of sound; Western perspective painting mirrors the Faustian will to infinite distance; and the Western novel responds to the Faustian imperative to explore the inner depths of the human personality while extending outward with a comprehensive view.[5] [7]

In sum, Spengler holds that European man is animated by the will not just to master all of nature, but to transcend the limits of the physical world itself.

Spengler writes:

What is Valhalla? . . . [It] is something beyond all sensible actualities floating in remote, dim, Faustian regions. Olympus rests on the homely Greek soil, the Paradise of the Fathers is a magic garden somewhere in the universe, but Valhalla is nowhere. Lost in the limitless, it appears with its inharmonious gods and heroes the supreme symbol of solitude. Siegfried, Parzeval, Tristan, Hamlet, Faust are the loneliest heroes in all the cultures. Read the wondrous awakening of the inner life in Wolfram's Parzeval. The longing for the woods, the mysterious compassion, the ineffable sense of forsakenness – it is all Faustian and only Faustian. Every one of us knows it. The motive returns with all its profundity in the Easter scene of [Goethe's] *Faust* I.

"A longing pure and not to be described
drove me to wander over woods and fields,
and in a mist of hot abundant tears
I felt a world arise and live for me."

Of this world-experience neither Apollinian [Greco-Roman] nor Magian [Middle Eastern] man, neither Homer nor the Gospels, knows anything whatever.[6] [8]

It is rather obvious, in fact, that the Faustian is equivalent to the Odinic. Wagner clearly saw this, and modeled the Wotan-Loge relationship in *Das Rheingold* on the relationship of Faust to Mephistopheles.[7] [9] To the examples Spengler gives concerning architecture, music, and painting must surely be added the intellectual tradition of Northern Europe: philosophy, science, theology, and mysticism. Here we truly see the Odinic, in our insatiable desire to bring everything into our ken; to find ourselves in everything. Thorsson writes: "By his very nature Ódhinn *synthesizes* everything around him. He makes all things his own and uses them according to his *will*, while remaining in an essential way *apart* from outside things."[8] [10] The entire Northern European intellectual tradition is Faustian, or Odinic. And we should speak specifically of "Northern European." Because although there is a European character that we can see in both the Greeks, for example, and the Germans, there are significant differences. These differences are very revealing, and I will offer a brief sketch of some of them.

For the Greek thinkers the soul is potentially all; whereas the Germanic tendency is to think that it is *actually* all. Contrast Aristotle with Leibniz (or Hegel). For Aristotle the mind has the potential to become one with its object by taking on the object's intelligible form. Further, the mind has the potential (never fully actualized) to take on the intelligible forms of *all things* – the potential, in other words, to contain the entire universe. But Aristotle tells us in *De Anima* that it has this ability in virtue of having no form itself; in virtue of being *nothing*. Leibniz's philosophy of mind is essentially the complete inversion of Aristotle's. Mind does not potentially contain the entire universe, it *actually* does. Mind is not open to a world "out there," for the world is already "in here." Minds (monads) are "windowless," Leibniz declares: we do not peer from our interior at a boundless "out there." Instead, it is our interiority that is boundless. And mind is not "nothing"; in fact, it is everything. Leibniz's position is Odinic or Faustian: we find truth in the all, but we find the all in ourselves.

For the Greeks, the soul is passive; for the Germans it is active. For Aristotle, the intellect (*nous*) is merely an empty receptacle for the intelligible ideas. For the German Idealists – Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, *et al.* – the soul is active. It constructs the world we experience, in part or in whole. For Fichte, it is the vocation of man to impose his will upon the natural world and to re-shape it, bringing the real into accord with the ideal – *our* ideal. (Fichte is arguably the most Odinic of all the German philosophers.)

Further, the Greek tendency, which we find in Orphism, Pythagoreanism, Parmenides, Plato, and Hellenistic Gnosticism, is to devalue nature and the body; to declare that they are unreal, or at least an impediment to the attainment of wisdom. The Germanic tendency has been more "this-worldly" – seeking truth in the body and in the world around us. This is evident, of course, in the spirit of the mythic sources, and in the idealism of Schelling and Hegel, which is the highpoint in the development of the Germanic speculative impulse. For Schelling and Hegel, we find ourselves in nature. In knowing the world around us, we know ourselves. The "speculative impulse" is just the Odinic spirit: seeking itself in all things, and all things in itself.

Here is how Hegel characterizes the soul of European man:

The principle of the European mind is . . . self-conscious Reason, which is confident that for it there can be no insuperable barrier and which therefore takes an interest in everything in order to become present to itself therein. The European mind opposes the world to itself, makes itself free of it, but in turn annuls this opposition, takes its other, the manifold, back into itself, into its unitary nature. In Europe, therefore, there prevails this infinite thirst for knowledge which is alien to other races. The European is interested in the world, he wants to know it, to make this other confronting him his own, to bring to view the genus, law, universal, thought, the inner rationality, in the particular forms of the world. As in the theoretical, so too in the practical sphere, the European mind strives to make manifest the unity between itself and the outer world.[9] [11]

Consider how Odinic-Faustian this account is. The European mind "takes an interest in everything," "confident that there can be no insuperable barrier" to its knowledge. This is exactly what I characterized in Section One as the true spirit of the Odinist. The European mind "makes itself free" from nature, "opposes itself" to it, but then "annuls this opposition . . . to make manifest the unity between itself and the outer world." Compare this to what Thorsson has to say about the Odinic spirit:

Ódhinn's being teaches the way of the 'whole-I,' the 'all-self'. . . It can mingle with the natural, organic cosmos. It can mingle with the non-natural, numinous realms. It does so, however, in order that it may further its willed aims. It is the essence of the way of the true seeker, never resting, always searching in darkness and in light, high and low, in life and in death.[10] [12]

And Hegel's conclusion to the above passage is decidedly Odinic-Faustian: the European mind "subdues the outer world to its ends with an energy which has ensured for it the mastery of the world."[11] [13]

What we have in Hegel's philosophy is simply the self-understanding of European man. But that self-understanding is already there centuries earlier, in mythic form, in the figure of Odin. It is important to note, however, that the self-assessment of European man encoded in our

myths is far more nuanced and pessimistic than Hegel's account, which was influenced by Enlightenment ideals. The figure of Odin is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand he is a heroic figure, bravely seeking wisdom and power. On the other hand, however, he is clearly a tragic figure. I have already noted the significance of his partial blindness. And his lust for power, and intervention in the lives of others, often has destructive consequences. Again, of all the bards who have retold and amplified the legends of Odin, it is Wagner who most clearly and powerfully brings out the tragic nature of the god. And since Odin represents us, I have already noted the sobering conclusions we must draw, when we reflect upon his character.

What more have we now learned about the path of the Odinist? We have learned, first of all, that it is a Western path. In following it, we Westerners are realizing in the flesh what Jung referred to as the "Wotan archetype," which is planted deep in the European – especially, of course, Northern European – soul.[12] [14] In following the Odinic archetype, furthermore, we Westerners really do make a kind of Faustian bargain. In our ceaseless pursuit of knowledge and power – in stretching ourselves out towards the infinite – we risk losing much more than an eye. We risk losing our souls.

Spengler saw the Faustian West as characterized by a sublime will to totality and transcendence, but he saw it ultimately issuing in the West's undoing. With the advent of the

Industrial Revolution and capitalism, Spengler believed, the Faustian will to infinite, outward expansion took on a rootless economic and technological character. He predicted, with remarkable prescience, that eventually the West would exhaust itself in hedonism, declining birth rates, and globalist entanglements. He also expected the West to decline in material terms as well, as its technology spread to Asia, which he believed would eventually become a formidable rival.[13] [15]

Is there hope for the Odinic-Faustian West? This is the most important question of the present age – the most important question for *us*. But there is a deeper philosophical question that lies behind this one: is the Odinic spirit necessarily tragic? Does it doom us? To this question the

Odinic answer can only be: *we will not accept this*. This is certainly the only answer I can give, for the Odinic is spirit my own – it is my ancestral spirit. It is impressed upon my soul, and cannot be effaced. I cannot, therefore, shake the conviction that *only* the Odinic spirit is capable of solving the problems that it has created. Only the pursuit of more knowledge – no, of *wisdom* – can give us the power to correct our course. Is this merely the archetypal Odinic blindness speaking? Perhaps. Or perhaps it is Odinic wisdom speaking.

We have seen Hegel claiming that the Western spirit holds that there can be no "insuperable barrier" to its knowledge. This is certainly an expression of the Odinic spirit. But while we may not accept barriers to what we can *know*, wisdom may involve coming to understand that *what we are* is delimited in certain ways – that, in fact, *to be* is to be determined or delimited. (For example, I stated above that I am determined to believe, true to my Odinic blood, that there can be no "insuperable barrier" to my knowledge). I have argued elsewhere that the next phase of the West's self-knowledge will involve the recognition of the futility and destructiveness of denying the unchosen conditions – biological, cultural, historical, social – that make us who we are. We will choose instead to affirm those conditions. Paradoxically, this affirmation of limits is the action of a *fully* self-aware, free, and autonomous being.[14] [16]

Affirming the unchosen conditions for our freedom doesn't mean the same thing as "settling down." We Westerners are dyed-in-the-wool Faustians: determined to strive, restlessly. It is this fact about ourselves that we must make peace with, and affirm.[15] [17] And so we will go on striving, but this time with full consciousness of who we are. Will this lead us again into misadventures? Almost certainly. But they will make glorious material for sagas, songs, and tragedies. And, ultimately, this is perhaps the most satisfying thing that can be said about the life of a man, or of a people. (Again, the Odinic spirit speaking.)

Notes

[1] [18] Thorsson gives a "positive" interpretation to the loss of the eye, whereas my interpretation (and Wagner's) is more "negative." Thorsson writes: "Ódhinn 'hides' his eye down in the column of vertical consciousness, down in the depths. There his

eye remains active, always able to see, to 'drink in,' the wisdom of all the worlds. Thus, Ódhinn always has two visions – one over 'this world' (from Hlidhskjálf) and one in the 'other worlds' (from the Well of Mímir)." Runelore, 192.

[2] [19] See my essay "Wagner's Place in the Germanic Tradition." I argue that Wagner should be viewed as a major interpreter and continuer of the Germanic mythological tradition, and that Der Ring des Nibelungen should take its place alongside such texts as the Nibelungenlied and Völsungasaga as a canonical source for Odinists and Ásatrúar.

[3] [20] Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, Vol. I, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Knopf, 1926), 183, 185-186

[4] [21] Spengler, Decline, 183.

[5] [22] Quoted in Ricardo Duchesne, The Uniqueness of Western Civilization (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 335.

[6] [23] Spengler, Decline, 185-186.

[7] [24] See my essay "Wagner's Place in the Germanic Tradition." See also Deryck Cooke, I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 131.

[8] [25] Runelore, 179.

[9] [26] Hegel's Philosophy of Mind, trans. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 45.

[10] [27] Runelore, 198.

[11] [28] Hegel's Philosophy of Mind, 45.

[12] [29] C. G. Jung writes that "the god of the Germans is Wotan and not the Christian God." Wotan, Jung says, is "a fundamental attribute of the German people" and "a Germanic datum of first importance, the truest expression and unsurpassed personification of a fundamental quality that is particularly characteristic of the Germans." Although a good deal of Jung's essay – written in 1936 – deals with modern Germany, we must understand him in these passages to be speaking broadly of the Germanic peoples. See C. G. Jung, "Wotan" in Civilization in Transition, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 10, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 191, 186.

[13] [30] See Duchesne, The Uniqueness of Western Civilization, 336. See Spengler, Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (London: European Books Society, 1992).

[14] [31] *See the final section of my review of Duchesne's The Uniqueness of Western Civilization in North American New Right, vol. 2, ed. Greg Johnson (San Francisco: Counter-Currents, forthcoming in 2014).*

[15] [32] *I know self-proclaimed Odinists/Odians and Ásatrúar who take what amounts to an anti-intellectual position, insisting that the root of modern ills is precisely our ceaseless quest for knowledge and power. Apparently, they think that we can simply "stop" – that we can change our nature, and dam up the "infinite thirst for knowledge" that Hegel held to be our chief feature as a people. This is not only highly unrealistic, it is contrary to the spirit of Odinism and Ásatrú. And those who profess such beliefs lack self-knowledge. We are all Odinists, for better or worse. We cannot get that eye back, try as we might, or pretend that we never hung on Yggdrasill.*

PART IV, ODINISM IS AN ESOTERIC PATH

So far, I have essentially argued that to be an Odinist is to be a lover of wisdom – one who puts nothing before this love, including piety towards Odin. Odinism is the path of divinization – the Odinist seeks to become "God" (supreme, all-powerful, all-knowing), just as Odin did. I then went on to make a striking cosmological claim: that the universe exists *in order to be known*, and that the Odinist is the vehicle of the universe's self-knowledge. Further, I have argued that Odin is the archetype that expresses the Northern European identity, and that Odinism is fundamentally a Western path. This path, however, is fraught with dangers. It is the source of all that is great about us, and all that is terrible; of all the tremendous achievements of our past, and the terrible problems of our present. What the *Katha Upanishad* says about the path it teaches is also quite applicable to our own: "Arise, awake, and learn by approaching the exalted ones, for that path is sharp as a razor's edge, and hard to go by, say the wise."

The foregoing account, however, may not fully satisfy some of my readers – a very special, select group of readers. What I have argued thus far is that we Westerners are, in a sense, *all* on the Odinic path, very broadly construed. I stated near the end of Section Two [3] that it is possible to be on the Odinic path – to embody the archetype of Odin – unconsciously. Such men as Paracelsus, Fichte, Hegel, Wagner, Nietzsche, and Heidegger were, arguably, "unconscious Odinists." But what of the *conscious* Odinists among us? I mean those of my readers who wish to consciously and deliberately follow this path, and who are steeped in the lore of our ancestors. They will want something more than just the exhortation to "pursue wisdom."

This is where we must enter into a discussion of what I will call "esoteric Odinism." But it must begin with a reconsideration of the "cosmological" argument of Section Two [3], and approach these matters on a deeper level. This will lead, in the end, to a discussion of the *practice* of Odinism.

In the foregoing I have argued for the thesis that it is man that brings the whole (the universe) to completion through his quest for knowledge of the whole. Through man, in other words, the universe achieves

knowledge of itself: it holds a mirror up to itself. In order to fully understand why this is the case, one must keep squarely in mind that man arises out of nature; he is a natural being, though of a peculiar sort.

As Aristotle saw (and later Hegel, following Aristotle) man recapitulates within himself the rest of nature, in possessing the appetitive and nutritive functions (plant nature), and the sensory and locomotive (animal nature).[1] [4] Biologically, we comprise the whole – in a sense we combine all creatures within ourselves; we are all things. We are the microcosm that reflects the macrocosm. But we step beyond all other creatures at the same time, in being capable of achieving self-knowledge.[2] [5] Thus, in striving to know ourselves – which always necessarily involves, as Hegel makes clear, finding ourselves in the world around us, taking an interest in all – we are the whole knowing itself. Man occupies a privileged position in nature, reigning over all as the highest terrestrial being – in virtue both of his knowledge, and his power. Man is part beast, part god (as Aristotle recognized).

The above only puts the argument of Section Two [3] in a slightly different way. The next step is to recognize that man's knowledge or consciousness of the whole (which is simultaneously his self-consciousness, in the most profound sense) is purely impersonal. Each man is, to one degree or another, the "carrier" of this consciousness, but it is something radically distinct from my consciousness of myself as an individual. To achieve knowledge of the whole, I must go beyond the personal ego and its attachments, and identify myself with a "higher self" that strives to embrace all. In other words, *I must sacrifice myself to myself.*

A different way to put the same point is to say that I must shift my sense of identification from the personal self to what I will call, following Thorsson, the Self. Thorsson writes,

The 'birth' of Ódhinn and the World-Tree sacrifice are essentially simultaneous – without it Ódhinn is not Ódhinn. In this process Ódhinn gives his self to him-Self while hanging on Yggdrasill (the steed of Yggr [= Odin], or the yew column). The subject has turned upon itself and has successfully made itself the object of its own work.[3] [6]

The Self is equivalent to what is sometimes referred to as "cosmic consciousness" (though this term has certain unfortunate associations with New Age authors). The Self is, again, the whole's consciousness of itself. And it is my *true Being* – who I *really* am. But it is not reducible to me, since it is not the same thing as my personal ego (my small "s" self). Again, each man – insofar as he realizes the Odinic ideal – is the carrier of this Self. It lives through us – but it does not die when we die. Thorsson writes, further, "Ódhinn's being teaches the way of the 'whole-I,' the 'all-self,' as well as the 'higher self.' This higher self is a supraconscious entity, the 'holy self' or the magical ego of the runemaster."[4] [7]

The Self is therefore a being distinct from us, though, as I have said, it is realized in the world through us alone. To draw a philosophical analogy, it is similar to the Aristotelian understanding of form as actuality. The form or being of an object is not reducible to the object (since other, similar objects share the same form), but it is realized in the world through the objects that actualize or exemplify it. Similarly the Self is something distinct from me, but it is possible – by disengaging myself from identification with the finite me – to realize my fundamental identity with it. (Just as Odin does in the sacrifice on Yggdrasill.) When this occurs, the Self is "actualized" in the world *and the world itself is actualized*, since, as I have argued, the *telos* of the whole is its consciousness of itself.

The Self is thus not just my Being – it is the Being of all things. Everything comes to be out of the universe's drive for manifestation. Of course, it is not as if the universe is a "thing" that manifests itself. Rather, the universe *is* this manifestation. If we ask *what* is doing the manifesting, the answer is the Self. This may at first seem like an odd answer, since what I have said earlier seems to imply that the Self is realized *later* in the process of creation, through human beings who, in their pursuit of knowledge, constitute the universe's self-awareness. But it is vital to understand that the Self is there from the beginning, prior to manifestation – logically, but not temporally prior, as the Being or essence of the universe itself, which is only fully actualized through human knowledge. The picture that emerges is that the entire world is an infinite Self coming to consciousness of itself, and that each and every

being in the universe plays a role in the manifestation of the Self to itself. But the crucial role is played by the one being who is capable of self-awareness and of knowledge of the whole: man.

There is thus a great "World I" that my own "I" is but a reflection of. And I have a fundamental choice that is not faced by any other being. I can behave as if my personal I exists for its own sake, abiding in perfect aloneness, detached from the whole. This is the path of foolish "attachment" to things that do not last. It is the path of egoism and self-aggrandizement; it is the path, in fact, of non-being. My other choice is to shift my sense of identity from that petty, personal I to the World I – the ideal aim being to realize that World I in myself; to make myself the Self. To sacrifice my self to my Self. Thorsson writes, "The Odian does not seek 'union' with Odin but seeks union only with that with which Odin sought union – the Self."[5] [8]

The left-hand path *cannot* mean the exaltation of the limited, imperfect ego. It cannot mean, for example, that *that* ego attains "special powers." That is the dream of an adolescent, or of a petty egoist. The left-hand path must mean the transmutation and perfection of the ego; i.e., not the aggrandizement of the self, but the identification with the Self. It is not an "annihilation" of the self and an absorption into the Absolute (this is the "mystical path," what Evola calls the "wet way"). The left-hand path (the "dry way") means that here, now, in this world I become the Self. It is a path of self-mastery and divinization that is lived within time and in engagement with the world.

But how do we do this? There are two ways, which are not mutually exclusive, indeed they should accompany each other: the way of theory, and the way of practice. "Theory" derives from the Greek verb *theorein*, "to see, or behold." A theory is therefore a "seeing," or better "a beholding." The way of theory involves, first of all, seeing the world in the manner I have described above: the purpose of existence itself as our quest for wisdom. The way of theory thus, in part, amounts to adhering to a certain philosophical outlook. But it is not enough simply to accept these ideas: one must actively be a seeker; one who searches for wisdom

as Odin did. One must, in other words, *theorize* – i.e., strive to understand, or to behold more and more.

The way of theory is extraordinarily liberating. If we can learn to find ourselves in the world by realizing that that world is there *for us*, and for our seeking, then we recognize that nothing matters save that seeking. And if we can free ourselves from everything that would hold that seeking back or confine it, then we become the freest of men.

But theory and theorizing are not all. There is also practice. I am using that term in the sense in which it is used in esoteric, initiatory traditions. Is there a spiritual practice of Odinism?

The key to this question is to be found in the story of Odin's self-sacrifice on Yggdrasill. I have dealt with this matter in another essay.[6] [9] Here I will approach the same material in a different and much simpler way.

A student of that most Odinic of philosophers, J. G. Fichte, left behind the following remarkable account of one of the great man's lectures, delivered in the winter semester of 1798/1799 at Jena:

I cannot deny that I was awed by my first glimpse of this short, stocky man with a sharp, commanding tongue. Even his manner of speaking was sharp and cutting. Well aware of his listeners' weaknesses, he tried in every way to make himself understood by them. He made every effort to provide proofs for everything he said; but his speech still seemed commanding, as if he wanted to dispel any possible doubts by means of an unconditional order. "Gentlemen," he would say, "collect your thoughts and enter into yourselves. We are not at all concerned now with anything external, but only with ourselves." And, just as he requested, his listeners really seemed to be concentrating upon themselves. Some of them shifted their position and sat up straight, while others slumped with downcast eyes. But it was obvious that they were all waiting with great suspense for what was supposed to come next. Then Fichte would continue: "Gentlemen, think the wall!" And as I saw, they really did think about the wall, and everyone seemed able to do so with success. "Have you thought about the wall?" Fichte would ask. "Now, gentlemen, think him who thinks the wall." The obvious confusion and embarrassment

provoked by this request was extraordinary. In fact, many of the listeners seemed quite unable to discover anywhere whoever it was that had thought about the wall. I now understood how young men who had stumbled in such a memorable manner over their first attempt at speculation might have fallen into a very dangerous frame of mind as a result of their further efforts in this direction.[7] [10]

What Fichte was asking his astonished students to do was to shift their attention from the objects around them to attention itself: to remember the self that attends to the world. In our daily lives we are always occupied with this object or that. The object may be a physical something, such as the keyboard in front of me, or it may be an idea, an expectation, a hope, a fear – anything that, for whatever reason, presents itself to us and "catches" our attention. (Even absence may present itself to us and preoccupy us, as when – to use the sort of example Sartre would have used – we arrive at the café at the appointed time expecting to see Pierre, but register only his absence.) The self always has some object or other. But there is, in addition, "another self" that can step back from one's attachment and reflect upon it. A self that is aware of the self that is aware. It remains detached and observant, whereas the characteristic of the mundane self is that it is always "attached" in one way or another.

The key to the Odinist "practice" is the identification with this detached self. Just *how* to do this is hard to describe. We could say that we must "shift" our identification from the mundane, attached self to the detached, observing self. But what does the shifting? It might be better to say that we must simply *become* this self, though this hardly sounds like giving instructions at all. In practice, one will find that one can simply *do* this – though how we do it is mysterious. And the practitioner will find at first – and for a long time – that shifting to the perspective of this detached self is hard to sustain for very long. Something will always come along to "grab" us and suddenly we find ourselves attached again, and identified with the mundane self.

The teaching I am describing here is perennial, and one finds traces of it in many different sources. In the UR material edited by Julius Evola (and published as *Introduction to Magic*), "Abraxas" writes that

the secret . . . consists in creating in yourself a dual being. You must generate – first by imagining and then by realizing it – a superior principle confronting everything you usually are (e.g., an instinctive life, thoughts, feelings). This principle must be able to control, contemplate, and measure what you are, in a clear knowledge, moment by moment. There will be two of you: yourself standing before "the other.". . . All in all, the work consists of a "reversal": you have to turn the "other" into "me" and the "me" into the "other."[8] [11]

Abraxas goes on to comment upon "you have to turn the 'other' into 'me' and the 'me' into the 'other'" as follows, and his words are worth quoting at length: "Depending upon which of the two principles the person focusses on, you will have the *Dry Way* or the *Humid Way*, the magical method or the mystical method." In the mystical method, "the mind creates an 'other' that still remains 'other.'" One loves or yearns after this "other." Abraxas refers to this standpoint as "feminine," "negative," and "dependent" ("it has the character of *need*"). He states "To turn [this standpoint] into the purely affirmative, central, and self-sufficient solar nature requires a qualitative leap and a daring that is very difficult for a mystic to achieve, considering the contrary nature of the previous mortification."[9] [12]

This "daring leap" is, of course, what is required of the Odinist. Abraxas continues:

In the magical, dry, or solar way, you will create a duality in your being not in an unconscious and passive manner (as the mystic does), but consciously and willingly; you will shift directly on the higher part and *identify* yourself with that superior and subsistent principle . . . Slowly but gradually, you will strengthen this 'other' (which is yourself [i.e., your Self]) and create for it a supremacy, until it knows how to dominate all the powers of the [lower] natural part and master them totally. What is required of you is a discipline of firmness and sobriety until an equilibrium is created, namely the quality of a life that owns itself and is free with regard to itself, cleansed from instinct and from the obscure appetite of the natural being, in both flesh and mind.[10] [13]

In sum, the first step of the work consists in dividing consciousness into an active, watching self, and a passive, experiencing self. The aim of the Odinist is to identify with the superior, detached, watching self. Now, very simply, this superior self *just is* the Self discussed earlier. It is not *you*. It is an *infinite consciousness* in the sense that it is not finitized through attachment or absorption in this object or that. It is the "World I" gazing at itself: the consciousness of existence itself, born through you. In these moments in which we achieve identity with this detached, observing consciousness, the Self is "actualized" in the world and – as I argued earlier – the world itself is actualized, since the purpose of the whole is its consciousness of itself. In these moments of identification with the Self, *you are the whole knowing itself*.

And you are Odin – or, more specifically, you reach the Odinic goal. Just like Odin, you have arisen from nature, from the all, and brought consciousness of the all into being. But before Odin could do this, he had to "negate" the nature from which he had arisen. In order to achieve the Odinic consciousness, you must do the equivalent: you must sever your consciousness from finite attachment, and infinitize it.

As I have noted, remaining identified with the Self is extraordinarily difficult. There are a number of different sources which contain hints about how to go about achieving this. These include the works of Edred Thorsson and Julius Evola (though they offer only hints; both writers know more than they are willing to say openly). There is, in addition, a great deal of practical information to be found in works dealing with the so-called "Fourth Way" teaching of the Greek-Armenian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff (1866-1949), a decidedly Odinic figure.[11] [14] For all intents and purposes, Gurdjieff's "self-remembering" is identical to the practice I have described here.

The Fourth Way is practiced in the world, not in separation from it. Gurdjieff contrasts it to three other paths: the way of the fakir (who works to master the body), the way of the monk (who masters the emotions), and the way of the yogi (who masters the mind or intellect). These paths not only tend to involve the isolation of the practitioner from the world, they lead, so Gurdjieff believed, to one-sided development.

The Fourth Way works on mastering all aspects of the self and, again, it requires that this self-mastery be sought while the practitioner is fully engaged with life. And we must take special note of the fact that Gurdjieff offered his teaching as a mystical path *for the West*. It is also easy to see that the Fourth Way belongs to the left-hand path.[12] [15] It uses the distractions and pressures of modern life as a means to mastering the self. For just this reason, it is obvious that this path is well-suited to the present time: the Wolf Age, Iron Age, or Kali Yuga. Finally, it is a *tough* way: there is nothing "touchy-feely" about it (which is why many New Age types tend to be put off by Gurdjieff).

The Gurdjieffian way is not without its pitfalls (and my discussion of it here does not in any sense constitute an "endorsement"). So-called "Gurdjieff groups" are often uncomfortably cultish, and sometimes – in their efforts to "remember the self" – members develop a cold, emotionless quality (ironic, given Gurdjieff's insistence that his teaching was about overcoming the "robot" in all of us). The Fourth Way has probably harmed about as many people as it has helped, and driven some people quite mad. This is undeniably part of its allure (at least for the dauntless Odinist). It must also be noted that Gurdjieff's initiatory teaching of self-mastery is coupled with cosmological speculations that strain credulity.[13] [16] In my eyes, these are more objectionable, in fact, than his claim that the Fourth Way is "esoteric Christianity." (The simple reason being that "esoteric [i.e., mystical] Christianity" in certain ways bears a passing resemblance to Odinism, especially in the hands of the classical German mystics.)

Nevertheless, the Fourth Way has much to teach us about the practice of Odinism; i.e., the technique of identification with the Self. But Gurdjieff's followers are also notoriously guarded about the actual methods of what they call "the Work," insisting that it can only be imparted through "group." To an Odinist, this is nothing more than a gauntlet thrown down, for we are not "joiners." One must therefore "read around" quite a bit in Fourth Way literature and connect many dots in order to uncover what the actual practice consists in.[14] [17]

I can summarize the basics of it as follows.

What is required, first of all, is the simple act of "self-observation." In this act, the self – as described above – bifurcates into an active, watching self, and a self that is watched. (This watching self and the Self, I have argued, are metaphysically identical.) Just what do we observe? Begin with the practice of grounding yourself in the present moment. Focus on bodily sensations: on the experience of touch, sight, sound, smell. Thoughts will come to you about what you are touching, seeing, etc. Observe this, and then gently draw yourself back to the experience of the sensations themselves. Properly practiced, this will give rise to a very special sort of realization which, if put into words, would simply say "I am." It should be obvious that what is involved in self-observation is a very special form of attention or awareness in which you become intensely present to Being. This almost inevitably leads to the experience I have described elsewhere as Ekstasis – wonder in the face of Being, in the sheer fact that things *are* – which I have argued is equivalent to *óðr* of which Odin is the personification.[15] [18]

When you practice self-observation you will note such things as tension in the body. Most of the time, you will find that this tension is unnecessary, given the circumstances you are actually in. You may also notice emotions that are not appropriate to those circumstances. But what you will notice especially is unnecessary thoughts: the constant chatter of the mind. Self-observation is extraordinarily frustrating at first, because as soon as one has achieved a state of observing without attachment, some stray thought will come along and suddenly one will find oneself "absent" from the present, and thinking about some petty concern. The particular danger for the lover of wisdom is that the experience of self-observation will give rise immediately to "insights," and the attention will then shift from observation to theorizing. Theorize later. But make no mistake, self-observation deepens theorizing – and vice versa.

It should be obvious by now that this practice requires extraordinary patience. It is a constant struggle between finite and infinite attention; between attachment and detachment; between the ordinary, mundane self or I and the World I or Self. But, with practice, it gets easier.[16] [19]

One must also resist the temptation to *change* what is observed, for then one loses the perspective of the detached observer and becomes involved. So if, for example, there is tension in the body, merely observe this. What you will find, oddly enough, is that this very act of observation releases the tension. The simple reason is that in observing it, one is not identifying with it. One is saying, in effect, "that is not me." And the tension often simply melts away. It is equally important not to *judge* what one observes for then one gets caught up in judging rather than observing. But according to the Gurdjieff teaching – and this is one of the most profound insights it has to impart – the simple act of self-observation will, in time, change one's undesirable or unhealthy features. The reason, again, is that the act of observation detaches one from these features; one ceases to identify with them. Performed repeatedly, therefore, self-observation has the power to weaken the hold that these features have over us. This leads us to the obvious conclusion that self-observation is a path to freedom and to power – over oneself and circumstances (for without self-mastery, no other mastery is possible). (Again, the Odinic nature of this practice is obvious.)

Further, one must be totally, ruthlessly honest with oneself. There may be no blind spots in self-observation. This leads to what is called in Gurdjieff's teaching "voluntary suffering," because inevitably much that one observes about oneself is negative. But one must always keep in mind that the Odinist path is the love of wisdom – and that it is simultaneously the quest for knowledge of the whole, and for self-knowledge. The Self that we strive to identify with or to actualize is, again, an infinite openness: it sees all, and attaches itself to nothing. Because it *is* all. Thus, if we close ourselves to any aspects of reality, no matter how painful, then we remain identified with the finite self. (The Gurdjieff teaching also cautions us, however, that we have erected many "buffers" that prevent us from seeing the truth – and if too many of these are removed too quickly, the result can be traumatic.)

It should be obvious from all the foregoing why the mind resists self-observation. Not only is it difficult, it leads to pain and, ultimately, the radical transformation – or overcoming – of the self. But the self (the ordinary, mundane self) does not want to be overcome. The self is to the

Self as nature is to Odin. Nature issues Odin; it gives rise to its own overcoming. But the Titans do not want to be overthrown. Ymir does not want to be killed and dismembered. Yet, this primeval murder is, as I argued much earlier, all part of nature's actualization as a cosmos – as an ordered arrangement – through the arising of Odin. Similarly, on the level of the individual Odinist, our mundane, finite self must be "killed," and dragged to the void that is the infinite, observing Self, which is nothing and all. And it must be taken apart, it must undergo "voluntary suffering," and be rebuilt. But we resist this. We hide from ourselves, just as nature conceals itself from us, forces us to dig deeper, always holding something back. ("Nature loves to hide," Heraclitus said.)

It is inevitable that there will be resistance to self-observation, but the Fourth Way teaches that in fact there is no progress without this. And the more truths about yourself that you awaken to, the fiercer the resistance will become. Then you will feel an extremely strong temptation to give up. This must be resisted at all costs. For the Odinist path is the path of the awakened being; we cannot settle for a return to sleep. This is the path of Self-realization, and it is extraordinarily hard. But it is the only path to true freedom and awakening. It is the perfection of the human individual – and, as I have argued, simultaneously the perfection of the world itself.

Clearly, the Odinist path is not an easy one – nor is it without its dangers. I will conclude with a warning from "Abraxis" in Evola's *Introduction to Magic*:

If you want to approach our Art, be aware that this is a painful struggle and somewhat like walking on a razor's edge. You may win or lose, and two things lead to certain disaster: to be afraid and to interrupt the operation. Once you have begun, you must go all the way, since an interruption leads to a dreadful reaction, with the opposite result. You can easily understand why: at every step you take, an increasingly higher quantity of swirling energy is arrested and pushed upstream; having been excited and provoked, it is filled with tension. As soon as you give up, it will come crashing down upon you and sweep you away. . . . One

does not have to embark [on this path], but once you have done so, there are only two alternatives: succeed or perish.[17] [20]

Notes

[1] [21] It can also easily be argued that we possess "mineral nature" as well, in that most of the elements found in the earth's crust are also found in the human body. The "mineral" aspect of the human body is most readily apparent in bone.

[2] [22] Aristotle expressed this point by saying that man, and only man, possesses a "rational soul," in addition to a "vegetable soul" and "animal soul."

[3] [23] Runelore, 191.

[4] [24] Runelore, 198.

[5] [25] Runelore, 198.

[6] [26] See "What God Did Odin Worship?" in Summoning the Gods: Essays on Paganism in a God-forsaken World (San Francisco: Counter-Currents, 2011).

[7] [27] From the memoirs of Hendrik Steffens, quoted and translated in J. G. Fichte, Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 111. I have amended the translation slightly.

[8] [28] Evola and the UR Group, Introduction to Magic, 48.

[9] [29] Evola and the UR Group, Introduction to Magic, 49.

[10] [30] Evola and the UR Group, Introduction to Magic, 50-51. Abraxas's entire essay – and the volume itself – handsomely repays multiple readings.

[11] [31] Stephen E. Flowers (a.k.a. Edred Thorsson) writes, "If we were to measure the magnitude of 'occult leaders' by the greatness achieved by those whom they taught or in some positive way influenced, then certainly the greatest such teacher of the twentieth century would be George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff." See Flowers, Lords of the Left-Hand Path (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2012), 272.

[12] [32] Flowers writes, "From a structural and methodological standpoint, the Fourth Way generally presents a picture in complete harmony with those of the left-hand path. It is only in the lack of recognition of the historical and archetypal analogs of the system with Satanic symbolism that the Fourth Way may fall short of the criteria of being a school of the left-hand path, but this is practically a matter of aesthetics. Fourth Way teachings, and even its methodology, are often antinomian. There is a constant 'going against the grain' – of nature, of God, of the mechanism of the universe. Its aim is the attainment of an awakened, independently existing

intellect and relative immortality (self-deification). This is individualistic, it comes in initiatic stages . . . and its chief technology is doing: the use of the will to cause the mechanism to conform to its volition (i.e., 'magic')." Flowers, Lords of the Left-Hand Path, 292-93.

[13] [33] Flowers gives a concise and accurate summary of Gurdjieff's theories in Lords of the Left-Hand Path, 272-93.

[14] [34] Perhaps the best book with which to begin is Self Observation: The Awakening of Conscience, by Robert Moore, writing under the pen name Red Hawk (Prescott: Hohm Press, 2009). There is some off-putting mushiness in this book, but it is filled with practical instructions and reveals far more than most Fourth Way texts. Also of great value are the posthumously-published notes of Gurdjieff's chief disciple, Jeanne de Salzmann, published as The Reality of Being (Boston: Shambhala, 2011). The book with which curious readers most often begin is P. D. Ouspensky's In Search of the Miraculous (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949). This contains valuable information, but the reader must be patient with Ouspensky's fixation on some of the more incredible aspects of Gurdjieff's theories. Ouspensky's The Fourth Way (New York: Random House, 1957) is also helpful, though extremely dry. The writings of Gurdjieff himself are not the place to begin. I find his magnum opus, Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson, to be completely unreadable. There is more than a little Loki in Gurdjieff, along with the Odinic element. He was a grand trickster, as were many figures in the occult and esoteric traditions. I am sure there is a teaching in Beelzebub, but Gurdjieff did his best to bury it under material that would make the average reader dismiss him as a madman. More accessible is Gurdjieff's Views from the Real World (New York: Dutton, 1975). And his Meetings with Remarkable Men (London: Penguin, 1985) is quite interesting as autobiography, though it strains credulity. (This book was made into a film in 1979, directed by Peter Brook, and is worth seeing despite its flaws.) Finally, a great deal can be gleaned from a source that is not technically part of the Fourth Way, but is most definitely aligned with it: Julius Evola's Introduction to Magic, op. cit. The reader would gain a great deal by reading this latter text alongside any of those mentioned above. Also quite useful is Evola's The Hermetic Tradition (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1995).

[15] [35] See my essays "The Gifts of Ódhinn and His Brothers" and "The Stones Cry Out: Cave Art and the Origin of the Human Spirit," in What is a Rune? And Other Essays.

[16] [36] It should also be obvious at this point that what I am describing is a kind of "active meditation." The exact same principles apply to meditation practice. In my view, both the active, Fourth Way meditation and the classical "sitting still, doing nothing" meditation should be practiced. The former is practiced throughout the

day. The latter is reserved for a specific time of the day, for a delimited period of time. I prefer to meditate upon awakening each day, for thirty minutes or more.

[17][37] Introduction to Magic, 20, 78.

SOME THOUGHTS ON YULE

Yule is the midwinter festival celebrated by my ancestors and by Germanic neo-pagans today. Midwinter is a time when much of nature seems to die or to depart. The trees are stripped of their leaves. The birds abandon us, flying off to warmer climes. Bears, badgers, chipmunks, and squirrels hibernate. Water freezes over. The earth is covered in ice and snow, so that nothing can grow. The air is so chilled that when we are out in it for too long, death becomes something tangible, and we rush inside.

Of course, midwinter mostly gives only the appearance of death. The trees have not died but have only drawn into themselves — as have the animals that hibernate. There is a stillness in nature that approaches death. However, we know that out of this stillness renewed life will come again. That which had drawn into itself will emerge again into manifestation. The cycle continues. This is what we celebrate in Yule. But the meaning of this is much more complex than it might seem.

When I was much younger, and Yule was Christmas, it was always a time when I felt the infusion of a curious warmth. This is what is commonly referred to as the "Christmas Spirit." A great deal of it, naturally, had to do with anticipating the presents I would be receiving. But I was also deeply affected by the music and the decorations. Everyone's mood seemed to lighten and become more benevolent. That all of this was set against winter chill somehow made the entire experience more magical, more deeply felt. I suppose it would be almost impossible to convey this feeling to someone who has never experienced it.

My parents were nominally Protestant Christians, but there was almost no Christ in Christmas for us. My father was, I suspect, an agnostic. My mother began going to church much later in life, but when I was a boy Christmas for her seemed to be entirely about decorating, singing songs, building fires, cooking, and exchanging gifts. All in all, it would be reasonable to say that the "Christmas" I grew up with was actually the pagan Yule.

I remember noticing at an early age how this "joyous season" is also thoroughly suffused with melancholy. For me, this was part of the

attraction — again, even when I was a boy. The first Christmas carol I really loved was "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," which is one of the oldest carols of all (dating to the 16th century), and about as cheery as the "Volga Boat Song." More recent carols or songs also frequently have a melancholy air, such as "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" (lyric: "Through the years we all will be together. If the fates allow."), and "I'll be Home for Christmas" (lyric: "I'll be home for Christmas. If only in my dreams."). But perhaps what epitomizes Christmas melancholy best of all is Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. I need not explain this assertion, as the story is familiar to everyone.

Many years later, the nature of the "Christmas Spirit" changed for me, as I matured. For a number of years now, it has been the case that all the trappings of the season occasion in me a state of introspection that is, like the season itself, simultaneously melancholy and joyous. Like so much of the world around me at midwinter, I am drawn inwards. I think that other people experience this, but to greatly varying degrees. Probably with some it is only a few glimmers of thoughtfulness, because most people do not tolerate introspection well. In my own case, I typically feel the onset of this condition around Thanksgiving (late in November), and it tends to last into January.

I think it is misguided to attempt to analyze exactly why this comes upon me, and (as we shall see) it is contrary to the lessons I typically learn from my Yuletide "dark night of the soul." But I think it safe to say that one of the conditions that makes it possible is a kind of pleasant weariness that comes upon me. The year is almost over, and I have been through all of its trials and tribulations, and have usually pushed myself too hard. As the weather gets colder and colder, the New Year approaches, and the festive/melancholy pageant of Yule gets under way, it is as if I hear a voice that commands me "Stop. Be still. Be at peace." It is supposed, after all, to be a season of peace — and this is not a feature exclusively of the Christianized Yule. It seems clear that that spirit was a feature of the festival before the very, very thin veneer of Christianity was laid over it. (For example, in the *Svarfdæla saga* a warrior delays a duel until three days after Yule in order not to violate the spirit of the festival.)

This feeling that comes upon me — to stop, be still, be at peace — is quite insistent. And I gladly yield to it. It is, I imagine, quite close to what I shall feel when I am very old, and can sense that my life is almost over. This is a significant parallel to draw, for I shall argue that the festival that is Yule is all about making peace with finitude; with limits. To say that Yule is a celebration of the eternal "cycle of life" or the "renewal" of nature sounds quite hopeful. But the truth is that although life will continue after I am dead, my own life will be extinguished. At least, I think this quite likely.

When I obey the command to "stop," what is it that I am stopping? It is not as if my activities cease, although I am able during Yuletide to take a brief vacation from some of them. And how does stopping bring a sense of peace? For these are intimately connected. The answer is that the primary thing I am called upon to stop is the habit of control. The spirit that I feel when Yuletide arrives is, in the most essential terms, an attitude of accepting my inability to control my life.

My own spirit is the Faustian spirit of Northern Europe, which I have written about elsewhere.[1] This is characterized simultaneously by a yearning for the infinite, and by a solemn inwardness. Arguably, most of my life has been marked by yearning for the infinite — where the infinite means the unlimited, the not finite. I have rebelled against limitations of all kinds. I have balked at my own finitude. This is particularly the case with respect to the finitude of my life itself: aging and the inevitability of death are topics I generally avoid. It's said that all young people tacitly think themselves immortal. But when I was young, I very consciously and deliberately set my sites on physical immortality. It seems a delusion now, but the possibility was quite real to me then.

It's helpful to recall that for the Greek philosophers the infinite was *apeiron*. But this word can also be translated as "indefinite," and though at first glance the concepts of "indefinite" and "infinite" seem to mean different things, they do not. What makes something definite is precisely its limitations: it is so many inches tall and no more, it is this color and not that, it cannot fly but it can be thrown, etc. I can see in color, whereas dogs can't. But nature has been kind, my ability to hear certain pitches, or sounds from far away, is much more limited than a dog's. Limitation is

responsible for something being definite, and everything that has being is something definite: it is this, and not that.[2] This all directs us to an escapable conclusion: the yearning for the infinite is the yearning to be nothing in particular. That is to say, the yearning for the infinite is the yearning to be nothing. I seldom quote Ayn Rand, but she was absolutely correct when she concluded (via a very similar chain of argument) that "The desire not to be anything [definite], is the desire not to be."

Realizing this, I am thrown in upon myself. And Yuletide produces in me a longing for rest; for a respite from my striving for the infinite. The spirit of the season tells me that this is *all right*; that I can stop for a while and be at peace. When I accept this invitation, first of all I feel as if I am relaxing for the first time in twelve months — relaxing my body, mind, and spirit. A kind of pleasant helplessness comes over me. And I am flooded with thoughts. Oddly, they are the same every year — a point to which I will return later.

The first of these thoughts is what I take to be a basic truth: that the desire for control in life is a rebellion against reality. Of course, all of us desire some control, and we would not be living things if we didn't. All living things, in order to survive, seek some measure of control over their circumstances. But some of us seem to seek control over all. We believe we can make of our bodies and our minds whatever we wish. We seek to predict and control the responses of others. We seek to know what the future will bring. Worry is the emotion that prompts us to this last form of seeking. The only way to remove worry would be to know the future. We worry because we find uncertainty unacceptable. But life is all about uncertainty. Therefore worry is a protest against life — an unwillingness to accept what is.

As I have argued elsewhere,[3] our role in existence is to embody the self-consciousness of existence itself. We actualize this role in the acquisition of knowledge, the pursuit of the various sciences (construing the term very broadly), but also in the act of being present to Being. This means being open to what manifests, without judgment or control. We are the beings who are witnesses to Being. We are Being confronting itself. We

are the alpha and omega of the whole, which exists to give rise to us, and in giving rise to us gazes upon itself and comes to completion.[4]

The orientation toward life that rejects limits and seems to seek total control is one that therefore makes it impossible to realize our nature as witnesses to Being. Again, the desire for radical control, and the desire to transcend all limits, is a rejection of reality, of what is present to us. Nothing can become truly present to us unless we *open* to its presence. But this means to be open to things as they are. To be a witness to Being, I must relinquish control. This is what both Meister Eckhart and Heidegger meant by *Gelassenheit*: leavingness, letting-go-ness, or (as some translators have it) "letting beings be."

Acceptance that I cannot control everything is hard on the ego. But I contain more than one ego; more than one thing that says "I." Acceptance that I cannot control everything is only hard on the "I" that refuses openness. This is the "I" that so wishes to shield itself from suffering and vulnerability that it closes to the whole of which it is a manifestation, and which yearns to be recognized by it. (This is the "selfishness" attacked by the mystics.) If I identify with this "I" then I refuse my own being: to be witness to Being itself.

To be this witness I must open myself to the reality of what is. But that means I must open myself to imperfection, in myself and in the world around me. (This is not the same thing as *liking* imperfection — for another aspect of reality is my own response to it.) I must open myself to the finitude, the limitation, that makes possible both beauty and ugliness. I must open to the finitude that makes possible both my virtues, and the vices I despise in myself.

This acceptance of finitude just is the relinquishing of the quest for total control and overcoming of all limits. And acceptance of finitude/relinquishing of control just is openness to Being. You might expect me to say that this is a "precondition" of openness to Being. But no: there is an identity here. The act of relinquishing control just is letting beings be.

The acceptance of finitude just is a multiplicity of finite beings becoming present to me.[5] Truly present. Not present only in those aspects I am willing to see, or present only in light of how I imagine I will negate and remake them. Such an orientation is exactly the perspective of one who seeks total control; who is willing to open to the world only on his own terms. Metaphysically, this perspective is actually insisting that only the self is real: it is willing to allow beings to be only when they have conformed to the demands of the self. For a person with such an orientation, only "I" am real; all else waits upon me to accept it, approve it, revise it. The acceptance of finitude, by contrast, means finite beings becoming present to me in their *otherness*. The acceptance of finitude is the acceptance that things are radically other — and this is no more, really, than accepting reality.

But, to reiterate, the acceptance of finitude also involves facing and affirming *my own* finitude. In the very same act in which I accept the radical otherness of things, I accept my own limits with respect to those things: they are *not* I; I can never fully know, control, or manipulate those others. It is then that true self-knowledge begins. We cannot know infinity. We can only know that which has discernible boundaries or limits. So long as we see ourselves as fundamentally infinite or indefinite — malleable, perfectible, transgressing all limits — we cannot know ourselves. Accepting the radical otherness of a world of finite and imperfect things throws us back upon ourselves and humbles us. Again, this is the beginning of self-knowledge.

And it is also the actualization of our cosmic role as witnesses to Being. Being cannot become present to us unless, as I have argued, we accept finitude: our own finitude, and that of other beings. Fundamentally, to accept my finitude is to accept my *embodiment*. The self that identifies with the infinite or indefinite sees itself as somehow vaguely disembodied — as, for lack of a better word, a spirit that dwells in thought, removed from bodies in general. This is the self that produces the constant internal monologue that detaches us from the present and dulls not only pain but pleasure. This is the self that so enthralls us in worries, hopes, fears, and schemes that we wonder at the years that have gone by. "Where was I?"

we ask. The answer is that we were not there. And so we gaze in horror at the aging face in the mirror, as if it were the face of a stranger.

To accept my own embodiment — better, to live my embodiment — is to be present to myself and to the world. There can be no such presence without the experience of it *in the body*. If this can be achieved even fleetingly then we have actualized our own being (again, to be witnesses to Being) and the purpose of existence itself. The purpose of everything is for consciousness of the whole to be actual *within* the whole — to be embodied. Existence achieves its end and consummation when it gives rise to a body among bodies that is capable of knowing existence itself, in the sense of being open to the Being of the whole. This openness is simultaneously perspectival, because it happens in specific bodies with a specific biology, history, and other limitations — and it is *aperspectival*, precisely because it is a disinterested awareness simply *that the All is*, without judgments, hopes, and fears. This is the deep truth in the traditional claim (possibly originating with Aristotle) that man's nature is dual: part beast, part god.

Because we are part beast, however, witnessing Being really is only fleeting. It is not a perspective that can be maintained constantly.[6] All we can do is try, continually, to bring ourselves back to it, recognizing the inevitability that we will always fall away. This is a daily drama for those consciously committed to this witnessing. And it is reflected in the cycle of the year, which climaxes at Yule. The bulk of the year is the time in which I largely fall away from being present to Being. At Yule — and, as I've indicated, for some days before and after — I am brought back to awareness of my true vocation. For most of us, it is *only* at this time that we awaken just a little bit. The experience is curiously pleasant and melancholy and satisfying. But most will not reflect on it. As the song says, "Would that we could always see such spirit through the year."

What happens in the soul is, again, an exact analogue to what occurs in nature. With the coming of midwinter, we are drawn deep within ourselves. Our yearning for the infinite gives way to the other aspect of our Faustian nature: solemn inwardness. And we die. Or rather the grasping, controlling "I" dies — or, at least, goes into hibernation. It will

awaken again in the spring (usually earlier) and the cycle will begin once more. I will "forget" and continue to strive for the impossible. That I do so — that *we* do so — is tragic. But it is also what makes us great, and our history glorious. On both an individual and a tribal level, we have to affirm that we are both beast and god, body and spirit, absent and present to being, closed and open.

Our nature is a continual oscillation between these poles. If we can joyously affirm this and not fall into dreaming that we will stay awake, stay open, stay "enlightened," then — paradoxically — this affirmation makes possible a greater openness or wakefulness. And the moments of this wakefulness may increase in duration, very slowly.

So be of good cheer. The earth has died, but will be reborn. I die to my "self" and am reborn. It is no surprise, by the way, that this drama precisely mirrors what happens in nature at midwinter. If it is in our own souls that existence finds its consummation, if existence exists in order to give birth to us and our spirit, then of course everything in nature can be seen as an approximation to both the human body and soul. Everything in nature is an emblem of our own nature, and our struggles and joys. (This insight is the key to unlocking the mystery of why the natural world is the way that it is — where it comes from, why it exhibits certain forms and cycles, and where it is going.)

This is the meaning I find in Yule, though I imagine some will think this rather esoteric.

Notes

1. See my essay "What is Odinism?" in TYR #4.

2. I discuss these points at length in my essay "Asatru and the Political" in What is a Rune? and Other Essays (San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2015).

3. See my essays "What is Odinism?" in TYR #4, and "The Stones Cry Out" in What is a Rune? and Other Essays.

4. "Completion" in the sense of "consummation": the actualization of its inherent purpose.

5. All beings are finite beings. We can speak of "infinity" as if it were one thing. And, if we chose, we could speak of "finitude" as if it were a thing ("a finitude"). But it can never be one thing — this is unimaginable. A finitude (a finite thing) implies a multiplicity of finite things, mutually limiting one another — if only in the simple fact that one is not another, does not occupy the same space, etc.

6. For more information see my essay "What is Odinism?"

RICARDO DUCHESNE'S THE UNIQUENESS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

PART I

1. Introduction: A Book for Our Times

Every few years I discover a book that is truly great. One that forces me to think in new ways about things familiar, teaches me things I never knew, and inspires in me scores of new ideas and insights. Such a book is Ricardo Duchesne's *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization*, which has been my companion now for close to two months. It's a big book (527 pages, including back matter), and it demands a big review.

Please take me at my word when I say that this book is well worth the attention I will devote to it – and well worth your attention as well. In fact, I cannot recall reading any book published in the last two decades that I would count as more significant. Yet you will be surprised to hear that I read it in short installments. This was due not primarily to the fact that I had other commitments, but rather because I kept having to put the book down to think about its ideas and make notes to myself. It often takes me forever to get through a book that I find truly exciting.

Duchesne teaches in the Department of Social Science at the University of New Brunswick Saint John in Canada. He is the author of some 36 refereed articles and 13 encyclopedia entries. *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* is his first book, but it is apparent both from its size and its scope that it is the fruit of many years of research and reflection. Indeed, by any standard this is an absolutely remarkable book. Duchesne not only surveys and assesses decades of scholarship in world history, his own arguments are formed through an encounter with thinkers like Hegel, Nietzsche, Weber, Spengler, and Kojève. And his treatment of these thinkers is far from superficial – indeed it is extraordinarily insightful (particularly in the case of Hegel, the most difficult thinker in the bunch). Duchesne's erudition is truly impressive, as is the profundity of his ideas.

In sum, this ought to be regarded, by historians and others, as a path-breaking book and treated as an instant classic. But it will not be. Or

rather, I should say, it has not been, since it came out two years ago (though it often takes a while for academic books to get noticed or to have an impact). It has been reviewed in a few places, but has largely been ignored, and will probably continue to be. The reason can be divined from the title: Duchesne wants to argue that the West is unique.

Now, you may be wondering, who would ever challenge such a claim? Why would anyone even need to mount a defense of Western uniqueness? If such questions occur to you, then you are likely an academic virgin. For in today's world of scholarship – in which a monolithic "political correctness" reigns supreme – not only is the West under attack for its Eurocentrism, imperialism, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and (God help us) phallologocentrism, even the idea of its *uniqueness* is being challenged. The position of today's politically correct historians can be summed up as follows: not only are we bad, we're also nothing special – though we are especially bad.

When I related all of this to a good friend recently, his response was "But isn't it rather unique that the Europeans, a minority of the world's population [about 20% in 1800] managed eventually to control almost the entire planet?" One also thinks of such things as the birth of science, philosophy, and participatory government in Greece, the Roman concept of the legal person, the development of mechanical clocks, the invention of the printing press, the discovery of the "New World," the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, the ideal of universal human rights, Beethoven's nine symphonies, the industrial revolution, quantum physics, the moon landing, the harnessing of electricity and nuclear power, the invention of the car, radio, television, computers, airplanes, and motion pictures. And, of course, this is merely a short list of Western accomplishments. Isn't this enough to indicate not just that the West is unique, but spectacularly, impressively, sublimely unique?

So how do these revisionist professors pull it off? (Calling them "revisionists," as Duchesne does, is more gentlemanly than calling them "politically correct," so I will use this term throughout the rest of the essay.) Essentially, their strategy is two-pronged. First of all, and as I shall discuss at some length, they minimize the importance of any Western

achievements that are not scientific or technological, or which do not make a direct or obvious impact on economic relationships (this is an outgrowth of the latent Marxism of their position, as well as of a certain vulgar modern materialism). And so, as incredible as it may sound, they deny the importance of such things as Greek philosophy, the ideals of the Reformation and Enlightenment, Beethoven's nine symphonies, etc. Second, insofar as they acknowledge Western scientific and technological innovations, they assert that these were either borrowed from other cultures, or were developments of ideas or inventions originated by others.

A large portion of Duchesne's book – almost the first 280 pages – is devoted to countering these claims. Because most honest and well-informed readers will recognize that these are not only highly problematic claims but also flimsy and often dishonest ones, many will find Duchesne's book slow going. However, those 280 pages contain a careful, painstaking analysis of the revisionists' claims – and also a complete and total demolition of them. On completing these pages I had the feeling that if there were any justice in the world, the revisionists should now simply melt into the floors of their lecture halls, like the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. Alas, most of them have tenure, and cannot be gotten rid of so easily.

If Duchesne's book were devoted simply to a refutation of the revisionist position it would be quite valuable. In fact, however, it is far more ambitious. The second half of the text presents a theory about the sources of the West's uniqueness. Duchesne argues that Europe has achieved so much because its spirit is profoundly different from that of the rest of the world. Its spirit is "restless"; it is constantly on the move, expanding outwards in all areas, seeking to make the world its own. It abhors restraints of any kind, especially on freedom of thought and individual liberty. Furthermore, it is highly agonal and competitive – even the poets compete with each other. And it is individualistic, honoring the deeds of great heroes and the iconoclasm of the great innovators.

Of course, similar claims have been made – as we shall see – by figures like Hegel, Nietzsche, and Spengler. And Duchesne builds upon their

ideas. However, he also goes beyond them. For however true it may be to speak about the West's spirit such "explanations" are ultimately unsatisfying if what one seeks is a theory of real historical origins: where does this spirit come from exactly? Why is it the West that gave rise to such a spirit? Duchesne's answers to these questions take us into what is truly the most radical part of his book. He argues that the West's restlessness and creativity have their origin in the aristocratic, warlike culture of the ancient Indo-Europeans. He writes: "As this book will demonstrate, the primordial basis for Western uniqueness lay in the [Indo-European] ethos of individualism and strife. For Indo-Europeans, the highest ideal was the attainment of honorable prestige through the performance of heroic deeds" (p. x).

2. The Rise of the Revisionist Historians

Duchesne's first chapter is entitled "The Fall of Western Civilization and the Rise of Multicultural World History." But what "fall of Western civilization" really refers to is the demise of the old "Western Civ" courses that used to be ubiquitous in academia. In the old days, it was thought that since our students were living and studying in the West, they needed to have a firm grasp of Western culture. Furthermore, the old-fashioned texts used in those classes tended to assert that history exhibited a discernible pattern: a linear trajectory, with the West leading the way. They assumed, in short, an ideal of progress, and were guilty of what is denounced today as Eurocentrism.

All this changed in the 1960s. With the rise of the New Left in the academy, the West was now seen to have advanced through the exploitation of other peoples, which scarcely counts as "progress" at all. "It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the 1960s saw the onset of a tidal wave against the idea of progress," Duchesne writes (p. 23). Cultural relativism, post-colonialism, historicism, deconstruction, and critical theory all converged, with the result that by the 1970s most academic historians had lost faith in Western civilization and in the old progressive interpretation of history.

One of the most influential architects of the new revisionism was the anthropologist Marvin Harris (1927–2001), whose work was heavily

influenced by Franz Boas's cultural relativism. Harris grafted Boas onto Marx, specifically Marx's theory of the different levels of society, where what we normally refer to as "culture" is held to be a "superstructure" founded upon economic relationships. The result for Harris was not only a rejection of any progressivist and Eurocentric model of history, but the dismissal of all attempts to understand cultures in terms of things not directly connected to the struggle for material survival and prosperity. Harris claimed that this was the only proper consideration, not just because of his Marxist roots but because he insisted that only a consideration of purely material factors could lend a semblance of "scientific objectivity" to the study of culture.

In fact, this is one of the central claims of the revisionists. As Duchesne puts it, they hold that "the first and most important preoccupation of human life is adaptation to the environment, and that this must be accomplished by creating technological and economic systems. . . . This premise assigns *ontological* and *causal* priority to the material conditions of social life. It views the role of ideational factors (philosophies, religious beliefs, art) in terms of their 'feedback' effects on these conditions" (p. 321, italics in original). I have already identified this premise as derived from Marxism.

Furthermore, Duchesne observes, correctly, that packed into it is an understanding of human nature as fundamentally passive and reactive. Essentially, the revisionists see human beings as buffeted about by material conditions, and culture as a kind of construct that has arisen as a result of how men have reacted to those conditions. The revisionists will permit no talk of "great men" moved by ideals or motives that transcend the drive for survival and reproduction. For such ideals and motives are vague, unobservable, and impossible to measure. Hence, to build an account of culture or history on them is "unscientific."

To see the fundamental error in this, imagine how revisionist anthropologists or historians might explain the following situation. Suppose that a husband and wife go out to dinner. Suppose further that there is a complicated dynamic between these two. The wife has complained for years that her husband must always have things his way,

and is fundamentally inconsiderate and selfish. She feels that his behavior demonstrates a basic lack of respect for her, and thus she has come over time to deeply resent her spouse. Now, suppose that a table full of revisionist anthropologists and historians observe these two at dinner. At a certain point the husband picks up the salt shaker, which was sitting at the center of the table, sprinkles his food with it, and sets it down beside his plate. Seeing this, the wife reaches out, snatches the salt shaker, and places it beside her. If we ask our tableful of revisionists to explain this behavior, their answer will likely be: "There must be a salt shortage."

Should we suggest that it might be wise to consider the psychological dynamics of this relationship – the husband's selfishness and lack of consideration, the wife's desire for respect and resentment against her husband – we will be told that such considerations are "not objective," and irrelevant anyway since in fact all human motivations relate to material conditions. The revisionists will have based their account on something "objective" all right, but the account misses everything. Duchesne will argue, in fact, that it is impossible to understand culture – especially Western culture – without taking into consideration the ways in which men are motivated by concerns that transcend the material, and physical survival.

Despite these obvious shortcomings, the approach of Marvin Harris and his followers was extraordinarily influential not just in anthropology, but in history and sociology as well. Another key figure in the rise of revisionism is the sociologist Stephen Sanderson, who was greatly indebted to Harris. To cultural relativism and historical materialism, Sanderson added the ostensibly reasonable idea that individual societies have to be understood in terms of networks of relationships to other societies. All cultures are interdependent and none can be seen as standing on its own – especially Western culture. The West, he argued, is not unique: other cultures have achieved most of the things that have been (falsely) credited to the West, and the West has been heavily dependent on what it has borrowed from other cultures.

However, as Duchesne argues at length, these claims are false on two fronts. First, most of the resemblances that revisionists find between the West and other cultures are, predictably, in the area of economics – such as trade practices, the development of commercial networks, etc. But even there the similarities are often quite superficial. Second, though it is undeniably true that the West has learned much from other cultures (demonstrating an openness that is in fact uniquely Western!), it has developed the ideas it has taken from others in ways they never dreamed of. Further, it must be said that the claims made by the revisionists about the achievements of other cultures are often patently dishonest. One revisionist historian, for example, claims that Newtonian mechanics was anticipated by the Chinese! (See p. 173.) Before we come to the dishonesty of revisionism, however, we first treat more fundamental matters.

3. The Contradictions of Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is one of those fashionable ideologies that takes less than five minutes of clear thinking to expose as fraught with insurmountable difficulties. Indeed, this is the common denominator of everything that comprises what we call "political correctness." All of it requires that we *not* think clearly, and that we not process what is right before our eyes. All of it requires "doublethink." Nevertheless, so many individuals – including well-meaning ones – are in such thrall to these positions that it is necessary to patiently refute them. One of the virtues of Duchesne's book is his discussion of the problems inherent in cultural relativism – a theory which is sometimes not explicitly stated by Leftists, but which is nevertheless inherent in ideologies like multiculturalism.

Consider the case of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) who was so convinced of the objective truth of cultural relativism that he could write comfortably of the burning of widows as "a spectacle of awesome beauty" (see p. 32 of Duchesne). One hears in this the voice of the fanatic, and can't help but be repelled. But, as Duchesne remarks in a dense footnote, more problematic still is the difficulty of explaining – if cultural relativism is true – how Geertz managed to transcend his own

cultural situatedness in order to appreciate the "awesome beauty" of something universally regarded by Westerners as unspeakably barbaric.

Cultural relativists are often accused of this sort of inconsistency. They appear to make claims which, according to their own position, are impossible. But Duchesne has a more interesting point to make. He draws our attention to a paradox that lies at the heart of cultural relativism: though it claims to have dispensed with Eurocentrism, cultural relativism itself is a product of European culture. No other culture has ever floated the idea that it is not "unique," and that its beliefs and practices are no more true or valid than anyone else's. Further, cultural relativism is based upon certain ethical assumptions that are uniquely Western. It is the West that gave rise to the idea that there is a "common humanity," and that all human beings – and their cultures – must be treated with equal respect. And it is only the West that has extolled the objective treatment of other cultures, which requires a vigilant self-criticism, lest one's own cultural prejudices distort one's findings.

In the light of these simple and obvious considerations, cultural relativists appear as remarkably naïve. They believe that they have transcended their own ethnocentric culture, while all the time they are in the grip of it. They assume that their values are universal, when in fact they are uniquely Western. They never reflect on this, and in their harsh treatment of their own culture it never occurs to them to notice that it is only the West that gave rise to the ideals according to which they attack it. And it never occurs to them to consider that perhaps this makes the West rather unique. It is Westerners alone out of all other peoples who engage in this sort of ruthless self-criticism – some might say self-hatred. Why is this? The cultural relativists and revisionist historians have no answer to this question – but Duchesne, as we shall see later on, can give us some insight.

In the process of critiquing cultural relativism, Duchesne briefly raises some troubling questions about multiculturalism. This is a natural transition, since multiculturalism is founded upon cultural relativism. However, Duchesne packs his comments into a footnote on p. 32. Indeed,

quite a few of his more "politically incorrect" asides are confined to footnotes, perhaps because he did not want to distract readers from the main argument of the text (which courts enough controversy). Duchesne writes "Is not the emphasis on cultural pluralism a form of [Western] universalism that requires modes of reflective reasoning (metacultural, historical, and anthropological) that are/were unavailable in other cultures and that threaten/have threatened the particular traditions and standards of diverse cultures?"

In other words, isn't the pluralistic ideal of multiculturalism itself a Western cultural artifact, at odds with the anti-pluralism and parochialism of other cultures (e.g. Islam, to name just one)? And therefore wouldn't the insistence that cultures co-exist and "harmonize" with each other require them to adopt alien, Western ideals of tolerance and, indeed, cultural relativism? Again, this is an obvious problem to which most multiculturalists seem to be totally oblivious – largely because, despite their professed interest in other cultures, they are in fact surprisingly ignorant of the often radical differences between them. They insist that somehow we will simply be able to "tolerate" all these differences. But, as Duchesne points out on the same page, "Can Westerners defend their liberal values by tolerating values which negate these liberal values?"

Finally, and most pointedly, he asks "Should Westerners be deprived of their own particular traditions in the name of the universal promotion of pluralism and diversity?" It often seems that multiculturalists believe that everyone has a right to practice and celebrate their culture, with the exception of Westerners, who must nip and tuck their culture to accommodate others. At the root of this, of course, is a deep and pernicious form of self-hatred: the feeling that we have no right to defend Western culture, for its history is just a long roster of sins against others. This is, of course, the net effect of decades of education and propagandizing by anti-Western, neo-Marxist historians, anthropologists, and sociologists, who have distorted the historical record and minimized or denied the West's unique virtues.

The situation today is typified by a story recently told to me by a friend who teaches at an expensive private high school. He said that his school's campus clubs include organizations for African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Hispanics. Is there a club for European-American (i.e., White) students? Yes indeed, but its purpose is to promote multiculturalism and tolerance. In short, the only identity permitted to the white, Western students is the identity of the self-hating Westerner, who demands of himself what he would never demand of others: that he repudiate his own culture, in the name of "diversity."

As I promised, it takes less than five minutes of clear thinking . . .

4. The Dishonesty of the Revisionists

Enter the late Jerry Bentley (1949–2012), revisionist historian. Bentley promoted the ostensibly valid claim that *all* the world's peoples deserve serious study by historians. But he promoted this largely by denying that there was anything distinctive or unique about "classical Greece, the European Renaissance, the Reformation, the Glorious Revolution and Parliamentary supremacy, or the Enlightenment" (pp. 54–55). Now, at the risk of seeming to make a dogmatic claim, I submit that the only excuse for holding such a position would be ignorance of all the historical events or periods just listed. But Bentley was a university professor, and far from ignorant. One therefore feels driven to the conclusion that he was, like so many other academics, in the grip of an ideology, and being less than honest.

In academic circles it's considered dirty pool to accuse a scholar of dishonesty. One must instead patiently refute their errors and carefully avoid hinting that one believes that those errors are less than honest. (And Duchesne, good academic that he is, plays this game, and generally avoids speculating about the motivations of his opponents.) This is the gentlemanly thing to do. But now and again one encounters a position that is so patently dishonest one feels a moral obligation to denounce it as such. And, in general, the dishonesty of the revisionists is pretty patent.

Consider, as another example, the case of Felipe Fernández-Armesto. You may not have heard this name, but he is one of the most highly-regarded academic historians today. His 1000+ page textbook *The World: A History* (2007) is utilized in classrooms throughout the English-speaking world, and has been lavishly praised by other historians. It should instead have created a scandal, given that Fernández-Armesto devotes scant treatment to ancient Greece, Rome, and Christian Europe, while lavishing attention on Asia, Africa, and the Americas (p. 62).

To make matters worse, Fernández-Armesto's treatment of European history is often absurdly distorted by his Left-wing ideological commitments. In dealing with classical Greece, for example, he asserts that "until recently" we hailed the Greeks as originators of democracy but "scholars today" have "revised" our assessment of them and exposed the fact that only privileged males counted as citizens. But, of course, this is not a recent discovery! It has been common knowledge for more than 2,000 years.

Duchesne writes that Fernández-Armesto "essentially walks over what was uniquely Greek – the existence of a government that allowed for the full participation of all male citizens – in the name of facts that were, in varying ways, common features of the rest of the ancient world" (p. 63). Historians of the past recognized the flaws in Greek society – the treatment of women as non-persons, the institution of slavery – but saw what was still exceptional about the Greeks in spite of their flaws. Fernández-Armesto's ideology will not allow him to take such a balanced view. Because the Greeks were not feminists and egalitarians, they must be "exposed" and vilified, their achievements denigrated and denied.

Aside from the ideological blinders worn by the revisionists, Duchesne also exposes the inherent flaws in their basic methodology. In brief, the revisionists cherry-pick the evidence, accumulating only the facts that seem to support their own claims. Duchesne puts it more politely, observing that their approach is too Baconian and insufficiently Popperian. In other words, they think that you can prove a case simply by assembling evidence that confirms it, and do not seem to realize that one must come to terms with evidence that *disconfirms* it as well.

But the revisionists have a convenient way of dealing with disconfirming evidence: dismissal and denunciation. For example, a book by the revisionist historian Andre Frank wildly overplays the role of China in world trade in the 18th century. At one point he confronts some troubling but well-founded statistics from another source: Europe's share of world trade in 1720 was 69%, and 72% in 1750. Frank's response: "this unabashedly Eurocentric claim is disconfirmed by the evidence discussed in the present book." In fact, Frank's book offers no hard evidence to refute these statistics.

When it comes to colonialism, the fur really starts flying. One of the revisionists' standard claims is that whatever Europe may have achieved in the modern period was accomplished through the ruthless exploitation of its colonial possessions and their inhabitants. The trouble with this claim, however, is that according to the best evidence Europe's profits from colonial trade in the late 18th century amounted to no more than 2% of GNP. The revisionists also love to claim that the Industrial Revolution was made possible by colonialism. But Duchesne notes that profits from colonial trade were too small to have contributed much to the capital formation that made the Industrial Revolution possible. In the case of Britain, colonial trade was no more important than domestic industries as a source of the capital that went into industrialization.

From the fact that Britain was linked into a global trade network it simply does not follow that she was parasitic upon it. Duchesne writes:

Academics are so preoccupied with the moral implications of the slave trade, the plunder of resources, and the use of violence in the enforcement of mercantilist trade arrangements, that they cannot see the obvious: Britain *earned* her riches through her own virtues and talents as a nation that deliberately set out to achieve imperial greatness. It was Britain's development of the best navy in the world, civil institutions, administrative and financial reforms that made it possible for her, in the first instance, to seize upon and appropriate raw materials and slaves in faraway lands. [p. 88]

And Duchesne points out other obvious problems with the claim that Europe's links with the rest of the world – colonial and otherwise – were

responsible for its achievements. First, all things considered the costs of colonialism – administration, taxes, defense – outweighed the gains. Second, Spain acquired huge colonial possessions but wound up undeveloped, lagging well behind other European countries that had fewer such foreign entanglements. Third, countries like Germany and Switzerland lacked colonial properties, but nevertheless became extraordinarily wealthy.

But the biggest problem of all is that – as mentioned earlier – the revisionists tacitly treat Europeans as passive agents whose destiny was determined by their situatedness within the "world system." It is this "world system" – the web of relations between interconnected nations – that emerges as the only truly active "agent" in the accounts of revisionists. "The world system," Duchesne writes, "is ultimately conceived as the active (structural) entity determining a country's developmental possibilities" (p. 91). What of the desires, dreams, ideals, and aspirations of remarkable, farseeing men? What of the "doers," who are not content to be acted upon and who, instead, act? The ideology of the revisionists simply contains no room for such men.

The revisionists are extremely keen to avoid doing the "bad old history," which saw the rise of the West in linear terms as a history of progress. So they swing to the opposite extreme, avoiding any suggestion that there is a pattern to Western history at all. So what explains the extraordinary achievements and innovations of the West if not, shall we say, "Western characteristics"? Well, we've already seen one answer to this: the West was dependent on the rest. The revisionists also continually have recourse to the idea that the many revolutionary changes and innovations in Western history were essentially accidental. We were in the right place at the right time, as it were. Again, no great, exceptional men with exceptional minds and motivations. All are moved only; none are self-moved.

Duchesne writes: "In their extremist desire to strip Europe of any deep-seated, differentiating characteristics, revisionists have left themselves with no option but to treat [Western] history as an unending series of 'lucky shots' and abrupt turns" (p. 203). One revisionist historian writes

that Europeans "weren't just lucky; they were lucky many times over." The truth is that Europeans were lucky indeed: lucky to be in possession of a singular genius and drive. But that this may have been our "lucky break" is a possibility the revisionists simply will not allow themselves to consider.

As I shall treat in greater detail in the next section, the revisionists also continually draw our attention to ideas and inventions that Europeans allegedly "borrowed" from others (even when the evidence for this is scanty). As Duchesne points out (p. 64) what they fail to realize is that being original does not preclude having debts to others – and that affirming the uniqueness of the West does not imply that it was self-contained (p. 177).

Japanese Zen was certainly indebted ultimately to the Indian sage Bodhidharma, but no honest man would call Zen "unoriginal." Einstein was likewise indebted to Newton, but again no honest man would use this as a basis to dismiss relativity theory. But, to come full circle, we are not dealing here with honest men (though it is doubtful, in fact, that the revisionists would question the originality of Zen and Einstein!). We are dealing with men in thrall to an ideology, determined not just to deny the West's greatness, but ultimately – in truth – to destroy it.

PART II

5. What about the East?

The revisionists' favorite non-Western people seems to be the Chinese. They tend to both exaggerate Chinese achievements, and to emphasize how the West has been dependent upon them (again, even where the evidence for this is slim). We have already seen how one historian has made a name for himself through his implausible claims about the Chinese share of world trade in the early modern period. And I have already referred to the absurd claim of another historian (Robert Temple) that it was really the Chinese who discovered Newton's laws of motion.

Of course, when many of my readers think of accounts of Chinese achievements they will immediately think of Joseph Needham's highly influential, multi-volume *Science and Civilisation in China*. This book is quite valuable in many ways, but the trouble with it is that Needham is so enamored of the Chinese he tends to exaggerate their achievements. Worse still are his unsubstantiated claims regarding the transmission of Chinese ideas and inventions to the West. One critic quoted by Duchesne refers to Needham's account of the influence of China on the West as "heavily flawed on several counts, of which the most important are the absence of sources that even begin to point at transmission" (quoted in Duchesne, p. 173). Indeed, Needham would sometimes simply *assert* that such and such innovation made its way from China to the West and say "the details of the transmission are still obscure."

For years it has been claimed by historians that since movable type was invented in China, it *must have been* transmitted from China to Germany, where it was picked up by Johannes Gutenberg. The trouble is that there is simply no evidence for this. The truth, of course, is that the West *has* borrowed many ideas and innovations from other cultures. But the West did not simply passively adopt these: we developed them, often to a point never reached, or even imagined, in their culture of origin. Further, as I have said already, the West's openness to foreign ideas is one of its unique characteristics. And one could not find a better contrast to this than the Chinese themselves.

The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, who lived in China from 1583 until his death in 1610, characterized the Chinese as largely uncurious and complacent. He wrote that "The Chinese are so self-opinionated that they cannot be made to believe that the day will ever come when they will learn anything from foreigners which is not already set down in their own books."[2] By contrast, Ricci himself – typical Westerner that he was – seems to have been quite open to learning from the Chinese. He translated a number of major Chinese works into Latin so as to make their thoughts available to Westerners. Indeed, as Duchesne notes (p. 243, citing figures like Montaigne) Europeans have always seen others as a mirror in which to assess themselves, both their virtues and their shortcomings.

Since ancient times, Europeans had had a burning desire to be able to visualize the entire world, and had produced many (increasingly accurate) world maps. According to Ricci, the Chinese evinced no such desire. Ricci writes that the Chinese "are grossly ignorant of what the world in general is like," and that their maps were "limited to their own fifteen provinces, and in the sea painted around [them] they had placed a few little islands to which they had given the names of different kingdoms they had heard of. All of these islands put together would not be as large as the smallest of the Chinese provinces."[2] Certainly, the Chinese had explored little of the world by the time Ricci encountered them — whereas, to state the obvious, Europeans had traveled all the way to China. From 1405 to 1433 Chinese fleets sailed seven times to the Indian Ocean (which seems to be about as far as they got). Rather than emboldening them to go further, however, around 1500 the Chinese made it a capital offense to construct a seagoing vessel with greater than two masts.

Ricci writes that the Chinese were astounded by European developments in mathematics, astronomy, and logic. European technology was also a cause for wonderment on the part of the Chinese (particularly European clocks). In particular he reports that they were impressed by Euclid. Ricci attributes this to the fact that Euclid provided demonstrations for his propositions, whereas the Chinese tended to

simply accept propositions on authority. And this, of course, is one of the major differences between East and West. As Duchesne notes, Chinese philosophy (and "Eastern philosophy," broadly speaking) is filled with self-effacing "sages" who claim to be nothing more than conduits for timeless wisdom. Their works are usually commentaries on classic texts, which are treated in a reverential and uncritical fashion. By contrast, Western philosophers have often begun by rejecting older ideas, and have introduced revolutionary new ideas.

Duchesne writes:

The West, I believe, has always embodied a reflective sense of self-doubt about what it knows and what remains to be known, a kind of restlessness that has been both destructive and productive of new literary styles, musical trends, visual motifs, and novel ideas. By contrast, the intellectual and artistic order of China has remained relatively stable throughout its history. (p. 194)

And he frames the contrast between East and West in this striking statement: "European actors were more dynamic in the higher degree to which they were able to reflect upon their actions and thus discursively give reasons for them. European actors were less passive or more reflective than non-Europeans in their acculturation to the conventions and beliefs of their society" (p. 92).

Indeed, the degree to which the Chinese revere authority is enough to make the most conservative Westerner cringe. But Duchesne discusses much else about Chinese culture that explains why it has never produced the sort of revolutionary innovations in science, philosophy, art, and technology that we have. For instance, in the China of old no separate profession or occupation of science existed. There was no real conception of pure science pursued *for its own sake*. Their style of scientific (and philosophical) thinking tended to be associative, and based upon the identification of analogies between things. (Think of the huge lists accumulated by the Chinese of things that are *yang* – men, a hot day, solidity, anger, etc. – and *yin* – women, a cold day, liquidity, passivity, etc.) Whereas by contrast Western science has striven to identify universal

laws concerning cause and effect relations between tangible entities, based upon observation and experiment rather than *a priori* theorizing.

Furthermore, the vast, centralized, and all-powerful Chinese bureaucracy was not favorable to the flourishing of a scientific culture, which depends upon individuals who are able to act freely and independently and pursue their research without interference or fear of displeasing the authorities. (It is surely this lack of an independent scientific spirit, as well as their general cultural inertia, that explains why the Chinese did not industrialize along with the West in the 19th century.) To be sure, the West has gone through periods where freedom of thought was encumbered by church and state authorities. But our philosophers and scientists always rebelled against this authoritarianism, and it always proved unsustainable. The Chinese appear to be far less willing to rebel against authority, and in one form or another – whether Imperial or Communist – they have lived under an absolute authority for their entire history.

Indeed, the difference between the Chinese political-societal structure and that of the West could not be greater. But it is when we set China alongside other non-Western societies that the difference between the West and all the rest becomes particular striking. Duchesne writes:

In China, India, and Islam, in general, there were no *countervailing* powers because there was [in contrast to the West] no substantial distinction between the state and civil society; there was no aristocracy with special rights, no separation of religious and secular powers, no independent cities, and no parliaments where relations between the various estates of society were open for adjudication. It was in reference to the absence of a civil society that the category "oriental despotism" was used by Montesquieu, Marx, Weber, and Karl Wittfogel. (p. 227)

In attempting to deny the West's uniqueness and give center stage to the achievements of non-Western cultures, such as the Chinese, the revisionists have inadvertently drawn our attention to the vast differences between the West and everyone else. The contrast is incredibly stark and dramatic. The West emerges as not just unique but remarkably unique.

But how do we define this uniqueness? Is there a common denominator to such Western phenomena as aristocracies with special rights, parliaments, separation between church and state, the pursuit of science for its own sake, a philosophical tradition distinct from religion, rebellion against traditional authority, openness to foreign ideas, intense self-criticism, and world exploration? In the next section, we will examine some attempts to define the spirit that is uniquely Western.

6. What is the Western Spirit?

Certainly one of the key differences between Europeans and other peoples is that we have always been searching for the *new*: "new worlds, new religious visions and new styles of painting, architecture, music, science, philosophy, and literature"; again in contrast to cultures like the Chinese, "where artistic and literary styles lasted for centuries" (p. 300). The West seems to be striving onward and outward infinitely, towards the new and undiscovered and untried. To repeat an apt characterization, there seems to be a fundamental "restlessness" at our core.

Duchesne cites four major authors who have dealt, in one way or another, with this Western quality. G. W. F. Hegel spoke of our "infinite drive"; Oswald Spengler of our "energetic, imperativistic, and dynamic" soul; Max Weber of our "rational restlessness"; and William McNeill of the "deep-rooted pugnacity and recklessness of Europeans." (This last name is the one least likely to be familiar to my readers: McNeill is an influential old-school historian, born in 1917, whose work is discussed at length by Duchesne.)

Obviously, the most important of these figures is Hegel, and Duchesne quotes two of his most memorable comments about the European soul:

The principle of the European mind is self-conscious reason which is confident that for it there can be no insuperable barrier and which therefore takes an interest in everything in order to become present to itself therein. . . . In Europe, therefore, there prevails this infinite thirst for knowledge. . . . The European is interested in the world, he wants to know it, to make this other confronting him his own, to bring to view the genus, law, universal, thought, the inner rationality, in the particular

forms of the world. As in the theoretical, so too in the practical, the European mind . . . subdues the outer world to its ends with an energy which has ensured for it the mastery of the world. (quoted in Duschesne, p. 285)

And:

The ignorant man is not free, because what confronts him is an alien world, something outside him and in the offing, on which he depends, without his having made this foreign world for himself and therefore without being at home in it by himself as in something his own. The impulse of curiosity, the pressure for knowledge, from the lowest level up to the highest rung of philosophical insight arises only from the struggle to cancel this situation of unfreedom and to make the world one's own in one's ideas and thought. (quoted in Duchesne p. 231)

Of course, the difference between these two quotations is that the latter doesn't refer explicitly to Europeans at all. However, Duchesne will argue that when Hegel discusses "human nature" he is in fact unwittingly (it seems) giving a description of the nature of European man. As we shall see, in general Duchesne's argument for European uniqueness is heavily dependent upon Hegel. So let us set him aside for later and consider Oswald Spengler for a moment.

In his two-volume opus *The Decline of the West* (1918–1923) Spengler argued that each civilization is characterized by a distinctively different spirit. According to Spengler, Western Europe was dominated by, as Duchesne puts it, "an overpowering will to supremacy" (p. 334). And Spengler characterized this will as "Faustian." One commentator (John Farrenkopf) describes the idea as follows:

The architecture of the Gothic cathedral expresses the Faustian will to conquer the heavens; Western symphonic music conveys the Faustian urge to conjure up a dynamic, transcendent, infinite space of sound; Western perspective painting mirrors the Faustian will to infinite distance; and the Western novel responds to the Faustian imperative to explore the inner depts. of the human personality while extending outward with a comprehensive view. (quoted in Duchesne p. 335)

In short, according to Spengler the West is animated by a desire not just to achieve mastery of nature, but to transcend the limitations of the physical world itself. Whereas Weber saw the West as characterized by a zeal for rationalizing everything, Spengler saw in the West "a distinctive primeval-irrational will to power" (p. 335). (The term "will to power" will inevitably call to mind Nietzsche, to whom we will turn in a later section.)

Spengler believed that after about 1800 the West's Faustian spirit took on a thoroughly "mechanical" form of expression, through the industrial revolution and capitalism. It went on desiring infinite, outward expansion, but the expansion took on a thoroughly economic and technological character. Organic ties to the land, to one's own people, and to one's traditions were broken. And while achievements in science and technology blossomed throughout the West, the arts withered and seemed to be, for all intents and purposes, finished (as Hegel also claimed). "Of great paintings or great music there can no longer be, for Western people, any question," Spengler wrote (quoted in Duchesne, p. 336).

John Farrenkopf argues that there were in fact "two Spenglers." The early one mourned the loss of Europe's aristocratic traditions, and the rise of middle-class materialism. The later Spengler, however, saw the remarkable scientific and technological breakthroughs of the modern West as a continuation, in another form, of its Faustian vitality. However, he remained a pessimist – and a remarkable prescient one. He believed that eventually the West would exhaust itself in hedonism, declining birth rates, globalist entanglements, and a creeping, degenerate femininization of culture. He also expected the West to decline in material terms as well, as its technology spread to Asia, which he believed would eventually become a formidable rival.

In short, Spengler saw the West as characterized by a sublime will to totality and transcendence, but saw it ultimately issuing in the West's undoing. As I will discuss in the conclusion to this essay, it is hard to disagree with Spengler's position. Still harder, however, is finding some remedy to the West's situation, if Spengler is indeed correct. For his part, William McNeill wrote the following, echoing Spengler:

It is not any particular set of institutions, ideas or technologies that mark out the West but its inability to come to a rest. No other civilization has ever approached such restless instability. . . . In this, far more than in any particular intellectual, institutional, or technological expression . . . lies the uniqueness of Western civilization. (quoted in Duchesne, p. 285)

All these observations – of Hegel, Weber, Spengler, and McNeill – seem quite correct as attempts to describe the spirit of the West. Yes, we are restless. We yearn for the infinite, and for mastery. Yes, we want to know everything and to control everything; to find in the other an image of ourselves – or, if necessary, to transform the other into such an image. Yes, we have a zeal for rationalizing everything, including our own existence; we wish to be self-grounding, and self-legitimating, with all arbitrariness and mystery expunged. But where does this peculiar spirit come from? And why is it we who are gifted – or, some might say, burdened – with it?

Surprisingly, Duchesne suggests that a major clue lies in the phenomenon of human aggression. He briefly discusses the sociobiology of Edward O. Wilson, one of whose major claims has to do with the importance of aggression as a human trait. Since sociobiology suggests that some human characteristics may be fixed and immutable, and writ in our genetic code, Wilson's work tends to be either derided or ignored by Leftist academics. This is especially the case when it comes to discussions of human origins and of the earliest, most primitive forms of human society. Good Rousseauians all, the revisionist anthropologists tend to romanticize our archaic ancestors as sort of primitive, proto-democratic peaceniks. But the evidence against this view is pretty overwhelming (nicely summarized in Lawrence H. Keeley's *War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* [31]).

But even if our ancient ancestors did live in smaller communities with a higher degree of sharing and without complex hierarchies, it is obvious that out of this "state of nature" there arose new forms of social organization in which "strong men" dominated. How do we explain this? Well, the last possibility the revisionists want to consider is that some men may have risen to the top as a result of their drive for power and prestige.

So anthropologist Marvin Harris (discussed earlier) and sociologist Stephen Sanderson insist that although it might *seem* like certain Big Men were looking for power and prestige, in fact they were simply playing the socially-useful role of motivating their fellow villagers to produce more than was needed for basic subsistence – in case, for example, a hard winter came along (p. 37).

Yet the specter of inequality looms: not all men become Big Men. Not all are even moved to *try*. So where does this inequality come from? Well, one can't even begin to understand it unless one rejects the assumptions of the revisionists and recognizes that human beings have other desires besides the desire to maximize material resources. They also have a desire for recognition: for prestige, and for power. In short, they have *thumos*: the part of the soul (i.e., personality) that Plato understood to be neither appetitive nor intellectual (or "theoretical," one might say); the part that seeks honor, and responds with potential violence when its honor is challenged or besmirched.

Duchesne states his central thesis as follows:

I will argue that the pursuit of prestige needs to be examined as a psychosomatic or mental disposition on the part of humans to achieve validation and recognition from other human beings. I will also argue that this disposition assumed a *heightened, more intensive* expression amongst the aristocratic culture of the Indo-European speakers who gradually infiltrated Europe after 4000 B.C. The "noblest" ideal of Indo-European aristocratic warriors was the pursuit of prestige through the performance of heroic acts in proud contempt for one's biological survival. (p. 40, italics in original)

Of course, not only does the image of the *thumotic* hero rankle our revisionists (all of whom know, deep down, that they are not exactly warrior material), they also consider such things as the desire for prestige to be "subjective" and not scientifically credible. And yet, as Duchesne correctly points out (following Hegel) the desire for recognition and prestige is *the* quintessentially human desire. All animals desire to "maximize material resources," but only humans desire intangible things like honor – and humans are even willing to sacrifice

their lives and material resources to get it. Well, some humans at least: the humans who have made history and, as we shall see, Western culture itself.

Duchesne describes the ancient Indo-Europeans as a people ruled by an aristocratic class of chieftains whose lives were dominated by an ethos that demanded they distinguish themselves as individuals by fighting for prestige. It was this competition among aristocratic warriors that was, as Duchesne puts it, the "Western state of nature." (In other words, the original, primal situation of Western peoples at the very beginning of their history.) And he argues that this state of nature is "the primordial source of Western restlessness" (p. 51). He writes, further, "I am persuaded that a higher degree of aggression was one of the defining characteristics of Europeans since barbarian times, combined with a greater love for liberty and a higher disposition for rationalization" (p. 209).

Certainly by any standard the West has been an incredibly aggressive and *thumotic* culture. According to some calculations, between 1130 and 1815 England spent between 75% and 95% of all revenue on war and armaments. Between 1500 and 1700 Europeans were involved in violent conflicts three years out of every four. During those two centuries combined there were only ten years without any conflict of any kind on the European continent. (These statistics appear on p. 209 of Duchesne.) And by 1800 Europeans, despite being a minority of the world's population, had managed to gain control of one third of the globe, often by violent means.

These are the sorts of facts and figures the revisionists love to seize upon as particularly damning to the West. Yet the major argument of Duchesne's book is that all of our spectacular achievements in science, philosophy, technology, and even the arts ultimately stem from our tendency toward strife and competition. This is the source of our desire for mastery and control of nature, our thirst to know the whole (which is itself a desire for a form of conquest), our independence of mind, our tendency to rebel against authority, our love of liberty, our desire to be self-grounding and self-legitimating. Europeans "were less passive or

more reflective than non-Europeans in their acculturation to the conventions and beliefs of their society" because of their proud, combative individualism – the heritage of our archaic, bellicose ancestors.

Duchesne writes:

Western culture, in contrast to the virtues of serene acceptance, calmness, or composure one finds in Eastern religions, has always been charged with tension, always striving to transcend itself, and thus always engaged in a fight against itself – a fight that would culminate in the nihilism, cultural relativism, weariness, and lack of faith in Western civilization that dominates today. (p. 284)

Notes

1. See China in the 16th Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci 1583-1610, trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), 142.

2. Ibid., 166-67.

PART III

7. Hegel and the Struggle for Recognition

Duchesne discusses the nature of the "struggle for prestige," and its role in shaping the Western character, in terms of a unique interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. And here I will pause for a moment simply to note that this is one of the features that makes his book so impressive. On top of everything else – his survey of the historical literature of several decades, demolition of revisionist histories, refutation of cultural relativism, survey of Western achievements, and discussions of figures like Weber and Spengler – we are treated to an original interpretation of perhaps the most difficult text in Western philosophy. (And Duchesne will go on to surprise and impress us in other ways as well.)

The Phenomenology of Spirit is traditionally understood to be an account of the process by which humanity comes to consciousness of its own nature as self-knowing and self-determining. ("Spirit," *Geist*, is nothing supernatural: it simply refers to the human spirit or human nature.) The *Phenomenology* can't accurately be described as an intellectual history of human consciousness, because although Hegel sometimes discusses actual historical movements he does not move in chronological order, and often it is not at all obvious how what is under discussion refers to concrete historical phenomena. It would be closer to the truth to see the *Phenomenology* as a "natural history" of human consciousness, surveying its various forms, and showing how their *telos* must be seen as the achievement of a standpoint in which human beings are in full possession of themselves; fully aware of what they are.

Duchesne makes the radical suggestion, however, that what Hegel is really doing is a phenomenology of the *Western* spirit (p. 302). He notes, correctly, that when Hegel makes explicit references to historical figures, events, and intellectual movements, he refers exclusively to those that appear in Western history. To be sure, Hegel never says that he is describing the Western spirit alone; he frames things in universalist terms, talking of "humanity," and of such things as "reason," which are implied to be universal human possessions. Duchesne argues, however,

that everything Hegel says about "spirit" (and about "reason") applies to the West almost exclusively. And he argues, further, that Hegel is one of a long list of Western philosophers who have simply (and often naively) projected features of the Western spirit onto "humanity" as a whole. (This is a fascinating thesis, and one that I shall explore at greater length in a later section.)

Duchesne tells us that in the *Phenomenology* Hegel portrays spirit "as if it were in a state of dissatisfaction and alienation, ceaselessly pressing ahead, trying to understand, overcome, and sublimate every non-conceptualized unknown it encountered" (p. 302). It seeks to take everything in; to know and to control the whole. And Spirit is, furthermore, characterized by a kind of "negativity" about itself, perpetually questioning itself. Its aim seems to be a radical sort of freedom, in which it has cancelled all difference, everything that might place a limit on its ability to re-form itself according to its own self-grounding principles and designs. Sound familiar?

Duchesne writes, further:

What drew Hegel's attention was the seemingly restless desire of *Western* reason to become fully conscious of itself as *free activity*. It was this desire to be the source of its own assumptions and principles that drove Western reason forward until it brought into existence a culture wherein individuals enjoyed freedom of inquiry, tolerance of diverse views, and meritorious achievement. According to Hegel, [Western] individuals become what they are potentially – rationally self-conscious agents – when they recognize themselves as free in their institutions and laws. (p. 303; first instance of italics added)

In other words, Hegel gives us an account of how the "human spirit" restlessly seeks to free itself of all encumbrances, to achieve total knowledge of itself and the conditions that make it possible, and to become self-legitimating. This process reaches its goal when spirit creates a philosophy (Hegel's) and a social structure which truly recognize men as free and self-determining. But Duchesne's thesis is that it is, in effect, really Western spirit that Hegel is describing, and he is actually telling the tale of how Western spirit gave rise to a fully adequate

self-understanding, reflected in the coming-into-being of classical liberal, democratic states.[1]

Hegel believed that spirit had come into full possession of itself in his own time, through the increasing democratization of European society inaugurated violently by the French Revolution. And he seems to have taken the position that this development marks the "end of history." This is a controversial interpretation among Hegel scholars. Also, the idea of an "end" to history strikes most people as absurd, because it seems to suggest that things have just stopped happening. But the idea makes sense if one understands history, as Hegel did, as the process by which man achieves consciousness of himself as free. If we have achieved that consciousness, and developed institutions that reflect it, it is indeed difficult to see how anything fundamental remains to be developed, so far as our institutions and our self-understanding go.

My readers are likely to be quite unsympathetic to Hegel's idea that the goal of history is the development of liberal, democratic states. And they are even less likely to side with him in thinking that our modern institutions reflect an adequate human self-conception. Nevertheless, however one *evaluates* our modern institutions, it really is quite plausible to see how they are indeed the culmination of certain Western tendencies of thought and action. Even if we wish to reject modern liberalism, it does seem as if it is the result of something *in us*; something peculiarly Western. (Readers who find themselves immediately resisting this claim should withhold judgment until they've read my discussion, in sections nine and ten, of the development of the Western conception of self and of Western political institutions.)

So if, for the moment, we tentatively accept the idea that Western history does have the pattern and the *telos* that Hegel imputes to it, let's now turn our attention to how the whole process began. For Hegel's it is account of our remotest, primal origins that is really what is most important for Duchesne.

For Hegel, human history (or, perhaps, Western history) begins with a struggle between two individuals, who represent basic human types. This is the famous "master-slave dialectic" of the *Phenomenology*. "Master" is

Herr and "Slave" is *Knecht*, and, predictably, Hegel scholars have endlessly debated the proper translations of these terms. It is entirely correct, for example, to point out that *Herr* might be better translated as "lord" and *Knecht* as "servant." But I will stick with the most familiar translations, as Duchesne does, and refer to "master" and "slave." It is the struggle between these two that constitutes Hegel's "state of nature" – an answer, in effect, to the highly implausible states of nature dreamed of by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. That this is Hegel's state of nature is seldom recognized by Hegel scholars, who take the discussion to be mainly about modern epistemological concerns. But Hegel signals that he wants to be interpreted this way when he writes elsewhere "the fight for recognition [between master and slave] . . . can only occur *in the natural state*, where men exist only as single, separate individuals" (quoted in Duchesne, p. 326; italics added).

In brief: two men engage in a life or death struggle with each other. What has occasioned the struggle is unimportant. Suffice it to say that there is some dispute between them (perhaps a dispute over ownership). Each wants to compel the recognition of the other; to demand the other's respect and admission of his right in the matter. It is, in short, an affair of *honor*. One yields to the other, thereby becoming his servant or slave. What characterizes him? He values his physical survival more than his honor; his fear and his love of life are greater than his ideals, his self-respect. The "master" is the reverse: he is willing to die for an ideal, for his honor. Following Alexandre Kojève's controversial interpretation, Duchesne takes Hegel to be claiming that in this primal struggle human spirit (and human self-consciousness) first emerge. It is only when man negates the animal in himself – the desire for self-preservation – for the sake of something that *doesn't physically exist* (an ideal) that human nature is born.

In this act, man first turns toward the idea, which only exists for man, and toward himself. For he must *self-consciously* choose to deny his fear and his love of life, for the sake of his ideal conception of himself, his honor. The struggle for recognition is thus the birth of human self-consciousness. For Hegel, the "political" result of the struggle is the coming into being of hierarchy: some are enslaved to others. But in a real

sense one man is "master" not because he masters another, but because he masters his own animal drives. And, fundamentally, the other man loses the struggle because he is a slave to those same drives.

When Hegel develops the dialectic beyond this initial stage, however, he argues that the slave eventually turns the tables on his master. The master desires recognition, but he cannot value the recognition of an inferior. So, he abandons himself to sensual pleasure and becomes the sort effete aristocrat with whom Hegel was familiar. Meanwhile the slave, put to work by the master, creates culture, seeking different means of obtaining true freedom (and recognition) for himself – a process that culminates in the coming into being of the modern, liberal-democratic state.

However, it is when the dialectic twists and turns beyond the initial struggle for recognition that Duchesne parts company with Hegel (or, rather, with Kojève's quasi-Marxist reading of Hegel). To name just one problem – to which we shall return later – it is absurd to claim that Western culture is the product of either *de jure* or *de facto* "servants," given the overrepresentation of men of aristocratic birth in the history of Western philosophy, science, and art. (This is a point that really demands a book in itself.)

But the more serious problem here is with Hegel's claim that the master is unable to achieve his desire for recognition, since he has made a slave of the only person who could give it to him. This is simply a *non-sequitur*, for as Duchesne asks (echoing the Hegel scholar Allen W. Wood) why can't the master receive recognition from his peers, i.e. from other masterly men? This obvious problem points to what seems to be a serious misunderstanding, on Hegel's part, of the psychology of the aristocratic master type.

Francis Fukuyama commits the same fallacy in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), an otherwise very valuable book which is heavily indebted to Kojève's reading of Hegel. Fukuyama suggests that the historical contributions of aristocratic masters were quite brief and unfruitful, since they went on to lead parasitic lives. And when Fukuyama discusses the master type he uses as examples men like Stalin and Mao,

who were megalomaniacs moved by a narcissistic desire to subjugate everyone around them, and were quite content to receive the adulation of inferiors.

What Hegel-Kojève-Fukuyama fail to understand is that the aristocratic master desires recognition of his worth *by similar men possessing equal worth*. "Masters" in the mold of Stalin and Mao are actually slavishly dependent on the approval of others – *any* and all others. (They are "second-handers," as Ayn Rand would have said.) A true aristocrat may (and should) give a damn about the plebes, but he doesn't give a damn about what they think of him. Why? Because their judgment is incorrigibly plebian; not concerned uppermost with ideals like honor, but with the mundane, the trivial, and the material. As Hegel himself astutely observed, "No man is a hero to his valet – not because the hero is not a hero, but because the valet is a valet."[2]

Further, Fukuyama falsely asserts that aristocratic societies were to be found "the world over." In fact, Duchesne argues that what we find in the West is a unique form of aristocracy in which the lords were free men, not mere vassals to a king, and the king was "first among equals." Taking his inspiration from a suitably modified Hegel, Duchesne envisions the Western state of nature as one in which free and equal Indo-European aristocratic berserkers competed with one another for prestige – each trying to outdo the others, to achieve personal glory and personal immortality through the words of the poets who recorded their deeds.

It is from this primordial Indo-European struggle for recognition that Western history flows, along with all of its achievements. All that is unique about us is founded ultimately on our deep, *thumotic* desire to have our worth and dignity recognized. And all our Western greatness is founded on the fact that *some men* have felt the desire not just to be recognized as "equal," but as *better* – but, again, only by those whose recognition is worth a damn. The first such men to feel these stirrings were the original Indo-European aristocratic warriors.

Duchesne writes:

I will argue . . . that the beginnings of self-consciousness presuppose the historical existence of self-assertive characters living in a heroic culture. The unceasing aristocratic desire for personal distinction was, in fact, the basis for the awakening of human self-consciousness and the eventual formation of an integrated personality capable of understanding the opposition between the "natural" and the "mental" world, leading to the dialectic of Western reason and freedom, which Hegel captured in his *Phenomenology of the [Western] Spirit*. (p. 332; bracketed insertion is Duchesne's)

Now, Duchesne is obviously not claiming that only Westerners have *thumos*. One thinks, for example, of the Japanese Samurai, who seem to have been about as *thumotic* a bunch as one could imagine – fighting duels and even taking their own lives over honor. Yet the samurai were unlike Indo-European warrior aristocrats in at least one crucial respect: they swore complete and total vassalage to their lord. Their bondage (no other word will do) was so complete they were expected to commit suicide if their lord fell in battle. And living as an exemplary samurai was not a means to personal glory or distinction: it was conceived rather as a Zen path to the effacing of one's individuality. As *Hagakure* states, "The Way of the Samurai is found in death. . . . [The Samurai] has already given up his life and has become one with his lord."

Western *thumos* seems to be different both in degree and in kind from the *thumos* we find elsewhere. Westerners are simply *far more* prone to rebel against authority and to demand recognition of their personal honor and dignity (no Western nobleman would ever have stood for the kind of treatment meted out by Japanese lords to their aristocratic, Samurai vassals). And, to get down to brass tacks, we are also just much more prone to pick fights. Further, our *thumotic* nature has a peculiarly individualistic twist to it. Our aristocratic warrior ancestors did not just demand that others treat them with the honor appropriate *to their social station* – they wanted to be honored as distinctive and unique *individuals*. Duchesne argues essentially that the uniqueness of Western culture flows from the uniqueness of our *thumos*: both its matchless ferocity, and its peculiar character.

8. The Indo-European Roots

Duchesne writes that "it is only in reference to Indo-European aristocratic berserkers that we can speak in Hegelian terms of a fight to the death for the sake of *pure* prestige" (p. 387). And he gets a little help from Nietzsche (to whom we will return later on): "The noble caste was in the beginning the barbarian caste: their superiority lay not in their physical strength, but primarily in their psychical – they were more complete human beings (which, on every level, also means as much as 'more complete beasts')" (quoted in Duchesne, p. 341).

Of course, any discussion of the Indo-Europeans in academic circles is automatically fraught with controversy. In case you are unaware, gentle reader, the reason for this is that the Indo-Europeans are the same people scholars used to refer to as the Aryans: the ancient ancestors of today's Europeans, whose homeland was probably the Pontic-Caspian steppe. That the Indo-Europeans existed as a genetically-distinct ethnic group is undeniable. But to admit this, of course, is tantamount to admitting that there is (or was) an "Aryan race."

Thus, while there are still quite a few scholars devoting themselves, in one way or another, to "Indo-European studies," they are at great pains to make sure that they say nothing that might cause other academics to suspect them of Far Right sympathies. This is taken to such extremes that many scholars tend to avoid any talk of an Indo-European people or culture at all, and instead treat "Indo-European" merely as a linguistic marker. For the uninitiated, the Indo-European language family comprises most of the languages of Europe, the Indian subcontinent, and the Iranian plateau. In one way or another, these languages are all derived from an original Indo-European language (dubbed "Proto-Indo-European" by linguists).

But how did the dispersal of the original Indo-European language take place? This is perhaps the touchiest question of all in Indo-European studies. Clearly, it had to have happened due to the dispersion of the Indo-Europeans themselves, but it is the nature of this dispersion that is so controversial. Duchesne asks "how do we explain the incredible superimposition of Indo-European languages on a majority of substrate

speakers by a minority of pastoral peoples who had expanded over territories many times greater than their original homelands?" (p. 346).

The obvious answer is that the Indo-Europeans conquered all these "substrate" speakers. (And this answer is well-supported by the existing evidence, archaeological and otherwise.) But Indo-Europeanists avoid embracing the obvious at all costs, since – to put the matter bluntly – it might cause us to be rather impressed by our barbarian ancestors. One politically correct scholar insists that the migrations of the Indo-Europeans "*must not* be seen as victorious expeditions of conquerors" (quoted in Duchesne, p. 347; emphasis in original). "But isn't this exactly what they were?" one might ask. Yes, but – again – certain thoughts must simply be forbidden in academia, even if they are supported by huge burial mounds full of evidence. Duchesne notes that J. P. Mallory – possibly the most influential scholar in the field today – carefully avoids suggesting that the Indo-Europeans were conquerors. So, what alternative explanation do the revisionists offer for the Indo-European migrations? You guessed it: scarcity. They needed more food.

Once again, we encounter the narrow, materialist view of the revisionists: it could not possibly be something like the desire for glory or adventure that moved our ancestors to expand outwards. It must instead have been the sort of concerns that preoccupy Assistant Professors struggling to support a family on a starting salary of thirty-five thousand dollars per annum. Unsurprisingly, however, Duchesne shows that the very same professors have no trouble extolling the "exceptionally dynamic, expansionist culture" and warrior prowess of non-Indo-European peoples of the steppes, such as the Mongols and the Huns (p. 348).

One exception to this trend is the late Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994), the notorious Lithuanian archeologist who theorized that the pre-Indo-European peoples of Europe had developed a "Goddess religion," and lived in matriarchal societies. Most scholars regard this viewpoint as having only slightly more credibility than Margaret Murray's "witch-cult hypothesis," and as similarly based on wishful thinking. Nevertheless, Gimbutas seems to have seen the Indo-European invaders correctly as

patriarchal conquerors. (Though for her, of course, they are the villains of the piece.)

Duchesne's own explanation for the Indo-European migrations is simple. He argues that the available evidence indicates that barbarian Indo-European culture valued individual prowess above all else. Its men consequently felt driven to distinguish themselves through heroic deeds, sometimes reaching as far as foreign lands. But not just any men: men of noble birth. As I have already noted Duchesne argues that Indo-European aristocracy was unique in that its nobles were essentially free men ruled by a king who was first among equals.

And this king was no despot; not only was he was expected to settle many matters in consultation with his nobles, often he was chosen by them. The "founding fathers" of the West were aristocratic warriors, not "democratic citizens" (as most historians have claimed). For the democratic values of Athens were actually a transformation of the ethos of the ancient Indo-European nobles, who asserted their right to be consulted, to hold councils, and to decide matters in common. Duchesne makes the valid point that Georges Dumézil, in his theory of "Indo-European tripartition" should have noted the unique, "libertarian" *nature* of Indo-European sovereignty – rather than simply stating that the "first function" is "sovereignty," which hardly serves to distinguish the Indo-European peoples from others at all.

But what made Indo-European aristocracy unique was not just this "democratic" element. It was also the idea that it was not just the king whose praises could be sung. *All* men of noble birth sought glory, and were honored for their exploits. Duchesne refers to the aristocratic Indo-European ethos as one in which "fighting and voluntarily risking one's life was the essential ground of being worthy of respect and honor as a man of noble birth" (p. 368). If one looks at "aristocracies" among other peoples, one finds that the king always reigns supreme, and that the nobles are wholly subordinate to him. It is only the king's exploits that are immortalized, and no nobleman would dare try to outshine him. Insofar as the nobles achieve any distinction at all, it is solely through service to the king (the ultimate service being giving up one's life for him).

Duchesne spends quite a bit of time discussing the warrior elites of Bronze Age Europe, who were honor-bound to confirm their social status through the Hegelian "struggle for recognition." To see this vividly depicted, one need only turn to Homer. Duchesne notes the presence in Homer of biographical accounts of warriors and their families. This celebration of the individual is wholly lacking in Near Eastern literature. And in considering this characteristic of Homer, we are inevitably led to think of the Icelandic saga literature – which provides even better illustrations of the "individualism" Duchesne emphasizes. He devotes a long footnote on page 439 to a list of similarities between Greek and Germanic heroic tales and traits. In all these Indo-European societies, we find men preoccupied with honor, with their legacy, and with the judgment of other "masters."[3]

Even the Indo-European mode of fighting was individualistic. Consider, for example, the Germanic berserkers. And the Celts were famous for fighting naked. In both groups it was thought that the less protected the body, the greater the honor. Why? The answer is obvious: it was a way in which they could show their fearlessness and contempt for life, for mere biological survival. This is perhaps the clearest and most vivid historical example one can find to illustrate Hegel's "master."

Duchesne quotes a number of primary sources, including Roman writings and sagas, speaking of "the freedom . . . to outdo other warriors" as "the greatest happiness"; a life without heroic deeds was the "greatest grief," etc. (p. 369). *The Lesson of the High One* in the *Poetic Edda* teaches (as Duchesne puts it) that "the most important thing in the life of the hero is not property, nor relatives, nor life itself, but his acts as an individual and whether they bring him glory and reputation" (p. 438). And in *Beowulf* we find the following: "As we must all expect to leave our life on this earth, we must earn some renown, if we can before death; daring is the thing for a fighting man to be remembered by. . . . A man must act so when he means to frame himself a long lasting glory; it is not life he thinks of" (quoted in Duchesne, p. 438).

One of the extraordinary characteristics of our barbarian ancestors is that they did not just desire the recognition of their immediate peers.

They desired the recognition of generations of peers yet to be born. They desired a kind of personal immortality, established through the recollection of their deeds. For this, of course, poets were necessary, men who would record these deeds in verse. As a result of this, poetry and song were greatly valued in Indo-European barbarian culture. Though here too *thumos* reigned: the poets themselves were a kind of warrior, competing against other poets and striving for prestige; striving to be the best. Their job was to glorify the heroes – and the gods.

Surprisingly, Duchesne draws upon Heidegger to explicate what this glorification truly meant. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger writes that "To glorify, to attribute regard to, and disclose regard means in Greek: to place in the light and thus endow permanence, being. For the Greeks, glory was not something additional which one might or might not obtain; it was the mode of the highest being" (quoted in Duchesne, p. 456). This is a passage pregnant with implications for how we should understand what it meant *to be* in the ancient Indo-European warrior culture. Heidegger is suggesting that true being involved eternity or permanence (which is certainly how the earliest Western philosophers conceived of being). The successful warrior, whose deeds are glorified, achieves the highest being – even if he loses his life. But for this, again, the poets were necessary.

And Duchesne notes an interesting connection between heroism and the form of poetry Aristotle regarded as highest and best: tragedy. Both require "a culture in which some individuals are free to set themselves apart from others. Tragedy is a form of literature that expresses acutely the inescapable sacrifices and limitations entailed in the human effort to achieve greatness" (p. 404). In the tragedy we again see the characteristic focus on, and celebration of the individual – even the individual who comes to ruin. The Greek audience felt pity for the tragic character because they identified with his desire to achieve greatness. And they recognized that, placed in a similar situation, they too could fall into hubris and be undone by their own faults. The lesson of the tragedy is *not* that those who strive for greatness are doomed, therefore we shouldn't try. The tragedy recognizes instead that our striving for greatness will

never cease, and that it can be won – but only at great, sometimes terrible price.

One of the major virtues of Duchesne's book is that it forces us to reflect on what is unique about the Western character, in terms we may never before have considered. It is extremely common, for example, for Westerners to project their characteristics onto humanity as a whole, and to assume that their feelings and drives and values are entirely universal. (As we shall see, this runs throughout the entire history of Western philosophy, and is one of the driving forces behind Western liberalism, multiculturalism, and revisionist scholarship.) For example, accounts of Greek tragedy commonly speak of how it treats of "universal" human characteristics and concerns. It is true that *Oedipus the King* can be appreciated, on more than one level, by non-Westerners. But the play itself is about a character who represents the Western spirit itself: striving ceaselessly and heedlessly *to know*, until he is destroyed by knowing.

We must guard against "universalizing" ourselves. And Duchesne's book is a great corrective for this tendency. One way in which he accomplishes this – quite masterfully, in fact – is to set the West alongside other cultures and to draw stark contrasts. And so at some length he contrasts the Indo-European (especially Greek) characteristics just discussed with those of the ancient Near Eastern peoples. In contrast to the Greeks, the Mesopotamians essentially saw man as an impotent plaything of divine, cosmic forces. The gods of the Mesopotamians were fearful and remote, while the gods of the Greeks had human form, with human emotions and foibles. The Greeks regarded their gods with awe, but not terror. Greek myth is often seen as "fatalistic," but Duchesne points out that the Greeks saw men as *choosing* their own fate or destiny (as in the tragic hero), rather than simply following a fate mapped out in advance by impersonal forces.

In contrast to the Indo-Europeans, the Near East placed very little importance on the individual. Egyptian monuments are covered in encomia to whatever pharaoh built them. But conspicuously absent – even from tombs – are family lineages, recalling the deeds or virtues of

the pharaoh's forebears. And the pharaohs ruled with absolute power. There were no "free aristocrats" striving for recognition in the Near East – and so no material for heroic epics. One might offer *Gilgamesh* as a counterexample, but Duchesne's incisive analysis makes short work of it. On the surface, Gilgamesh is striving for immortality, like the heroes of the sagas. But the latter sought immortality through noble deeds. Gilgamesh, by contrast, seeks a literal, *physical* immorality through a plant that lies at the bottom of the sea. The heroes of the sagas cared nothing for long life: they preferred a short and glorious one, and had only contempt for old men who died "straw deaths." Think of how much contempt they would have had for a man who *artificially* prolonged his physical existence, out of love of life and fear of death. (And, when you're done with that, think of how much contempt they would have had *for us*.)

The characterization of Gilgamesh as a king is also revealing. Though the epic celebrates Gligamesh's kingship, it is clear that he is nothing more than a tyrant. The text tells us that "his lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior's daughter nor the wife of the noble" (quoted in Duchesne p. 413). Fittingly, Duchesne contrasts Gilgamesh to Homer's Agamemnon, whose troubles begin when he steals Achilles's girl. Much of the Iliad is occupied with the consequences of Agamemnon's theft, which results in Achilles and his followers refusing to fight. A vassal refuses to fight for his king, because the king has violated his honor. In any other cultural context these events would be unthinkable. (Or the epic would be a lot shorter, as Achilles would simply have lost his head – but Agamemnon knows that he is no absolute monarch, and that the other nobles would never stand for this!)

Of course, not all historians have seen our barbarian ancestors as "individualist" and "libertarian." Classicists like Bruno Snell and Richard Onians have argued, in fact, that the barbarians were actually "unconscious"; that they did not really possess a full-developed sense of individual identity. The most extreme case of this has to be an author Duchesne does not mention, the late Princeton psychologist Julian Jaynes. In his provocative book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976), Jaynes drew on some of the same evidence cited by Snell, *et al.*, to argue that Homeric man had no

personal autonomy at all, and hallucinated the voices of gods telling him what to do.

Such claims are based largely upon cherry picking evidence from ancient texts, and upon pure wooly speculation. They are easily refuted by a careful study of the ancient materials available to us (actually, even by a cursory study – since they are quite clearly the product of self-aware human beings!).

More serious, however, is the claim that the Indo-European barbarians saw themselves exclusively in terms of their caste, or social role. That the ancient Indo-Europeans did have strict caste divisions and rules is well-known. But modern, Western scholars, living in socially-mobile liberal societies, falsely assume that the presence of a caste system must be incompatible with any sense of individuality or any celebration of the individual as individual.

In fact, the caste system simply defined the parameters within which individuals could distinguish themselves and gain renown. As Hegel would put it (the Hegel of *The Philosophy of Right*), the "determination" of the caste role was the condition for the expression of the individual's freedom. There is no such thing as an abstract, contentless, and unconditioned freedom: freedom is always freedom to be *something definite*. It must start from some definite context, and involve a choice made from among a number of defined options. It is only within such a context that we are free, but we can never be free of a context. Hence the larval, unformed state of modern man: free to be "anything" he winds up being nothing.

The freedom our barbarian, warrior ancestors sought was the freedom to be what they were: warriors. Their being was defined by their social role, but it was a being that had to be won through deeds. And there were degrees of being: some men's deeds were greater than others, and achieved an eternity (again, though being remembered) not available to others. Of course, some men were simply more fortunate than others (had Sigurd taken a different path through the forest, he might not have run into that dragon). But mainly it came down to the degree of a man's

desire for glory; the strength of his *thumos*. And this is a property that is most definitely not the same in all men.

The desire for recognition is not developed equally in everyone, nor is it the quite the same thing in everyone. Duchesne brings in Fukuyama's distinction between *isothymia*, the desire to recognized as equal, and *megalothymia*, the desire to be recognized as greater. The former is essentially the *thumos* of slaves, and it is only this sort of recognition that is satisfied at the "end of history," with the establishment of liberal, democratic states. One might say that according to Hegel-Kojève history begins with the *megalothymia* of the masters, and ends with the satisfaction of the *isothymia* of the slaves. But according to Duchesne, it is simply false to suggest that what has driven history, and brought about the extraordinary achievements of the west, is *isothymia*. On the contrary, it was always the desire of some men to set themselves over others as the *best*.

And we must also consider that if some men are more *thumotic* (i.e., *megalothymotic*) than others, it may also be true that some peoples are more *thumotic* than others. This is the bold suggestion that Duchesne makes, though he is cautious here and uses the language of "culture," asking "may it not also be the case that this desire has been unevenly manifested by the cultures of the world?" (p. 420). He writes elsewhere in the text: "here I am suggesting that 'the West' is a cultural term without fixed geographical and ethnic boundaries" (pp. 237-38). But we have to ask: where does culture come from? Why do some peoples create (or manifest) cultures markedly different from others?

The revisionists will answer that they encountered different environmental conditions. And this is at least partly true. Each culture is the product of an encounter between a people and an environment with its own set of features and limitations intrinsic to it. But the people that encounters that environment does not do so *tabula rasa*: peoples have their own intrinsic features and limitations that they bring to the encounter. (Though, as evolution teaches us, what results may further shape their character.) Cultures are not abstract ideologies that can be

created by or imposed upon any people: they flow from the unique nature of a people, in its encounter with a unique place.

The evidence marshaled by Duchesne points unavoidably to the conclusion that European cultural uniqueness is a product of the *nature* of European people, which is not a cultural artifact but, again, that from which culture flows. Of course, the belief in "national character" or in intrinsic ethnic or racial characteristics is absolutely anathema in academia, however much obvious truth there may be in it. And Duchesne has courted enough controversy, as we have seen. So, wisely, he leaves this topic alone.

Yet, he goes pretty far nonetheless, asking on page 420: "Is it possible to argue with Nietzsche [i.e., in agreement with him] that not all cultures are equally proficient in the production of creative individuals? Can we not add to Nietzsche that the West produced the 'highest exemplars' of humanity due to its singular aristocratic grounding?"

Notes

1. Whether or not Hegel was aware that this was really the tale he was telling is a complicated issue. To be sure, it seems as if he is describing humanity in general and speaking of general human characteristics (like "reason"). However, one has to bear in mind that when Hegel turns, in other texts, to describe the world's peoples, he asserts that what he calls the "Germanic peoples" (i.e., Western Europeans) are the principle carriers and developers of "spirit" and "reason." Other peoples (e.g., the Chinese, who live under a system of "oriental despotism") are only implicitly free and self-determining. Hegel recognizes that there are such things as differing national characters. And contrary to the claims of many of his interpreters, he never explicitly claims that non-Westerners will inevitably catch up with Westerners and develop the sort of institutions and self-understanding that we have. Thus, Hegel may have been well aware that when he was describing "human spirit" he was actually describing the West, since he clearly took the mentality of the West as the most full-developed exemplar of the spirit only imperfectly and inadequately exhibited by other peoples. Derek Hawthorne's essay "Nationalism and Racialism in German Philosophy: Fichte, Hegel, and the Romantics [3]" discusses some of these issues.

2. Paraphrased from Hegel, The Philosophy of History, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 32.

3. Of course, most of the heroic exploits of the barbarians involved the acquisition of what anthropologists have dubbed "prestige goods." Predictably, the revisionists claim that it was the possession of these goods that was the source of the prestige of the warrior. But here the revisionists are simply confused, as Duchesne clearly demonstrates. The acquisition of "booty" was not a means to prestige. Rather the possession of booty served as a symbol of one's success in warfare. And it was success in warfare that was what resulted in prestige.

PART IV

9. The Legacy of the Indo-Europeans: The Construction of the Western Self

In this section and in the next I will discuss how Duchesne understands the *thumotic* warrior spirit of the ancient Indo-Europeans to have shaped Western history. The present section is devoted to the development of the Western self-understanding, preeminently through philosophy. The following section deals with the development of Western political institutions.

Duchesne writes near the end of the book, "My view is that the restlessness of barbarian individuals was the primordial source of all that has been noble and great in Western civilization. Plato was the product of this individualism; his effort to subordinate the warrior ethos to the faculty of reason was an expression of his desire to achieve rational mastery" (p. 441). This statement is rich with implications not just for our understanding of Plato, but of Western philosophy itself.

What Duchesne is referring to primarily is the famous treatment of justice in Book Four of *The Republic*. There, the soul is said to have three parts, appetite (for food, sex, money, etc.), reason, and spirit (*thumos*). Those whose souls are dominated by *thumos* are made into the warrior class of Plato's ideal city (which, in certain ways, clearly reflects Dumézil's traditional Indo-European "tripartition"). But in both the city and the soul, reason must guide *thumos*. It does not cancel *thumos* or eradicate it: it channels and controls *thumos*. But in a certain sense the desire to achieve this state is itself *thumotic*: it is a desire, as Duchesne says, for self-mastery. It is *thumos* directed not against an internal troublemaker, but against an internal one. The "rational man" cannot achieve the mastery of *thumos* without the cooperation of *thumos*; he cannot win this mastery without a clear ideal of the man he should be, and an unyielding pride that pushes him to achieve it.

But how exactly did we get from the *thumos* of the berserker to the *thumos* of Socrates? How exactly did warlike, Indo-European culture give birth to philosophy and science? Here we must engage in a good bit of speculation, but Duchesne's speculations are quite plausible. He argues that "The exalted state of berserker inspiration associated with

the fight for pure prestige, together with the entire Indo-European way of life, had a profound effect on the constitution of the human personality, awakening within it a sense of human 'inwardness' and thereby leading to the discovery of the mind" (p. 431).

What Hegel called "being-for-self," or self-consciousness, emerges through desire. I desire to eat this particular animal, but he is too wily for me and evades my attempts to capture him. So I "turn inward" and consider whether I am not going about things the wrong way. Frustration leads to reflection on the self, however primitive that reflection may be. Of course, many animals are capable of this sort of self-reflection.

Human self-consciousness only truly emerges when human beings conceive of an ideal like honor, and fight for its recognition. Why? Because to have such an ideal that I fight for involves having *a conception of myself* that I choose to defend or advance. This is the germ of all the more elaborate self-conceptions that will follow in Western intellectual history. (It is the germ of Plato's self-conception: the master who must vanquish the other, in the name of his honor, becomes the master who must vanquish the other *within himself*, overweening spirit and desire.) It all begins when individuals first fight for their name, their honor, their reputation. But, of course, this is far more likely to happen in a society of free, warlike individuals whose social place *depends upon* fighting for such ideals. Thus, oddly enough, it is to the ancient, barbarian culture of the Indo-Europeans that we must look for the origins of what Hegel called Absolute Spirit: the human quest for self-consciousness, which includes philosophy.[1]

But in arguing this way, Duchesne has actually switched allegiances from Hegel to Nietzsche (and he knows it). It was not "slaves" that created Western culture and the Western self-conception. It was masters who "first achieved self-mastery over their willful nature and thereby created the 'Greek miracle'" (p. 441). Duchesne follows Nietzsche in arguing that culture is not something alien to nature, superimposed upon it, but rather a sublimation of the "strife" already found in nature. The Greeks achieved their "civility" by sublimating their barbarian spirit and

channeling it by means of laws, standards, and ideals of various kinds. The civilized Greek aristocrat was the man who learned to command himself, and his impulses. (The man who, again, could win the struggle within himself.)

The Greek word *arête* will be familiar to anyone who has studied Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in a philosophy course. The word is normally translated "virtue." By Aristotle's time the idea of *arête* had everything to do with self-control. Originally, the word essentially meant "the quality of being an aristocrat." Indeed, *arête* is actually derived from the same root as *aristos*, and the central "quality of being an aristocrat" – in Homer's time at least – was the pursuit of personal glory. But well into Aristotle's time, it was widely believed that only men of aristocratic birth were truly capable of achieving *arête*.

From Homer on the ideal *arête* evolved away from a purely martial virtue. Yet, as I've already discussed, it is easy to see how the ethical doctrine of Plato's *Republic* flows from what is fundamentally a warrior spirit. One sees the same quality in Aristotle's *Ethics*, where the ideal of self-control and avoiding excess is paramount. Aristotle's discussion of the "great-souled man" (*megalopsychos*) in Book Four is practically a portrait of the ideal aristocrat or courtier. Duchesne writes:

The moderation that Apollo preached – "nothing in excess," "know thyself" – was an attempt to sublimate the aristocratic will to power of martial men, not by pacifying this will, but by bringing it under self-control by balancing the seeing mind (nous) and the emotive mind (thumos) and thus mitigating its ferocity and reckless bloodlust. As Nietzsche put it, "Apollo could not live without Dionysus." (p. 451)

If one turns from the ideas of the philosophers to the men themselves one finds that most of them seem to have been born to aristocratic families. Examples include Thales, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, Democritus, Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle, among others. A large number of Socrates's "interlocutors" in the Platonic dialogues were aristocrats, including, famously, Adeimantus and Glaucon (of *The Republic*), the brothers of Plato. But it was not just the philosophers of Greece who were aristocratic: most of the major poets, scientists, and

democratic leaders were of noble birth as well. It might be objected that the reason for this is that these gentleman had so much *leisure time* to pursue their activities. Certainly, this is part of the truth. But as my readers may have noticed, when the *hoi polloi* are granted more leisure time they seldom feel driven to spend it on music and dialectic. No, there was something in the aristocratic upbringing (or genes) of these men that drove them to lead these spectacular lives.

But if we want the perfect example of how aristocratic character gives rise to philosophical "inwardness" and an ethic of self-mastery, we must turn from the Greeks to the Romans. The Emperor Marcus Aurelius (who reigned from 161 to 180) was perhaps the greatest of the Stoic philosophers. Stoicism upheld a doctrine of "true freedom," which had nothing to do with simply doing as one pleases. Instead, true freedom consists in being liberated from the control of bodily and emotional impulses. One wins this freedom through the use of reason; through identification with the "directing mind," ruling over the passions. One might see Aurelius – undisputed master of the vast Roman Empire – as the freest man on earth. Yet he only saw himself as free to the extent that he was able to master not others but himself.[2]

The development in Europe of what we might call the "philosophical self" and "philosophical life" thus involved what the Greeks called *agon*, struggle or competition. This is true in two major ways. First, the development of the "higher," civilized, and philosophical identity involved struggle against oneself. The battle takes place within the soul, and it is between a self-aware and rational "master" and the slavish passions that he seeks to subdue (lest they make a slave of *him*). And the philosophical life, lived with others, involves *agon* as well: dialectic, or philosophical debate between individuals. We think immediately of Plato's dialogues, where the interlocutors struggle with one another, and metaphors of contest and warfare are openly used. But the history of Western philosophy is itself an *agon*, with each philosopher seeking to topple his predecessors or contemporaries; to put forward the *best* philosophy. Duchesne writes:

There were no Possessors of the Way in aristocratic Greece; no Chinese sages decorously deferential to their superiors and expecting appropriate deference from their inferiors. The search for the truth was a free-for-all with each philosopher competing for intellectual prestige in a polemical tone that sought to discredit the theories of others while promoting one's own. (p. 452)

But this was true in all areas of Greek life – and European life generally. Even the poets, artists, artisans, sophists, mathematicians, and doctors competed. And it is from this *thumotic* free-for-all that all the glories of the West have emerged. Just as with the primordial struggle for recognition, it is all about the individual struggling against others for distinction and supremacy. On a political level, that primordial struggle never ended. In the realm of the intellect, itself born from the struggle for honor, it becomes the quest for a radical form of rational autonomy.

If we turn to the Middle Ages we find European theologians crafting a rationalized version of Christianity. This religion, born in the Near East, a cultic offshoot of Judaism, was imposed upon the pagan peoples of Europe, often adopted by their leaders out of political expediency. But it was alien to the European soul. The process by which it was Europeanized has been termed by James C. Russell the "Germanization of Christianity."[3] But this amounted, in most ways, to the attempt to make Christianity more rational – culminating, of course, in the Protestant Reformation.

Europeans could not accept a *mysterium tremendum* before which they had to abase themselves and switch off their minds. They demanded a faith that made sense, that affirmed the value of the individual and of *this world*. And so we find Thomas Aquinas at pains to make sense out of the most senseless claims of the Church, and teaching that rational autonomy is a gift of God. We find Renaissance philosophers like Ficino, Pico, and Bruno in barely-concealed revolt against the Church, and yearning for a this-worldly pagan humanism.

It is Pico, interestingly enough, who provides us with perhaps the best glimpse into the pure, unadulterated essence of the Western spirit itself. Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) is a hymn to the glory of man's

intellect and unlimited capacity for knowing. Pico tells us that after God had created all the planets, stars, and beasts he felt the desire to fashion some sort of being that was capable of knowing and appreciating creation itself. Rather than endow one of the other beasts with this power, God created mankind and – in a sense – gave him no nature at all. Instead of having a fixed nature like the other creatures, God made man capable of acquiring knowledge from and imitating all other created things. (One can discern in Pico an echo of Aristotle's conception of man as the bearer of *nous*, which is capable of knowing all because it itself is nothing.)

While Pico speaks as if he is describing "mankind," he is in fact articulating the self-conception of Western man exclusively. It is in the struggle for prestige that Western man initially sets himself in opposition to nature – the nature *within himself*; the desire for mere biological survival. From this develops the idea that (Western) man may achieve full mastery of nature – both within himself, and without; that he may be radically free and autonomous, free of all unchosen forms of determination. Free to be *anything*. Arguably, this ideal has proved our undoing. As Hegel writes in the *Philosophy of World History*:

The life of a people ripens a certain fruit, its activity aims at the complete manifestation of the principle which it embodies. But this fruit does not fall back into the bosom of the people that produced and matured it; on the contrary, it becomes a poisoned draught to it. That poison-draught it cannot let alone, for it has an insatiable thirst for it: the taste of the draught is its annihilation, though at the same time the rise of a new principle.[4]

(I will have more to say about the fate of the West in my Conclusion.)

In any case, with the Protestant Reformation came, as Duchesne puts it, "the full development of individualism . . . and its encouragement of industriousness, persistent action, and empirical utilitarianism" (p. 295). What the Reformation represents is the climax of the Germanization and rationalization of Christianity. With the rise of Protestantism, the barbarian, Indo-European soul wins at last: it sweeps aside the alien, Near Eastern otherworldliness of Christianity and affirms the value of

action in *this world*. Gone is the oriental despotism of the Church. What matters now is the direct relationship of the *individual* to God, and his struggle to *win salvation* through faith and good works. And gone too is Near Eastern smoke and mirrors and superstition. In its place: a *rational* faith. As many have pointed out, Protestantism thus helped set the stage for the Enlightenment – and, ironically, for its own undoing.

Out of the European rationalization of Christianity came the doctrine of the "natural rights" of the individual, as articulated early on by Hugo Grotius (1583–1645; though the basis of "natural rights" theories can be traced back to much earlier figures, like Aquinas). Progressively, Europe began to "rationalize" everything, and always to make the individual and his autonomy paramount. Dogma, custom, tradition, and superstition all were progressively eliminated. Duchesne writes that "At the heart of Western modernity . . . is the ideal of freedom, and the ideal of a critical, self-reflexive public culture. A culture is modern and Western when it has a conception of itself as *self-grounding or self-legitimating*, and when individuals are free to articulate their ideas and their feelings through the exercise of their own faculties" (pp. 237–38; emphasis added).

Immanuel Kant provides us with a perfect example of how Western philosophers came progressively to express in ever starker and more explicit terms the ideal of radical individual autonomy. In Kant's ethical writings he puts forth a principle of moral self-legislation entirely divorced from any kind of concrete social or cultural context. (It was this feature of Kant's ethics that Hegel would famously critique in his *Philosophy of Right*.) The individual stands alone, giving a law to himself, according to principles he himself wills (or ought to will).

In the hands of Kant's follower J. G. Fichte, this conception of human autonomy becomes even more radical. Fichte argued that the individual is much freer than anyone had previously thought – because the entire world is the creation of the Ego. The Ego creates the world as a field for moral striving: my destiny is to strive against the world and to transform *what is* into my ideal of what *ought to be*; to cancel the otherness of the world and bring it into accord with the plans of the self. This turn toward "subjectivism" can easily be seen simply as a radicalization of the

Western focus on individual autonomy. And even as yet another staging of the struggle for prestige: Fichte vanquishes the "other" that would determine him by erecting a philosophy which declares this other to be non-existent. As a result, he emerges as master of the entire world! It would be Friedrich Nietzsche, however, who would bring this "subjective turn" to its climax, erecting an ideal of an Overman – carrier, in fact, of the barbarian master spirit – who frees himself even of the concept of objective truth itself.

Now, all of these men (with the possible exception of Nietzsche) had presented their philosophies as accounts of "human nature." Kant, for example, offered his treatment of the nature of the moral agent as an account of "humanity," and held that the acts of autonomous reasoning engaged in by this agent are universal human possibilities. (Fichte followed him in this.) However, Duchesne states the obvious:

The project of self-determination is modern and Western. The philosophy of Kant has to be seen as a high spiritual expression of the self-knowledge of the European community in the modern era. The idea that all individuals should always be treated as persons and never as means presupposes the rise of the West. The self-legislating individual is not natural but constructed out of a historically specific ethical community, the institutions of the modern [Western] compassionate family, the modern [Western] market society, and the modern [Western] constitutional state. (p. 283)[5]

This striking passage not only illuminates Kant but has tremendous implications for our understanding of the history of Western ideas. Suppose that much of what Western thinkers have said about "humanity" really is simply a projection of their own Western consciousness onto others. If so, then the entire history of Western philosophy must be understood as a phenomenology of Western Spirit: as the West's self-understanding, unfolding in history. This is exactly the position Duchesne takes. He writes "There is no 'categorical imperative,' no 'cunning of reason,' and no 'will to power' outside the West because the experience of non-Western societies is rather dissimilar" (p. 335).

As he does with many of his more provocative statements, Duchesne buries this one in a footnote – along with yet another devastating critique of the revisionists:

It is quite revealing that the same multicultural relativists who have repeatedly warned us that the experience of the West should not be used as a model for the patterns of world history have been unwilling to draw the conclusion that the intellectual history of the West – the ideas on human nature of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger – may express and reflect only the 'specific existence' of Western man. (p. 335)

In short, what if the ideas about human nature that Western relativists have imbibed from Western philosophers – ideas about reason and objectivity, and the desires for recognition, freedom, autonomy, and self-realization – are really only descriptions of aspects of the character of Western man? What then?

Notes

1. Duchesne is not claiming that only the Indo-Europeans and their descendents are self-conscious, anymore than he is claiming that only Indo-Europeans fought for prestige or exhibited warlike aggressiveness. His claim is merely that because of the greater emphasis Indo-European culture placed upon the free, aristocratic individual fighting for prestige, the West achieved a degree of self-reflectiveness (and self-criticism) unmatched by other cultures.

2. Of course, critics will be quick to pounce on my (and Duchesne's) use of Aurelius, since another of the great exponents of Stoicism was the slave Epictetus, who predates Aurelius (he lived from 55 to 135). Epictetus was not the founder of Stoicism, however. That honor belongs to Zeno of Citium (ca. 334 – ca. 262 BC), whose father may have been a merchant, but who was certainly no slave. One could easily argue that Stoicism appealed to Epictetus for precisely the reasons Hegel in The Phenomenology of Spirit holds that it was a development of "slave consciousness" (my term, not Hegel's): it promised a "true freedom" independent of one's social circumstances. Thus, in the hands of Epictetus Stoicism becomes a variant of what Nietzsche called "slave morality" and ressentiment (though the writings of Epictetus contain valuable insights).

3. See James C. Russell, The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity (Oxford University Press, 1996).

4. Hegel, Philosophy of History, 78.

5. Duchesne is actually summarizing Hegel's critique of Kant in The Philosophy of Right, though he does not make this explicit.

PART V

10. The Legacy of the Indo-Europeans: The Construction of Modern Western Political Order

We have already had occasion several times to discuss how the Indo-European aristocratic warrior spirit is, in fact, the true origin of democratic institutions and doctrines of "rights." Our *thumotic*, barbarian ancestors would never accept the rule of tyrants, and demanded to "have a say," to be recognized. Democracy is simply the application of this principle beyond the aristocratic class. Exactly how that process took place is a very complicated story. But we need to take a closer look at it, however brief and inadequate – as it will (amongst other things) allow us to discern the process by which the contributions of aristocratic warriors to civilization came to be forgotten – as well as the process by which Western uniqueness came to be denied.

I have already mentioned that the basis for Athenian democracy was a pre-existing aristocratic system of a "council of nobles," and that many of the most prominent figures in Athenian democratic politics were of noble birth. In Rome we see a similar pattern. The Roman Republic was preceded by a period of tyranny, which was eventually replaced by a group of aristocrats. These men constituted the leading figures in the Republic, and they ruled in the name of liberty – which meant, freedom from absolute monarchs. As Duchesne correctly points out, without this group of Aristocrats, there would have been no Republic, and all that followed it, both for good and for ill.

Eventually, the Romans dropped their emphasis upon heredity as a source of aristocratic virtue, and instead created a system in which individuals could prove their virtue and move up in the world through competition. One could argue that this is in fact more in keeping with the ancient, barbaric Indo-European spirit: nobility is really all about deeds and spirit, not who one's father happened to be. In fact, so broadminded were the Romans that they offered limited citizenship to freed slaves, and full citizenship to their descendants. By the time of the early Empire, in fact, the *majority* of Roman citizens were descended from slaves (!).

In the Medieval period, the aristocratic principle of sovereignty was central to the feudal system of government – just as it had been in the days of the barbarians. The nobles had autonomy within their sphere, and the king was expected to respect the rights of his nobles and to consult them. And the nobles demanded quite a lot of their kings, the Magna Carta of 1215 being only the most famous example (other, similar documents were imposed on kings throughout Europe). Duchesne refers as well to the Medieval "warren of jurisdictions" – duchies, baronies, bishoprics, counties, guilds, monasteries, universities – which effectively meant that no one man or group of men had authority over all. (Consider by contrast the centralized "Oriental despotism" of China.)

All of this laid the groundwork for the development of parliamentary government out of the feudal system. As Duchesne notes, drawing on the work of Marc Bloch, it was only in those lands that had been governed by a system of aristocratic councils that representative, parliamentary government arose. (It didn't happen, for example, in Japan, where the submission of the noble vassals to their lord was total.) And we see rising to prominence all over Europe three "estates" that demanded a voice: the nobles, clergy, and "townsmen" (or middle class). As Duchesne puts it, "the privileges of the aristocracy were not antithetical to the idea of bourgeois 'rights' and 'liberties' but were instead their original inspiration and precedent" (p. 483).

The increasing commercialization of early modern Europe meant that the power of merchants and bankers – of the middle class – steadily grew. In Dumézilian terms, what occurred was a gradual shift to the rule of the "third function" – even if, on the surface, it was still those of noble birth who ruled officially. And with this change in power relationships came a change in the *Zeitgeist*. Increasingly it was no longer the values of the nobility ("honor") or the church ("piety") that mattered, but rather the values of the middle class: industriousness, utility, sociability, affability, cleanliness, "likeableness," "niceness," etc.

As societies turned more toward commerce and the values and interests of merchants and bankers, the more the purpose of society was seen as the promotion of peace, order, and security. Enter Thomas Hobbes, who

argued precisely that this was the only legitimate purpose of political order – deriving the humdrum values of bourgeois shopkeepers deductively from an Epicurean metaphysics (the part of *Leviathan* that nobody reads). Hobbes's stated intention was to reign in the aristocratic desire for "vainglory" that threatened peace and security, and therefore the free flow of commerce. For "vainglory" simply read *thumos*. Hobbes's theory of the "social contract" – which expresses what is in fact the distilled essence of the modern social and political outlook – was constructed in conscious opposition to the *thumotic* virtue that was the foundation of Western greatness itself.

Of course, one can't really eliminate *thumos* – and there will always be certain men who are particularly gifted with it. So, what the modern world does is to channel that *thumos* into activities that do not threaten it. Men are encouraged to become "economic warriors" doing battle with others to see who can build and sell the biggest and best mousetrap. No real man is ever truly satisfied by this – but the society offers him money and pharmaceutical drugs to kill the pain. The most *thumotic* are encouraged to go into the military to "fight for democracy." Not for glory – only to *keep the peace*.

With this rechanneling of *thumos* also came a reconception of it. When *thumos* was put to work for economic ends, it became confused with the pursuit of self-interest. In other words, if one looks at the economic warriors busily competing with one another and hooting and hollering at their latest sale or acquisition, it certainly *looks* like all that is going on here is a bunch of greedy ex-frat boys seeking their selfish benefit. In fact, of course, this is exactly how the *slave types* (in Nietzsche's sense) saw the masters of old. They did not see that what was really at work, under the surface, was the pursuit of an ideal – the desire for honor and prestige.

In the modern period, the slave perspective on *thumos* has become the dominant perspective – and even the self-understanding of most genuinely *thumotic* men. *Thumos* has simply been conflated with appetite, and seen as on a par with the desires for food, sex, and comfort. The connection of *thumos* to the pursuit of an ideal – in fact, to the

negation or mastery of appetite – has been completely lost. And so Duchesne writes, on the very last page of his book: "Accordingly, to the degree that the spirited part of the Western soul was suppressed by the ethical demands of modern democratic liberalism, rechanneled intro economic inventiveness, or confounded with bodily appetites, it became increasingly difficult for scholars to attribute the restlessness of the West to this part of the soul" (p. 488).

In other words, the reason why our revisionists must understand everything in economic terms, seeing, for example, even the Indo-European migrations as responses to "scarcity," is that they are modern men who have effectively been neutered. (Duchesne puts it more politely.) They simply do not know the *thumotic* part of the soul. There is no place for it in their understanding of human motivations. One sees this even in modern science, where the evolutionary biologists insist that the *thumotic* pursuit of recognition *simply must* reduce to a desire to attract mates or accumulate material resources. It simply does not occur to them that there might be some *fundamental* difference between human beings and earthworms, and that there might be a part of the human being that rises above – indeed, that negates – the purely natural. And how could this to occur to them? The only world they have ever personally known is dominated by an ethos nicely summed up by the rapper Ice Cube: "Life ain't nothing but bitches and money."

11. Concluding Reflections

And yet, even within the most modern of Western men – yes, even within our politically correct revisionists – we still see some glimmer of the old, Indo-European *thumotic* nature. One sees this, of course, in the polemical nature of their scholarship. And, as Duchesne points out, their critique of the West embodies the perennial Western negativity about itself, and Western "self-doubt." This may be the hardest point for Right Wing critics of the Left to understand. The suicidal self-hatred of Western Left Wingers is something that seems utterly mad, and defies explanation. I've spoken to many a conservative who has expressed utter consternation over this. The important thing to understand is that the

anti-Western animus of the Left may be foolish, dishonest, and disastrous – but it is not un-Western.

From the beginning – if Duchesne is correct – we have been animated by a spirit of individualism that has involved the willingness to negate even the desire for life in order to achieve the ideal. We have been willing to risk everything, in other words, for individual autonomy, and for our vision of what is *right*. This is the source of everything great about us, but it is simultaneously our tragic flaw. It seems to lead, in many Westerners, to a form of madness in which one comes to believe that freedom means emancipation from all limits whatsoever. And so we modern Westerners now believe that we are not just capable of taming or channeling our animal desires, but of giving birth to ourselves.

We believe that we can free ourselves from history, from culture, from biology, even from the limits of time and space. We deny heredity, natural inequality, upper limits on physical and mental development, ethnic and national characters, and even the difference between the sexes. We want to "have it all" and be all, or anything. But, of course, this really amounts to being nothing all. And that really is our goal: the apotheosis of the Western spirit. To be absolutely free of all limits and all otherness; to be free of anything not chosen by the autonomous self. To be free, in fact, of identity. Pico understood us correctly: we Westerners are the animal with no nature – or at least we *think* that we are. And this realization, in fact, is what Hegel saw standing at the end of history. All of history for Hegel was the coming into being, through (Western) humanity of Aristotle's God: the being who is utterly and completely independent, self-sufficient, and undetermined; spinning in an eternal bliss of pure and perfect self-relatedness.

But, of course, this is complete insanity. It is true enough that we are able to negate our animal nature in the name of an ideal, or to channel our animal drives. But we are not free to be anything we like. The very ability to react against our animal drives has its basis in factors – biological and cultural – that we have not chosen. And the obvious truth is that we haven't freed ourselves from history, culture, and biology. We have only fooled ourselves into thinking that we have, or that it is possible. Intrinsic,

immutable human characteristics continue to exist – as well as intrinsic, immutable human inequalities. The madness of the West is not that it has removed these things, but that it thinks it has. And this madness may well lead to its destruction.

As a perfect illustration of how one cannot escape one's nature and one's history, consider the Left Wingers Duchesne crosses swords with. Whether we tarry with the p.c. historians or sociologists at Ivy League schools, or with the garden-variety liberals of Berkeley, or with the Democratic power brokers of Washington, D.C., or with the Labour organizers of London, we will find a people as deeply invested in Eurocentrism as Rudyard Kipling.

I know that this will seem to be an incredible claim. But consider: while those on the Left spend a great deal of time today speaking about "diversity," in reality they are only willing to affirm those aspects of other cultures that do not conflict with the ideals of Western liberalism. Other cultures may enter into the great, multicultural project – but they may not exhibit (as many do) sexism, misogyny, or homophobia – or engage in such practices as arranged marriages, duels, honor killings, or clitoridectomy. Western liberals are in fact perfectly prepared to welcome individuals from cultures that practice these things – but most see it as their mission to enlighten them and get them to stop.

The left wing "celebration of diversity" amounts, in the end, to a celebration of culture in its external and superficial forms. In other words, to Western liberals "multiculturalism" winds up amounting simply to such things as different costumes, music, styles of dance, languages, and food. The real guts of the different cultures – how they view the world, how they view the divine, how they view men and women – have to be nipped and tucked (or even excised entirely) to bring them into conformity with Western liberalism.

Thus, the hidden agenda of so-called "multiculturalism" is really the "Enlightenment," or rather Europeanization, of all peoples. Now, I would venture to say that virtually no Western liberals are consciously aware of this. The obvious reason is that for the most part they are unable to see the culture of liberalism as uniquely Western – *and thus they do not*

perceive that they have any Western identity at all. They see themselves as cosmopolitans; citizens of the world. They have no qualms about "helping" others to become like themselves, because they think that what they are really doing is merely helping those others to *become truly human* (to "realize their human potential").

As Duchesne discusses at length, they have unconsciously taken European traits and values as simply "human" and projected them onto the rest of the world. It is thus possible for them to *both* "celebrate diversity" and, for example, give condescending lectures to Muslims about women's rights. They do not perceive this as imposing their culture onto others, because they do not even perceive their culture *as* their culture; they see it as a "universal humanity" that others may need a little help to fully actualize. And it is their mission to help them to do so! (And one of our Western characteristics is that we must *always* have a mission in order to justify our existence.) The unification of all peoples, an end to war and strife, universal respect for rights, universal political enlightenment. It's the end of history, and it's all decked out in a coat of many colors. But there is but one lily-white Western mono-culture underneath. And the ultimate irony is that that mono-culture is spread by self-hating Westerners who condemn their culture because they think it has failed to live up to ideals that are, in fact, the invention of Westerners.

Of course, it is not just the Leftists who exhibit these tendencies – who want to civilize the planet by spreading a Western culture they do not even recognize as Western. Conservatives are playing the same game (especially the recent variety of "neo-conservatives"). It seems not to matter who is in charge. We are always in the business of exporting our "timeless ideals." Always forcing others to be free. Always celebrating otherness by imposing a "humanitarian" sameness. It seems that we Westerners simply cannot escape our Westerness, regardless of our political affiliation.

So what is the cure for this peculiar brand of madness? Here we have to be careful, because some of the cures proposed by Right Wingers are, in fact, worse than the disease. A cure is worse than the disease when it kills

the patient. And some have proposed alternations to our self-conception and way of life that are profoundly anti-Western. For example, it is true that one of our problems is that we lack unity. So some of us look to non-Western countries like North Korea, take note of their impressive unity, and yearn for something similar. But we must keep squarely in mind that though our individualism, our passion for freedom, our self-criticism, and our bellicose nature have indeed, it seems, produced some pretty problematic results – nevertheless *this is us*. This is who we are.

Whoever would seek to save the West must not seek to change what is fundamentally Western about us. Indeed, such an aim is doomed to failure. So what is the answer? It is just possible, of course, that there may not be one. It is just possible that Western man is indeed a tragic figure, and his story a tale with no happy ending possible. This was Spengler's position, in fact. And we must confront it. In the final analysis, we might just be a people whose incomparable greatness was made possible by traits that eventually doomed it.

Of course, if we adopt this pessimistic outlook we are bound to make Spengler's prophecy a self-fulfilling one. So I would like to suggest an alternative. It deserves to be discussed at greater length, but I will merely sketch it out here. Fittingly, I will take my inspiration from Hegel. The thinker who revealed to us the beginning of Western history, its course, and its alleged end may also be able to provide us with a way to a new beginning.

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel deals with different conceptions of freedom. Most philosophers and ordinary people take freedom to mean "lack of constraint," and to be the opposite of "determination." But, good dialectician that he was, Hegel argues that this conception rests upon a false dichotomy. If freedom means lack of determination, then freedom is completely impossible. All of us are born into a determinate set of cultural, social, geographical, and historical circumstances. We don't choose these things, but they shape who we are – often in ways we are oblivious to (as my earlier discussion of Eurocentric Leftists illustrates).

But Hegel argues that this fact is not something we should mourn – because this "determination" is merely the set of conditions that makes

possible our freedom. As I remarked earlier, freedom is always freedom within a context; "freedom of choice" means freedom, within a certain context, to select from a number of options. The context always defines what the options are – even the option you may dream up, that no one else has realized or thought to choose. And all sorts of factors define and make possible a context, factors over which we have no control. So, for example, that I was born in this country as opposed to that one, to this sort of family, in this time period, etc., undeniably limits me – but it defines a context in which I may make choices and, indeed, realize myself as the sort of being I am.

Now, suppose someone responds to this by saying "Yes, but I didn't get to choose the context I was thrust into, or to define what my choices are. Therefore I'm not free." This is simply not a reasonable position, however, for it demands the impossible – and thus sets up an impossible, chimerical notion of freedom. Hegel's real answer to this, however, is to say that we are always *fully and absolutely free* so long as we recognize that the "limiting factors" in our lives are in fact the conditions for our self-realization; the conditions for such freedom as we have, in other words. The man who sees these conditions as merely alien and "oppressive" will feel himself unfree. If, on the other hand, he is able to recognize how his unchosen context has made it possible for him to be the man he is, with the choices and possibilities arrayed before him, he will not see these factors as limiting. If, in other words, he *chooses the unchosen* then he remains a fully autonomous individual. Hegel's provocative way of putting this is to say that we must "will our determination."

And this might be the way to save Western man. We cannot change the fact that what we seek is autonomy — to conquer the other, to penetrate, to know, and to control. But the next step in the historical development of Western self-understanding may be to recognize the absolute necessity and immutability of the conditions that make our nature possible. And to affirm them: to will them, to choose them. Hegel, in *The Philosophy of Right*, spoke exclusively of willing the social conditions that make possible our freedom. But let us expend this to include biological, and other conditions. Thus, for example, the cure for the West's radical

feminism is for the feminist to recognize that the biological conditions that make her a woman – with a woman's mind, emotions, and drives – cannot be denied and are not an oppressive "other." They are the parameters within which she can realize who she is and seek satisfaction in life. No one can be free of some set of parameters or other; life is about realizing ourselves and our potentials within those parameters.

Hegel was right about history: the *telos* of (Western) history really is our coming to consciousness of ourselves. But, contra Hegel's followers, we are not at the end of history. In fact, we are going through a stage of history in which we are still profoundly deluded in our self-understanding. And it is having disastrous consequences. The next phase of the historical dialectic, if there is one, will be the antithesis of the present: We Westerners will recognize the futility and destructiveness of denying our nature; of denying the unchosen conditions – biological, cultural, historical, social – that make us who we are. And we will choose instead to affirm those conditions. This is no defeat for us, and no rejection of what makes us uniquely Western. It is the action of a *fully* self-aware and autonomous being. It is the Western spirit come to complete and perfect consciousness of itself: as *unique*, as a being of a specific nature which it simply cannot escape. And who would want to escape such a glorious nature?

So what then? That is a uniquely Western question. For the West, there is always something yet to come, some adventure to be had. Well, willing the conditions for our freedom doesn't mean the same thing as making peace with the world. No, we Westerners are determined to *strive* – to be *restless*. It is only this fact about ourselves that we must make peace with, and affirm. And so we will go forward to new adventures, conquering new territories (literally and metaphorically). But this time it will be with full consciousness of who we are – and pride in who we are. The end of history comes when we achieve this absolute self-consciousness and stop deluding ourselves, and denying ourselves. But the "end" of our history is only the beginning, for it is truly the point at which we come into full possession of ourselves and our possibilities. And those possibilities are limitless and will remain so, *if we live and act always in the knowledge of who we are*.

The above reflections go beyond what Duchesne says in *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization*, but they are inspired by it. If you have made it to the end of this very long essay, I think you will understand why I regard this as such a brilliant and important book. Duchesne stands on the shoulders of giants like Hegel, Nietzsche, and Spengler, but this book both synthesizes their ideas, and supplements them with new and important insights. *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization* is a book that has come along at just the right time. It helps us to see ourselves very clearly – our glories and our faults, and the conditions that make these possible. In short, it is an important chapter in the unfolding phenomenology of the Western spirit. And it may just help to usher in that next stage of history, in which we truly realize and embrace who we are.

BECOMING WHO WE ARE

LEFTIST EUROCENTRISM AND THE DESTINY OF THE WEST

Editor's Note:

The following essay is the final section [3] of Collin Cleary's review of Ricardo Duchesne's The Uniqueness of Western Civilization, revised to stand alone. It contains a number of extremely important observations which deserve to be spotlighted, rather than tucked away at the end of an epic-length book review.

Even within the most modern of Western men – yes, even within our politically correct academics – we still see some glimmer of the old, Indo-European *thumotic* nature. One sees this, of course, in the polemical nature of Leftist scholarship. And, as Ricardo Duchesne points out, their critique of the West embodies the perennial Western negativity about itself, and Western "self-doubt." This may be the hardest point for Right-wing critics of the Left to understand. The suicidal self-hatred of Western Left-wingers is something that seems utterly mad, and defies explanation.

Of course many Right-wingers do, in fact, have a ready explanation: the self-hatred that currently grips Europeans, and European-Americans, is a kind of plague germ spread by non-Europeans who wish to manipulate us for their own ethnic self-interest. But such manipulation would be impossible if Europeans did not already exhibit an innate capacity for ruthless, sometimes suicidal self-criticism. The anti-Western animus of the European Left may be foolish, dishonest, and disastrous – but it is not un-Western.

From the beginning the West has been animated by a spirit of individualism that has involved the willingness to negate even the desire for life in order to achieve the ideal. We have been willing to risk everything, in other words, for individual autonomy, and for our vision of what is *right*. This is the source of everything great about us, but it is simultaneously our tragic flaw. It seems to lead, in many Westerners, to a form of madness in which one comes to believe that freedom means emancipation from all limits whatsoever. And so modern Westerners

now believe that we are not just capable of taming or channeling our animal desires, but of giving birth to ourselves.

We believe that we can free ourselves from history, from culture, from biology, even from the limits of time and space. We deny heredity, natural inequality, upper limits on physical and mental development, ethnic and national characters, and even the difference between the sexes. We want to "have it all" and be all, or anything. But, of course, this really amounts to being nothing at all. And that really is our goal: the apotheosis of the Western spirit. To be absolutely free of all limits and all otherness; to be free of anything not chosen by the autonomous self. To be free, in fact, of identity. Pico della Mirandola (in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, 1486) understood us correctly: we Westerners are the animal with no nature – or at least we *think* that we are. And this realization, in fact, is what Hegel saw standing at the end of history. All of history for Hegel was the coming into being, through (Western) humanity of Aristotle's God: the being who is utterly and completely independent, self-sufficient, and undetermined; spinning in an eternal bliss of pure and perfect self-relatedness.

But, of course, this is complete insanity. It is true enough that we are able to negate our animal nature in the name of an ideal, or to channel our animal drives. But we are not free to be anything we like. The very ability to react against our animal drives has its basis in factors – biological and cultural – that we have not chosen. And the obvious truth is that we haven't freed ourselves from history, culture, and biology. We have only fooled ourselves into thinking that we have, or that it is possible. Intrinsic, immutable human characteristics continue to exist – as well as intrinsic, immutable human inequalities. The madness of the West is not that it has removed these things, but that it thinks it has. And this madness may well lead to its destruction.

As a perfect illustration of how one cannot escape one's nature and one's history, simply consider today's Left-wingers. Whether we tarry with the p.c. historians or sociologists at Ivy League schools, or with the garden-variety liberals of Berkeley, California, or with the Democratic power brokers of Washington, D.C., or with the Labour organizers of London,

we will find a people as deeply invested in Eurocentrism as Rudyard Kipling.

I know that this will seem an incredible claim. But consider: while those on the Left spend a great deal of time today speaking about "diversity," in reality they are only willing to affirm those aspects of other cultures that do not conflict with the ideals of Western liberalism. Other cultures may enter into the great, multicultural project – but they may not exhibit (as many do) sexism, misogyny, or homophobia – or engage in such practices as arranged marriages, duels, honor killings, or clitoridectomy. Western liberals are in fact perfectly prepared to welcome individuals from cultures that practice these things – but most see it as their mission to enlighten them and get them to stop.

The Left-wing "celebration of diversity" amounts, in the end, to a celebration of culture in its external and superficial forms. In other words, to Western liberals "multiculturalism" winds up amounting simply to such things as different costumes, music, styles of dance, languages, and food. The real guts of the different cultures – how they view the world, how they view the divine, how they view men and women – have to be nipped and tucked (or even excised entirely) to bring them into conformity with Western liberalism.

Thus, the hidden agenda of so-called "multiculturalism" is really the "Enlightenment," or rather *Europeanization*, of all peoples. Now, I would venture to say that virtually no Western liberals are consciously aware of this. The obvious reason is that for the most part they are unable to see the culture of liberalism as uniquely Western – *and thus they do not perceive that they have any Western identity at all*. They see themselves as cosmopolitans; citizens of the world. They have no qualms about "helping" others to become like themselves, because they think that what they are really doing is merely helping those others to *become truly human* (to "realize their human potential").

They have unconsciously taken European traits and values as simply "human" and projected them onto the rest of the world. It is thus possible for them to *both* "celebrate diversity" and, for example, give condescending lectures to Muslims about women's rights. They do not

perceive this as imposing their culture onto others, because they do not even perceive their culture *as* their culture; they see it as a "universal humanity" that others may need a little help to fully actualize. And it is their mission to help them to do so! (And one of our Western characteristics is that we must *always* have a mission in order to justify our existence.) The unification of all peoples, an end to war and strife, universal respect for rights, universal political enlightenment. It's the end of history, and it's all decked out in a coat of many colors. But there is but one lily-white Western mono-culture underneath. And the ultimate irony is that that mono-culture is spread by self-hating Westerners who condemn their culture because they think it has failed to live up to ideals that are, in fact, the invention of Westerners.

Of course, it is not just the Leftists who exhibit these tendencies – who want to civilize the planet by spreading a Western culture they do not even recognize as Western. Conservatives are playing the same game (especially the recent variety of "neo-conservatives"). It seems not to matter who is in charge. We are always in the business of exporting our "timeless ideals." Always forcing others to be free. Always celebrating otherness by imposing a "humanitarian" sameness. It seems that we Westerners simply cannot escape our Westernness, regardless of our political affiliation.

So what is the cure for this peculiar brand of madness? Here we have to be careful, because some of the cures proposed by Right-wingers are, in fact, worse than the disease. A cure is worse than the disease when it kills the patient. And some have proposed alterations to our self-conception and way of life that are profoundly anti-Western. For example, it is true that one of our problems is that we lack unity. So some of us look to non-Western countries like North Korea, take note of their impressive unity, and yearn for something similar. But we must keep squarely in mind that though our individualism, our passion for freedom, our self-criticism, and our bellicose nature have indeed, it seems, produced some pretty problematic results – nevertheless *this is us*. This is who we are.

Whoever would seek to save the West must not seek to change what is fundamentally Western about us. Indeed, such an aim is doomed to

failure. So what is the answer? It is just possible, of course, that there may not be one. It is just possible that Western man is indeed a tragic figure, and his story a tale with no happy ending possible. This was Spengler's position, in fact. And we must confront it. In the final analysis, we might just be a people whose incomparable greatness was made possible by traits that eventually doomed it.

Of course, if we adopt this pessimistic outlook we are bound to make Spengler's prophecy a self-fulfilling one. So I would like to suggest an alternative. It deserves to be discussed at greater length, but I will merely sketch it out here. Fittingly, I will take my inspiration from Hegel. The thinker who revealed to us the beginning of Western history, its course, and its alleged end may also be able to provide us with a way to a new beginning.

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel deals with different conceptions of freedom. Most philosophers and ordinary people take freedom to mean "lack of constraint," and to be the opposite of "determination." But, good dialectician that he was, Hegel argues that this conception rests upon a false dichotomy. If freedom means lack of determination, then freedom is completely impossible. All of us are born into a determinate set of cultural, social, geographical, and historical circumstances. We don't choose these things, but they shape who we are – often in ways we are oblivious to (as my earlier discussion of Eurocentric Leftists illustrates).

But Hegel argues that this fact is not something we should mourn – because this "determination" is merely the set of conditions that makes possible our freedom. As I remarked earlier, freedom is always freedom within a context; "freedom of choice" means freedom, within a certain context, to select from a number of options. The context always defines what the options are – even the option you may dream up, that no one else has realized or thought to choose. And all sorts of factors define and make possible a context, factors over which we have no control. So, for example, that I was born in this country as opposed to that one, to this sort of family, in this time period, etc., undeniably limits me – but it defines a context in which I may make choices and, indeed, realize myself as the sort of being I am.

Now, suppose someone responds to this by saying "Yes, but I didn't get to choose the context I was thrust into, or to define what my choices are. Therefore I'm not free." This is simply not a reasonable position, however, for it demands the impossible – and thus sets up an impossible, chimerical notion of freedom. Hegel's answer to this is to say that we are always *fully and absolutely free* so long as we recognize that the "limiting factors" in our lives are in fact the conditions for our self-realization; the conditions for such freedom as we have, in other words. The man who sees these conditions as merely alien and "oppressive" will feel himself unfree. If, on the other hand, he is able to recognize how his unchosen context has made it possible for him to be the man he is, with the choices and possibilities arrayed before him, he will not see these factors as limiting. If, in other words, he *chooses the unchosen* then he remains a fully autonomous individual. Hegel's provocative way of putting this is to say that we must "will our determination."

And this might be the way to save Western man. We cannot change the fact that what we seek is autonomy – to conquer the other, to penetrate, to know, and to control. But the next step in the historical development of Western self-understanding may be to recognize the absolute necessity and immutability of the conditions that make our nature possible. And to affirm them: to will them, to choose them. Hegel, in *The Philosophy of Right*, spoke exclusively of willing the social conditions that make possible our freedom. But let us expend this to include biological, and other conditions. Thus, for example, the cure for the West's radical feminism is for the feminist to recognize that the biological conditions that make her a woman – with a woman's mind, emotions, and drives – cannot be denied and are not an oppressive "other." They are the parameters within which she can realize who she is and seek satisfaction in life. No one can be free of some set of parameters or other; life is about realizing ourselves and our potentials within those parameters.

Hegel was right about history: the *telos* of (Western) history really is our coming to consciousness of ourselves. But, contra Hegel's followers, we are not at the end of history. In fact, we are going through a stage of history in which we are still profoundly deluded in our self-understanding. And it is having disastrous consequences. The next

phase of the historical dialectic, if there is one, will be the antithesis of the present: we Westerners will recognize the futility and destructiveness of denying our nature; of denying the unchosen conditions – biological, cultural, historical, social – that make us who we are. And we will choose instead to affirm those conditions. This is no defeat for us, and no rejection of what makes us uniquely Western. It is the action of a *fully* self-aware and autonomous being. It is the Western spirit come to complete and perfect consciousness of itself: as *unique*, as a being of a specific nature which it simply cannot escape. And who would want to escape such a glorious nature as ours?

But what then? That is a uniquely Western question. For the West, there is always something yet to come, some adventure to be had. Well, willing the conditions for our freedom doesn't mean the same thing as making peace with the world. No, we Westerners are determined to *strive* – to be *restless*. It is this fact about ourselves that we must make peace with, and affirm. And so we will go forward to new adventures, conquering new territories (literally and metaphorically). But this time it will be with full consciousness of who we are – and pride in who we are. The "end of history" comes when we achieve this absolute self-consciousness and stop deluding ourselves, and denying ourselves.

But the "end" of our history is only the beginning, for it is truly the point at which we come into full possession of ourselves and our possibilities. And those possibilities are limitless and will remain so, if we live and act always in the knowledge of who we are. If, to put it a different way, *we become who we are*.

WAGNER'S PLACE IN THE GERMANIC TRADITION

PART I

1. Introduction

Richard Wagner is the man principally responsible for keeping the Germanic mythological tradition alive in the modern world. Countless individuals have been exposed to that tradition through Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and it is safe to say that at any given moment somewhere in the world some portion of the *Ring* is being played or performed. In other words, at any given moment, by means of the *Ring*, the stories of the gods and heroes are being recounted: the story of the building of Valhalla, of Wotan's (Odin's) sacrifice of an eye, of Siegmund's drawing the sword from the tree, of Siegfried's slaying the dragon, of Siegfried and Brünnhilde's ill-fated love, and of the murder of Siegfried – to name just a few of the mythic elements incorporated into the *Ring*. The myths live and continue to move people thanks to Wagner. And they will continue to do so, for Wagner used the myths as the basis for one of the greatest artworks ever created (arguably *the* greatest – for it is, as Wagner himself claimed, the *total* work of art). The *Ring* is immortal.

Given this, one would think that Germanic neo-heathens (Ásatrúar) would all be fanatic Wagnerites – travelling great distances to see the Ring performed, studying the libretti, collecting the countless recordings by this conductor and that. But with a few exceptions, this is not the case. The most obvious reason for this is that Ásatrúar, whatever good intentions they may have, are still products of their time, unaccustomed to the sort of challenges posed by Wagner. Wagner is "classical music," after all, and not nearly as approachable as Mozart or Bach. His music is not "relaxing."[1] It is frequently unnerving and emotionally moving. His operas are dominated, for the most part, by a kind of dour Germanic earnestness (which is one of the chief reasons, I suspect, that many find them off-putting). There is little humor. Plus, Wagner is not content merely to tell a story, his works are laden with philosophical meaning (their Schopenhaurean pessimism is surely another reason why some avoid them). Finally, it must be mentioned that virtually every Wagner

opera is extremely *long*, and even Wagner fanatics find themselves nodding off at times. Wagner is not for people with short attention spans or an inability to sit still.

Still, there is another major reason why Ásatrúar resist Wagner, and that has to do with the impression that although Wagner draws on Germanic myth, he also distorts it or "twists" it for his own purposes.[2] One finds a wide variety of people making this claim, aside from Ásatrúar. J. R. R. Tolkien, for example, accused Wagner of distorting Northern European myth. An ironic claim given the obvious indebtedness of *The Lord of the Rings* to Wagner (which Tolkien disingenuously denied, saying "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases"). And given Tolkien's insistence on injecting Christian elements into his own mythos (e.g., Frodo as Jesus). Numerous scholars have also taken Wagner to task for "getting the myths wrong." A. T. Hatto is representative here, writing of the *Nibelungenlied*: "Modern poets and poetasters have often returned to its subject, prominent among the Richard Wagner with his gigantic music drama *Der Ring des Nibelungen* with which . . . he has ultimately harmed the cause of medieval German poetry by intruding reckless distortions between us and an ancient masterpiece."[3]

Of course, the obvious response to such an assertion is that Wagner's aim was to produce a work of art, not a piece of scholarship. However, a real defense of Wagner – which is the purpose of this essay – will have to be somewhat more elaborate. I intend to argue not only that Wagner was a remarkably serious student of Germanic myth, and that the *Ring* is remarkably faithful to it. I intend to argue, further, that the "changes" he makes to the myths are all legitimate developments of the mythic material. And, most important of all, in developing that material in his own way he was following in the footsteps of the anonymous authors of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Völsungasaga* and other works, all of whom had put their own personal stamp upon the sources they worked from. In doing so, they had revealed new layers – new *truths* – latent in the sources. The myths and sagas are not fixed and static; in the right hands, they give birth to new ideas and new connections. As we shall see in the

case of Wagner, the myths have the power to possess those who take them up.

I will, furthermore, argue for an even stronger and more controversial claim: of all the forms in which the Germanic mythology has been preserved, Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is the most beautiful. Wagner is the greatest *skald* who ever lived. There is beauty in the *Eddas* and sagas, but it is a rough beauty mixed with a great deal that is indecorous. There is profundity there too, but it exists alongside a lot that is naïve and unrefined. And as for the *Nibelungenlied*, no honest person has ever felt anything other than disappointment when coming to it after an encounter with Wagner. Indeed, the poetry of Wagner's libretti for the *Ring* is superior to that of the *Nibelungenlied*.

And Wagner's poetry is, in the main, more intellectually profound because Wagner stood on the shoulders of the great German philosophers G. W. F. Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Arthur Schopenhauer. Indeed, Wagner is the great synthesizer of German myth and German philosophy (the topic of "Wagner's place in the Germanic tradition," in fact, covers more than just his appropriation of the myths). Aside from this, of course, Wagner adds still another entirely new dimension to the mythic tradition, and it is really for this above all else that he is celebrated: he sets it to some of the most rapturous music ever written, music which seems to express the very spirit of the tradition itself.

Now, the above claims will scandalize some of my readers. "How can you compare Wagner to the original sources – let alone praise him, in some ways, as superior?" Well, such an objection misses the point, and rests on some faulty presuppositions. First of all, virtually every one of the "original sources" dates from Christian times, and was composed by authors many of whom were Christian (like Snorri Sturluson) and not "pagan" at all (except, perhaps, in spirit). Second, and most important, the entire point of this essay is to argue that Wagner should be regarded as *one of our sources*. It may very well be that Wagner was more a pagan at heart than Snorri Sturluson. He was certainly a harsh critic of Christianity (and the idea that he came to embrace Christianity in his

later period – the period of *Parsifal* – is largely a myth). But the primary reason for regarding Wagner as a legitimate *skald*, if you will, is his deep immersion in the tradition, and the profundity of his insight into it.

What is it exactly that makes Wagner's appropriation of the Germanic myths so profound? In fact, what Wagner did was to weave together many different strands of the Germanic tradition (mythological, poetic, and philosophical) in order to create a *complete speech* laying bare the history and character of Western man. Wagner is the Hegel of music. The *Ring* is a kind of *phenomenology of the Western spirit*, expressed through the total work of art: combining drama, poetry, music, song, scenic design, costumes, and much else. In the *Ring* we confront ourselves and our *tragic* nature. For the *Ring* is a conscious and deliberate attempt on Wagner's part to create a modern equivalent of Greek tragedy. In the *Ring*, the tragic character is Western man himself. What is his tragic flaw? That is a point I will explore much later in this essay.

As has already been implied by the foregoing, I will confine myself in the present text to the *Ring*, though a full consideration of Wagner's place in the Germanic tradition would obviously have to deal with most of his operas and their use of Germanic legend – including *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Parsifal*, and various sketches for uncompleted works, such as *Wieland der Schmied*.

2. Origins of the Ring

The *Nibelungenlied*[4] was rediscovered in Germany in the early 19th century, in the wake of Romanticism and in the midst of the Napoleonic occupation. It was a time of increasing national awareness, and the *Nibelungenlied*, with its saga of the heroic Siegfried, was hailed as the great national epic. Dozens of editions were printed, both in modern German and in the original Middle High German, and it was taught in schools. By the 1830s the idea of adapting it into a grand opera had been floated by several authors. In 1853 composer Heinrich Dorn produced a *Die Nibelungen* opera, which enjoyed a certain popularity in Germany until it was completely eclipsed by Wagner's *Ring*. Germany in the early

nineteenth century also saw a revival of interest in the old pagan Germanic gods, who soon took their place in school books alongside the Greek pantheon. It was into this milieu that Wagner was born (in 1813) and came of age. But it took him awhile to arrive at the idea of an opera based on Germanic myth.

Wagner was a German nationalist, though the nature of his nationalism was complex. To be a German nationalist in the nineteenth century meant that one advocated the unification of the German states (something which did not occur until 1871). Of course, German nationalism also consisted in German pride, and celebration of all things German – sometimes, indeed, to the point of extolling German superiority. But what always seems curious to us today is that this German nationalism often went hand in hand with an Enlightenment cosmopolitanism. The philosopher J. G. Fichte (1762–1814) is a paradigm case of this. He had long advocated such liberal ideals as the unification of mankind and the enlightenment of all peoples. During the Napoleonic occupation Fichte became an ardent nationalist, penning his famous *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808). But he had not fundamentally changed his ideals: it was Germany that would lead the way, Fichte believed, in unifying and enlightening mankind. Essentially, Wagner was cut from the same cloth.

Fichte had sought to awaken the German nation, to bring it to consciousness of itself, through his philosophy and the power of his rhetoric. Wagner set out to do it through opera, but in order to do that he had to reconceive opera itself. And the model according to which he did so was Greek tragedy. Wagner believed that Greek tragedy was – up until his time – humanity's greatest artistic achievement. First of all, tragedy combined all the other arts: drama, poetry, mime, costumes, instrumental music, song, and dance. Most importantly, it was based upon myth, which was timeless and (so Wagner believed) revealed universal truths of human nature. The entire community participated in the tragedy, at least as spectators: when a tragedy was performed (always at state expense) it drew the entire populace. And since the tragedy was based on myth, the event had a religious significance.[5]

Wagner wrote the following in his essay *Art and Revolution*:

With the Greeks the perfect work of art, the drama, was the sum and substance of all that could be expressed in the Greek nature; it was – in intimate connection with its history – the nation itself that stood facing itself in the work of art, becoming conscious of itself, and, in the space of a few hours, rapturously devouring, as it were, its own essence.[6]

Following the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (about whom we will have more to say later on), Wagner held that myth itself is a projection of the nature of a people; a people confronting itself. And it was essentially this thesis that led him to conceive the idea of an opera based upon the *Nibelungenlied* – though, as we shall see, Wagner's conception soon expanded beyond German legend to embrace Scandinavian myth as well. This made it much broader than merely "German." Indeed, though Wagner hoped through the *Ring* to bring Germany to consciousness of itself, his aim was actually much more ambitious than this: he hoped to awaken all of mankind; to express in his work universal truths of the human condition. Wagner wrote in *Art and Revolution*:

If the Greek artwork embraced the spirit of a fine nation, the artwork of the future must embrace the spirit of free mankind, beyond all the confines of nationality; the national essence in it must be only an ornament, the charm of an individual case amidst a multiplicity, and not a limiting barrier.

And, in *The Artwork of the Future*:

Two main stages in the development of mankind lie clearly before us in history – the racial-national and the unnational-universal. If we are at present looking to the future for the completion of this second stage, we have in the past the closure of the first stage clearly discernible before our eyes.[7]

These lines may disappoint some. But it is important to keep in mind my earlier remarks, to the effect that Wagner's cosmopolitanism did not actually preclude his being a nationalist of sorts. It is equally important to keep in mind that these lines were written in 1848 and 1849, at a time when Wagner was a wooly-headed anarchist revolutionary, and a friend

of Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876). However, as we shall see, in time Wagner abandoned his revolutionary ideals. It is safe to say that eventually he settled for awakening the German nation.

So let us consider exactly how the *Ring* was conceived, and how it took shape. Wagner's original idea was to adapt the *Nibelungenlied* into a single opera titled *Siegfrieds Tod* (*Siegfried's Death*), which, as its title implies, would have concentrated on the events leading up to Siegfried's murder by the Burgundians (or Gibichungs). On October 4, 1848, four days prior to starting work on the libretto of *Siegfrieds Tod*, Wagner wrote a short "prose sketch" of the opera. However, it went considerably beyond the material in the *Nibelungenlied*, creating an entirely new "back story" leading up to Siegfried's death, culled primarily from Wagner's study of Scandinavian mythology, and from scholarly attempts to reconstruct pre-Christian German myth. In this sketch we find the basic outlines of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Wagner's intention was that the "back story" could be conveyed through dialogue (a device he employs in several of his works). However, he soon realized that the back story he had created was so elaborate that this was really impractical. And so he conceived the idea of writing not just one opera but a trilogy – a trilogy, that is to say, with a "prologue." In short, he conceived the idea of a tetralogy, though Wagner steadfastly insisted on always referring to it as a trilogy with a prologue (*Das Rheingold*).

The timeline for the creation of the *Ring* is simple. Wagner wrote the libretti for *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* in 1852, and completed the libretti for *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* in 1853. In the autumn of that same year he began the music for *Das Rheingold*, and finished it in January of 1854. The music of *Die Walküre* was begun in June 1854 and finished late in the fall. Then there is a gap, with work on *Siegfried* not beginning until 1857. Wagner finished the first act in April, but then interrupted it in order to write *Tristan und Isolde*, at the behest of the Bavarian King Ludwig II, who had become Wagner's chief patron. The music for the second act of *Siegfried* was not written until June 1865, and the third act was finished in early 1869. The music of *Götterdämmerung* was begun the following year, but not completed until 1874.

I turn now to the topic which will probably be of greatest interest to my readers: Wagner's use of the mythic German and Scandinavian sources. There are five major primary sources for the *Ring* (as opposed to scholarly works). The first, of course, has already been mentioned: the thirteenth-century *Nibelungenlied*. This is, in fact, the only one of Wagner's primary sources in (Middle High) German. It was written by an unknown author in Austria, four centuries after the Christian conversion. The Christian elements in the poem bothered Wagner, as did the medieval courtly refinement that the anonymous author took such obvious pleasure in describing. Wagner wanted a rougher, more barbaric, pagan Siegfried, so he looked to the Scandinavian sources, which he believed were "more authentic." (Though this is, in fact, a thorny issue.) Thus, one of the effects of Wagner's appropriation of the story of Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied* is to strip it of Christian accretions and to return it to its (probably) pre-Christian, pagan context. Wagner would later write:

My studies drew me on, through the poems of the middle ages, right back to the foundations of the ancient German mythology; I was able to strip away one distorting veil after another which later poetry had thrown over it, and so set eyes on it at last in all its chaste beauty . . . . Although the splendid figure of Siegfried had long attracted me, he only fully enthralled me for the first time when I succeeded in freeing him from all his later trappings, and saw him before me in his purest human form. It was then for the first time too, that I recognized the possibility of making him the hero of a drama, which had never occurred to me while I knew him only from the medieval *Nibelungenlied*.[8]

Among the four major Scandinavian sources, the first that must be mentioned is *Thidrekssaga*, another thirteenth-century text, compiled in Norway in Old Norse. It is believed to be based upon German materials – indeed scholars believe that all of the Scandinavian sources dealing with Siegfried (Sigurd) are elaborations of German sources. (To avoid confusion I will use the Wagnerian form "Siegfried" and other Wagnerian versions of traditional names throughout this essay – hence Siegfried, not Sigurd; Brünnhilde not Brynhild, etc.) This means that Wagner's belief that in turning to the Scandinavian sources he was encountering a more

"authentic" Siegfried is probably erroneous. (Though it is still possible, one supposes, that there could have been some very ancient tradition that both the German and Scandinavian sources drew upon.) Thidrekssaga primarily deals with Dietrich von Bern, but also includes stories concerning Siegfried, the Nibelungen, and Attila the Hun (who figures in the *Nibelungenlied* as King Etzel).

The other three primary sources were all compiled between 1150 and 1270 in Iceland (which had a late conversion to Christianity, around 1000). First is the *Poetic Edda*, from which Wagner drew details about the gods and Siegfried. Second is the *Prose Edda*, which contains some myths that Wagner adapted, as well as a fairly lengthy sketch of the Siegfried legend. Finally, the *Völsungasaga* was Wagner's most important source of all, in which he found woven together almost all the elements he needed for the *Ring*, told with a great wealth of detail.

In addition to these five sources, Wagner made some limited use of a few others. These include *Norna-Gests þáttr* (or the *Story of Norna-Gest*) a fourteenth-century Scandinavian text that summarized the Siegfried story, with some original details. Two other minor sources include the fifteenth-century *Heldenbuch* (Book of Heroes), and the sixteenth-century *Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid* (*Song of the Horny Siegfried*, "horny" referring to his skin, impervious to attack – except, of course, in one spot).

We know from Wagner's correspondence that he consulted all of the above-mentioned texts. Also, all are in his Dresden library (which has been preserved) with the exception of *Thidrekssaga*, *Völsungasaga*, and *Norna-Gests þáttr*. Wagner had difficulty locating the *Völsungasaga*, but finally was able to consult a copy in the Dresden Royal Library in October 1848. He studied German translations of all of the Scandinavian texts, however we do know that he actually did look at the Old Norse originals, studying them side by side with the available translations. Wagner's personal library contains two translations of the *Prose Edda*, and translations of portions of the *Poetic Edda*. He borrowed more translations of the Poetic Edda from the Royal Library. (A complete German translation did not appear until 1851.)

In addition to the above primary sources, Wagner was also heavily indebted to the scholarly literature on the German and Scandinavian texts. The field of "German studies" had emerged largely as a result of the Romantic movement, and the first serious philological work on the medieval sources was being produced around the time of Wagner's birth. In researching the *Ring*, Wagner read *virtually all* of this scholarship. Particularly important to him, however, were two works by the brothers Grimm: Wilhelm's *Die Deutsche Heldensage*, published in 1829, and Jacob's *Deutsche Mythologie*, which appeared in 1835.

The Grimms were engaged in a common scholarly task: to reconstruct the ancient, pre-Christian German faith and traditions. In Scandinavia, pagan beliefs had been preserved in the *Eddas* and sagas, but no comparable German texts existed. The Grimms reasoned that traces of the old German religion had to have been preserved in such sources as folktales, place names, and Christian demonologies. Wilhelm and Jacob scoured every possible source, attempting to piece together a reasonable picture of what the old religion must have been like. (In the process, they collected their volume of *Märchen*, or fairy tales, the achievement for which they are now best known to the public.) As a kind of model on which to base their reconstruction, the Grimms looked to Scandinavian mythology, reasoning that it was a local inflection of a mythology common to all the Germanic tribes.

It would be no exaggeration to say that Wagner was almost as inspired by the Grimms' scholarship as he was by the primary sources. And countless elements in the *Ring* have their origin in Wagner's study of the two aforementioned books by the Grimms. Jacob Grimm had established *Wuotan* as the name of the chief German god, mentioning also a Saxon variant *Wôdan*. Wagner's initial choice for the name of the chief god of the *Ring* (really, its main character) was originally Wôdan, but after a while he changed it to *Wotan*, adapted from Grimm's Wuotan. (Grimm does not actually give the form "Wotan.") The following chart summarizes Grimm's list of the "reconstructed" names of German gods, and Wagner's alterations to them:

Grimm	Wagner

Wuotan	Wotan
Frikka	Fricka
Frouwa	Freia
Donar	Donner
Frô	Froh

The Grimms often made imaginative links between names and other elements in the sources they utilized, and this seems to have emboldened Wagner to do the same – achieving a kind of fushion of German and Scandinavian elements. Indeed, some of the inferences or connections Wagner has been criticized for actually have their origin with the Grimms. For example, Wagner also includes a character named "Loge," who is the equivalent of the Scandinavian Loki. In fact, there is scant evidence that there was a Loki figure in the German mythological world. However, Jacob Grimm postulated "Locho" or "Loho" as possible German equivalents. Wagner didn't particularly like either, and settled on "Loge."

Purists have long railed against Wagner, however, for making his Loge/Loki a god of fire. Again, however, this has its origin in Grimm. In Scandinavian myth there was a fire giant named Logi, and Grimm thought that there might be a connection to Loki. (More recent scholarship doesn't support this.) We find the origin of Wagner's Loge in these words of Jacob Grimm: "Now a striking narrative . . . places *Logi* by the side of *Loki*: a being from the giant province beside a kinsman and companion of the gods. This is no mere play upon words, the two really signify the same thing from different points of view, *Logi* the natural force of fire, and *Loki* with a shifting of the sound, a shifting of the sense: of the burly giant has been made a sly, seducing villain."[9]

Wagner's "Erda" also comes from Jacob Grimm, who postulated her as the equivalent of the "earth goddess" Nerthus mentioned by Tacitus in his *Germania*. Unfortunately, Grimm could not turn up any evidence that the German Wuotan possessed any of the personal characteristics familiar to us from Wagner: his one eye, his spear, his guise as the

"wanderer," etc. Wagner simply borrows all of this from the Scandinavian sources. In doing this he was, however, merely following the example of the Grimms in using the Scandinavian materials as a touchstone for reconstructing German beliefs. (Though in this case and in others, he allowed himself the sort of license permitted to an artist, but forbidden to a scholar.)

Let us turn now to consider another issue: the literary form of the *Ring*. My readers may be surprised to learn that in the *Ring* (and in none of his other woks) Wagner made use of an ancient Germanic form of alliterative verse called *Stabreim*. This was the verse form of, among other texts, the *Poetic Edda* and *Beowulf*. Deryck Cooke gives the following succinct description of Stabreim: "a line of four stresses, divided into two symmetrical halves of two stresses each, and having either two or three of the stresses emphasized by using the same initial sound for the different words (all vowels counting the same)."[10] Cooke uses the following example to compare Wagner's use of *Stabreim* to that of the *Poetic Edda*. This example also illustrates how Wagner drew direct inspiration from the words of the *Edda*, not just its literary form. In both instances, it is Brünnhilde who speaks, having just been awakened by Siegfried:

*Poetic Edd*a (*Sigrdrifumal*, The Lay of Sigrdrifa):

*H*eill dagr! *H*eilir dags synir!
Heil *n*ott oc *n*ipt!
*O*reiþom *a*ugom litið ocr þinig
oc gefit *s*itjondom *s*igr!

(Hail to the day! Hail to the sons of day!
Hail to night and her kin!
With gracious eyes may you look upon us,
And give victory to those sitting here![11]

Wagner, *Siegfried*, Act Three, Scene Three:

*H*eil dir, Sonne! *H*eil dir, Licht!
*H*eil dir, *l*euchtender Tag!

*L*ang' war mein Schlaf; ich bin er*w*acht:
*W*er ist der Held, der mich er*w*eckt'?

(Hail to you, sun! Hail to you, light!
Hail to you, light-bringing day!
Long was my sleep, awakened am I:
Who is the hero who woke me?[12])

The form is not identical, and Wagner does take some liberties – but, as Cooke notes, the effect is the same. The *Nibelungenlied*, it should be noted, did not employ Stabreim, but was written instead in the then-fashionable style of "end rhyme," with rhyming couplets. Thus, we are faced with the interesting fact that in its verse style Wagner's *Ring* is more traditional, more *urdeutsch* than the *Nibelungenlied*!

In section four I will discuss in detail how Wagner made use of the source material discussed earlier. But before turning to the full story of how Wagner wove together all those different strands in order to create the *Ring*, let's anticipate and respond to some objections against what he produced. We have now seen that Wagner was deeply immersed in the sources, and conversant with most of the major scholarly literature on the subject. But, some will say, why did he have to "distort" those sources? Why did he have to graft myths onto one another and change them? And, worse yet, why did he have to invent wholly new material? Weren't the canonical stories enough for him?

In responding to these sorts of objections, let's consider first that Wagner's project of achieving a synthesis of Germanic myth was not original with him. It was also the project of the anonymous author of the *Nibelungenlied*. As Cooke notes, writing of that author, "His work eclipsed the previous materials because he had the masterly idea of conflating them into a large, comprehensive epic, and the genius to carry out this idea by expanding and reshaping them in a way of his own."[13] But the exact same thing could be said of Wagner. And so, as Cooke also points out, if we must accuse Wagner of distortion then the author of the *Nibelungenlied* must stand accused as well.

But I can imagine some Ásatrúar biting this bullet and declaring that the *Nibelungenlied*, with its courtly, Christian veneer is indeed a distortion. The trouble is that, for quite different reasons, the same accusation could be made against the *Völsungasaga*. The simple reason is that, as alluded to earlier, all the Scandinavian accounts of the Siegfried legend are now thought to be developments and elaborations of German originals. (This is why Wagner's belief that in going to the Scandinavian material he was getting a "more authentic" Siegfried is so problematic.) And, of course, if one compares the accounts of Siegfried in the *Völsungasaga*, *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, *Norna-Gests þáttr*, and other sources, one will find that they differ with each other as much as do Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

It is completely pointless to debate which is the "authentic" story. Perhaps there was some great ur-text which all of these, ultimately, are drawn from. But if so, it has been lost to us. Such possibilities, however, are really beside the point. Each of these texts is an artistic creation. They are not self-effacing attempts to faithfully mirror some original source. That would, in fact, be contrary to the Germanic spirit! No, they are highly *individual* creations, using the basic Siegfried story as a framework which they then embellish and elaborate, often intermingling it with other myths and heroic legends.

Cooke says it best: "Each source, in fact, represents a new artistic interpretation of pre-existing material, to suit the writer's purpose; and *The Ring* is a comprehensive artistic interpretation of the whole man essence of the material, undertaken by one of the greatest imaginations in human history." And furthermore, Cooke expresses my own view when he says, "It might even be argued that *The Ring* is as valid and coherent a dramatic synthesis of the complex mythology of Northern Europe as we are ever likely to get."[14]

At the same time, however, it must be noted that Wagner's *Ring* is not just a "synthesis" of Germanic mythology. Wagner's purpose was to use that mythology to convey a message – initially about the state of the modern world, then, later on, about the state of life itself. But here the critics will pounce: "You see, Wagner distorts the myths by using them to

convey his own ideas!" But should we suppose that the authors of the *Nibelungenlied*, *Völsungasaga*, and other texts, were really doing anything different? They too were recasting pre-existing material in order to speak to their own time – and to reveal truths that were timeless and universal. This was exactly Wagner's own aim.

Wagner wrote the following in *Opera and Drama*: "The incomparable thing about myth is that it is true for all time, and its content, however closely compressed, is inexhaustible throughout the ages. The only task of the poet is to expound it."[15] Of course, our imaginary objectors might still argue that perhaps the ideas that Wagner expresses through the myths distort the spirit of the myths themselves. This is a much more difficult issue to address, but I will do my best to address it, in the section that follows the next one. For now I will simply say that I believe a convincing case can be made, as Cooke puts it, that the *Ring* is "a justifiable interpretation of latent implications in the original material."[16] Further, as I have said already, I believe that the myths have the power to possess whoever takes them up, and to shape his outlook and take it in new directions. I believe this was the case with Wagner – whose change in outlook while writing the Ring cannot be attributed entirely to Schopenhauer. There is something about these myths and legends that resonates deeply with anyone of Germanic ancestry. It unlocks something inside them. And in Wagner's case, it helped him give birth to one of the greatest creations of the Western spirit.

In the next installment of this essay, I will tell the story of the *Ring*, describe in detail how Wagner derived it from the traditional sources, and offer an interpretation of the meaning of this great work.

Notes

[1] Classical music is currently marketed in the United States as "good for relaxation." As always, everything must be oriented toward commerce and the body. Mozart is "good," therefore, because his music lowers the heart rate and helps one drift off to sleep. One wakes up the next morning refreshed and ready to head back to the office and make more sales. Therefore, Mozart is good because Mozart = money.

[2] Often this is tied to the idea that Wagner was some kind of proto-Nazi – a view typically asserted by people who have no real knowledge of Wagner, and only the vaguest idea of what Nazism was. I do not intend to deal with this issue in the present essay. However, once I have finished discussing the philosophy behind the Ring, intelligent readers will realize how problematic it is to try to link Wagner to National Socialism.

[3] . Quoted in Deryck Cooke, I Saw the World End: A Sudy of Wagner's Ring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 83.

[4] An anonymous epic poem in Middle High German, probably written between the period 1180 and 1210, telling the story of Siegfried.

[5] See Bryan Magee, Aspects of Wagner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5-6.

[6] Quoted in Bryan Magee, The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 86-87.

[7] Both quotes appear in Cooke on p. 264.

[8] Quoted in Cooke, 98.

[9] Jacob Grimm, Teutonic Mythology Vol. 1, trans. James Steven Stallybrass (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 241.

[10] Cooke, 74.

[11] The translation appears in The Poetic Edda, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 167.

[12] The translation is in Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion, ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, libretti translated by Stewart Spencer [henceforth: Spencer] (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 267.

[13] Cooke, 95.

[14] Cooke, both quotes appear on p. 86.

[15] Quoted in Cooke, 87.

[16] Cooke, 86.

PART II, THE STORY OF DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN

The Story of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

For the uninitiated, I will now tell the story of the *Ring*, confining myself to essentials. Even the initiated would do well to read this summary, just to re-familiarize themselves with the story, as the account of Wagner's use of the source material to follow will presuppose that one is well-acquainted with the events of all four operas. Those who feel they are very familiar with the storyline of the *Ring* can skip to the next installment.

Das Rheingold begins deep beneath the surface of the river Rhine. Three mermaids, or water nymphs ("Rhine Daughters") guard a chunk of gold which possesses special properties: using a magic spell, it can be shaped into a ring which would confer on its wearer mastery over the entire earth. However, there's a catch: the spell can only be worked by one who has completely renounced love. The dwarf Alberich appears and desperately tries to woo the Rhine daughters. After they taunt the ugly creature mercilessly, he renounces love and steals the gold.

Meanwhile on a nearby mountain, Wotan and the gods are waiting to take possession of Valhalla, which is being built for them by a pair of giants. Egged on by the mischievous Loge, Wotan has made an unwise deal with them: he has promised the giants the beautiful Freia as payment, should they complete the job on time. Wotan fully expects to be able to get out of this deal, on some pretext or other. But when the giants finish the job and show up expecting payment, he is at a loss to know what to do. He can't give up Freia, as she is the source of the golden apples that keep the gods eternally young.

Once more coming to Wotan's aid, Loge tells him of how Alberich has acquired the ring of power and is busy amassing a treasure with the aid of the Nibelungen (dwarfs), who are now his serfs. Wotan and Loge descend into Nibelheim in order to steal the treasure from Alberich and offer it to the giants as substitute for Freia (an arrangement the giants tentatively accept). In Nibelheim, Alberich brags of his powers and demonstrates his newly-created Tarnhelm, a kind of cap that can make its wearer invisible, or allow him to take any shape he wishes. Loge tricks

Alberich into taking the shape of a tiny frog – whereupon Loge and Wotan nab the evil dwarf and return to the surface of the earth with both him and his treasure.

Wotan forces Alberich to give up the ring of power, and puts it on his own hand. But Alberich isn't going to go quietly: he curses the ring, promising that all who wear it will meet their doom. The giants, whose names are Fasolt and Fafner, are pleased with Wotan's compromise, and claim the treasure and the Tarnhelm. Suddenly, however, wise Erda (a kind of chthonic goddess-prophetess) rises from the earth and advises Wotan to shun the ring. He wants to gain more knowledge from her, but she disappears quickly. Having now heard of the Ring's powers, the giants demand it as well, and Wotan has no choice but to relinquish his prize. But the curse soon shows its power when Fafner kills Fasolt in a quarrel over possession of the ring. Fafner then lumbers off with ring, Tarnhelm, and treasure. Satisfied that Freia is safe, the gods cause a rainbow bridge to appear and walk across it, entering Valhalla. They leave behind clever Loge, who predicts their downfall.

When *Die Walküre* begins, many years have passed since the events just described. Wotan fears the power of the ring, now in the hands of Fafner, and at the same time he covets it. So he has hatched a two-part scheme. First, he has descended into the earth and Erda, siring on her nine immortal, semi-divine female warriors: the Valkyries. It is their job to gather dead heroes and bear them to Valhalla. Wotan, in short, is building an army of the dead, who will be able to defend him against a possible onslaught by whoever may bear the ring. (Alberich had promised him that he intended to storm Valhalla and Fafner might well do the same – or, worse yet, Alberich might regain the ring.)

Second, in the guise of "Wälse" Wotan has sired twins on a mortal woman. Their names are Siegmund and Sieglinde. Siegmund is now a young man, and Wotan has guided him since infancy, hoping that he will become a hero capable of killing Fafner and capturing the ring – for immediate delivery to Wotan, needless to say. Why can't Wotan slay Fafner himself? Because his power rests upon the treaties and agreements he has made (all of which are engraved on his spear). If he reneged on his agreement

with Fafner and killed him, his power would lose its legitimacy in the eyes of the world. Only a man – a hero – free of Wotan's entanglements may defeat Fafner and acquire the ring.

All of the above is, in fact, the background to *Die Walküre*, revealed through dialogue. When the actual story opens, Siegmund is on the run, pursued by a clan he has wronged in some fashion. He seeks shelter in a house, not realizing that it is actually the home of Hunding, the leader of the clan that has sworn vengeance against him. Fortunately, Hunding is out and Siegmund is given hospitality by none other than Sieglinde, Hunding's wife. The twins were separated when they were very young, however, and do not immediately recognize each other. When Hunding returns, he informs Siegmund that the next day they will fight a duel to the death. Then he retires, leaving the twins alone. Slowly, they come to recognize each other – and simultaneously to feel something more than just familial love. Siegmund tells his sister that their father, Wälse (Wotan), had promised him a sword in his hour of direst need. And, lo and behold, Sieglinde shows him a sword thrust into a great ash tree. It was put there long ago by Wotan in his guise as the grey-bearded Wanderer. Siegmund draws the sword from the tree and christens it Nothung ("needful"). Then he claims Sieglinde as his bride, and the two of them disappear into the forest.

Meanwhile on a barren mountainside, Fricka is in high dudgeon over Siegmund and Sieglinde's adultery, to say nothing of their incest. Fricka, you see, is the goddess of hearth and home, so she takes the forbidden love of the twins as an affront to her authority. And she knows everything about Wotan's little scheme. She confronts her weary husband, demanding that when Siegmund faces Hunding, Siegmund must die. This, of course, is the very last thing Wotan wants, since his plan is that Siegmund must go on to win the ring. But Fricka also confronts Wotan with his own self-deception: Siegmund is no "free hero"; Wotan has manipulated him every step of the way. Seeing the truth of it, the Lord of Hosts has no choice but to give in to her demands.

After Fricka departs, Wotan is comforted by his favorite Valkyrie, Brünnhilde. He confesses everything to her, including his lust for the

ring's terrible power. But now, in a state of extreme dejection, he admits that all he longs for is "the end." He orders Brünnhilde to go to Siegmund and insure that on the following day he will fall to Hunding's sword. Brünnhilde is stunned, as she knows of Wotan's love for Siegmund. But she reluctantly agrees to do as commanded.

After Brünnhilde meets Siegmund, however, and hears of his deep love for Sieglinde (he refuses to enter Valhalla without her) she decides that she cannot carry out Wotan's orders. (Besides, she has the capacity to see into Wotan's heart, and reads there his true desire: that Siegmund should live.) And so when the battle with Hunding begins, Brünnhilde attempts to defend Siegmund – but suddenly Wotan appears, shatters Siegmund's sword with his spear, and allows Hunding to kill his beloved son. Brünnhilde quickly manages to gather the fragments of the sword, and disappears with Sieglinde – who by this point is pregnant with Siegmund's child: the greatest hero of them all, Siegfried.

Riding Grane, her horse, Brünnhilde carries Sieglinde to a mountaintop where the other Valkyries are gathered and implores them to help her. Terrified of Wotan's wrath, they make a token attempt to conceal her when the god finally arrives, bent on punishing his favorite. Sieglinde hastens away, carrying the fragments of Nothung, and Wotan pronounces his judgment: Brünnhilde is to be rendered mortal, then put to sleep. The first man to waken her she will take as husband, even if he be the lowest man on earth. She defends herself, stating that she only did what she knew Wotan truly wanted, in his heart of hearts. He knows that this is true, and his love for her moves him to grant Brünnhilde's one request: that her slumbering body be encircled by flames that only a hero can pass through. (We all know who that hero will be – and so, it seems, do Wotan and Brünnhilde.) Wotan puts her to sleep and summons Loge, the god of fire, to ring her with a wall of flame.

Perhaps close to twenty years have passed when *Siegfried* begins, for the title character is now a young man. His mother, Sieglinde, died giving birth to him, and he has been raised all these years by the dwarf Mime. This is no kindly foster father, however. He is the brother of Alberich, and longs to gain the ring for himself. He has raised Siegfried just so that he

might grow up, kill Fafner, and hand the ring over to him. (In short, not unlike how Wotan raised Siegmund!) Such a task will require a great hero, for in the intervening years Fafner has changed himself into a dragon (presumably by means of the Tarnhelm, though Wagner does not say so) and guards the ring and the treasure in a cave deep in the forest.[1] Mime has told Siegfried nothing of his parentage, insisting that he is both the boy's father and mother. But the young hero has grown to hate the scheming Mime, and is physically repulsed by him – sensing intuitively that he cannot be the dwarf's son. Mime, for his part, hates Siegfried for his beauty and purity, and sees him only as a tool.

Now when Mime found the dying Sieglinde, not only did he spirit away her child, but also the fragments of Nothung. Since then, the dwarf has tried repeatedly to reforge the sword, without success. One day Wotan, in his guise as the Wanderer, comes knocking while Siegfried is out. He challenges Mime to a guessing game, and the price if Mime loses will be his head! The question and answer session that follows becomes an opportunity for Wagner to recap the audience on what has occurred in the preceding two operas. Mime loses, but Wotan lets him keep his head – and even gives him some advice: only a man who has never felt fear may forge the sword and make it whole again. Then he departs.

Wotan, of course, has described Siegfried. And lately, in fact, Siegfried has been perplexed over the fact that he has yet to experience this "fear" that Mime speaks of. When he returns home, he forces Mime to reveal the truth about his parents. Then he seizes the fragments of Nothung and successfully reforges the sword. While Siegfried is at the fiery forge, a jubilant Mime plots to kill the boy as soon as he has slain Fafner. He is now more convinced than ever that the ring will soon be his.

A little later, Wotan encounters Alberich in the forest. The unhappy dwarf is lingering about outside Fafner's cave. Together, they rouse Fafner from his slumber, and warn him that a hero approaches who may be his undoing. But the dragon dismisses their words, and slumbers on, sitting atop his hoard. The god and the dwarf depart, and soon Mime and Siegfried arrive at the mouth of the cave. The dragon attacks Siegfried, who uses Nothung to deal him a mortal blow. Before Fafner dies,

however, he warns an uncomprehending Siegfried that there is a curse on the treasure. When Siegfried burns his fingers on the dragon's corrosive blood, he involuntarily sucks on them – and is suddenly able to understand the language of the birds calling to him from the trees. They warn Siegfried that Mime intends to poison him. Having now had quite enough of the nosy old dwarf, Siegfried runs him through with the sword. The birds also advise Siegfried as to the location of a certain maiden, asleep on a mountaintop ringed by fire. Taking the ring and Tarnhelm, Siegfried sets off to rescue Brünnhilde.

At the base of the mountain on which the Valkyrie sleeps, Wotan raises Erda from the earth to question her about the fate of the gods. She has no more to tell him than he already knows: the age of the gods is nearing its end. Resigned to his fate, Wotan expresses the hope that together Siegfried and Brünnhilde will redeem the world. However, when he actually crosses paths with Siegfried later on, Wotan is suddenly seized again by the desire to hold on to his power. He attempts to block Siegfried's way, but the hero (who has never learned of the gods) shatters Wotan's spear (symbol of his power) with Nothung. Immediately, Wotan disappears – and never appears again in the *Ring*. Siegfried successfully passes through the fiery barrier and finds Brünnhilde in full armor. At first he thinks she must be a man. But when he removes the armor he realizes otherwise – and for the first time in his life feels fear. Brünnhilde awakes joyfully, but then realizes to her horror that she is now a mortal woman. Soon, however, the two find themselves in love. With an outpouring of jubilation, they celebrate their love – and the twilight of the gods.

Götterdämmerung opens with a prologue involving the three Norns. Together they spin the fates of man, represented by a great thread. The three sisters recount the tale of how, at the beginning of time, Wotan gave up his eye to drink at their well of wisdom. And of how he tore a branch from the world ash tree to serve as his spear. But since then the well has dried up, and the tree has never recovered from this violation: it has withered and died. The Norns tell us that Wotan, having now lost his worldly power to Siegfried, has ordered the dead heroes of Valhalla to cut up the tree and pile the wood around his fortress. It will not be long

before the god will thrust one end of his shattered spear into Loge, whereupon fire will consume Valhalla. As to the events that will follow, the Norns are uncertain. Suddenly, as they gather the thread it snaps. The end of time is near.

At the opening of Act One, the scene shifts to the Hall of the Gibichungs (Burgundians) on the Rhine. The Gibichung king is Gunther, a weak and vacillating man. His most trusted advisor is his dour half-brother Hagen, whose father is Alberich. Just as Wotan sired Siegmund in order to acquire the ring, Alberich sired Hagen for the same task. Hagen now advises Gunther that he should use Siegfried to win Brünnhilde for himself, and make her his queen. And once that task is done, Siegfried can marry Gunther's sister, Gutrune. Of course, all of this is really a scheme on Hagen's part to acquire the ring.

As luck would have it, Siegfried arrives a little later, having left Brünnhilde on her mountaintop to go adventuring. Before leaving her, however, he gave her the cursed ring as a token of his love. But on his arrival at the Gibichung court, Siegfried is given a magic potion that makes him lose all memory of Brünnhilde – and immediately fall in love with Gurtrune. After Siegfried and Gunther become blood brothers, the hero agrees to don the Tarnhelm, taking on Gunther's likeness, and to pass through the flames and win Brünnhilde for the Gibichung king.

Meanwhile, Brünnhilde is visited on her lonely mountaintop by Waltraute, another of the Valkyries. She pleads with Brünnhilde to restore the ring to the Rhine. Waltraute tells her of Wotan, who now sits in Valhalla in a state of deep despair, awaiting the end of the world. Only Brünnhilde may now avert the coming catastrophe, if she will restore the natural order of things, and return the ring to the Rhine daughters. But Brünnhilde refuses to part with the ring, since Siegfried gave it to her as a sign of his love. Almost as soon as Waltraute leaves, Siegfried himself appears—but, of course, he is a changed man (in more than one sense). He seizes the ring from Brünnhilde's hand, and declares her the property of Gunther. Of course, the confused Brünnhilde really believes that he is Gunther, as Siegfried is wearing the Tarnhelm. Later, he will

turn her over to the real king, and then travel separately, back to the palace on the Rhine.

When Gunther and Brünnhilde arrive at the Gibichung court, they are greeted by Hagen and the Gibichung vassals. And, of course, by Siegfried. Brünnhilde is astonished to see him there, and to hear that he is engaged to Gutrune. Siegfried, of course, has no memory of her. Brünnhilde swears an oath that she and Siegfried have lain together as man and wife. Speaking falsely, but honestly, Siegfried insists that they have not, and then departs. Left alone with Brünnhilde and Gunther, Hagen offers to avenge her by killing Siegfried, and Brünnhilde reveals the one vulnerable spot on the hero's body: his back. In Wagner's version this is not because the dragon's blood missed a spot. It is because Brünnhilde did not protect Siegfried's back with her magic spells, thinking it unnecessary since Siegfried would never turn his back on an opponent. (What she fails to realize, of course, is that the world now contains men without honor, who would gladly stab the hero in the back – a significant point, to which we will return later.) For his part, Gunther agrees to the plot against Siegfried, believing that he may well have lain with Brünnhilde. Under these unhappy circumstances, the double wedding nevertheless proceeds as planned.

Gunther and Hagen plan to kill Siegfried while he is hunting in the forest with them. On the appointed day, Siegfried encounters the three Rhine daughters. They implore him to return the ring, telling him that it is cursed. Foolishly, he ignores their pleas. Hagen then gives Siegfried an antidote to the magic potion he took earlier. The hero begins to remember everything – and just as he recollects his love for Brünnhilde, Hagen stabs him in the back. The hunting party then carries Siegfried's lifeless body back to the castle. Gutrune is beside herself with sorrow, accusing her brother of murder. But Hagen brazenly takes credit for the deed. When Hagen and Gunther quarrel over the ring, Hagen kills his king. But when he reaches down to take the ring from Siegfried's finger, he is horrified when the dead man raises his arm threateningly.

Brünnhilde then enters and orders a funeral pyre to be built for Siegfried. She proclaims that Siegfried's death has atoned for Wotan's guilt, and

that her suffering has at last made her wise. She command's Wotan's ravens to return to Valhala, bringing him news of the world's imminent demise. Taking the ring, Brünnhilde promises that it will be returned to the Rhine. Then she ignites the funeral pyre and, mounting Grane, rides into the flames. The castle is consumed in fire, and the Rhine overflows its banks. Hagen is still bent on capturing the ring, but the Rhine daughters drag him into the water to his death. The flames spread, and Valhalla itself is consumed. The gods are no more. But the orchestra returns to the "Rhine music" heard at the very beginning of the *Ring*, suggesting rebirth, and eternal cycles of creation and destruction.

Note

1. An alternative hypothesis is that possession of the ring has physically corrupted Fafner, as it does Smeagol in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. Rather than use the obvious modern German word Drache, Wagner deliberately employs the Old High German Wurm. This meant the same thing as "dragon," but the image it conveys is of something larval, rather than reptilian.

PART III, WAGNER'S USE OF SOURCE MATERIALS FOR THE RING

Wagner's Use of Sources for the *Ring*

As a brief summary of how Wagner makes use of the major sources discussed in section three above, I don't think one could do any better than this paragraph from an article by Elizabeth Magee:

Looking back, we can see how the *Eddas* supplied most of *Das Rheingold*, aided by a view of the Nibelungs taken from *Das Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid*. The *Volsunga saga*, supplemented by skaldic poetry, dominates *Die Walküre*. *Siegfried* retains the Wanderer from the *Volsunga Saga* and introduces the *Thidreks saga* boyhood tale into an *Edda*– based scenario. In *Götterdämmerung* Wagner blends *Edda* and *Volsunga saga* material until finally, at Siegfried's death, the German *Nibelungenlied* is allowed to come into its own. The perishing of the gods of the epilogue and the purging by fire and flood bring us back to the *Snorra Edda* and the *Völuspá*.[1]

Of course, there's a great deal more to tell – and it is a rather intricate story. Still, a full study of Wagner's adaptation of the sources would take a book-length work, so we can only scratch the surface here.

First of all, let us note that the stories of Siegfried do not originate, as Wagner supposed, in Scandinavia. In fact, the earliest sources are thought to be Frankish and Burgundian lays, written as late as the 5th century. These somehow or other made their way to Scandinavia, and were elaborated in the *Völsungasaga* and other texts. There is nothing in the German materials (including the *Nibelungenlied*) about the ring, Brünnhilde's being a Valkyrie, Siegfried and Brünnhilde meeting prior to his encountering Gutrune (Kriemhild), a magic potion that makes him forget Brünnhilde, and many other details. In fact, there is nothing in the German accounts of Siegfried even about the gods. Wagner derived all of these elements from the Scandinavian sources.

It is rather ironic that most educated people believe that the *Ring* is based heavily upon the *Nibelungenlied*, when in fact Wagner derives comparatively little from it. Elizabeth Magee, in the passage quoted

above, puts the matter quite correctly: it is only in *Götterdämmerung*, and then really only in the parts dealing with Siegfried's death, that Wagner is greatly indebted to the *Nibelungenlied*. As to the *Thidreksaga*, though it is in Old Norse, it is thought to be mainly a translation of German materials, possibly a translation of a single German text. From *Thidreksaga*, Wagner derived the motif of Hagen ("Hogni") being only part human. In this text, his father is an elf; his mother he shares with Gunther. Furthermore, Wagner derived from *Thidreksaga* much of the material about Siegfried's boyhood: how he was raised by Mime the smith (here "Mimir"), his splitting of the anvil, etc. In *Thidreksaga* the dragon is actually Mimir's brother (called here "Regin," elsewhere the name of the smith who raises Siegfried). After dispatching "Regin," Siegfried kills Mimir/Mime, just as in Wagner's version.

There is much more to tell about Wagner's use of the purely Scandinavian materials. First of all, in all three of the major Scandinavian sources Wagner utilized (the *Poetic Edda*, *Prose Edda*, and *Völsungasaga*) there occurs some version of the story of "Andvari's gold," which was extremely important to Wagner. In brief – and sticking closely to the version in the Prose Edda – Odin, Loki, and Hoenir are out exploring when Loki spies an otter who has just caught a salmon. Acting quickly, he kills the otter with a stone, bagging both him and the fish. But it turns out that the otter is the son of a powerful man named Hreithmar, who has two other sons: Fafnir and Regin. They capture the Aesir and skin Otter, demanding that the gods pay a ransom of gold great enough to cover the skin entirely. So Loki descends into the world of the "dark elves" (dwarfs) and finds a dwarf named Andvari who has amassed a large treasure, by means of a ring that can magically produce gold (and this is all it does, by the way: it is not a ring of power). When Loki steals both the treasure and the ring, Andvari places a curse upon them. Odin at first wants to keep the ring for himself, but he has to relinquish it in order to completely cover Otter's skin. Fafnir and Regin then kill their father for the treasure, but Fafnir makes off with it, hoarding it on Gnita Heath and changing himself into a dragon. Regin then raises young Sigurd, who slays both Fafnir and Regin, etc.

It is obvious how this story forms the basic framework of the *Ring*, with a number of details changed. For example, the Aesir need the treasure in Wagner's version in order to ransom Freia. With that alteration, Wagner fuses the Andvari story with the story in the *Prose Edda* of the building of Valhalla, as well as the story of the theft of Idun's apples (about which I'll have more to say in just a moment). Andvari becomes Alberich. Fafnir and Regin become Fafner and Fasolt, the giants who build Valhalla for the gods. Regin becomes Mime, who in Wagner's version is obviously no relation to Fafner. It is Freia that the treasure must cover, not Otter's skin. And, most important of all, the ring becomes a ring of power, as well as a device for generating treasure. (One common misunderstanding of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is that Alberich's treasure is the Rhinegold: in fact, the ring is the Rhinegold, whole and entire, in a transformed shape; the treasure is accumulated by means of the ring.)

[2]

Now as to Freia and her golden apples, this comes about in Wagner through conflating the figure of Freia with the goddess Idun. In the *Prose Edda* it is said that the goddess Idun "keeps in her box the apples the gods have to eat, when they grow old, to become young again, and so it will continue up to Ragnarök."[2] Wagner simply conflates Freia with Idun. This is not by any means an unreasonable move on his part, and some have theorized that Idun is in fact an aspect of Freia.[3] That her apples are golden seems to have been a feature Wagner borrowed from the mythic Greek apples of the garden of Hesperides.

In both the *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda*, we find Brünnhilde depicted as a Valkyrie[4], an element which does not appear in any of the German sources. In the *Poetic Edda* (but not the *Prose Edda*) she is punished by Odin for taking the wrong side in a battle, and put to sleep by him. In the *Prose Edda* (and in the *Völsungasaga*) Siegfried gives her Andvari's ring, just as Wagner has Siegfried give Alberich's ring to Brünnhilde in the Prologue of *Götterdämmerung*. Regin (Wagner's Mime) is not a dwarf in either the *Prose Edda* or the *Völsungasaga*. Wagner draws this detail from the *Poetic Edda*, though it is not clear that the "Regin" listed as a dwarf in *Völuspá* is the same Regin who appears as Siegfried's foster father.

Also from *Völuspá* Wagner derives the basic character of Erda, who prophecies, as does the Völva (seeress), the end of the gods. As Cooke points out, Tacitus provided Wagner with some further inspiration here, as he notes that Nerthus (Grimm's Erda) "intervenes in the affairs of men."[5] Wagner also refers to Erda as "Wala" and "Urwala." This too comes from Jacob Grimm, who theorized that *Walawa* or *Wala* was the Old High German equivalent of Völva.

There is, of course, much else in the *Eddas* that inspired Wagner, and that he made use of – too much to detail here. He was particularly taken, it seems, by the description in the *Prose Edda* of the dwarfs as like maggots that had "quickened" in the flesh of Ymir.[6] In his "Prose Sketch" of the *Ring* from 1848, he describes the Nibelungs as "like worms in a dead body."[7] As Cooke points out, Wagner also borrowed the flavor of a number of exchanges in the *Poetic Edda*. In the *Vafthrudnismal*, Odin engages in a question and answer game with a giant, his head being the price for losing the contest – similar to Wotan's contest with Mime in *Siegfried*. In *Grimnismal*, Odin and Frigg quarrel over two rival warriors, much as Wotan and Fricka do over Siegmund and Hunding in *Die Walküre*. In *Lokasenna*, Loki taunts the gods relentlessly, not unlike Loge does in *Das Rheingold*. Many other examples could be adduced, offering further confirmation (if any is needed at this point) of how a close reader Wagner was of the traditional sources.

We now turn to the *Völsungasaga*, which is without question the most important source for the *Ring*. This is a fascinating text, which demands multiple readings. It is as barbaric a tale as there ever was, filled with instances of mindboggling brutality, and brimming with much that is simply bizarre. It demands an esoteric reading, which someday I hope to produce. We have the entire Siegfried story presented here, repeating much of the material contained in the *Eddas*, including the story of Andvari's ring. Thus, one often cannot say categorically that this element or that was drawn by Wagner from the *Völsungasaga*, rather than the *Eddas*. However, it is safe to say that the *Völsungasaga* was his major source and inspiration, as generally speaking it elaborates all elements of the Siegfried story in much greater detail than do the *Eddas*.

It is only in the *Völsungasaga* that we have the full story of Siegfried's parentage. Indeed, several generations pass in the story before Siegfried ever appears. In the *Völsungasaga*, Siegfried is not produced through an incestuous union of brother and sister. The product of that union, in fact, is Sinfjotli, whose sibling parents are Siegmund and Signy. Siegfried is actually the son of Siegmund and his third wife, Hjordis. However, Wagner wisely considered the motif of the incestuous marriage so arresting and dramatic that he used it for Siegfried's parents instead. (And he rejected the name "Signy" for "Sieglinde," the name of Siegfried's mother that appears in the German sources.)

It is Hjordis who preserves the fragments of the sword Gram (Nothung, in Wagner's version) after the death of Siegmund. Thus, Wagner's "Sieglinde" is actually a conflation of Signy and Hjordis.[8] Again, purists may object – but Wagner's decision makes complete dramatic sense, and is arguably an improvement on the overly-complex and often confusing storyline of the *Völsungasaga*. Wagner likewise conflated Siegmund with Agnar, a warrior whom Brünnhilde supports in battle contrary to Odin's orders.

One element will disappoint readers coming to this text from Wagner: in the *Völsungasaga* Siegfried is murdered in his bed (and, in this version, Hogni/Hagen is against the plot!). This was obviously far less dramatic and visually interesting than the version in the *Nibelugenlied*, where

Siegfried is murdered in the forest. Interestingly, the *Poetic Edda*, in a prose portion, notes that there are conflicting stories about Siegfried's death:

In this poem the death of Sigurd is related and here it is said that they killed him outside. But some say this, that they killed him inside, sleeping in his bed. And Germans say that they killed him out in the forest. And the "Old Poem of Gudrun" says that Sigurd and the sons of Giuki were riding to the Assembly when he was killed. But they all say that they treacherously betrayed him when he was lying down and unarmed.[9]

Wagner wisely preferred the German version, and so it is this that is portrayed in *Götterdämmerung*.

A couple of other details concerning the *Völsungasaga* may be mentioned here. First, to state the obvious, Wagner "Germanizes" Völsung as "Wälse." In the *Völsungasaga*, Völsung is actually the great grandson of Odin. However, Wagner actually identifies him with Odin/Wotan, thus eliminating three generations from the clan of the "Wälsung." In Die Walküre, Siegmund refers to his father (Wälse) as "Wolfe." This is a sly reference to a fascinating portion of the *Völsungasaga*, in which Siegmund and Sinfjotli hide out in the forest, donning wolf skins and changing themselves into wolves for nine days at a time. This tale is told (without the lycanthropy) very briefly by Siegmund in Act One of *Die Walküre*, where it is a recollection of his time with *his* father, Wälse (Wotan). In short, Wagner conflates Siegmund with Sinfjotli.

To make one last point about the *Völsungasaga*, in it we find Odin continually intervening mysteriously in the stories events, which gave Wagner the idea for Wotan's relatively brief and unexpected appearances in Acts One and Three of *Siegfried*, as well as Sieglinde's recollection, in Act One of *Die Walküre*, of how "the Wanderer" appeared briefly and thrust Nothung into the ash tree (a scene taken straight from the *Völsungasaga*.[10]

Now let us deal with some loose ends: Wagnerian elements that are difficult to trace to the traditional sources. First of all, Wagnerites are

usually shocked to discover that there are no Rhine maidens (or "Rhine daughters," *Rheintöchter*) in German folklore, nor is there any Rhinegold. These seem to be Wagner's invention. However, some mermaids do appear in the *Nibelungenlied* (though not in the Rhine). Depending upon how the text is interpreted, the author may be suggesting that there are three of them – and one is named Sieglinde! (Definitely not to be confused with Siegfried's mother, whom the text also names Sieglinde.) There is nothing in any source about a dwarf trying to woo some mermaids or water nymphs, and there is no "renunciation of love" motif. This is all Wagner.

As to the Rhinegold, in the *Völsungasaga*, Andvari (whom Wagner transforms into Alberich) is living with his gold under a waterfall (in the *Prose Edda* he lives in a pool of water, and in the *Poetic Edda* he lives under "Andvara-falls"; in all three sources he has taken the form of a fish). In *Reginsmal* (in the *Poetic Edda*), Loki refers to the gold of Andvari by the kenning "the water's flame." Deryck Cooke speculates that this could have suggested to Wagner the idea of the gold gleaming beneath the surface of the Rhine.[11] Further, Cooke also points out that in all sources except *Thidrekssaga* "the Rhine is the treasure's ultimate destination."[12] All of this could have inspired Wagner to create the Rhinegold, and the Rhine maidens to guard it. Further, as noted above Andvari's ring is not a "ring of power." However, the Nibelungenlied does very briefly mention a "little rod of gold" amongst the Nibelung treasure which can confer mastery over all humankind.[13] Wagner simply seems to have conflated the ring with the rod.

I have said that Wagner's Alberich is based upon Andvari, but matters are actually more complex than this. Let's start with the name, which actually appears in the *Nibelungenlied*. There we find Siegfried journeying to "Nibelungenland," conquering the kingdom, making vassals of its knights, and seizing the Nibelung treasure. But in doing so he must tangle with a "savage dwarf" named Alberich. Aside from being a dwarf, he has none of the properties with which Wagner endows him, and appears only briefly. An "Elberich" also shows up in the fifteenth-century *Heldenbuch*, which Wagner consulted as well. Elberich is "ein wilder Zwerg" (a fierce dwarf), who possesses a ring of invisibility. Only

here he is described as "King Elberich the dwarf." It could be, as Cooke conjectures, that both the *Nibelungenlied* and *Heldenbuch* are drawing on some other source in which Alberich/Elberich is the owner of the hoard. In the sixteenth-century *Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid* the hoard belongs to a dwarf named "Nybling." Wagner seems to have consciously synthesized all of this: the dwarf Andvari with his gold become Alberich the dwarf and the Nibelung hoard, and the "Nibelungen" become dwarfs. But there is one further component that went into the Alberich of the *Ring*. As noted earlier, in *Thidrekssaga* the father of Hagen/Hogni is an "elf." Wagner simply made this a "dark elf" (dwarf) and identified the character with Alberich.

As to Wagner's "Nibelheim," this is his Germanization of the Norse Niflheim. In making this alteration, of course, Wagner connects Niflheim with the Nibelungs. Purists have howled over this, but in fact there is a real etymological connection. Both Old Norse *nifl* and German *Nebel* mean "mist" or "fog" and derive from Proto-Indo-European **nebhos*. In compounds Old Norse *nifl–* suggests darkness. But in all probability "Nibelung" originally meant something like "being of the mist" or possibly "being of darkness." There are no dwarfs in the Norse Niflheim. Instead, they live in Svartalfheim: "dark elf world/home." Though we might have wanted Wagner to distinguish the two, it is not entirely unreasonable to conflate Niflheim and Svartalfheim, and to make Niflheim/Nibelheim the abode of the dark elves given that: (1) *nifl–* can carry the connotation of darkness (dark elves, dark place under the earth), and (2) the association of "Nibelung" with dwarfs (Alberich/Elberich, Nybling, the depiction of the Nibelungs as dwarfs in *Das Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid*, etc.).

Interestingly, in *Das Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid* the Tarnhelm appears as a *nebelkap* (mist cap). The term "Tarnhelm" is actually Wagner's coinage. In the *Nibelungenlied* it is a Tarnkappe, only in Middle High German *Kappe* didn't mean a hat, it meant a cloak. However, in the *Nibelungenlied* it only has the power to make the wearer invisible. In Wagner's version alone it has the power to cause one to change shape. Readers may also be surprised to learn that there is no "Tarnhelm" in the Scandinavian sources. Siegfried changes shape with Gunther/Gunnar by using a magic spell (in the *Völsungasaga* it is provided to him by

Grimhild, wife of King Giuki). Fans of Fritz Lang's splendid 1924 film *Die Nibelungen* (which deserves a commentary all to itself) will be surprised to hear that in the *Nibelungenlied* Siegfried never changes shape with King Gunther: everything is accomplished entirely by means of the cloak of invisibility. (Lang borrowed the "shape changing" motif from Wagner.)

Finally we may note that there are numerous references to the runes in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, where the term has the same variety of meanings it does in the Scandinavian sources. At times it simply seems to mean letters or signs. For example, in Scene Two of *Das Rheingold* Fasolt reminds Wotan of the "runes [*Runen*] of well-considered contract, safeguarded by your spear."[14] At other times, however, *Runen* means magic formulae. For instance, we are told in *Das Rheingold* that "A rune-spell [*Runenzauber*] makes a ring from the gold."[15] In the Prologue of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde says to Siegfried "I gave to you a bountiful store of hallowed runes [*heiliger Runen*]." And Siegfried says to her "in return for all your runes I hand this ring to you." [16]

This exchange from *Götterdämmerung*, of course, calls to mind the *Sigrdrifumal* in the *Poetic Edda*, and once more demonstrates Wagner's intimate knowledge of the traditional sources. In closing this section I will just remark that a *full* investigation of Wagner's indebtedness to the Germanic tradition – his mythic, philosophic, poetic, and musical sources of inspiration – would be a complete education in the Germanic tradition itself.

In the next installments of this essay I will discuss the philosophical influences on Wagner and offer an interpretation of the meaning of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. We will find that the *Ring* holds up a mirror to the West itself.

Notes

[1] Elizabeth Magee, "In Pursuit of the Purely Human: the 'Ring' and its Medieval Sources," in Spencer, 32. (For full endnote references to some sources, see Part One of this essay.)

[2] Snorri Sturluson, The Prose Edda, trans. Jean I. Young (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 54.

[3] See for example North, Richard, The Haustlǫng of Þjóðólfr of Hvinir (Hisarlik Press, 1997), xiv.

[4] Though in the Lay of Sigrdrifa she is referred to as "Sigrdrifa."

[5] Cooke, 227.

[6] Prose Edda, 41.

[7] Richard Wagner, "The Nibelungen-Myth as Sketch for a Drama," in Pilgrimage to Beethoven and Other Essays, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 301.

[8] Siegmund had a wife between Signy and Hjordis: Borghild, with whom he had two sons.

[9] Poetic Edda, Brot af Sigurdarkvida, 176.

[10] As to the lesser sources Wagner utilized, in Norna-Gests þáttr Siegfried's foster father is clearly depicted as a dwarf. In Das Lied vom hürnen Seyfrid, the Nibelungs and the sons of "King Nibelung" are depicted as dwarfs. One of the sons, "Eugel," is compelled by Siegfried into helping him, utilizing a "cloak of invisibility."

[11] Cooke, 135.

[12] Ibid., 135.

[13] "Nibelung" has various meanings in these sources, and the situation is actually quite confusing. In the Nibelungenlied the "Nibelungen" are not dwarfs, and the denotation of the term shifts, eventually referring to the Burgundians.

[14] Spencer, 74

[15] Ibid., 82.

[16] Ibid., 285, 286.

PART IV, WOTAN AND THE FAUSTIAN WEST

Wotan and the Faustian West

As noted in the Introduction [2] to this essay, at the time of the *Ring*'s conception Wagner was an anarchist revolutionary. Major influences on his thinking included Bakunin, Feuerbach, Hegel, and possibly Marx (though of these only Bakunin was an anarchist). Wagner's anarchist ideology is readily apparent not just in his early notes on the *Ring*, but in the finished cycle of operas.

In the first draft of the *Siegfrieds Tod* libretto (see Part One [2] of this essay), Siegfried enters Valhalla at the drama's climax, and a sort of anarchist utopia is established on earth. In the 1848 "Sketch" of the *Ring*, Wagner has Brünnhilde cry to the Nibelungs "Not Alberich shall receive [the ring]; no more shall he enslave you, but he himself be free as ye."[1] Here we detect an influence of Hegel's "master-slave dialectic": the master is actually unfree; he only attains true freedom for himself when all are free.

However, as was the case with many anarchists and socialists at the time, Wagner was simultaneously an odd kind of Radical Traditionalist: he believed that the sort of society he wanted to bring about had once existed on earth, in a Golden Age long gone by, when men lived free of gods and masters, and greed and war. Now, we may marvel at the naiveté of this and wish that Wagner had never held this position, but for the moment let us just note that such a tendency, for all its flaws, is quintessentially Western. It is Western both in its intense self-criticism – its radical critique of the present state of Western culture – and in its dream of a perfected, future society.[2]

However, Wagner did come to shed this naïve anarchism and to radically reconceive the meaning of his own work. And the event that led to this was his encounter with Arthur Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation* (published in 1818, 1844). In this work, which is one of the most accessible in all of German philosophy, Schopenhauer argues that the world is a manifestation of an infinite, striving force he called Will. The different species and natural kinds are all "grades of the Will's manifestation." These form a hierarchy, which works out to be more or

less identical to the "great chain of being" we find in Aristotle, Schelling, and Hegel. At the top, of course, is man, the most perfect objectification of Will. Man is capable of knowing that he is Will – and thus, through man, Will confronts itself.[3] This grand vision, however, is profoundly pessimistic. Schopenhauer thought that when mankind confronted itself as Will – or when Will confronted itself (it comes to the same thing) – the result would be horror and a rejection of life. And Schopenhauer urged that on us.

It would be no exaggeration to say that Wagner fell completely under the spell of Schopenhauer's pessimistic vision. He read *The World as Will and Representation* four times in its entirety in 1854, during the period of time when he was writing the music of *Die Walküre*. Schopenhauer completely cured Wagner of his revolutionary optimism – and led him to rethink the *Ring*. However, the way that he did so is unusual. Wagner actually changed very little in the libretti of the *Ring* (mainly only tinkering a bit with Brünnhilde's final speech in Act Three of *Götterdammerung*). Instead, he came to realize that the Schopenhauerean perspective was present in the work all along, and that the revolutionary ideology in terms of which he had consciously conceived it was forced and inauthentic. Wagner wrote the following in a letter to Liszt years later: "I looked at my poem and saw to my astonishment that what convinced me in Schopenhauer was already there, in my poetic concept. Only then did I really understand my Wotan. I was deeply moved. For years after that, Schopenhauer's book was never far from me. Its ever-growing influence on me and my life was extraordinary and decisive."[4]

In short, for Wagner the *Ring* simply ceased to be a clarion call for a better world, a world without greed and power lust. Instead, it became a reflection on the tragic nature of life; on the ineradicability of greed and power lust, and the folly of optimism. And we will see that this is not a case of Wagner simply superimposing a new interpretation on a work already finished. He was, indeed, correct to think that this is the interpretation best supported by the work itself.

However, there is much more to the *Ring* than just a pessimistic commentary on life, as I shall discuss. And I will have more to say about Schopenhauer later on, but for now we need to consider another source for Wagner's change of mind, one that usually goes entirely overlooked. Wagnerians normally attribute the shift in Wagner's thinking entirely to his encounter with Schopenhauer. But we must also consider the possibility that Wagner was responding to the peculiar logic of the mythic material he was adapting; that it came to possess him, and to alter his outlook. Wagner himself gives us plenty of reason to suspect this. Here, in a passage worth quoting at length, is Wagner in his autobiography speaking of his encounter with Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*:

All who know the work can understand how the unusual wealth of its contents, gathered from every side, and meant almost exclusively for the student, would react upon me, whose mind was everywhere seeking for something definite and distinct. Formed from the scanty fragments of a perished world, of which scarcely any monuments remained recognizable and intact, I here found a heterogeneous building, which at first glance seemed but a rugged rock clothed in straggling brambles. Nothing was finished, only here and there could the slightest resemblance to an architectonic line be traced, so that I often felt tempted to relinquish the thankless task of trying to build from such materials. And yet I was enchained by a wondrous magic. The baldest legend spoke to me of its ancient home, and soon my whole imagination thrilled with images; long-lost forms for which I had sought so eagerly shaped themselves ever more and more clearly into realities that lived again. There rose up soon before my mind a whole world of figures, which revealed themselves as so strangely plastic and primitive, that, when I saw them clearly before me and heard their voices in my heart, I could not account for the almost tangible familiarity and assurance of their demeanor. The effect they produced upon the inner state of my soul I can only describe as an entire rebirth. Just as we feel a tender joy over a child's first bright smile of recognition, so now my own eyes flashed with rapture as I saw a world, revealed, as it were, by miracle, in which I had hitherto moved blindly as the babe in its mother's womb.[5]

The mythological material Wagner found in Grimm and the traditional sources touched a chord deep in his Germanic soul, and awakened him in new ways. As M. Owen Lee notes, "Like those novelists who tell us that their characters 'take over' the writing and determine their own fates, Wagner acknowledged that his *Ring* was shaping itself from some source beyond his conscious control."[6] And the main character of the *Ring*, of course, is Wotan. Essentially, in writing the *Ring* Wagner came to be possessed by the spirit of Wotan.

He wrote to his friend Röckel, another anarchist revolutionary, "I started my poem with an optimistic view of the world . . . and I hardly noticed, when I was outlining it, that I was unconsciously following a quite different and much more profound intuition. I was seeing, not a single moment in the world's evolution [the supersession of capitalism by anarchistic socialism], but the essence of the world, the world in all of its moments."[7] In Schopenhauer, Wagner found a vocabulary in terms of which he could interpret this "intuition" – but the intuition did not originate with Schopenhauer. It was borne of Wagner's study of Germanic myth, and his insight into the "essence of the world" was a product of its spirit.

The myths always say more than any writer makes them say. But Wagner comes closer than anyone to providing the complete mytho-poetic speech for the West. Through his profound engagement with the figure of Wotan, Wagner manages to express the essence of the Western spirit; the spirit of "Faustian man." In another essay ("Ásatrú and the Political [3]") I wrote the following:

Oswald Spengler aptly described the soul of Northern European man as "Faustian." He tells us that the "prime-symbol" of the Faustian is "pure and limitless space":

Far apart as may seem the Christian hymnology of the south and the Eddas of the still heathen north, they are alike in the implicit space-endlessness of prosody, rhythmic syntax and imagery. Read the *Dies Irae* together with the Völuspá, which is little earlier; there is the same adamantine will to overcome and break all resistances of the visible.[8]

The Faustian soul is characterized by a solemn inwardness, tending towards solitude and melancholy – but matched by a ceaseless, outward-striving will. European man has always sought to go beyond: to explore, to find adventures in other lands, to conquer, to peer into the mysterious depths of things, to find new ways to control and manipulate his environment. This is not to say that these qualities are never found in other peoples, but – as Spengler recognized – they are most pronounced and developed in Northern European man.[9]

In telling the story of Wotan, the *Ring* tells the story of the Faustian West. In the same essay I wrote:

We find the Faustian spirit in our gods. Ódhinn is the ceaseless wanderer, and the leader of the wild hunt. From his throne, called Hlidskjalf, he can survey the entire world. His two ravens, Huginn and Muninn (Thought and Memory) fly over the earth, bringing news of all things back to him. But there are secrets concealed even from Ódhinn, and beings (such as the Norns) over which he has no power. Like us, he burns with a desire to know the hidden and to control his fate. So he hung on the windy tree, nights all nine, and won the secret of the runes – the hidden lore that explains all things. He sought wisdom too from Mimir's well (the well of memory) and sacrificed an eye to drink from it. We are Ódhinn, and he is the embodiment of the Faustian spirit.

Wagner wrote to Röckel in 1854: "Observe [Wotan] closely! He resembles *us* to a tee."[10] What Wagner means here is that Wotan represents "modern man" (he goes on to describe Wotan as "the sum total of present-day intelligence," and to contrast him with Siegfried, who is the "man of the future"). But here Wagner falls into the unconscious universalism that is characteristic of Western thinkers: the tendency to project Western features onto humanity as a whole. Obviously, however, Wotan does *not* resemble "modern man" in, for example, the China, India, or Africa of 1854 (or even of today).

In a similarly universalistic vein, Lee writes that "Wotan represents not so much the notion of God as what there is in man that has godlike potential."[11] But this is not fully accurate either. What Wotan represents is the striving of *Western* man for the infinite, for the

transcendence of all boundaries; his striving, indeed, to become God. Wotan represents human consciousness in its Faustian inflection: the restless search for total knowledge, coupled with the desire to manipulate and to control all of nature. These are two sides of the same coin. But what Wotan depicts above all else is Faustian, Western man *achieving self-consciousness*: coming to full awareness of his nature – and willing his own end.

Cooke notes that "it has been mainly Europeans, or men of European origin, who have dominated and despoiled nature on a large scale; and in *The Rhinegold* Wagner was adapting North European myths to present an artistic diagnosis of the ills of *European* civilization."[12] Before we react in knee-jerk fashion against this seemingly "anti-Western" statement of Cooke's, let us just pause to note that *he is right*.

And as a further piece of evidence to support the claim that it is really Western man that is represented in the figure of Wotan, not man in general, let us consider this quote from Wagner's essay *Art and Climate* (1841):

Yet where climatic nature draws man beneath the all-sheltering influence of her rankest prodigality, and rocks him in her bosom as a mother rocks her child,—where we must therefore place the cradle of newborn mankind—there has man remained a child forever—as in the tropics,—with all an infant's good and evil qualities. First where she drew this all-conditioning, over-tender influence back, when she handed man, like a prudent mother her adult son, to himself and his own free self-devisings,—where man, then, mid the waning warmth of the directly fostering care of climate, was forced to cater for himself,—do we see him ripening to the full unfoldment of his being. Only through the force of such a Need as surrounding Nature did not, like an over-careful mother, both listen for and still at once ere it had scarcely risen, but for whose appeasement he must himself provide, did he gain consciousness not only of that need but also of his *power*. This consciousness he reached through learning *the distinction between himself* and from whom he now must *wrest* it, became the object of his observation, inquiry, and dominion.[13]

In short, only an inhospitable climate would have caused man to individuate himself from nature. We do not find this happening, to use Wagner's example, in the Tropics, and so we do not find real history in the Tropics, or art, literature, science, or philosophy on anything other than an extremely rudimentary level. What inhospitable climate does Wagner have in mind, and where, thus, did history begin? He tells us on the next page of the essay:

Not, therefore, in the teeming Tropics, not in the sensuous flower land of India, was born *true art*; but on the naked, sea-splashed rocks of Hellas, upon the stony soil and beneath the scanty shadows of the olive trees of Attica, was set her cradle:—*for here, amid privations, strove Hercules and suffered* – here was the first *true man* begotten

And so it is Wagner's view that it is primarily European man who succeeded in separating himself from nature – and who then turned on nature, so to speak, and sought to dominate her. Thus, if Wotan represents this aspect of "man," it is truly European man that is meant here. Wagner is critical of this Western "will to power," but he also seems to be aware that it is the source of all of our achievements. The early Wagner sought to reform the West; to heal the division Western man had made between himself and nature. The later Wagner saw our nature as inherently *tragic*, and offered, as we shall see, a different answer. And of course, Wagner was strongly influenced by Greek drama, in which the tragic nature of (Western) man is central. Oedipus, for example, represents the Western spirit: striving ceaselessly and heedlessly *to know*, until he is destroyed by knowing.

Wotan – Western man – is the tragic character of the *Ring*, and his tragic flaw is his restless, and reckless pursuit of knowledge and power.

Notes

[1] Sketch, 311.

[2] For more information see my review of Ricardo Duchesne's The Uniqueness of Western Civilization (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011): https://www.counter-currents.com/2013/04/ricardo-duchesnes-the-uniqueness-of-western-civilization/ [4] . Or better yet see the book itself.

[3] See Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 1, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1969), see especially pages 153-154. The Idea that through man Will confronts itself is implicit in Schopenhauer's theory of art.

[4] Quoted in M. Owen Lee, Wagner's Ring: Turning the Sky Around (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 53.

[5] Richard Wagner, My Life, trans. Andrew Gray (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 260.

[6] Lee, 26.

[7] Quoted in Lee, 53.

[8] Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, Vol. I, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 185-186

[9] See also my review of Ricardo Duchesne's The Uniqueness of Western Civilization (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011): https://www.counter-currents.com/2013/04/ricardo-duchesnes-the-uniqueness-of-western-civilization/ [4] .

[10] Selected Letters of Richard Wagner, trans. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), 308.

[11] Lee, 56-57. In a way, Lee inadvertently hits on a very important point made by Edred Thosson: that the "Odinist" does not worship Odin; instead, he strives to become him.

[12] Cooke, 252. Italics in original.

[13] In Ellis, 252.

PART V, THE ONE-EYED GOD

The story of the *Ring* involves four ages, similar to those taught in Tradition.

The Age of Titans is the period represented by figures somehow more primordial than the gods: Erda, the Norns, and possibly the Rhine daughters. Events in this age are not depicted in the *Ring*; they are merely referred to (primarily in *Götterdämmerung*).

The Age of Gods is the time dominated by Wotan and the other divinities (who, aside from Fricka, have little to do in the *Ring*). It is depicted in *Das Rheingold*, and the stage is set for its passing away in *Die Walküre*.

The Age of Heroes is portrayed in *Siegfried*, and the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*. However, it is really only truly inaugurated in Act Three of *Siegfried*, at the moment when the hero shatters Wotan's spear. Of all the ages, its duration in the *Ring* is the briefest.

The Age of Men – the decadent "wolf age," equivalent to the Indian Kali Yuga – is depicted in *Götterdämmerung*, and really comes into its own when Siegfried is duped into drinking the potion of forgetfulness. The archetypal "men" of this age are Gunther and Hagen. All is lost when Siegfried is murdered, and the age shifts into its final, cataclysmic form: *ragnarök* (which Wagner understood to mean *Götterdämmerung*, or "twilight of the gods").[1]

As Lee notes, Wagner wrote to Liszt that the opening music of *Das Rheingold* represented "the beginning of the world."[2] And certainly what the opening scene of that opera depicts is a kind of primordial or original crime: Alberich's theft of the Rhinegold. The Titanic Age is really the time of pre-human, preconscious nature, personified by "the Titans" (to borrow a term, of course, from Greek mythology). These are relatively unconscious beings, almost devoid of personality, who represent the dull, cyclical, pre-determined patterns of the universe that existed for eons prior to the origin of volitional, self-aware human consciousness. For Lee, Alberich's theft represents man's separating himself from – and violating – nature, represented by the Rhinegold and the spirits of nature, the Rhine daughters, who guard it. This is certainly part of Wagner's

intention, but Lee overemphasizes it. For it is truly Wotan who represents human – more narrowly, as I shall argue, Western – consciousness. Wagner's attitude toward this consciousness is critical, but Alberich represents a degraded aspect of it.

In fact, the real "beginning of time" involves Wotan's encounter with the Norns, which is recalled (not depicted) in the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*. The "First Norn" states:

At the world-ash [Yggdrasil]
once I wove
when, tall and strong,
a forest of sacred branches
blossomed from its bole;
in its cooling shade
there splashed a spring [Mimir's well],
whispering wisdom,
its ripples ran:
I sang then of sacred things. –

A dauntless god
came to drink at the spring;
one of his eyes
he paid as toll for all time:
from the world-ash
Wotan broke off a branch;
the shaft of a spear
the mighty god cut from its trunk.[3]

With this act, the Age of Titans ends and the Age of the Gods, of Wotan, begins. Human consciousness arises and separates itself from nature.

Cooke writes, "Before this event, there *were* no events, but only the unconscious word of nature, in which Erda slumbered, the Norns guarded the Well and the Tree, and the Rhinemaidens guarded the Gold; after that event, conscious life began."[4] Indeed, as Cooke has demonstrated in his analysis of Wagner's music, all the *Leitmotiven* of the *Ring* are developments of more basic motives, some of which are

associated with "unconscious nature," and others with man. But let us let Wagner speak for himself. Here is what he writes in the essay *Artwork of the Future* (1849):

From the moment when man perceived the difference between himself and nature, and thus commenced his own development as *man*, by breaking loose from the unconsciousness of natural animal life, — when he thus looked nature in the face and from the first feelings of his dependence on her, thereby aroused, evolved the faculty of thought, — from that moment did error begin, as the earliest utterance of consciousness. But error is the mother of knowledge; and the history of the birth of knowledge out of error is the history of the human race, from the myths of primal ages down to the present day.[5]

So, Wotan's drinking from Mimir's well and ripping the branch from the ash tree represents a kind of primordial fall.

And let us now consider what Wotan gives up in order to gain knowledge: he sacrifices an eye, or half his vision. Cooke argues that this represents Wotan's loss of "half of his instinctual being – the half which is the instinct for mutual love and fellowship."[6] And Bryan Magee notes that after the loss of the eye "Never again does [Wotan] see anything straight."[7] In the *Ring*, Wotan is again and again shown to lack insight into himself. He fails to foresee the consequences of his actions, or to perceive his own true feelings. He has repressed his capacity for love, and sought only knowledge and power.

Wotan is blind to love, and to the harm he has done to the world. The branch he tears from the world ash tree becomes his spear, symbol of his power. On it he carves runes which express the laws he has decreed and the contracts he has made that bind him and others. (This element in the characterization of Wotan/Odin is largely Wagner's own invention.) But as Wagner notes in his "Sketch," "the peace by which [the gods] have arrived at mastery does not repose on reconcilement: by violence and cunning was it wrought." And then comes this strange statement: "The object [*Absicht*] of their higher ordering of the world is moral consciousness [*sittliches Bewusstsein*]: but the wrong they fight attaches to themselves."[8] This is a tantalizing but vague comment, almost

seeming to suggest a kind of Fichtean conception of Wotan. Through his pursuit of mastery, he sought to bring the real into accord with the ideal, but his efforts in that direction were compromised by his own transgressions, his exploitation of nature, and of other beings (Freia, the giants, Siegmund, etc.). (This understanding of Wotan is certainly supported by the Eddas, in which Odin creates an entirely new world through the transformation of the body of the Titanic Ymir, who dominated the preceding age.)

In all of this, Wagner establishes in *Das Rheingold* that Wotan has, in fact, been aided and encouraged by Loge. Just what does Loge represent? Cooke argues that he represents the intellect, and this interpretation certainly seems to be on the right track. Cooke writes that Loge embodies the "elemental power of thought, which, though available to all, will serve only the individual with the determination to harness and use it – and Wotan has harnessed and is using Loge." Cooke writes, further, that intellect (like Loge) is "not always easy to summon, it is difficult to control, often at odds with a man's ideals, instincts, and emotions, and impossible to coerce into producing the answers [the gods] demand."[9]

Loge/Intellect is crafty and cunning, leading Wotan astray and entangling him in making false promises. Cooke refers to Loge as "demonic," and as intellect in its "demonic aspect – as a source of ideas and inspirations."[10] Indeed, the Wotan-Loge relationship bears a strong resemblance to the Faust-Mephistopheles relationship, as depicted by Goethe. Cooke does not make this observation, but he does claim that one minor source for the *Ring* was "a popular Faust play" (though he clearly does not mean Goethe's *Faust*, Cooke never says anything else about it[11]). Wagner, of course, was a great reader of Goethe, and in 1839 planned a symphony based on *Faust* (only the first movement survives as The Faust Overture). And it can be argued there is something "Faustian" about quite a few characters in Wagner, including the Flying Dutchman, and Tannhäuser. In Act Two of *Das Rheingold*, Wotan tells Brünnhilde

When youthful love's
delights had faded,
I longed in my heart for power:
impelled by the rage
of impulsive desires,
I won for myself the world.
Unwittingly false
I acted unfairly,
binding by treaties
what boded ill:
cunningly Loge led me on
but vanished while roaming the world.[12]

Here we cannot help but be reminded of Mephistopheles egging Faust on in his restless search for satisfaction.

And just like Mephistopheles does with Faust, Loge also manages to confront Wotan with certain truths. Indeed, he is one of the agents of Wotan's increasing self-awareness throughout the *Ring* (in addition to Fricka, Brünnhilde, Erda, and others). In *Das Rheingold*, Loge effectively confronts Wotan with the fact that he cannot both dominate the world, and seek love. He also speaks about love as the great creative element in life – something Wotan will not recognize until much later in the *Ring*.

Loge's character suggests the dual nature of intellect: it has the potential both to reveal truth, and to manipulate and distort. It is almost irresistible to read "Loge" as *logos*. But there is also a close kinship between Loge and *technē*. As noted earlier, Wagner makes Loge the god of fire, and if Cooke is right about Loge representing intellect, it is surely the promethean fire that is meant here. Loge says the following to Alberich in Scene Three of *Das Rheingold*:

You know me well,
you childish elf?
Then say who I am
that you yelp like that.
In a frozen hole,
where you coweringly lay,

who'd have given you light
and warming fire
if Loge hadn't smiled upon you?
What use would your forgework
have been
if I hadn't heated your forge?
I am your kinsman
and once was your friend:
so your thanks seem far from fitting![13]

As Cooke puts it, Loge helps the dwarfs "with their technical labour."[14] And we may also note that Wagner uses the same musical motive to represent both Loge's craftiness (as displayed in *Das Rheingold*) and the "magic fire" that appears in *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*.

Though Loge is never seen again (in anthropomorphic form) after *Das Rheingold*, he does appear twice more, in his elemental form, as fire. First, Loge appears in *Die Walküre*, just after Wotan has the inspiration to draw together Siegfried with Brünnhilde, by surrounding her with a ring of fire only the hero can penetrate. (Cooke points out, correctly, that this is actually Brünnhilde's idea, though here she is surely speaking once more as Wotan's will.) Second, and most significantly, Loge appears as the cataclysmic fire that destroys Walhalla and the world at the climax of *Götterdämmerung*.

In light of the foregoing remarks on the nature of Loge, it is irresistible to conclude that at the end of the *Ring*, intellect *consumes all*. The *Ring*, of course, is really the story of Wotan's attainment of self-awareness, as an indirect result of his almost entirely "extroverted" search for knowledge and power. In this, as I have noted, he is aided by several figures who confront him with the truth about himself, and who act as extensions or personifications of his being (including Loge and Brünnhilde). In the end, Wotan's "intellect," his quest for knowledge, comes full circle: he achieves consciousness of himself and, in true Schopenhaurean fashion, wills "the end" (*das Ende*), through the agent of his will, Brünnhilde, who uses Loge/fire/intellect to engulf the world in flames.

But we must at all times keep right before us the fact that Wotan is the symbol of Western man. If we read the whole story of Wotan's quest and its fiery climax with this in mind, it is impossible not to think of the present predicament of modern, Western man. Like Wotan, he has sought limitless knowledge and power. He has conquered almost the entire earth, and most of its peoples, then sailed off to the stars in search of more. At all times he has been moved both by a desire for adventure, and by ideals of aesthetic and moral perfection. But now, just when Western man has reached the height of scientific and technological achievement, when he has finally created a world of plenty almost entirely free of hardship and disease, like Faust he feels satisfied, and has seemingly lost the will to go on.[15] Worse yet, he has damned himself according to ideals that were, in fact, his own creation – and, like Wotan, he has willed his own death and displacement.

Inspired by the Germanic mythological material, Wagner has done much more than offer a commentary on modernity (as he had originally envisioned). The *Ring*, in fact is a work of prophecy: Wagner gives us Western man's past, present, and – so it would seem – future. But does the *Ring* offer us, in the end, nothing more than a tragic picture of the West, culminating in its self-immolation? I believe that it does, but to see this we must delve deeper. There is still much more to be said about the *Ring*. Let's consider Wotan's character in greater detail, taking each of the four operas in turn.

Notes

[1] Please note that Wagner never refers to any of these "ages." This is my interpretation.

[2] Lee, 35.

[3] Spencer, 281.

[4] Cooke, 248.

[5] Richard Wagner, The Art-Work of the Future and Other Works, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 70. (Henceforth "Ellis.")

[6] Cooke, 261.

[7] Magee, The Tristan Chord, 112.

[8] Sketch, 302.

[9] Cooke, 169.

[10] Cooke, 173.

[11] Cooke, 131. Cooke died before he could complete his study of the Ring, and only the first volume was ever published.

[12] Spencer, 149.

[13] Spencer, 95.

[14] Cooke, 210.

[15] In Act Five Goethe's Faust, Part II, Faust announces an ambitious public works program to better the lives of the people:

A swamp lies there below the hill,
Infecting everything I've done:
My last and greatest act of will
Succeeds when that foul pool is gone.
Let me make room for many a million,
Not wholly secure, but free to work on.
Green fertile fields, where men and herds
May gain swift comfort from the new-made earth.
Quickly settled in those hills' embrace,
Piled high by a brave, industrious race.
And in the centre here, a Paradise,
Whose boundaries hold back the raging tide,
And though it gnaws to enter in by force,
The common urge unites to halt its course.
Yes, I've surrendered to this thought's insistence,
The last word Wisdom ever has to say:
He only earns his Freedom and Existence,
Who's forced to win them freshly every day.
Childhood, manhood, age's vigorous years,
Surrounded by dangers, they'll spend here.
I wish to gaze again on such a land,
Free earth: where a free race, in freedom, stand.
Then, to the Moment I'd dare say:
'Stay a while! You are so lovely!'
Through aeons, then, never to fade away
This path of mine through all that's earthly. –

Anticipating, here, its deep enjoyment,
Now I savour it, that highest moment.

Having now experienced this rather American vision of the "Promised Land," Faust promptly keels over dead. (Translation by A.S. Kline, http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/FaustIIActV.htm [2])

PART VI, DAS RHEINGOLD AND DIE WALKÛRE

Das Rheingold

When the events of *Das Rheingold* begin, the Wotan-Loge relationship is already well-established, and the primeval crimes described earlier are long past. However, the opera begins with yet another crime against nature: Alberich's theft of the Rhinegold. This opening scene is tied to the very end of the ring: the conflagration set in motion by Brünnhilde expiates the "original sin" of Alberich's theft (and of Wotan's actions), and Wagner links the two scenes musically. As I shall discuss more fully later on, we are thus left with the sense of a return to the beginning, of cycles continuing without end.

But let us now consider just who Alberich is. He represents, in fact, the darker aspect of man's emergence from nature and quest to control her. Alberich seeks wealth and crude, lawless power. Further, he is motivated in large measure by envy and resentment. He envies the power, carefree lives, and beauty of the gods. And he resents the Rhine daughters for their rejection of him. He is an ugly, misshapen, unwanted creature. And when he renounces love, it is really life that he is renouncing. Alberich sets himself against life, and seeks to despoil and degrade all that is better than he. (It is clear that Wagner taught Nietzsche a thing or two about *ressentiment*.) Whereas Wotan (in a good mood) seeks to transform otherness according to his ideals, Alberich seeks essentially to annihilate it.

In *The Art-Work of the Future*, Wagner writes about the "absolute egoist," who is surely represented by Alberich: "The terrible thing about the absolute egoist is that he sees in other human beings nothing but the natural means of his own existence, and – even if in a quite particular, barbaric-cultivated way – *consumes* them, like the fruits and animals of nature, and thus will not *give*, but only *take*."[11]

But why must Alberich renounce love in order to acquire the power of the ring? Cooke argues that it is because wielding that power will require slave labor, and so he who would have it must renounce love for humanity. But surely what is also involved is really the renunciation of love of nature itself – of being, really. The attitude of love, whether it is

love for one person, or for humanity, or for nature, involves a kind of openness to what is other.

But the power Alberich seeks really entails a total aggrandizement of the self, and a closing off to otherness.[2] This "closing off" takes the form of destroying or corrupting what is other. (It is obvious, though, that the standpoint of Wotan has the potential to shade off into that of Alberich, seeking to manipulate or destroy all that which does not conform to one's ideals – and so in *Die Walküre* we do indeed find Wotan confessing that he has come to be tempted by the "dark side.")

In addition to this psychological (or metaphysical) dynamic, there is, of course, a political dimension to what Wagner is saying. And there is a theory of history here as well. For Wagner, the rise of Alberich represents a shift in modern power relations. In historical terms, Wotan represents rule by the aristocracy, who, once upon a time, were men of adventure, daring, and curiosity. This was rule by the noble, according to laws, contracts, and a code of honor.

Alberich, on the other hand, represents the rise of the capitalist middle class, who were moved in no small measure by resentment against the aristocracy, and a lust for the external trappings of aristocratic life, without the underlying honor and nobility they served to signify. While the rule of the aristocracy might have been, at times, despotic, the middle class sought to put in its place an even more debased system, one ruled entirely by greed and power lust (devoid of any conception of *noblesse oblige*).

George Bernard Shaw, in his classic essay on Wagner's *Ring*, describes Alberich quite well: "It is just as if some poor, rough, vulgar, coarse fellow were to offer to take part in aristocratic society, and be snubbed into the knowledge that only as a millionaire could he ever hope to bring that society to his feet and buy himself a beautiful and refined wife. His choice is forced on him."[3] Anarchist-socialist though he may have been, it is quite clear that Wagner is much more sympathetic to the aristocracy than he is to the middle class. In *The Art-Work of the Future*, he blames the decline of art on its passing from the control of the aristocracy to that

of the middle class philistine, "the most heartless and cowardly creation of our civilization."[4]

Over and over again in the libretto of the *Ring*, Wagner describes Alberich as motivated by envy. And it is clear that wealth is merely a means to power for Alberich – a means, really, to exact his revenge upon life. When Wotan and Loge encounter Alberich in Nibelheim, the dwarf berates the two gods: "You who live, laugh and love up there in the breath of gentle breezes: in my golden grasp I'll capture all you gods! As love has been forsworn by me, so all that lives shall also forswear it: lured by gold, you'll lust after gold alone!"[5] Basically, he sees the gods as time-wasting, life-loving aristocrats. His is the voice of middle class greed, and of the "Protestant work ethic."

Of course, if we return to my claim that Wotan specifically represents Western man, then Alberich takes on a whole new significance. (And so does Wagner's contrast, which I shall come to in a moment between "Light Alberich" and "Dark Alberich.") In this case, Wotan clearly represents European man conceived as *árya*, as noble: he dwells in the hyperborean regions, pursues knowledge, is "dauntless" and *thumotic*, is concerned with honor and the rule of law, etc. By contrast, Alberich, Mime, and the Nibelungen minions are dark, squat, consumed by envy and greed, dishonorable, and conniving. Understood in "racialist" terms (and critics of Wagner often read him this way), the threat posed by Alberich represents not the ascendency of the middle class, but the "rising tide of color."

Reading Alberich either with this interpretation in mind, or the more conventional one about the rise of the middle class, it is important to note that it is Wotan himself who paves the way for Alberich. Over time, Wotan's rule loses its legitimacy, as he connives and cheats and makes false promises. Wotan's rule is also inherently harmful – and is so from the very beginning, when he rips the branch from the ash tree, thereby setting in motion the death of the natural world itself. The stifling nature of his laws is embodied by Fricka, who uses them to force Wotan into destroying his beloved Siegmund, as revenge against Siegmund's

"transgression" with Sieglinde. (And as Cooke points out, Fricka is "symbolically barren," because Wotan's laws are barren.[6])

The response to Wotan's rule comes in two waves. First there is Alberich, who seeks power through wealth, not through boldness or though knowledge. And after him comes Siegfried, the innocent who would wipe away the old order. But although it is clear that Wagner sympathizes with Wotan, in fact he treats Wotan and Alberich as two sides of the same coin. This is because Wagner viewed the exercise of power *as such* to be inimical to life.

And so in the *Ring*, Wagner has Wotan refer to himself as "Light Alberich," and to Alberich as "Dark Alberich." This immediately calls to mind the distinction in the Scandinavian materials between the "light elves" and "dark elves." Wagner seems to be assimilating Wotan and the gods to the upper, "light world" here. But the more obvious significance is to emphasize that both Wotan and Alberich are inflections of the same principle, the lust for power and control; Alberich is just a darker, perverted version of it. But even the "light" version is inherently pernicious, according to Wagner. (One can see that at the heart of Nietzsche's rebellion against Wagner was his belief that the "will to power," as exhibited by Wotan could be noble; Wagner errs in not seeing that Alberich's power lust is something qualitatively different: the twisted, hate-filled power lust of the misshapen slave type.)

Cooke makes a number of perceptive comparisons between Wotan and Alberich.[7] Both are out to gain power by exploiting nature, and both encounter (and despoil) nature while it is under the guard of three "wise-women" (the Norns, the Rhine daughters). The contrasts, of course, are just as interesting. Whereas Wotan originally sought knowledge, Alberich sought only power. The former's quest is satisfied, whereas the latter's is not. Alberich gave up love in order to attain power; Wotan gave up an eye to gain the knowledge that would lead to power. And as Cooke puts it, this left him "blind to the claims of love."[8] However, Wotan's power was bound by his laws, whereas Alberich seeks unconditional power, motivated by envy and a desire for revenge.

Over time, however, Wotan becomes more like Alberich, tiring of love and seeking power for its own sake. He tells Brünnhilde in Act Two of *Die Walküre*, "When youthful love's delights had faded, I longed in my heart for power."[9] Wotan's willingness in *Das Rheingold* to risk the loss of the beautiful Freia is indicative of his loss of interest in love. And once he has attained the ring from Alberich he is almost seduced by it: "Now I hold that which exalts me, the mightiest lord of the mighty!" And later (to Fafner): "Brazenly ask for whatever you want, everything will I grant you; but not for the world shall I give up the ring!"[10] When Erda appears and counsels Wotan to give up the ring, she does *not* warn that its possession will literally bring about the end of the gods. In effect, she advises him not to allow the ring to corrupt him in this, the final phase of his existence.

In the end, although Wotan clearly envies the unbridled power the ring confers on Alberich, he cannot do as the dwarf does and give up love entirely. His love for Brünnhilde, in fact, is what paves the way for her union with Siegfried (when he accedes to her wish to be surrounded by the ring of fire). And this in turn leads to the loss of his own power. In his final hours – as Waltraute informs us – Wotan pines for Brünnhilde, as his army of the dead heaps the remains of the world ash around Walhalla, to prepare for his own immolation. In the end, Wotan regains his sight, and allows love to win out over power.

Die Walküre

Initially, of course, Wotan schemes to win the ring, siring the race of the Wälsung. His plan is that Siegmund will be a "free hero" unbound by any of the agreements Wotan has made. In his "Sketch" Wagner also refers to Siegmund as a "free will" – implying that Wotan is fundamentally unfree. The truth is the god is not all powerful. He rules only by means of the agreements and the laws he has made, and he is honor-bound to uphold them. But Wotan's plot displays his blindness yet again. There are forces at work in the coming of the Wälsung that Wotan himself does not control.

For example, why does Wotan beget twins? He only needs Siegmund, after all. And yet Sieglinde is produced as well. These two are fated to meet in adulthood, and to produce Siegfried. But Wotan does not know

this, and he is not the one who has fated it to be so. Wotan is not only not omniscient, he is physically vulnerable as well, as Siegmund's description of life with his father "Wolfe" indicates: "Outlawed the old man fled with me, deep in the wildwood."[11] Wotan is not fully in control of the situation, and does not entirely forsee the consequences of his actions. In fact, his scheme to gain the ring actually becomes a means to the end of the gods – who cannot be saved.

It is in *Die Walküre* that Wotan comes to realize his own lack of consciousness. And the first to help him confront himself is Fricka, he forces Wotan to recognize that Siegmund is not a "free will" at all: Wotan has manipulated him every step of the way. But the most significant agent of Wotan's self-understanding is Brünnhilde. She is, of course, Wotan's child with Erda, who had counselled him at the conclusion of *Das Rheingold*, and from whom he had ardently sought to learn more. In Act Three of *Siegfried*, Erda will tell Wotan "You are not what you say you are!"[12] But it is chiefly through Brünnhilde that Erda instructs Wotan; she is a means by which he can attain true knowledge – not of the world, but of himself. Again and again it is women who reveal Wotan to himself.

It is to Brünnhilde that he speaks the following: "To my loathing I find only ever myself in all that I encompass! That other self for which I yearn, that other self I never see; for the free man has to fashion himself – serfs are all I can shape!"[13] When he speaks these words in *Die Walküre*, Wotan does not yet know that that free man will be Siegfried, who will fashion himself as he does the sword Nothung. And he does not know that Siegfried – together with Brünnhilde – will bring about his own destruction. Yet he yearns for this, telling Brünnhilde in the same conversation, "Let all I raised now fall in ruins! My work I abandon; one thing alone do I want: the end – the end."[14]

Recall that Wotan also confessed to Brünnhilde that he had begun to lose interest in love, and to yearn instead or power. It is Brünnhilde that reawakens Wotan's capacity for love, however. First, when she disobeys Wotan, acting out of love for Siegmund, she forces Wotan to confront his own love for the hero and to understand that she only acted according to his heart's own true desire. As Cooke points out, it is only through

Siegmund's love for Sieglinde – so movingly expressed in his refusal to enter Walhalla without her – that Siegmund becomes truly independent of Wotan.[15] In both Brünnhilde and Siegmund, therefore, it is love that threatens Wotan's carefully-laid plans. But, of course, Wotan is moved by his love for Brünnhilde and grants her request to be encircled by a fire that only the greatest of all heroes can pass through. Here Wotan sets the stage for the triumph of love itself – the union of Brünnhilde and Siegfried.

"Love" was, indeed, the original "message" of the *Ring*, and Wagner's solution to our modern problems. When I first heard this, I was terribly disappointed, and for a long time I thought there was nothing in Wagner for me except the music. The ideas seemed half-baked and vaguely Lefty. I think this is one of the reasons so many who are interested in the Germanic tradition have shied away from Wagner, and seen him as a distorter. This "love is the answer" stuff has never had any appeal for me. But, as I will argue shortly, there's much more to it in Wagner than meets the eye, and it is not quite as "mushy" as one would think. (And, of course, it must be reiterated that Wagner abandoned this "love is the answer" message – though love is still held up in the *Ring* as a kind of supreme ideal.)

Notes

[1] Quoted in Cooke, 261.

[2] Alberich represents what I termed "Will" in my essay "Knowing the Gods" (note that my use of "Will" is not to be confused with Schopenhauer's). See Collin Cleary, Summoning the Gods (San Francisco: Counter-Currents Publishing, 2011).

[3] Quoted in Cooke, 269.

[4] Quoted in George S. Williamson, The Longing for Myth in Germany (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 202.

[5] Spencer, 96.

[6] Cooke, 152.

[7] See Cooke, 148-49.

[8] Cooke, 159.

[9] Spencer, 149.

[10] Spencer, 105; 111.

[11] Spencer, 127.

[12] Spencer, 257.

[13] Spencer, 152.

[14] Spencer, 153.

[15] Cooke, 306.

PART VII, SIEGFRIED AND GOTTERDAMERUNG

Siegfried

If Wotan is the main character of the *Ring*, Siegfried is its hero. However, in dealing with the character of Siegfried we do not depart from our discussion of Wotan at all. This is because Siegfried, like many of the other characters in the *Ring*, is a kind of hypostatization of an aspect of Wotan himself.

We have already seen this in several cases. Loge represents the crafty, creative-destructive intellect utilized by Wotan, which eventually leads him astray. Fricka is the personification of Wotan's rigid and barren laws. Brünnhilde is the embodiment of Wotan's will. Alberich is Wotan's dark side, which he finds himself tending toward, as he confesses in *Die Walküre*. What, then, does Siegfried represent?

Let's consider once more Wotan's words to Brünnhilde: "To my loathing I find only ever myself in all that I encompass! That other self for which I yearn, that other self I never see; for the free man has to fashion himself – serfs are all I can shape!"[11] Siegfried is somehow a counterpart self to Wotan. Of course, the same could be said of Alberich. But here the relationship is of an entirely different order. Alberich represents Wotan's dark alter ego, which he abhors, whereas Siegfried represents a kind of ideal that Wotan longs for. In some sense, Siegfried possesses something Wotan lacks. But just what is this? The most obvious answer is freedom – Wotan makes this clear in the lines just quoted. Siegfried is free of the entanglements that restrict Wotan. But there is something else at work here as well.

In Act Three of *Siegfried*, when the god and hero confront one another, Siegfried comments on Wotan's missing eye. Wotan responds:

Mit dem Auge,
das als and'res mir fehlt,
erblick'st du selber das eine,
das mir zum Sehen verblieb.

Rendering this into English is somewhat tricky. Spencer, the most reliable English interpreter of the *Ring* libretti, gives us the following somewhat inventive, but thought-provoking translation:

With the eye which,
as my second self, is missing,
you yourself can glimpse the one
that's left for me to see with.[2]

Other translations don't quite know what to do with *das als and're*, and just leave it out. (The translation included with one CD release of Siegfried gives the lines as follows: "With the very eye that's missing in me you yourself are looking at the one I still see with.")

Obviously, we are being told that Siegfried possesses Wotan's missing eye, at least in the sense that he possesses some form of perception that Wotan lacks. Of course, we know that Wotan's powers of perception are deficient in at least a couple of different ways. First, gripped by his lust for power and hemmed in by his own laws, Wotan has grown largely insensitive to natural sentiments, especially love. Second, he lacks self-understanding. Now, when the god and hero clash, note what Wotan says his missing eye is doing, as it sits in Siegfried's skull. It is looking at Wotan. It therefore seems reasonable to surmise that Wotan is referring to his own lack of self-awareness, and perhaps indicating that, unlike him, Siegfried truly possesses this virtue: Siegfried, in other words, stands at a higher level of consciousness.

This interpretation is certainly amply supported by the remarks Wagner makes about Siegfried in his "Sketch" for the *Ring*. There, Siegfried is portrayed as an innocent, free even of knowledge of the gods. At the same time, however, he is portrayed as a fully conscious, self-actualized being. When Wagner writes of Wotan's (or, in the "Sketch," "the gods'") plan to sire the race of the Wälsungs, he states that "In man they therefore seek to plant their own divinity, to raise his strength so high that, *in full knowledge of that strength*, he may rid him of the gods' protection, to do of his free will what his own mind inspires."[3] A page later Wagner states that in the "rightful hero" (Siegfried) "his self-reliant strength shall reach full consciousness." Later in the "Sketch" he has

Siegfried say "Show me the chance of mastering the gods, and I must work my main to vanquish them."[4]

And yet in the finished *Ring*, Siegfried comes off as anything but fully-conscious. He is a total innocent all right, but he seems completely lacking in introspection or self-awareness. And, of course, he is duped in *Götterdämmerung* into an even deeper state of unconsciousness. That this, in fact, came to be Wagner's own understanding of the character is confirmed by two passages from Cosima Wagner's diaries, summarizing conversations with Wagner. The first is from July 2, 1872: "Which is the greater, Wotan or Siegfried? Wotan the more tragic, since he recognizes the guilt of existence and is atoning for the error of creation." And consider especially the entry from July 4, 1873: "after lunch conversation about Siegfried and Brünnhilde, the former not a tragic figure, since he does not become conscious of his position."[5]

It therefore seems likely that Cooke is closer to the mark when he interprets the "missing eye" motif as follows: "Siegfried, Wagner's projection of 'natural man,' inspired at this moment [in Act Three] entirely by his instinctive need for mutual love and fellowship (which he will soon find in Brünnhilde), has the eye (symbolizing that instinctive need) that Wotan lacks."[6] In other words, Siegfried does not represent greater self-consciousness. Instead, he actually represents a kind of *unselfconscious naturalness*. This treatment of the character, by the way, is entirely in keeping with how he is portrayed in the *Nibelungenlied*, *Völsungasaga*, and other sources, in which he comes close to being a sort of heroic dolt.

Now, this interpretation may seem odd. Shouldn't Wotan's ideal "other self" possess the self-consciousness he lacks? Not necessarily. Wotan is flawed in that he lacks self-consciousness, and only gradually comes to attain it. But his deeper flaw – from Wagner's perspective – is the divorce between his intellect and his natural sentiments. It is his unquenchable thirst for knowledge and control (two sides of the same coin) that leads to the death of nature itself, as represented by the ash tree. His attainment of self-awareness is a good thing *only* in that it reveals to him the harm he has done. Of course, it also leads him to will his own end,

and an end to the world itself. Wotan's great sin, therefore, is not fundamentally his lack of self-awareness *as such*, but his lack of awareness specifically of the way in which he has allowed his intellect to shut him off from the natural world, and natural feelings.

The transition from the Age of Gods to the Age of Heroes in the *Ring* is therefore really the transition from a kind of "head-centered," emotionally retarded, overly "intellectual" approach to life, to one that is innocent, natural and unselfconscious, and centered in the heart. When the "head-centered" orientation comes to full consciousness of itself, it is horrified by its barrenness and the destruction it has caused, and it wills its own end. It yearns for the state of "no mind" – thus opening the door to the "heart-centered" orientation, which knows without knowing, and acts without acting.

Once again, it is hard for us Westerners not to identify with Wotan. Like him, we have also lived a head-centered existence, seeking to manipulate and control all through knowledge. And the result has been disconnection from nature and from our own natural sentiments – in myriad ways. Because Westerners are highly self-critical, we long ago realized this, or the best of us did. And we experienced a kind of self-loathing, which often manifests itself either in a yearning for a simpler, pre-modern existence, or in an idealization of "non-Western cultures." This self-loathing is oddly characteristic of the West. There is a perennial idea that nags at us: perhaps life would be better if we knew less, and felt more. Hence the Rousseauean idealization of the "noble savage." There is quite a generous dollop or two of this in the *Ring*, and in general what we find in Wagner is an expression of this perennial Western uneasiness about our Faustian nature, and longing for the peace of the primitive and unselfconscious life.

Siegfried is like Nietzsche's "child": he is "innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes.'"[7] He has thrown off all the old sins, laws, and "hang-ups" and "head games" of the "older generation." He is the new Western man, free of all the baggage of the past. And he is, of course, the revolutionary ideal. When Siegfried kills the dragon Fafner he is striking at the very

heart of greed and power lust. (The esoteric meaning of dragon slaying is the killing of the undeveloped ego and its tendency to hang on, or to grasp senselessly at things it would be well rid of – like the dragon who hoards a treasure it cannot possibly make use of.) He gains the creature's gold as a consequence, but of course the gold comes with a curse! Wagner seems to be saying that there is no "clean" way to have wealth, that it always corrupts.

With the disappearance of Wotan from the scene, we enter very briefly into what can be described in the *Ring*'s cycle of time as the "revolutionary phase" (i.e., the Age of Heroes). The idea here is supposed to be that together Siegfried and Brünnhilde will create a world free of inhuman laws, hierarchy, greed, power lust, and oppression – a world ruled by love alone. The usual dream, in other words. But all this is merely suggested, never depicted in the *Ring*. Here Wagner is true to his anarchist roots: like all anarchists he is completely and totally vague when it comes to communicating what the promised future utopia will actually look like.

Let us now briefly consider just what Wagner meant by "love." As I suggested earlier, one feels a rather strong urge to dismiss this as gooey, high-minded claptrap – but we need to resist that. Cooke writes that "the love that Wagner envisaged is by no means one of the kinds of love so dear to the romantics as a nostrum – idealized sexual love or a feeling of affectionate benevolence; it is an active *social* force, at once sexual, compassionate, self-sacrificial, and creative."[8] But what can this mean? Here we may get some help from Feuerbach, who wrote "Love is the universal law of intelligence and nature; — it is nothing else than the realization of the unity of the species through the medium of moral sentiment."[9] In other words, love is "fellow feeling"; a sense of identification with another person. (Though it is possible also to have such feelings for nature as a whole, for animals, and, some people claim, for God – though I don't know what this means, unless God is here understood as the personification of nature.)

But how is love the answer to greed and power lust, and specifically to modern capitalism, which was clearly one of Wagner's targets? The

problem with capitalism, quite simply, is that it sets members of a nation against one another through class warfare. Under the ethos of capitalism, individuals are driven to benefit themselves (and, at most, their immediate family) even if this involves the exploitation of others, and the adoption of practices that may harm the larger society in the long run. (In Wagner's view aristocracy is less pernicious, though it involves rigid class distinctions, and at its worst tends toward a hard-hearted, "let them eat cake" attitude toward the less fortunate.) The radical socialist cure for this, of course, is to eradicate the distinction between bosses and workers, haves and have-nots. But no amount of wealth redistribution can make a nation whole, unless one can foster in the people genuine fellow-feeling – love, in other words; love of one's own.

If this could be effected, and if suitable social and economic reforms were adopted, it might not even be necessary to eliminate the market economy. There would still be bosses and workers, but they would be united in something higher than economic relations: they would have the sense of belonging together in one nation, which would promote social-spiritedness, generosity, and cooperation between all men, regardless of their "class." This was essentially the vision promoted by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*. And it was essentially what National Socialism promised. (If Hitler was not inspired in his socio-economic views by Wagner, he at least found those views confirmed and reinforced by him.) I also can't resist pointing out that "love" as an answer to capitalism is also the message of another great work of art, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.[10]

Did Wagner see the social role of love in these "nationalistic" terms? I noted much earlier in this essay that Wagner was a German nationalist – but at the same time a kind of internationalist as well. (And I noted, further, that this was not an unusual combination for German nationalists.) We can be fairly certain that Wagner had hopes that the love that could unite a nation could also transcend national boundaries and create a "family of man." Of course, in the process of writing the *Ring*, Wagner came to see that although love was still the highest ideal, it was not the final answer. As we shall see, love has the potential to effect great change, but ultimately it never completely triumphs over wickedness.

Götterdämmerung

[2]

As mentioned earlier, *Götterdämmerung* takes place in the final, decadent age: the Age of Men, the *Kali Yuga*. Siegfried and Brünnhilde are a bit like two love-struck hippies who have actually succeeded in toppling The System – and have managed to inherit the wealth. But, of course, it is cursed. And in a world where "love" supposedly reigns, and greed and power lust are out of style, there is still human envy and vanity to contend with. This is, in fact, what ultimately destroys the love of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, and hastens the world to its end. The Age of Men could also be accurately described as an age of envy.

King Gunther needs to take a bride, but why does he set his sights on Brünnhilde? Why not a nice girl who's not surrounded by a ring of fire, and didn't used to be a man-eating Valkyrie? The answer is that he wants the prestige of winning Brünnhilde, who everybody knows can only be won by a hero. Of course, Gunther is incapable of doing the job himself, so he recruits Siegfried to do it for him, while keeping it a secret from others so that he can enjoy all the unearned admiration. The psychology here is nothing new, but it is difficult to fathom (unless one happens to be a self-aware Gunther-type, which is rare). How could anyone enjoy receiving the admiration of others, if they know that it is all based on a lie?

But Gunther is not alone here; his sister Gutrune is cut from the same cloth, though this is less obvious. When Hagen floats the idea of Gutrune marrying Siegfried she responds, "You mock me, wicked Hagen! How should I ever bind Siegfried? If he's the world's most glorious hero, the loveliest women on earth would have wooed him long ago."[11] These words reveal Gutrune's insecurity. Though she is a princess of Burgundy, she obviously does not think she has what it takes to win Siegfried's love. And does she perhaps also feel a frisson of excitement at the thought of having a man wanted by so many other women? When Hagen proposes that she give Siegfried the magic potion, making him love her and forget all other women, Gutrune agrees without any hesitation whatsoever – even though she must realize that the hero's "love" will be completely artificial, and her "winning" of him a cheat.

In the persons of Gunther and Gutrune we encounter a human trait not depicted so far in the *Ring*: the desire for unearned prestige, for faking it. Rousseau, with whose works Wagner was familiar, discusses this as one of the traits that emerges when men band together in civilized society. He remarks that the "rank and fate" of each man is dependent upon natural qualities such as intellect, beauty, strength, and talent: "And since these qualities were the only ones that could attract consideration, he was soon forced to have them or to affect them. It was necessary, for his advantage, to show himself to be something other than what he in fact was." And near the end of the same text he remarks that "the savage lives in himself; the man accustomed to the ways of society is always outside himself and knows how to live only in the opinion of others."[12] Rousseau's is the original description of the "culture of narcissism." Most people are content to "fake it," and will do almost anything to gain or to preserve esteem in the eyes of their fellows. They will even destroy the highest ideal, as Gunther is willing to destroy Siegfried in order to preserve his secret.

In contrast to Gunther and Gutrune, Hagen is motivated by greed and power lust. In Hagen, child of Alberich, these old ills rear their ugly heads once more; they simply will not go away. Love cannot vanquish them for the simple reason that some people do not have it in them to love, as Hagen appears not to. When love is directed at them, they smell

weakness – and use the lover's love to their own advantage. And love fails as well because some people simply aren't lovable. Hagen uses the vanity of Gunther and Gutrune to further his own ends: acquiring the ring of power, and killing Siegfried. He puts them in a situation where the death of Siegfried becomes necessary, mainly in order to preserve Gunther's "honor" (since Brünnhilde claims publicly that Siegfried has lain with her – and since Siegfried could divulge Gunther's secret). Of course, Hagen himself is really the pawn of his father, Alberich.

The vanity and narcissism of Gunther and Gutrune are really as completely opposed to love as are the power lust of Wotan and the greed of Alberich. And this is no accident, for all of these phenomena are variations on a theme. I have written elsewhere about *thumos*, the part of the soul that Plato understood to be neither appetitive nor intellectual (or "theoretical," one might say); the part that seeks to aggrandize the self in some fashion, winning honor and prestige, and responds with potential violence when its honor is challenged or besmirched.[13] There are higher and lower forms of *thumos* represented in the *Ring*, and the highest is depicted in Wotan. His thirst for knowledge and mastery is *thumotic* in character. The only other semi-positive portrayal of *thumos* in the *Ring* is Siegfried's heroic bellicosity.

All the other forms of *thumos* in the drama are degenerated by comparison. None is worse than that of Alberich, who seeks – out of pure envy and with a kind of nihilistic glee – to compel others to recognize him, or be destroyed. His brother, Mime, is essentially moved by the same desire. And one sees, of course, that Hagen is his father's son. Gunther and Gutrune also seek recognition, as I have argued, brought about this time not through force but through fakery. Even Fricka exhibits a *thumotic* side: her insistence that Wotan punish Siegmund is motivated largely by the fact that, as goddess of home and marriage, she takes his love for Sieglinde as an affront against her authority and her honor.

Thus, one could argue that the major conflict in the *Ring* is really between *thumos* and *agape*.[14] In other words, the conflict is between two sorts of "other directed" impulse: one that seeks to raise the self above the other in one fashion or other (through thoroughly knowing it, controlling

it, or compelling its recognition), and one that seeks to effectively erase the distinction between self and other, by loving the other as one's self.

In *Siegfried*, *agape* seems to have triumphed over *thumos*. But in *Götterdämmerung* the tables are turned, and *thumos* proves ineradicable. That is to say, the human desire for power and prestige simply will not go away. Love does not win in the end, as Wagner originally intended. But although love doesn't win, neither does *thumos* – for the simple reason that Brünnhilde puts the torch to Siegfried's funeral pyre and sets in motion a blaze that consumes the entire world. Hagen is dragged down by the Rhine daughters, still screaming for the ring. In the end, everything is consumed – including the good (love) and the bad (power lust and greed). So the next question we must ask – our final, major question – is this: what is it that "wins" at the end of the *Ring*? What do Brünnhilde and her act at the finale of *Götterdämerung* represent?

Notes

[1] Spencer, 152.

[2] Spencer, 262.

[3] Sketch, 302-3, emphasis added.

[4] Sketch, 308.

[5] Quoted in Spencer, 371 (endnote 157).

[6] Cooke, 262.

[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 27.

[8] Cooke, 275. Italics in original.

[9] Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 266.

[10] Metropolis was co-written by Lang's wife Thea von Harbou, who later became a National Socialist.

[11] Spencer, 291.

[12] From The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Basic Political Writings, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 67, 81.

[13] See especially my review essay of Ricardo Duchesne's The Uniqueness of Western Civilization, https://www.counter-currents.com/2013/04/ricardo-duchesnes-the-uniqueness-of-western-civilization/ [3]

[14] Though there is undeniably an erotic dimension to Wagner's championing of "love," the "love" that he most often seems to have in mind corresponds most closely to agape, not eros.

PART VIII, GELASSENHEIT

Gelassenheit

We can say that the plot of the *Ring* is simply this: Western man, in the person of Wotan, finally awakens to the destructiveness of his *thumotic* nature, and wills his own end. (See my review [2] of Duchesne's *Uniqueness of Western Civilization* for a discussion of how Western man is preeminently *thumotic* man.) This comes initially in the form of *agape*, the negation of *thumos*. Wotan allows himself and the rule of *thumos* to be displaced by the hopeful, new world ruled by *agape*. But, alas, it is not to be. *Thumos*, in its degenerate forms, re-emerges and destroys the love of Siegfried and Brünnhilde.

Now, one could claim, however, that love *does* win in the end. When Brünnhilde touches the torch to the funeral pyre and consumes the entire, imperfect world with all of its power lusters, she does so out of love for Siegfried. This is true in a way, but something much more is at work here. To see this, we must look closely at what Brünnhilde says at the climax of the drama. As the fire blazes she does speak of Siegfried to her horse, Grane: "Does the laughing fire lure you to him? – Feel how the flames burn in my breast, effulgent fires seize hold of my heart: to clasp him to me while held in my arms and in mightiest love and to be wedded to him!"[1] But earlier she says something far more significant, calling to Wotan: "[It] was I whom the purest man had to betray, that a woman might grow wise. – Do I now know what you need? All things, all things, all things I know [*Alles! Alles! Alles weiss ich*], all is clear to me now!"

What is this wisdom that Brünnhilde has acquired, this knowledge of all things? (Note how Wagner emphasizes *four times* that she now knows *all*.) Wagner actually wrote two other versions of Brünnhilde's final speech. The first, the earliest version (from 1852), is referred to by scholars as the "Feuerbach ending," because it so clearly shows the influence of the philosopher, and reflects Wagner's idea for the meaning of the *Ring*, prior to his reconceiving it. In it, Brünnhilde says that she leaves behind her "a world without rulers." (In the final version, of course, she destroys the world!) And she says that she bequeaths to the world

not wealth, not gold, not splendor, not "smooth-tongued custom's stern decree" but instead "love" alone.[2]

Much more interesting is the so-called "Schopenhauer ending" of 1856, which I will quote at length:

I depart from the world of desire,
I flee forever the home of delusion;
the open gates
of eternal becoming
I close behind me now:
to the holiest chosen land,
free from desire and delusion,
the goal of the world's migration,
redeemed from reincarnation,
the enlightened woman now goes.
The blessed end
of all things eternal,
do you know how I attained it?
Grieving love's
profoundest suffering
opened my eyes for me:
I saw the world end.

Ultimately, Wagner rejected this too – but for different reasons, I believe. While Wagner clearly did change his mind about the "Feuerbach ending," and came to feel that it was not what he wanted to convey, I don't think this is the case with the "Schopenhauer ending." I think that it expresses pretty much exactly what he had come to believe was the "message" of the *Ring*. Perhaps he rejected it because it was too explicitly philosophical – too Buddhist, really. And so he went with the somewhat more ambiguous speech now familiar to us. But in both cases, the underlying ideas are the same. The wisdom Brünnhilde has gained – her knowledge of all things – is the realization that this world really is a veil of maya, and that the only appropriate standpoint is that of renunciation.

I have already discussed how there is a theory of history – of "ages" – within the *Ring*. The shift from Wagner's early, anarchist conception to

his later "Schopenhauerean" conception is marked by a shift in his understanding of time. In true socialist fashion, the earlier Wagner saw time, or history, as linear and progressing towards a new world without masters, ruled only by love. The Wagner of the mature *Ring*, however, sees time as cyclical. At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, as the entire world is consumed by fire and flood, we hear the familiar strains of the "Rhine music" from the beginning of *Das Rheingold*. What this suggests, as many have pointed out, is that the end returns to the beginning: after the cataclysm, the world will be renewed; things will happen all over again in an "eternal recurrence of the same." (The *Ring* is a ring, in other words.) A cyclical view of time, of cycles of ages repeating over and over again, is suggested here.

Wagner's "Schopenhauerean" standpoint sounds awfully grim. But just listen to the "Rhine music" that closes *Götterdämmerung* – again, reminding us of the beginning of *Das Rheingold*. *It is bright and hopeful*. "Renunciation" need not be an angry rejection of the world. It need not require us to become hermits – and it certainly does not require us to kill ourselves (in a famous essay, Schopenhauer opposed suicide). What it involves is recognizing that the world, or life, is suffering. And suffering, as the Buddha taught, is caused by desire. We think that the satisfaction of certain desires will make us happy, but in fact we only become ensnared in desiring more. There is therefore no *true* satisfaction in the satisfaction of desire – this is just a trap, in fact.

The first step toward true satisfaction consists in recognizing this. The next step is not to eliminate our desires, for that is impossible, but to *change our relationship to our desires*. We learn not to identify with our desires and to become largely indifferent to whether or not they are satisfied. But this perspective is impossible without coming to see the world for what it is: as a never-ending cycle of suffering, followed by satisfaction, followed by suffering – which will *never* change. This is what Brünnhilde comes to see. This is why she repeatedly tells us that she now knows *alles*. And she brings the world to an end – symbolically conveying a state of complete and total detachment from the travails of life. But again, the tone at the end of the *Ring* is bright and filled with promise. The lesson we are meant to take away is indeed that we must detach

ourselves from the world – that we must die to it, in a sense – but that we may live in the world at the same time, in a transformed and enlightened state. (Wagner wrote to a correspondent that the *Ring* "teaches us that we must learn to die"[3]) Joseph Campbell liked to call this standpoint "Joyful participation in the sorrows of the world." And this is clearly the approach to life that Wagner himself came to adopt.

Wagner's incorporation of this (optimistic) Schopenhauerean standpoint into the *Ring* is, of course, another chapter in the story of his engagement with the Germanic tradition. Though I have referred to Buddhism in explaining these ideas, in fact Schopenhauer claimed that he arrived at all of his basic theories prior to his encounter with Eastern thought. And, indeed, there is a tradition of what we might call "Germanic Buddhism," going back to the medieval German mystics. Meister Eckhart, as well as the anonymous author of the fourteenth-century *Theologia Germanica*, both refer to a concept called *Gelassenheit*. This is very hard to translate, but it might be rendered literally as "allowingness" or "leavingness." (*Gelassenheit* is a noun formed from the past participle of the verb *lassen*, which mean "to leave, let, or allow.") The term shows up in Heidegger's work as well, and has been translated into English (very imperfectly) as "letting beings be." *Gelassenheit* is essentially the same attitude of detachment or renunciation taught by the Buddha and by Schopenhauer: living in the world, while remaining unaffected by it – letting things be, without identification.

Of course, as Julius Evola taught us, there is another dimension to this standpoint, which gets lost when it is misrepresented as being all about peace and love and nonviolence.[4] Indeed, the path of "joyful participation in the sorrows of the world" is the path of the warrior. And it is only possible through a kind of *internalization of thumos*. To follow this path one must master one's desires, or one's attachment to desire. Instead of an enemy "out there" that I seek to subdue, the enemy is internal: it is my attachment to ephemera, my bad habits, my restless mind that gives me no peace. I must conquer these things. Only then can I be free. One can thus see that the standpoint of Brünnhilde at the climax of the *Ring* is actually a further transformation, or "sublimation," of *thumos*. She is only able to light the pyre because she has broken her

attachment to the world – the supreme act of self-mastery; the supremely free act.

As Evola was fond of saying "There is no god above an awakened man." At the end of the *Ring* we thus really do leave behind gods – by becoming godlike ourselves. Of course, in the warrior the achievement of *Gelassenheit* allows him to continue to fight, conquer, and kill – now with complete detachment, free of concern for the outcome. It allows him to say "yes" to strife and conflict and to the brutality of life. This is the standpoint that is taught to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita* – the standpoint Evola has referred to as the "Aryan Doctrine of Battle and Victory."[5]

And we find this same warrior spirit in the North, in our own Germanic tradition, expressed vividly in the Eddas and Sagas – in all the sources that took possession of Wagner when he planned and composed the *Ring*. One wishes that Wagner had explicitly realized that Brünnhilde's "path of renunciation" is also the path of the warrior, but clearly he did not. (Too bad Evola wasn't around to advise him that the Buddha was *Kshatriya*.) And yet what we must conclude is that in the message of the *Ring* there is in fact *no fundamental departure from the spirit of the pagan, Germanic tradition*. Here we come full circle, back to the original intention of this very long essay, which was not just to place Wagner within the Germanic tradition (broadly construed), but to defend the *Ring* as a grand synthesis – and elaboration – of the Germanic mythological material.

One wishes, again, that Wagner's attitude toward *thumos* – in its higher forms – had been affirmative. And that he could have said "yes" to our Faustian Western nature, and celebrated our desire for knowledge and mastery. It would be left to Wagner's erstwhile friend Friedrich Nietzsche to do all of that. And clearly Nietzsche's own affirmation of "will to power" was born of the same frustration with the *Ring* that we feel. It says so much, including much that is right, but ultimately we cannot make it say exactly what we really want it to.

This need not trouble us, however, for the imperfections of the *Ring* pale in comparison to its sublime virtues. At the very least, Wagner can certainly be said to have succeeded in creating a modern equivalent of

Greek tragedy. But it is crucial to note that it was Germanic myth, not Greek myth, that gave birth to this "total work of art" – which stands, in this author's estimation at least, as the greatest artistic achievement of the modern era.

Appendix: Suggestions for Exploring Wagner

The best way to approach Wagner for the first time is to listen – repeatedly – to just about any of the many CD compilations of "musical highlights" from his operas. There are innumerable discs that offer a "Compact Ring [3]" or a "Ring Without Words [4]," and just about all of them are worth listening to. Then, when one has developed an affinity for Wagner's music, one should attempt to either see live performances of his operas, or watch video recordings. Possibly the best opera to begin with is *The Flying Dutchman* [5], as it happens to be one of the shortest. *Tristan and Isolde* [6] contains, in my view, Wagner's most sublime music, and might also be a good first choice.

As for video recordings of the *Ring*, the best available is from 1980: the controversial Patrice Chéreau [7] staged at Bayreuth. Also worth a look is the Metropolitan Opera's production, staged by Otto Schenk [8]. (Avoid at all costs the Met's recent, ghastly Robert Lepage production [9] – on video [10] or otherwise.) Though the Schenk production is far more "traditional," the Chéreau production is superior in many ways – especially in its pacing.

As for reading material, one could start with the libretti of the *Ring*. The best translation is by Stewart Spencer in *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung* [11]. The best books *about* Wagner are Deryck Cooke's *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring* [12] (which I made extensive use of in this essay), Bryan Magee's *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* [13] (reviewed here [14]), and Magee's *Aspects of Wagner* [15] (probably the book to begin with: it is quite short and offers a good overview of Wagner's work and its meaning, reviewed here [16]).

Notes

[1] Spencer, 350.

[2] Spencer, 362-63.

[3] Quoted in Lee, 94.

[4] See Evola's Doctrine of Awakening.

[5] See Julius Evola, "The Aryan Doctrine of Battle and Victory," in Tyr 2 (Atlanta: Ultra, 203-2004).

HOW TO KNOW IF YOU HAVE HAD A MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Most people believe they have never had a mystical experience. This includes sceptics, of course – but also those who are quite open to the idea and who wonder, perhaps, why they have never been graced with one. However, the conclusions of both groups are usually based on misconceptions about what a mystical experience must be like. People imagine, for instance, that it involves visions of some kind, in which, perhaps, voices are heard or supernatural beings appear. They may believe that mystical experience involves Swedenborgian journeys to other realms, out of body experiences, automatic writing, and other such exotic phenomena. While certainly such events (if they exist) do qualify as "mystical," it is nonetheless a serious error to use these sorts of phenomena as a standard.

Like many other sorts of experiences, mystical events exist on a spectrum or continuum. For example, everyone accepts that there is more than one kind of orgasm: sex is sometimes rapturous, sometimes disappointing. So it also is with aesthetic experience: I may be profoundly moved by one musical performance, and relatively unmoved by another. As to the spectrum of mystical experience, at one end there is rapture, and a sense of being totally transformed. Plotinus writes, "It has happened often. Roused into myself from my body – outside everything else and inside myself – my gaze has met a beauty wondrous and great. At such moments I have been certain that mine was the better part, mine the best of lives lived to the fullest, mine identity with the divine."

The other end of the mystical spectrum is not, however, like the other end of sex or the experience of listening to music; the other end of the mystical spectrum is not "disappointing" or "unmoving." It is still an extraordinary experience (in the literal meaning of that term), and it is profound – but it is very brief, and much less dramatic than the experiences we have heard about from figures like Plotinus, or Hildegard of Bingen, or Emmanuel Swedenborg. These fleeting, not-so-dramatic mystical experiences, I would maintain, actually come to us on a semi-regular basis. In fact, I would wager that almost everyone reading this

essay has already had one. These experiences go largely unnoticed, however, for three basic reasons: (1) they do not fit our stereotype of the mystical experience (heavens parting, staring into the gaping maw of Krishna, etc.); (2) they are usually, again, very brief; and (3) they do not cohere with the rest of waking life, and our sense of what is "normal."

To further explain what I am getting it, I will use the phenomenon of hallucination as a helpful analogy. (This is somewhat of an ironic choice, of course, since skeptics would like to dismiss all so-called mystical experiences as hallucinations!) Most people will tell you that they have never had a hallucination. The reason is that they have a fixed, overly dramatic idea of what hallucinations are: seeing pink elephants, imagining that your dog is telling you to go out and kill (as in the "Son of Sam" case), or imagining that bugs are crawling all over your skin (as in the DTs). And they assume that hallucinations are a sign of some serious physical or mental malady. But any competent intro psychology professor will tell you that, in fact, we have hallucinations on a daily basis.

Have you ever imagined that you heard the phone ring, when it had not? Have you ever thought you saw, in your peripheral vision, a bug crawling on the ceiling, and turned to look and found nothing there? Have you ever thought you smelled something bad and searched in vain for the source? These sorts of things are daily occurrences and the examples just given qualify as, respectively, auditory, visual, and olfactory hallucinations. These events happen to us so often we don't even reflect on them, hence most people's surprise when told that they regularly experience hallucinations. Further, we are habituated to deal with these minor hallucinations in a way that is quick, efficient, and perfectly rational. We simply check to see if the experience matches up to the rest of our experience.

For example, I turn my head and look directly at the ceiling to see if a bug really is there. Finding that there isn't one, I instantly dismiss the experience as a "trick of the eye" and think no more about it. Or, smelling something bad, I ask if others smell it. If they do not, I usually pay the matter no further attention. In both cases, we immediately dismiss the event as a "trick" because it does not fit into the regular pattern of our

experience of reality: real objects don't simply vanish when looked at directly; odors are usually detectable by more than one person (they are, to use a fancy word, intersubjectively verifiable). And so on.

I'd like to suggest that the place of mystical experience in our lives is actually quite close to that of hallucinations – and our manner of dealing with both is strikingly similar. I believe that we experience small-scale, fleeting mystical experiences on a semi-regular basis (not as often, however, as we experience hallucinations – though this will obviously depend upon the person). Having claimed this, now I must flesh out just what I mean by such a "small-scale mystical experience."

Have you ever, in the middle of doing something (anything, really) suddenly felt that there was a kind of "break" in the ordinary flow of your object-centered experience? I do not mean that suddenly you are no longer aware of what is in front of you. But it is as if suddenly the *quality* of your awareness changes. For example, have you ever, quite suddenly, been struck by the fact that what you are looking at *really exists*? Again, it could be anything. Perhaps you are handling a small stone. And suddenly, inexplicably, it is as if you see for the first time that *this is*. Fleetingly, you experience a sense of wonder and strangeness. Or, to take another example, perhaps there comes a moment in your day when, for no apparent reason, you suddenly and very briefly have the strong intuition that everything right now, just as it is, is somehow fundamentally *right*. A further example: Have you ever had the experience, perhaps in some kind of natural setting, when you felt relaxed and content, that there is some fundamental *unity* to everything?

Usually, these experiences go as swiftly and as inexplicably as they come. Again, I am not speaking of an experience of being yanked away from the objects around you, or of seeing new or strange objects (such an experience would belong at the extreme end of the mystical spectrum). Rather, I am talking about a kind of momentary shift of focus, in which you are suddenly seeing the same world in an entirely different way. This experience is an interruption in the normal flow of time, and it is a shift to what I have already characterized as a different "quality" of experience. It communicates nothing in words. You simply seem to see

the truth of things at a higher, or deeper level. And the experience carries a "quality of profundity." In other words, when you have the experience it carries an ineffable, but unmistakable "feel of truth." If the experience could speak, it would say "This is *it*: this is how things *really* are."

Again, the experience I am speaking of is usually very, very brief. And, just as in the case of the hallucination, we tend to simply dismiss it. The reasons we do so, in fact, are very similar, though subtly different. In the case of the hallucination, we dismiss a sensory event because it does not fit in with the steady flow or overall pattern of sense experience. In the case of the fleeting, small-scale mystical experience, the event is dismissed because it seems to convey an *interpretation* of the real that is completely out of keeping with our ordinary interpretation. If we were to *stay* with what the experience seems to say to us about reality, it would necessitate a radical shift in how we relate to what is present to us, at least for a few minutes – but for most of us, even those few minutes are intolerable.

To illustrate this, let's take the first example I gave above: I am handling a small stone, and suddenly I have the strange intuition that for the first time I am realizing that *this is*. Such a realization constitutes a fundamental change of focus from how we usually relate to objects. Ordinarily, our relation to objects is utilitarian. I pick up the stone, say, because I want to skip it across the lake – because I'm competing with my friends to see who can do it best. So, the stone simply becomes a tool; something to use for some practical purpose. But if I pick up the stone and am suddenly struck with wonder by the fact that this thing *exists*, this is an entirely different way of relating to the stone. If I were to stay with this feeling and with the thought to which it leads – presumably: the fact *that things are* is something that should occasion wonder – I would immediately lose interest in skipping stones. I would be immediately removed (mentally, not physically) from my surroundings, and my whole manner of relating to the world would change, at least for a while.

For most people, this is strange and uncomfortable. The feeling of wonder may be in some sense pleasurable and satisfying, but is also

powerfully discomfiting to many. And imagine what would happen if I tried to stay with this moment, to really look at this stone and stay with this intuition of its existence, instead of skipping it across the lake. Well, as the seconds tick by my friends would stand there expectantly, waiting for me to skip the stone, wondering why I am frozen there, staring at it. If still more seconds tick by there is the danger they will think me . . . odd. And so there are powerful influences at work that pressure us not to stay with this moment. To do so would both upset our well-established, conventional sense of the real, of what life is about – and risk ostracism. There is also very little chance that most people will return to the experience later, in thought, and ask themselves what it meant. For when we try to interpret what is being conveyed by the experience, it is, again, always something at odds with how we have been taught to orient ourselves toward the real.

So, these sorts of experiences happen to us now and then – but they are brief, and we usually quickly dispense with them, and do not return to them. Do you recognize yourself in any of what I have said? Have you ever had an experience that seemed in any way like the ones I have described? If so, you have had mystical experiences and simply did not know it. Sometimes these experiences do stay with us. In other words, we move on from them quickly – but we don't forget them. And perhaps we may recall them from time to time, but the recall may not really lead to anything. Now and then, we remember this strange event and how it seemed to crack open our ordinary experience of things. Perhaps we wonder, or shudder a bit – then we promptly return to our ordinary life.

My mother had such a tale to tell. She thought of herself as a religious person, though she was far from devout and considered religious observance more of a social duty than anything else. She was very close to her father, and suffered greatly when he died. Shortly after the funeral, my mother found herself standing in her parents' backyard, near the end of the day. Her eyes were attracted by the setting Sun, its orange glow shining through the trees. In just that moment, she told me that she suddenly felt suffused by a strong sense of peace. She had the intuition, which did not come in the form of words, that everything was as it should be, that everything was *right*. Then the experience passed

away, and she returned to the house and to her family. The experience lasted only a few seconds, but she remembered it vividly for years. It may have been the one thing in her life that convinced her of a cosmic order – what she simply would have called God.

Experiences of the kind I am describing happen even to hardened skeptics. They usually dismiss them, of course, with some kind of materialistic explanation. Some glitch in the brain, they conclude. Nothing to get excited about. Certainly no reason to think any differently about the world or ourselves. No reason to question our assumptions. Their appeal to what they consider "science" (in reality, a dogmatic and ill-founded materialism) provides them with an interpretation that is at least as comforting – for them – as the faith of a Christian. Of course, there are also some people who are just mystically tone deaf: not only are they skeptics, they really never have had an experience of the kind I have described, and can't even begin to understand what I am talking about.[1] [2]

Hopefully, however, the foregoing has convinced most of my readers that, yes, they have had a mystical experience; that some experiences they formerly did not think of as "mystical" really do qualify. Still, at this point some might wish for a definition of "mysticism." Perhaps because they might believe that using such a definition as a criterion would be a sure way to decide whether we have had mystical experiences. The trouble with this, however, is that all discussion of "mysticism" really must begin with the "mystical experience."[2] [3] "Mysticism" is notoriously difficult to define, and the basic reason for this is stated openly by many mystics themselves: This is something that really cannot be put into words. And the root reason for *this* is that mysticism, as a form of thought or body of ideas, has its basis in the ineffable mystical experience.

All mystical writings are attempts to put into words the realizations that someone has had from mystical experience. Now, I am aware that not all mystical writers actually speak of their experiences (e.g., Meister Eckhart) – but I would maintain, nonetheless, that mysticism, as writings or teachings, is impossible without some basis in mystical experience. That experience could be anywhere on the "spectrum" we discussed

earlier. But mysticism without at least some mystical experience is, so far as I can see, unthinkable. Of course, the trouble with mystical experience is that it itself is unthinkable, or at least unspeakable – again, as the mystics continually tell us. There is a great deal of irony in the fact that so much ink has been spilled trying to describe the indescribable – an irony that has not been lost on many, including those who would simply dismiss mysticism.

Of course, oceans of ink have also been spilled trying to describe *love* – even though that emotion is probably indescribable and indefinable; we truly know it only when we experience it. But nobody thinks that all the poetry and prose that has been produced on love is therefore complete hogwash, and a waste of time. (And certainly nobody thinks that if we can't define love it doesn't exist.) Rather, we find that the great poets do indeed capture *something* about love – they do indeed *approach* the reality of it. What they say resonates with us, even though what they say never perfectly captures love, just because no verbal formula ever could.

Skeptics' objection to mysticism is that mystics contradict themselves – to such a degree that we can even speak of a "logic of contradiction" in mysticism. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad tells us that Brahman "sees without seeing . . . hears without hearing . . . thinks without thinking." Mystics like Eckhart and Cusa tell us that God is both "transcendent and immanent," "distinct and indistinct," "maximum and minimum" – and neither. A first step toward understanding why mysticism (East and West) contains such paradox is simply to recognize that it is always an attempt to express in words an experience that is beyond words; an experience of "something" that is beyond all familiar categories. Hence, all descriptions fail.

Skeptics also reject mysticism because mystics claim to be describing One Reality, but they do not agree with each other. The differences between mystics are partly a reflection, again, of the inherent impossibility of capturing the mystical "something" in words. But they are also the result of pre-existing beliefs and cultural peculiarities. For example, a Christian mystic is inevitably going to interpret his

experience of the ineffable as having something to do with Jesus Christ. A Hindu mystic will arrive at a very different interpretation.

Julius Evola provides us with another example of differences in mystical interpretation – one with which my readers may be familiar. In *Introduction to Magic* and elsewhere, Evola rejects "mysticism" and terms his own path "initiation." He also sometimes refers to the former as the "wet (or humid) way" and the latter as the "dry way." According to Evola, mysticism is all about yearning to be swept away by an ineffable Absolute; submerging one's existence in the Other. By contrast, initiation is about *identification* with the Absolute – it is a path of transforming oneself into the Ultimate Power; essentially, it is a path of self-deification.

Now, Evola has correctly identified two real and contrasting paths. But his terminology is arbitrary. My use of "mysticism" is simply broader than his: I would describe the "wet way" and "dry way" as two varieties of mysticism. The two ways identified by Evola are, in fact, perfect illustrations of how mystical experience provokes conflicting interpretations. To see this, let us consider the claim made in Vedanta, *tat tvam asi* (you are it!). We can also express this in the formula "Atman = Brahman." Suppose we have an experience of this – meaning an experience in which suddenly I feel that I am identified with the Ultimate. When we come away from the experience, how we subsequently interpret it is going to involve differences of emphasis.

To put it in the simplest possible way, we arrive at the interpretations known as the "wet way" and the "dry way" depending upon which side of the = sign we emphasize in "Atman = Brahman." Do I interpret the experience as meaning that the Ultimate *really is me* (Brahman = ATMAN), or as meaning that I *really am the Ultimate* (i.e., an appearance of the Ultimate; Atman = BRAHMAN)? The first interpretation is an experience of self-deification: I am God (the "dry way"). The second is an experience of the cancellation of my little self, and absorption into the great Ultimate (the "wet way").

However, one can see that the move from one to the other is really a kind of "Gestalt switch." (Is it a rabbit, or is it a duck? Is it a vase, or is it two people facing each other?) What determines whether one inclines to the

"wet way" or the "dry way"? It probably has a great deal to do with personal character. And it almost certainly has something to do with one's sex. The "dry way" is pretty much exclusively dominated by men, and women's mysticism is wholly and entirely "wet." (Medieval female mystics constantly wrote about yearning for Christ as for a lover, yearning to be penetrated by "the beloved," longing to lose themselves in Him, etc.)

The "wet way" and the "dry way" are simply two ways of talking about the same exact thing, with different types of people preferring two different sets of interpretive categories. Which interpretation is "correct"? Both. And neither. The same can be said for *all* mystical teachings. All are correct. And none. The mystics are really at their most honest, and closest to truth, when they simply say "this cannot be said."

But we find this disappointing. We want the texts of mysticism to communicate a full-bodied truth to us. Ultimately, however, all they can really do, by way of their strangeness and paradoxical reasoning, is put our minds into a state of confusion, a feeling of the utter futility of language and conventional logic. This can serve to point us beyond our ordinary experience to *something else*. In short, the writings or teachings prepare the ground. For what? For the mystical experience, which is the only true means of understanding.

Our disappointment with mystical texts rests on a misunderstanding. It tacitly assumes that words and accounts are the only way in which truth can be communicated. But the whole point of mysticism, really, is that mystical experience is *another mode in which truth can be reached*. Other human modes of truth-seeking include poetry, myth, music, painting, sculpture, drama, philosophy, and science.

Even though most of us (as I hope I have now convinced you) have had mystical experiences, we usually think of "the mystic" as someone who has them more often. But sometimes this is not the case: Sometimes the mystic is a man (or woman) who is grabbed by one experience and seeks to live the rest of his life in the light of it. What does this mean? It could possibly mean to interpret it again and again – perhaps to interpret it to death. But it could also mean to replicate the *openness* that is a

precondition of mystical experience in the first place. Simply put: If we had not been somehow open or receptive at the time, no mystical experience would have occurred. If the mystic is smart enough to recognize this, and to find some way to till this soil a bit, then the likelihood of further mystical experiences increases. (This is the esoteric purpose of prayer.)

Given all the foregoing, however, the reader may be surprised when I say that the real point of the mystical life is *not* to have mystical experiences. It is to live in the light of the truth that one has glimpsed. The point of the mystical life is not to have multiple, peak experiences of "awakening"; it is to live life fully awake. It is to put oneself into a state that lives with the truth, a truth which is only briefly glimpsed in the mystical experience. Obviously, this state of living with the truth is not a constant mystical experience. This would be like thinking that the purpose of life is to achieve an uninterrupted orgasm.

We can begin to live the mystical life by catching ourselves when we have small-scale mystical experiences, of the kind I have described. And the good news is that we can make them more likely, through putting ourselves into that state of openness or receptivity discussed a moment ago. But how does one do that? Well, here we arrive at one of the greatest paradoxes of the mystics, which seems calculated to turn the impatient and the skeptical away from the path permanently. The answer is that it must be through a doing that is no doing at all; an acting that is not acting. And how do you do that? *You don't*.

Notes

[1] [4] Probably the only way such people may ever have mystical experiences is through the use of psychedelic drugs – which do, in fact, guarantee an experience of the kind I have described. Of course, even a dramatic drug experience can be dismissed by skeptics as merely a "hallucination" – hence the question-begging term "hallucinogens." The choice of terminology we face here – "hallucinogens" vs. "psychedelics" – points to competing phenomenological descriptions. One set of individuals interpret their experience on, say, LSD, as "hallucinations"; i.e. as false. But the same data could just as well be interpreted as affording us deeper insight

into the fundamental nature of reality. Why should we automatically assume that the experience is "deceptive," as opposed to an indication of some important truth? The only reason for rejecting such an interpretation is the recognition that what is experienced in the "trip" does not cohere with ordinary experience, and commonsense metaphysics. Obviously, such a reaction – whether it comes from a "scientist" or from an "ordinary person" – is motivated simply by fear and conformism.

[2] [5] Yes, I am aware that many scholarly discussions of "mysticism" do not begin this way. My point is that they should.

EVOLA'S NIETZSCHEAN ETHIC

A CODE OF CONDUCT FOR THE HIGHER MAN IN KALI YUGA

The subtitle of the English translation of Julius Evola's *Ride the Tiger* (*Cavalcare la Tigre*) promises that it offers "A Survival Manual for the Aristocrats of the Soul."[1] [2] As a result, one comes to the work with the expectation that it will constitute a kind of "self-help book" for Traditionalists, for "men against time." One expects that Evola will offer moral support and perhaps even specific instructions for revolting against the modern world. Unfortunately, the subtitle proves misleading. *Ride the Tiger* is primarily devoted to an analysis of aspects of the present age of decline (the Kali Yuga): critiques of relativism, scientism, modern art, modern music, and of figures like Heidegger and Sartre; discussions of the decline of marriage, the relation between the sexes, drug use, and so forth. Many of the points Evola makes in this volume are made in his other works, sometimes at greater length and more lucidly.

For those seeking something like a "how to" guide for living as a Traditionalist, it is mainly the second division of the book ("In the World Where God is Dead") that offers something, and chiefly it is to be found in Chapter Eight: "The Transcendent Dimension – 'Life' and 'More than Life.'" My purpose in this essay is to piece together the miniature "survival manual" provided by Chapter Eight – some of which consists of little more than hints, conveyed in Evola's often frustratingly opaque style. It is my view that what we find in these pages is of profound importance for anyone struggling to hold on to his sanity in the face of the decadence and dishonesty of today's world. It is also essential reading for anyone seeking to achieve the ideal of "self-overcoming" taught by Evola – seeking, in other words, to "ride the tiger."

The central figure of the book's second part is unquestionably Friedrich Nietzsche, to whom Evola repeatedly refers. Evola's attitude toward Nietzsche is critical. However, it is obvious that Nietzsche exercised a profound and positive influence on him. Indeed, virtually every recommendation Evola makes for living as a Traditionalist – in this section of the work, at least – is somehow derived from Nietzsche. This

despite the fact that Nietzsche was *not* a Traditionalist – a fact of which Evola was well aware, and to which I shall turn later.

In the last paragraph of Chapter Seven, Evola announces that in the next chapter he will consider "a *line of conduct* during the reign of dissolution that is not suitable for everyone, but for a differentiated type, and especially for the heir to the man of the traditional world, who retains his roots in that world even though he finds himself devoid of any support for it in his outer existence."[2] [3] This "line of conduct" turns out, in Chapter Eight, to be based entirely on statements made by Nietzsche. That chapter opens with a continuation of the discussion of the man who would be "heir to the man of the traditional world." Evola writes, "What is more, the essential thing is that such a man is characterized by an existential dimension not present in the predominant human type of recent times – that is, the dimension of transcendence."[3] [4]

Evola clearly regarded this claim as of supreme importance, since he places the entire sentence just quoted in italics. The sentence is important for two reasons. First, as it plainly asserts, it provides the key characteristic of the "differentiated type" for whom Evola writes, or for whom he prepares the ground. Second, the sentence actually provides the key point on which Evola parts company with Nietzsche: for all the profundity and inspiration Nietzsche can provide us, he does not recognize a "dimension of transcendence." Indeed, he denigrates the very idea as a projection of "slave morality." Our first step, therefore, must be to understand exactly what Evola means by "the dimension of transcendence." Unfortunately, in *Ride the Tiger* Evola does not make this very easy. To anyone familiar with Evola's other works, however, his meaning is clear.

"Dimension of transcendence" can be understood as having several distinct, but intimately-related meanings in Evola's philosophy. First, the term "transcendence" simply refers to something existing apart from, or beyond the world around us. The "aristocrats of the soul" living in the Kali Yuga must live their lives in such a way that they "stand apart from" or transcend the world in which they find themselves. This is the meaning of the phrase "men against time," which I have already used (and which

derives from Savitri Devi). The "differentiated type" of which Evola writes is one who has differentiated himself from the times, and from the men who are like "sleepers" or *pashu* (beasts). Existing in the world in a physical sense, even playing some role (or roles) in that world, one nevertheless lives wholly *apart* from it at the same time, in a spiritual sense. This is the path of those who aim to "ride the tiger": they do not separate themselves from the decay, like monks or hermits; instead they live in the midst of it, but remain uncorrupted. (This is also little different from what the Gurdjieffian tradition calls "the fourth way," and it is the essence of the "Left-Hand Path" as described by Evola and others.)

However, there is another, deeper sense of the "dimension of transcendence." The type of man of which Evola speaks is not simply *reacting* to the world in which he finds himself. This is not what his "apartness" consists in – not fundamentally. Nor does it consist in some kind of intellectual commitment to a "philosophy of Traditionalism," as found in books by Evola and others. Rather, "transcendence" in the deepest sense refers to the *Magnum Opus* that is the aim of the "magic" or spiritual alchemy discussed by Evola in his most important works (chiefly *Introduction to Magic* and *The Hermetic Tradition*). "Transcendence" means the overcoming of the world and of the ego – really, of *all* manifestation, whether it is objective ("out there") or subjective ("in here"). Such overcoming is the work of what is called in Vedanta the "witnessing consciousness." Evola frequently calls this "the Self." (For more on this teaching, see my essays "What is Odinism? [5]" in *TYR*, Vol. 4 [6], and "On Being and Waking" in *TYR*, Vol. 5, forthcoming [7].)

These different senses of "transcendence" are intertwined. It is only through the second sense of "transcendence," of the overcoming of all manifestation, that the first sense, standing apart from the modern world, can truly be achieved. The man who is "heir to the man of the traditional world" can retain "his roots in that world" only by the achievement of a state of being that is identical to that of the "highest type" of the traditional world. That type was also "differentiated": set apart from other men. Fundamentally, however, to be a "differentiated type" does not mean to be differentiated from others. It refers to the state of one who has actively differentiated "himself" from *all else*, including

"the ego." This active differentiation is the same thing as "identification" with the Self – which, for Evola, is not the dissolution of oneself in an Absolute Other, but the transmutation of "oneself" into "the Self." Further, the metaphysical differentiation just described is the only sure and true path to the "differentiation" exhibited by the man who lives in the Kali Yuga, but stands apart from it at the same time.

Much later I will discuss how and why Nietzsche fails to understand "the dimension of transcendence," and how it constitutes the fatal flaw in his philosophy. Recognizing this, Evola nonetheless proceeds to draw from Nietzsche a number of principles which constitute the spirit of "the overman."[4] [8] Evola offers these as characterizing his own ideal type – with the crucial caveat that, contra Nietzsche, these principles are only *truly* realizable in a man who has realized in himself the "dimension of transcendence." Basically, there are ten such principles cited by Evola, each of which he derives from statements made by Nietzsche. The passage in which these occur is highly unusual, since it consists in one long sentence (lasting more than a page), with each principle set off by semi-colons. I will now consider each of these points in turn.

1. "The power to make a law for oneself, the 'power to refuse and not to act when one is pressed to affirmation by a prodigious force and an enormous tension.'"[5] [9] This first principle is crucial, and must be discussed at length. Earlier, in Chapter Seven ("Being Oneself"), Evola quotes Nietzsche saying, "We must liberate ourselves from morality so that we can live morally."[6] [10] Evola correctly notes that in such statements, and in the idea of "making a law for oneself," Nietzsche is following in the footsteps of Kant, who insisted that genuine morality is based upon *autonomy* – which literally means "a law to oneself." This is contrasted by Kant to *heteronomy* (a term Evola also uses in this same context): morality based upon external pressures, or upon fealty to laws established independent of the subject (e.g., following the Ten Commandments, conforming to public opinion, acting so as to win the approval of others, etc.). This is the meaning of saying, "we must liberate ourselves from morality [i.e., from externally imposed moral commandments] so that we can live morally [i.e., autonomously]." In order for the subject's standpoint to be genuinely moral, he must in a

sense "legislate" the moral law for himself, and affirm it as reasonable. Indeed, for Kant, ultimately the authority of the moral law consists in our "willing" it as rational.

Of course, Nietzsche's position is not Kant's, though Evola is not very helpful in explaining to us what the difference consists in. He writes that Nietzsche's notion of autonomy is "on the same lines" as Kant's "but with the difference that the command is absolutely internal, separate from any external mover, and is not based on a hypothetical law extracted from practical reason that is valid for all and revealed to man's conscience as such, but rather on one's own specific being."[7] [11] There are a good deal of confusions here – so much so that one wonders if Evola has even read Kant. For instance, Kant specifically rejects the idea of an "external mover" for morality (which is the same thing as heteronomy). Further, there is nothing "hypothetical" about Kant's moral law, the "categorical imperative," which he specifically defines in contrast to "hypothetical imperatives." We may also note the vagueness of saying that "the command" must be based "on one's specific being."

Still, through this gloom one may detect exactly the position that Evola correctly attributes to Nietzsche. Like Kant, Nietzsche demands that the overman practice autonomy, that he give a law to himself. However, Kant held that our self-legislation simultaneously legislates for others: the law I give to myself is the law I would give to any other rational being. The overman, by contrast, legislates for himself only – or possibly for himself and the tiny number of men like him. If we recognize fundamental qualitative differences between human types, then we must consider the possibility that different rules apply to them. Fundamental to Kant's position is the egalitarian assertion that people do not get to "play by their own rules" (indeed, for Kant the claim to be an exception to general rules, or to make an exception for oneself, is *the* marker of immorality). If we reject this egalitarianism, then it does indeed follow that certain special individuals get to play by their own rules.

This does not mean that for the self-proclaimed overman "anything goes." Indeed, any individual who would interpret the foregoing as licensing arbitrary self-indulgence of whims or passions would be

immediately disqualified as a potential overman. This will become crystal clear as we proceed with the rest of Evola's "ten principles" in Chapter Eight. For the moment, simply look once more at the wording Evola borrows from Nietzsche in our first "principle": the "power to refuse and not to act when one is pressed to affirmation by a prodigious force and an enormous tension." To refuse what? What sort of force? What sort of tension? The claim seems vague, yet it is actually quite clear: autonomy means, fundamentally, the power to say *no* to *whatever* forces or tensions press us to affirm them or give way to them.

The "forces" in question could be internal or external: they could be the force of social and environmental circumstances; they could be the force of my own passions, habits, and inclinations. It is a great folly to think that my passions and such are "mine," and that in following them I am "free." Whatever creates an "enormous tension" in me and demands I give way, whether it comes from "in me" or "outside me" is precisely *not mine*. Only the autonomous "I" that can *see this* is "mine," and only it can *say no* to these forces. It has "the power to refuse and not to act." Essentially, Nietzsche and Evola are talking about self-mastery. This is the "law" that the overman – and the "differentiated type" – gives to himself. And clearly it is not "universalizable"; the overman does not and cannot expect others to follow him in this.[8] [12]

In short, this first principle asks of us that we cultivate in ourselves the power to refuse or to negate – in one fashion or other – all that which would command us. Again, this applies also to forces within me, such as passions and desires. Such refusal may not always amount to literally thwarting or annihilating forces that influence us. In some cases, this is impossible. Our "refusal" may sometimes consist only in *seeing* the force in question, as when I see that I am acting out of ingrained habit, even when, at that moment, I am powerless to resist. Such "seeing" already places distance between us and the force that would move us: it says, in effect, "I am not that." As we move through Evola's other principles, we will learn more about the exercise of this very special kind of autonomy.

2. "The natural and free asceticism moved to test its own strength by gauging 'the power of a will according to the degree of resistance, pain,

and torment that it can bear in order to turn them to its own advantage.'"[9] [13] Here we have another expression of the "autonomy" of the differentiated type. Such a man tests his own strength and will, by deliberately choosing that which is difficult. Unlike the Last Man, who has left "the regions where it is hard to live,"[10] [14] the overman/differentiated man seeks them out.

Evola writes that "from this point of view everything that existence offers in the way of evil, pain, and obstacles . . . is accepted, even desired."[11] [15] This may be the most important of all the points that Evola makes in this chapter – and it is a principle that can serve as a lifeline for all men living in the Kali Yuga, or in any time. If we can live up to this principle, then we have made ourselves truly worthy of the mantle of "overman." The idea is this: can I say "yes" to *whatever* hardship life offers me? Can I use all of life's suffering and evils as a way to test and to transform myself? Can I forge myself in the fire of suffering? And, going a step further, can I *desire* hardship and suffering? It is one thing, of course, to accept some obstacle or calamity as a means to test myself. It is quite another to actively desire such things.

Here we must consider our feelings very carefully. Personally, I do not fear my own death nearly as much as the death of those close to me. And I fear my own physical incapacitation and decline more than death. Is it psychologically realistic for me to desire the death of my loved ones, or desire a crippling disease, as a way to test myself? No, it is not – and this is not what Evola and Nietzsche mean. Rather, the mental attitude in question is one where we say a great, general "yes" to all that life can bring in the way of hardship. Further, we welcome such challenges, for without them we would not grow. It is not that we desire this specific calamity or that, but we do desire, in general, to be tested. And, finally, we welcome such testing with supreme confidence: whatever life flings at me, I will overcome. In a sense, I will absorb all negativity and only grow stronger by means of it.

3. Evola next speaks of the "principle of not obeying the passions, but of holding them on a leash." Then he quotes Nietzsche: "greatness of character does not consist in not having such passions: one must have

them to the greatest degree, but held in check, and moreover doing this with simplicity, not feeling any particular satisfaction thereby."[12] [16] This follows from the very first principle, discussed earlier. To repeat, giving free rein to our passions has nothing to do with autonomy, freedom, or mastery. Indeed, it is the primary way in which the common man finds himself controlled.

To see this, one must be able to recognize "one's own" passions as, in reality, *other*. I do not choose these things, or the power they exert. What follows from this, however, is not necessarily thwarting those passions or "denying oneself." As Evola explains in several of his works, the Left-Hand Path consists precisely in making use of that which would enslave or destroy a lesser man. We hold the passions "on a leash," Evola says. The metaphor is appropriate. Our passions must be like well-trained dogs. Such animals are filled with passionate intensity for the chase – but their master controls them completely: at a command, they run after their prey, but *only* when commanded. As Nietzsche's words suggest, the greatest man is not the man whose passions are weak. A man with weak passions finds them fairly easy to control! The superior man is one whose passions are incredibly strong – one in whom the "life force" is strong – but who holds those passions in check.

4. Nietzsche writes, "the superior man is distinguished from the inferior by his intrepidity, by his defiance of unhappiness."[13] [17] Here too we have invaluable advice for living. The intrepid man is fearless and unwavering; he endures. But why does Nietzsche connect this with "defiance of unhappiness"? The answer is that just as the average man is a slave to the passions that sweep him away at any given time, so he is also a prisoner of his "moods." Most men rise in the morning and find themselves in one mood or another: "today I am happy," "today I am sad." They accept that, in effect, some determination has been made for them, and that they are powerless in the matter. If the unhappiness endures, they have a "disease" which they look to drugs or alcohol to cure.

As with the passions, the average man "owns" his moods: "this unhappiness is *mine*, it is *me*," he says, in effect. The superior man learns to see his moods as if they were the weather – or, better yet, as if they

were minor demons besetting him: external mischief makers, to whom he has the power to say "yes" or "no." The superior man, upon finding that he feels unhappiness, says "ah yes, there it is again." Immediately, seeing "his" unhappiness as other – as a habit, a pattern, a kind of passing mental cloud – he refuses identification with it. And he sets about intrepidly conquering unhappiness. He will not acquiesce to it.

5. The above does not mean, however, that the superior man intrepidly sets about trying to make himself "happy." Evola quotes Nietzsche as saying "it is a sign of regression when pleasure begins to be considered as the highest principle."[14] [18] The superior man responds with incredulity to those who "point the way to happiness," and respond, "But what does happiness mean *to us*?"[15] [19] The preoccupation with "happiness" is characteristic of the inferior modern type Nietzsche refers to as "the Last Man" ("'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth."[16] [20]

But if we do not seek happiness, in the name of what do we "defy unhappiness"? Answer: in the name of greatness, self-mastery, self-overcoming. Kant can be of some limited help to us here as well, for he said that the aim of life should not be happiness, but making oneself *worthy* of happiness. Many individuals may achieve happiness (actually, the dumber one is, the greater one's chances). But only some are *worthy* of happiness. The superior man is worthy of happiness, whether he has it or not. And he does not care either way. He does not even aim, really, to be worthy of happiness, but to be worthy of *greatness*, like Aristotle's "great-souled man" (*megalopsuchos*).[17] [21]

6. According to Evola, the superior man claims the right (quoting Nietzsche) "to exceptional acts as attempts at victory over oneself and as acts of freedom . . . to assure oneself, with a sort of asceticism, a preponderance and a certitude of one's own strength of will."[18] [22] This point is related to the second principle, discussed earlier. The superior man is master, first and foremost, of himself. He therefore seeks opportunities to test himself in exceptional ways. Evola provides an extended discussion of one form of such self-testing in his *Meditations on*

the Peaks: Mountain Climbing as Metaphor for the Spiritual Quest (and, of course, for Evola mountain climbing was not entirely metaphorical!). Through such opportunities, one "assures oneself" of the strength of one's will. But there is more: through such tests, one's will becomes even stronger.

"Asceticism" suggests self-denial. But how does such testing of the will constitute "denying oneself"? The key, of course, lies in asking "what is my self?" The self that is denied in such acts of "self-mastery" is precisely the self that seeks to hold on to life, to safety, to security, and to its ephemeral preoccupations and possessions. We "deny" this self precisely by threatening what it values most. To master it is to progressively still its voice and loosen its hold on us. It is in this fashion that a higher self – what Evola, again, calls the Self – grows in us.

7. The superior man affirms the freedom which includes "keeping the distance which separates us, being indifferent to difficulties, hardships, privations, *even to life itself*."[19] [23] This mostly reaffirms points made earlier. But what is "the distance that separates us"? Here Nietzsche could be referring to hierarchy, or what he often calls "the order of rank." He could also be referring to the well-known desire of the superior man for apartness, verging sometimes on a desire for isolation. The superior man takes himself away from others; he has little need for the company of human beings, unless they are like himself. And even then, he desires the company of such men only in small and infrequent doses. He is repulsed by crowds, and by situations that force him to feel the heat and breath and press of others. Such feelings are an infallible marker of the superior soul – but they are not a "virtue" to be cultivated. One either has such feelings, or one does not. One is either the superior type, or a "people person."

If we consult the context in which the quote appears – an important section of *Twilight of the Idols* – Nietzsche offers us little help in understanding specifically what he means by "the distance that separates us." But the surrounding context is a goldmine of reflections on the superior type, and it is surprising that Evola does not quote it more

fully. Nietzsche remarks that "war educates for freedom" (a point on which Evola reflects at length in his *Metaphysics of War*), then writes:

For what is freedom? Having the will to responsibility for oneself. Maintaining the distance that separates us. Becoming indifferent to trouble, hardships, deprivation, even to life. Being ready to sacrifice people to one's cause, not excluding oneself. Freedom means that the manly instincts, the instincts that celebrate war and winning, dominate other instincts, for example the instinct for "happiness." The human being who has *become free*, not to mention the spirit that has become free, steps all over the contemptible sort of wellbeing dreamt of by grocers, Christians, cows, women, Englishmen, and other democrats. The free human being is a *warrior*.[20] [24]

The rest of the passage is well worth reading.

8. Evola tells us that the superior man rejects "the insidious confusion between discipline and enfeeblement." The goal of discipline is not to produce weakness, but a greater strength. "He who does not dominate is weak, dissipated, inconstant." To discipline oneself is to dominate one's passions. As we saw in our discussion of the third principle, this does not mean stamping out the passions or denying them. Neither does it mean indulging them: the man who heedlessly indulges his passions becomes "weak, dissipated, inconstant." Rather, the superior man learns how to control his passions and to make use of them as a means for self-transformation. It is only when the passions are mastered – when we have reached the point that we cannot be swept away by them – that we can give expression to them in such a way that they become vehicles for self-overcoming.

Evola quotes Nietzsche: "Excess is a reproach only against those who have no right to it; and almost all the passions have been brought into ill repute on account of those who were not sufficiently strong to employ them."[21] [25] The convergence of Nietzsche's position with Evola's portrayal of the Left-Hand Path could not be clearer. The superior man has a right to "excess" because, unlike the common man, he is not swept away by the passions. He holds them "on a leash" (see earlier), and uses them as means to transcend the ego, and to achieve a higher state. The

common man, who identifies with his passions, becomes wholly a slave to them, and is sucked dry. He gives "excess" a bad reputation.

9. Evola's penultimate principle is in the spirit of Nietzsche, but does not quote from him. Evola writes: "To point the way of those who, free from all bonds, obeying only their own law, are unbending in obedience to it and above every human weakness."[22] [26] The first words of this passage are somewhat ambiguous: what does Evola mean by "to point the way of those who . . ." (the original Italian – *l'indicare la via di coloro che* – is no more helpful). Perhaps what is meant here is simply that the superior type points the way for others. He serves as an example – or he serves as the vanguard. This is not, of course, an ideal to which just anyone can aspire. But the example of the superior man can serve to "awaken" others who have the same potential. This was, indeed, something like Nietzsche's own literary intention: to point the way to the Overman; to awaken those whose souls are strong enough.

10. Finally, Evola tells us that the superior type is "heir to the equivocal *virtus* of the Renaissance despots," and that he is "capable of generosity, quick to offer manly aid, of 'generous virtue,' magnanimity, and superiority to his own individuality."[23] [27] Here Evola alludes to Nietzsche's qualified admiration for Cesare Borgia (who Nietzsche offers as an example of what he calls the "men of prey"). The rest of the quote, however, calls to mind Aristotle's description of the great-souled man – especially the use of the term "magnanimity," which some translators prefer to "greatness of soul."[24] [28] The superior man is not a beast. He is capable of such virtues as generosity and benevolence. This is because he is free from that which holds lesser men in thrall. The superior man can be generous with such things as money and possessions, for these have little or no value for him. He can be generous in overlooking the faults of others, for he expects little of them anyway. He can even be generous in forgiving his enemies – when they are safely at his feet. The superior man can do all of this because he possesses "superiority to his own individuality": he is not bound to the pretensions of his own ego, and to the worldly goods the ego craves.

Evola's very long sentence about the superior man now ends with the following summation:

all these are the positive elements that the man of Tradition also makes his own, but which are only comprehensible and attainable when 'life' is 'more than life,' that is, through transcendence. They are values attainable only by those in whom there is something else, and something more, than mere life.

In other words, Nietzsche presents us with a rich and inspiring portrayal of the superior man. And yet, the principles he discusses will have a positive result, and serve the "man of Tradition," only if we turn Nietzsche on his head. Earlier in Chapter Eight, Evola writes: "Nietzsche's solution of the problem of the meaning of life, consisting in the affirmation that this meaning does not exist outside of life, and that life in itself is meaning . . . is valid only on the presupposition of a being that has transcendence as its essential component." (Evola places this entire statement in italics.) In other words, to put the matter quite simply, the meaning of life as life itself is only valid when a man's life is devoted to transcendence (in the senses discussed earlier). Or we could say, somewhat more obscurely, that Nietzsche's points are valid when man's life *transcends* life.

Evola's claim goes to the heart of his criticism of Nietzsche. A page later, he speaks of conflicting tendencies within Nietzsche's thought. On the one hand, we have a "naturalistic exaltation of life" that runs the risk of "a surrender of being to the simple world of instincts and passions." The danger here is that these will then assert themselves "*through* the will, making it their servant."[25] [29] Nietzsche, of course, is famous for his theory of the "will to power." But surrender to the baser impulses of ego and organism will result in those impulses hijacking will and using it for their own purposes. One then becomes a slave to instincts and passions, and the antithesis of a free, autonomous being.

On the other hand, one finds in Nietzsche "testimonies to a reaction to life that cannot arise out of life itself, but solely from a principle superior to it, as revealed in a characteristic phrase: 'Spirit is the life that cuts through life' (*Geist ist das Leben, das selber ins Leben schneidet*)." In other words, Nietzsche's thought exhibits a fundamental contradiction –

a contradiction that *cannot* be resolved within his thought, but only in Evola's. One can find other tensions in Nietzsche's thought as well. I might mention, for example, his evident preference for the values of "master morality," and his analysis of "slave morality" as arising from hatred of life — which nevertheless co-exist with his relativism concerning values. Yet there is so much in Nietzsche that is brilliant and inspiring, we wish we could accept the whole and declare ourselves Nietzscheans. But we simply cannot. This turns out to be no problem, since Evola absorbs what is positive and useful in Nietzsche, and places it within the context of Tradition. In spite of what Nietzsche himself may say, one feels he is more at home with Tradition, than with "perspectivism."[26] [30]

Evola's ten "Nietzschean principles," reframed for the "man of Tradition," provide an inspiring guide for life in this Wolf Age. They point the way. They show us what we must become. These are ideas that challenge us to become worthy of them.

Notes

[1] [31] Julius Evola, Ride the Tiger: A Survival Manual for the Aristocrats of the Soul, trans. Joscelyn Godwin and Constance Fontana (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2003).

[2] [32] Evola, 46, my italics.

[3] [33] Evola, 47.

[4] [34] Übermensch; translated in Ride the Tiger as "superman."

[5] [35] Quoting Nietzsche, Will to Power, section 778.

[6] [36] Evola, 41. Translator notes "adapted from the aphorism in Kritische Gesamtausgabe, vol. 7, part 1, 371."

[7] [37] Evola, 41.

[8] [38] There is a great deal more that can be said here about the difference between Kantian and Nietzschean "autonomy." Indeed, there is an argument to be made that Kant is much closer to Nietzsche than Evola (or Nietzsche) would allow. Ultimately, one sees the stark difference between Kant and Nietzsche in the "egalitarianism" of the different formulations of Kant's categorical imperative. How can a man who is qualitatively different and superior to others commit to following

no other law than what he would will all others follow? How can he affirm the inherent "dignity" in others, who seem to have no dignity at all? Should he affirm their potential dignity, which they themselves simply do not see and may never live up to? But suppose they are so limited, constitutionally, that actualizing that "human dignity" is more or less impossible for them? Kant wants us to affirm that whatever men may actually be, they are nonetheless potentially rational, and thus they possess inherent dignity. For those of us who have seen more of the world than Königsberg, and who have soured on the dreams of Enlightenment, this rings hollow. And how can the overman be expected to adhere to the (self-willed) command to always treat others as ends in themselves, but never as means only – when the vast bulk of humanity seems hardly good for anything other than being used as means to the ends of greater men?

[9] [39] *The translator's note: "Adapted from Twilight of the Idols, 'Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,' sect. 38, where, however, it is 'freedom' that is thus gauged." Beware: Evola sometimes alters Nietzsche's wording.*

[10] [40] *Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, "Zarathustra's Prologue," 5.*

[11] [41] *Evola, 49.*

[12] [42] *Evola, 49. The Will to Power, sect. 928.*

[13] [43] *Will to Power, sect. 222.*

[14] [44] *Will to Power, sect. 790.*

[15] [45] *Will to Power, sect. 781.*

[16] [46] *Thus Spake Zarathustra, "Zarathustra's Prologue," 5.*

[17] [47] *Aristotle also said that the aim of human life is "happiness" (eudaimonia) – but "happiness" has a connotation here different from the familiar one.*

[18] [48] *Will to Power, sect. 921.*

[19] [49] *Twilight of the Idols, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," sect. 38. Italics added by Evola.*

[20] [50] *See Twilight of the Idols, trans. Richard Polt (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 74-75.*

[21] [51] *Here I have substituted the translation of Walter Kaufmann and R. G. Hollingdale for the one provided in Ride the Tiger, as it is more accurate and concise. See The Will to Power, trans. Kaufmann and Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 408.*

[22] [52] *Evola, 49.*

[23] [53] The translators of Ride the Tiger direct us here to Beyond Good and Evil, sect. 260.

[24] [54] Grandezza d'animo literally translates to "greatness of soul."

[25] [55] Evola, 48.

[26] [56] Evola writes (p. 52), "[Nietzsche's] case illustrates in precise terms what can, and indeed must, occur in a human type in which transcendence has awakened, yes, but who is uncentered with regard to it."