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Freeing the Ancient Wisdom from Catholic Crusts: Stefan George and Incognito Paganism

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Stefan George und die Religion



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Wolfgang Braungart

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Inhalt

Vorwort und Übersicht über die Beiträge — VII

Wolfgang Braungart

Romantische Mythopoesie, Georges Mythopoesie — 1

Oder: Kann man Mythen machen? Zur Einführung

Jürgen Brokoff

Prophetie und Erlösung in Stefan Georges Lyrik nach 1900 — 27

Lothar van Laak

Maximin als religiöses Medium — 42

Georg Dörr

Stefan Georges neopagane Maximin-Religion — 52

Bricolage und intramundane Eschatologie

Uwe Spörl

Gottlose Mystik und Georges poetische Religion — 80

Zwei Arten ästhetischer Religiosität in und mit der Literatur um 1900

Jan Stottmeister

„Richtlinien“ gegen Rudolf Steiner — 98

Theosophie-Kritik als Wissenschaftskritik im George-Kreis um 1910

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

Freeing the Ancient Wisdom from Catholic Crusts — 113

Stefan George and Incognito Paganism

Justus H. Ulbricht

Apollo lehnt geheim an Baldur. Oder: Der Dichter ruft die Götter auf — 126

Neopagane Kontexte von „Weihe[n]stefans“ Religiosität

Uwe Puschner

Rasse und Religion — 145

Die Ideologie arteigener Religionsentwürfe

Christoph Auffarth

Das ‚Dritte Reich‘ – das ‚Geheime Deutschland‘ — 157

Stefan George im Kontext. Thesen

Richard Faber

Der Ästhetizist Algabal, der politisch-religiöse Dichter Stefan George und das Problem seines Präfaschismus — 175

Almut-Barbara Renger

Die Konjunktur des Meisters — 197

Stefan George im Spiegel religions- und wissenssoziologischer Studien seiner Zeit

Volkhard Krech

Wo „Rausch und Helle“ eins werden — 222

Stefan Georges Kunstreligion im Lichte von Georg Simmels Religionstheorie

Bertram Schefold

Götter sehen? – Einführung zu Martin Mosebachs Vortrag — 234

Martin Mosebach

Stefan Georges Religion — 241

Anschriften der Beiträger — 254

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

Freeing the Ancient Wisdom from Catholic Crusts

Stefan George and Incognito Paganism

In a conversation with Edith Landmann, Stefan George made a statement that is utterly revealing about his religious affinities: “Weiss der Teufel, woher das kommt, dass ich vom Christentum ausser in seiner heidnischen Form so gar nichts verstehe. Ich bin doch, möcht me spreche [sic], aus einer guten alten katholischen Familie”.¹ The true significance of this utterance will, I hope, have become clear by the end of this article. On the following pages I will be asking myself, firstly, in what sense and to what extent George and his circle may be seen as representing a somehow ‘religious’ phenomenon; and, secondly, how this religious dimension could best be described and interpreted. I will argue that ‘paganism’ (‘Heidentum’) is indeed a key term in that respect, but that in George’s case we are dealing with a *philosophical* rather than a cultic form of paganism: one that has existed in Western culture mostly as an idealized religion of the imagination, a dreamed religion,² particularly since the period of the Renaissance.

To understand the nature of George’s paganism, first of all it must be clearly distinguished from the explicit neo-pagan agendas of the ‘Cosmic Circle’ of Munich linked to the names of Ludwig Klages and Alfred Schuler. We have a fascinating report, by Klages, of how George reacted to Schuler during a memorable dinner on 29 April 1897.³ The passage is well known, but I will quote it here at some length:

[...] im besten seiner nicht geräumigen Zimmer eine längliche Tafel, imgrunde bescheiden, für seine Verhältnisse üppig mit Speisen bedeckt; Licht von Kerzen und einem römischen Dreidochter; vor diesem auf metallenen Sockel eine Nachbildung des “Adoranten”, dahinter Lorbeer und anderes Grün; um jeden Teller ein Kranz leuchtender Blüten; Weihrauchduft. – Nach der Mahlzeit beginnt [Schuler] mit dem Vorlesen seiner stärksten Fragmente, mächtig schon einsetzend und zu immer mächtigerem Pathos fortgerissen. Es bildet sich, so möchte man meinen, ein magisches Feld [...] George gerät in wachsende, schließlich

¹ Edith Landmann: Gespräche mit Stefan George, Düsseldorf – München 1963, p. 47. Cf. Georg Dörr: Muttermythos und Herrschaftsmythos. Zur Dialektik der Aufklärung um die Jahrhundertwende bei den Kosmikern, Stefan George und in der Frankfurter Schule, Würzburg 2007, p. 284.

² On paganism as a religion of the imagination, cf. Joscelyn Godwin: The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance, London 2002.

³ Not 1899, as often stated in the literature: See Dörr, Muttermythos (note 1), pp. 188f.

kaum noch beherrschte Erregung. Er hat sich hinter seinen Stuhl gestellt; fahler denn fahl scheint er im Begriff, die Fassung zu verlieren. Die seelenatmosphärische Spannung wird unerträglich. Keiner vernimmt noch genau, was Schuler kündigt; doch aus dem Dröhnen seiner Stimme wächst ein Vulkan, der glühende Lava schleudert [...]

Auf der nächtlichen Straße stehe ich plötzlich mit George allein. Da fühle ich mich am Arm ergriffen: “Das ist Wahnsinn! Ich ertrage es nicht! Was haben Sie getan, mich dorthin zu locken! Das ist Wahnsinn! Führen Sie mich fort; führen Sie mich in ein Wirtshaus, wo biedere Bürger, wo ganz gewöhnliche Menschen Zigarren rauchen und Bier trinken! Ich ertrage es nicht!”⁴

This is not a picture one would usually associate with Stefan George. Apparently he felt so threatened by the ‘spell’ that Schuler was trying to cast on him that this most elitist of all poets was desperate to escape from the heavy occult atmosphere of Schuler’s pagan cult and was suddenly yearning for the ‘normality’ of beer-drinking ‘Bürger’ in a common pub! Schuler’s brand of romanticized ancient Roman and chthonic matriarchal paganism was definitely not to his taste, and how much it disturbed him can be inferred from his poem ‘A. S.’ (Alfred Schuler) in ‘Das Jahr der Seele’:

Dass wir der sinne kaum mehr mächtig · wie vergiftet
Nach schlimmem prunkmahl taglang uns nicht fassten ·
Stets um die stim noch rosen brennen fühlten ...⁵

If Stefan George and his circle represented some kind of ‘pagan’ religion, then it was clearly very different from that of Schuler and Klages. As has been well formulated by Thomas Karlauf in his impressive biography of George, the famous clash with the ‘Cosmic Circle’ in the Winter of 1903/1904 was ultimately based, at least from George’s perspective, on two opposed ways of understanding the nature of art: “Stand die Kunst auf seiten des Geistes [...] oder gehorchte sie den Kräften der Seele und diente dem Rausch?”⁶ The reference is, of course, not only to Nietzsche’s opposition of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, but more specifically to Ludwig Klages’ metaphysics, which highlighted *die Seele* as the dark but positive principle opposed to the negative, alien and hostile principle of *der Geist*. It is clear that in the wake of his conflict with the ‘Kosmiker’, George definitely came out in favour of *der Geist* and henceforth saw *die Seele* as the

⁴ Ludwig Klages: Einführung des Herausgebers. In: Alfred Schuler: Fragmente und Vorträge. Aus dem Nachlass. Mit Einführung von Ludwig Klages. Leipzig 1940, pp. 1–119, esp. p. 72f.

⁵ Stefan George: Sämtliche Werke in 18 Bänden. Ed. by Stefan George Stiftung. Arranged by Georg Peter Landmann and Ute Oelmann, Stuttgart 1982ff. Vol. V, p. 82. Abbreviated as follows: SW, volume, page number.

⁶ Thomas Karlauf: Stefan George. Die Entdeckung des Charisma, München 2007, pp. 331–332.

enemy. Notably in the second cycle of ‘Der siebente Ring’ (‘Gestalten’), a few years after the ‘Schwabinger Krach’, we witness a dramatic battle between darkness and light. Right in the first poem, ‘Der Kampf’, a representative of the chthonic enemy (“Trunken von sonne und blut” – evident references to Schuler’s cult of ancient Rome, with ‘Sol Invictus’, the Mithraic ‘Taurobolium’, and so on) comes rushing from his sinister subterranean abode and out into the open air, where he meets the “schönlockige Gott”: no one else, of course, than the “divine boy” Maximin. The protagonist tries to attack him, but does not stand a chance, for he is immediately struck to the ground by a beam of light that flashes from the eyes of the God:

Weh! sie kämpfen mit licht.
Den er fasset der fällt.
Stampfend sezt er den fuss
Auf meine keuchende brust.
Lächelnd singt er sein lied ...
Trunken von sonne und blut
Sink ich in ruhmlosen tod.⁷

And that is that. The message should be clear: the ‘Kosmiker’ do not stand a chance against the Lord of Light. In further poems of the same cycle, George highlights a range of further elements that are significant for their suggestions of a spiritual elite in mortal combat with the forces of evil. For example, the poem ‘Der Widerchrist’ paints a horror-like picture of how common people are seduced by diabolic false Messiah, but discover the deception only when it is far too late: “Dann hängt ihr die zunge am trocknenden Trog/Irrt ratlos wie vieh durch den brennenden hof .../Und schrecklich erschallt die Posaune.”⁸ The poem ‘Templer’ is based on the concept of a spiritual warrior elite, with explicit references to the Rosicrucian brotherhood: “Wir Rose: innre jugendliche brunst/ Wir Kreuz: der stolz ertragen leiden kunst.”⁹ And in ‘Die Hüter des Vorhofs’, we read about the education of the members of the spiritual elite, who are given to remember that they are in truth the offspring of gods. And then eventually, of course, we get to the Maximin-cycle of ‘Der Siebente Ring’, where the God himself makes his full appearance. Since the cult of Maximin is analyzed in some detail elsewhere in this volume, I will not go into it further at this point, but will assume that the reader is familiar with George’s remarkable deification

⁷ SW VI/VII (note 5), p. 37.

⁸ *Ib.*, p. 57.

⁹ *Ib.*, p. 52.

of the early-deceased Maximilian Kronberger, who was elevated to a divine status: “Dem bist du kind · dem freund/Ich seh in dir den Gott/Den schauernd ich erkannt/Dem meine andacht gilt.”¹⁰

Now how can we contextualize and interpret George’s poetic cult, after the break with the ‘Kosmiker’, from the perspective of the study of religion? To answer that question, I would like to highlight a number of key elements:

1. From his early years on, George was obsessed with the project of *creating a world of his own*, a world of superior beauty and truth, separate from the vulgar outside world of bourgeois society – a world, most of all, in which he himself could play the role of uncontested, autocratic leader. In the early days, those who participated in this self-created world even appear to have communicated by means of a secret language – a language entirely in George’s power because he had invented it himself:

In einem sange den keiner erfasste
Waren wir heischer und herrscher vom All.

Süss und befeuernd wie Attikas choros
Über die hügel und inseln klang:
CO BESOSO PASOJE PTOROS
CO ES ON HAMA PASOJE BOAÑ.¹¹

2. This project of creating his own world eventually took the form of what is known in traditional terms as an *‘inner church’ of the spirit*. George referred to it as his ‘Staat’, and it became known under other names such as ‘das Neue Reich’ and ‘das Geheime Deutschland’ as well. Historically, the notion of an inner church is rooted in theosophical traditions since the 18th century: it seems to have emerged in the work of Ivan Lopukhin and Karl von Eckartshausen against the background of earlier spiritualist and pietist movements, and was later taken up by occultists such as Arthur Edward Waite.¹² I do not think that Stefan George was necessarily aware of these precedents or parallels, or interested in them, but what he had in mind was in fact a kind of inner church or community of the spirit. As formulated much later by Hubertus Prinz zu Löwenstein, after George’s death and the dissemination of his circle:

¹⁰ *Ib.*, p. 90.

¹¹ *Ib.*, p. 117.

¹² Author: Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture, Cambridge 2012, p. 250 with note 367.

Nur im geistigen Raume [...] ist das Reich heute vorhanden, und nur in der Seele und in der Handlung einiger weniger hat es sich bislang zu verkörpern vermocht. Diese aber tragen sein Zeichen so sichtbar auf ihrer Stirne, dass sie in einer Einöde leben dürften und doch würden sie von den Brüdern, die zu ihnen angehören, sofort erkannt werden.¹³

Apart from the theosophical Inner Church, such a notion also clearly resonates with the concept of a secret brotherhood modeled on the 17th-century Rosicrucians, who were believed to live their lives incognito but who would recognize one another by means of secret signs known only to themselves.

3. This brings me to a third point, that of a *circle of initiates*. In his famous article ‘The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies’, George’s long-standing admirer Georg Simmel highlighted the difference between two types of ‘secret society’. In the case of a ‘Hidden Church’ or secret association of the Rosicrucian type, to which I just referred, *its very existence* is supposed to be a secret known only to the initiates. But in addition to this, Stefan George’s circle also took the form, in Simmel’s formulation, of a visible social formation that “is unequivocally known, [while] the membership, or the purpose, or the special conditions of the combination are secret”.¹⁴ Entrance into a social formation of this kind requires a process of *initiation*, and obviously George’s work is full of references to such an ‘Aufnahme in den Orden’ (the title of a piece written as early as 1901), an ‘Einführung der Novizen in die Mysterien’, and so on. Of course, acceptance or non-acceptance depended entirely on the will of ‘der Meister’ himself.
4. Once accepted into George’s ‘Kreis’, its participants were confronted with implicit or explicit, subtle and more overt forms of *ritualization* that resulted in an atmosphere of sacrality with George himself as the charismatic and, most of all, *numinous* center. The important point here is the predominance of *form* over content. When Albert Verwey objected to the manner in which George exalted his personal *genius* into a general object of worship or veneration, George seems to have responded with great irritation: Maximin, he retorted, could as well have been “a black stone or a green cone”.¹⁵ Thomas Karlauf concludes, correctly in my view, that “Für ihn zähle nicht das Was, sondern das Wie, nicht der Inhalt des Glaubens, sondern die Hingabe der

13 Hubertus Prinz zu Löwenstein: Nach Hitlers Fall. Deutschlands kommendes Reich – Vorletzter Entwurf (Manuscript in Deutsches Exilarchiv, Frankfurt a. M.), p. 50, here quoted according to Ulrich Raulff: Kreis ohne Meister. Stefan Georges Nachleben, München 2009, p. 176.

14 Georg Simmel: The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies. In: The American Journal of Sociology 11/4, 1906, p. 441–498, here p. 470–471.

15 Albert Verwey en Stefan George. De documenten van hun vriendschap. Ed. by Mea Nijland-Verwey, Amsterdam 1965, p. 267.

Gläubigen.”¹⁶ “Hingabe”, or complete submission, of course, to George himself; and I hardly need to emphasize the extremes of egotism and narcissism typical of the ‘Meister’s’ behavior, or the amazing degree to which his followers were willing to submit themselves to George and allowed him to make decisions even about their intimate personal lives.

5. Finally, of course, George’s ‘Kreis’ was a ‘Männerbund’ that essentially excluded women; and the real secret at its very core was a homo-erotic spirituality. In this regard, the fact that George seems to have been sexually intimate with quite a number of his followers over the years is of not much more than anecdotal importance. Much more significant is the fact that his ‘Kreis’ was grounded in a *psychological* eroticism in which his followers were expected to benefit from the presence of the ‘Meister’ and his superior knowledge and wisdom, while the ‘Meister’ in turn benefited from their youth and superior beauty. This is, of course, the essence of what is known as ‘Socratic Love’ in the Platonic tradition. The great Renaissance Platonist Marsilio Ficino, to whom I will return, has captured it in a formulation that can be applied without any trouble to George and his pupils:

A man enjoys the beauty of a beloved youth with his eyes. The youth enjoys the beauty of the man with his Intellect. ... Truly this is a wonderful exchange. Virtuous, useful, and pleasant to both. The virtue certainly is equal to both. For it is equally virtuous to learn and to teach. The pleasure is greater in the older man, who is pleased in both sight and intellect. But in the younger man the usefulness is greater.¹⁷

So let me summarize these five points, which I consider central to the Stefan George cult: (1) the imaginative creation of an autonomous world of spiritual beauty and truth; (2) the notion of an invisible inner church of the spirit; (3) the emergence of a circle of initiates; (4) the centrality of ritual over doctrine, form over content; and (5) the cultivation of a homo-erotic spirituality.

Can we find parallels in Western culture for this phenomenon? To answer that question, many George specialists have pointed towards Plato and his Academy, and I will be doing the same here. However, in order to understand its relevance to George, I believe it is important to contextualize Platonism in a specific way: one that highlights the traditional status of Platonism as paganism rather than its well-known status as a model of rational philosophy through Socratic dialogue. To explain the importance of this point to understanding and

¹⁶ Karlauf, Stefan George (note 6), p. 359.

¹⁷ Marsilio Ficino: De amore II.9. Translation according to Marsilio Ficino. Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love. Ed. and transl. by Sears Jayne, Woodstock 1985, p. 58.

contextualizing Stefan George's circle, I must now make a short excursus about *Platonism as paganism*.¹⁸

When the history of philosophy institutionalized itself as an academic discipline in the wake of the Enlightenment, it did so by dismissing large parts of the history of Western thought as false 'pseudo-philosophy'. With respect to the history of Platonism, this implied two moves that are intimately related but must be distinguished for analytical purposes. Firstly, it was imperative for post-Enlightenment academics to distinguish very clearly between Plato's own philosophy and the interpretations of later generations, the so-called 'Middle Platonists' and the 'Neo-Platonists'. Roughly before Schleiermacher, scholars tended to read Plato through the lenses of such middle- and neoplatonic concepts, resulting in all kinds of anachronistic misinterpretations.¹⁹ Secondly, having cleaned Plato from such later middle- and neoplatonic accretions, historians of philosophy presented his dialogues as an essentially rational project, without any 'mystical' or 'irrational' elements. Now, this first move was quite correct and legitimate, and has become an indispensable foundation for modern research. The second move, however, was not so convincing: even apart from Plato's famous 'seventh letter', the authorship of which has long been contested, the famous treatises on love – the 'Phaedrus' and the 'Symposium' – can hardly be seen as rational discussions based on Socratic dialogue. On the contrary, they cast Socrates in the role of an inebriated and divinely inspired seer, who does not engage in discussion very much, but mostly delivers monologues on eros in a state of *mania* and whose most impressive and memorable statements are made in mythical and symbolical rather than discursive language. In both dialogues, and particularly in the 'Phaedrus', Plato is presented not just as a philosopher, but as a wisdom teacher: he discourses about the Good, the Beautiful, and the True from a position *ex cathedra*, presumably because he has had first-hand experience of these ultimate realities. This religious dimension of Platonism has tended to be marginalized roughly since Schleiermacher; and moreover, the many religious or spiritual interpretations of Plato by middle- and neoplatonic authors have been equally marginalized, rationalized, or treated as sources of embarrassment by modern historians of philosophy. This is unfortunate, for even if a middle- or neoplatonic philosopher misinterprets Plato or adds new ideas of his own, these new perspectives still should be studied and taken ser-

¹⁸ For a much longer discussion I must refer to author, *Esotericism and the Academy* (note 12), chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁹ E. N. Tigerstedt: *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato. An Outline and Some Observations*. In: *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 52, 1974, pp. 1–108.

iously in their own right. The truth is that, as a historical phenomenon, Platonism has always had a strong religious dimension next to its obvious philosophical content.

This fact was perfectly understood by the early so-called ‘Apologetic Fathers’ of the church (notably Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, or Eusebius of Caesarea). They adhered to a perspective that has been referred to as ‘Platonic Orientalism’,²⁰ which means that not only did they believe that Plato had been a teacher of religious wisdom but, furthermore, that he had derived that wisdom from the ancient ‘oriental’ peoples and their divinely inspired teachers. The most important names in that regard were Hermes Trismegistus among the Egyptians, Zoroaster among the Persians, and Moses among the Hebrews. By claiming that Christianity had its ultimate origin in Mosaic wisdom, the ‘Apologetic Fathers’ could defend themselves against pagan philosophers who argued that the gospel was a new religion of rebellious upstarts without the historical depth and authority conferred by ancient tradition.²¹ The argument was that true, divinely inspired wisdom could be found not only in the Old and New Testament, but potentially in the writings of the ‘pagan philosophers’ as well, including the Hermetic and Platonic textual corpora.

Now this Christian-apologetic perspective, with its inclusivist attitude towards pagan wisdom traditions, experienced a sensational revival in the 15th century, when all the primary sources relevant to Platonic Orientalism (Plato’s complete dialogues, the ‘Corpus Hermeticum’ attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, but also the ‘Chaldaean Oracles’, incorrectly attributed to Zoroaster by Gemistos Plethon and many later authors) were brought from Byzantium to Italy in order to preserve them from the advancing Ottoman armies. The central figure in this Platonic Orientalist revival was the Florentine thinker Marsilio Ficino, who translated almost all of these sources into Latin; and with this, as will be seen, we have reached the strongest historical precedent for the ‘George-Kreis’ as a form of ‘neo-pagan’ religion.

Of course, it was not in Ficino’s interest to highlight the ‘pagan’ nature of Platonism. His argument was that Plato and a whole range of other gentile philosophers had been inspired by God himself, either directly through the divine *Logos*, or indirectly through chains of transmission originating in a primal divine

20 This usage of the term is independent of the famous work of Edward Said [Orientalism, 1978]. The concept of ‘Platonic Orientalism’ was introduced by John Walbridge: *The Wisdom of the Mystic East. Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism*, Albany 2001; cf. author, *Esotericism and the Academy* (note 12), pp. 12–17 and *passim*.

21 For the details, see author, *Esotericism and the Academy* (note 12), pp. 17–28.

revelation to Moses, Zoroaster, or Hermes. Since the true God was by definition the God of the Christians, this meant that essentially ‘Christian’ doctrines had been revealed already to the pagans. I see no reason to doubt the sincerity of Ficino’s profession of Christian faith, but if one probes a bit beneath the surface of his ‘Platonic Theology’,²² it is clear that he was reading the nature of Christian theology entirely through Platonic (and Plotinian) lenses, and even had no problem with claiming that the entire tradition of true wisdom derived not from Moses – as had been held by the Christian apologists – but from a seer as unambiguously ‘pagan’ as Zoroaster, the leader of the Persian fire priests and the supposed inventor of magic.²³

Marsilio Ficino worked in Florence under the patronage of Cosimo de’ Medici, and eventually surrounded himself by a circle of devoted Christian Platonists. Although Ficino’s so-called ‘Platonic Academy of Florence’ is a predominantly fictional phenomenon,²⁴ there is no doubt that as Ficino got older, he became surrounded by a retinue of younger humanists who looked up to him as the uncontested authority in all matters Platonic. This Florentine circle around Ficino provides us with an extremely interesting parallel and antecedent for the ‘George-Kreis’.

Of crucial importance in that regard is the role of poetry in Ficino’s worldview. He was taking his cue from Plato’s ‘Phaedrus’, which (as already noted above) contains a famous discussion of four forms of *mania*: four distinct types of exalted or ecstatic consciousness, conventionally referred to as ‘frenzies’ or ‘madnesses’. In his crucial treatise ‘De amore’, modeled after Plato’s ‘Symposium’ and finished in July 1469, Ficino described a kind of “therapy of the soul”²⁵ that begins with the first *mania*: Plato’s poetic frenzy, inseparable in Ficino’s case of the frenzy induced by harmonious music. By means of poetry and music, the higher part of the soul is wakened from its torpor, and its lower part is moved from a state of discord and dissonance towards a state of concord and harmony. This first step – the awakening of the soul by means of poetry – is the essential and indispensable foundation for the rest of the process. Once awa-

²² The term comes from Ficino himself: Marsilio Ficino: Platonic Theology. Ed. and transl. by Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins, 6 vols., Cambridge/Mass. – London 2001–2006.

²³ On this important point, see author, Esotericism and the Academy (note 12), pp. 41–53.

²⁴ James Hankins: Cosimo de’ Medici and the ‘Platonic Academy’. In: Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 53, 1990, pp. 144–162; id.: The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence. In: Renaissance Quarterly 44/3, 1991, pp. 429–475.

²⁵ Author: The Platonic Frenzies in Marsilio Ficino. In: Jitse Dijkstra/Justin Kroesen/Yme Kuiper (eds.): Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity. Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer, Leiden – Boston 2010, pp. 553–567, here p. 559–563.

kened, the soul must focus all its energies into one and the same direction by means of sacred ritual practices (associated with the second, ‘teletic’ frenzy); once properly directed, the soul must regain its essential unity by means of the third, ‘prophetic’ frenzy, which allows it to see future events; and finally, the unified soul must re-unite with its eternal, immortal, divine archetype. This happens through the fourth and highest of the frenzies, that of love (*eros*), defined as the soul’s ‘desire for beauty’: a desire that is first evoked by looking at beautiful bodies, but that will ultimately be satisfied only by the perfect beauty of the immortal ideas in the divine mind itself.

This Ficinian model of ‘soul therapy’, grounded in a creative re-interpretation of Plato’s treatises on love, appears to be a remarkably close model for what George was trying to accomplish in his own circle. *Poetry* was, of course, the crucial and indispensable means of initiation into the circle, but at its inner core there was the mystery of *love* between the ‘Meister’ and his disciples, and I will return to this below. If poetry stands for the initiation into George’s cult, and the mysteries of *eros* dominate its final culmination, the two other frenzies are clearly central to it as well: in the form of *ritual* acts that produced an atmosphere of sacrality and spiritual exaltation, and, finally, the attainment of inspired *seership* as exemplified most prominently by ‘der Meister’ himself. In short, George seems to have re-created or re-invented a basic model of Platonic spirituality grounded in the ‘Phaedrus’ and exemplified by Ficino’s circle in 15th-century Florence.

These parallels become even more compelling when we realize that Ficino’s circle, too, was an all-male ‘inner church’ of the spirit grounded explicitly in the homo-erotic model of Socratic love. In a remarkable testimony to intellectual prudishness and implicit ‘idealization’, generations of Ficino scholars have either overlooked or turned a blind eye to the fact that the great Florentine philosopher was obviously inclined towards male-male love, that his famous treatise ‘De Amore’ made no attempt to ‘heterosexualize’ Plato (as customary at the time) but explicitly extolled the virtues of ‘Socratic Love’ between men, and finally, that it was written in a deliberate attempt on Ficino’s part to ‘process’ his own overwhelming infatuation with one of the young humanists in his retinue, Giovanni Cavalcanti.²⁶ Unlike George in his relation to his pupils, Marsilio Ficino felt obliged to suppress and sublimate his strong sexual attraction to

²⁶ For the full story, see author: *Under the Mantle of Love. The Mystical Eroticism of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno*. In: Author/Jeffrey J. Kripal (eds.): *Hidden Intercourse. Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, Boston – Köln 2008 – New York 2011, pp. 175–207, esp. p. 184–194.

Cavalcanti – as documented by several tormented passages in ‘De Amore’ – but otherwise the impact of Cavalcanti on Ficino seems almost identical to the impact that Maximilian Kronberger had on George. Consider these sentences from Ficino’s dedication of his work to what he calls “his unique friend” Cavalcanti:

[...] that this god Love possessed such power was concealed from me for thirty-four years. Then a hero, a man who was already divine, looked favorably upon me with his heavenly eyes, with a wonderful bending of his head towards me, he showed me the extent of love’s power.²⁷

Ficino is, of course, speaking about Cavalcanti here. And the divine rays that shoot from the eyes of the divine boy – they are not killing his enemies, as in George’s poem ‘Der Kampf’, but certainly put a powerful spell on the lover – are actually analyzed in detail in chapter VII of ‘De Amore’, in terms of early modern theories of the imagination.

If Ficino’s Platonic circle in Renaissance Florence was a close historical precedent for George’s circle, we are left with a question of a more theoretical nature: in what sense, or to what extent, can we refer to these two phenomena as instances of ‘pagan religion’? What makes this question difficult to answer is the fact that ‘paganism’ as a category of otherness counts among the most neglected topics in the study of Western religion. Scholars of religion have spent rivers of ink on theoretical concepts such as ‘magic’, ‘myth’, or ‘mysticism’; but underneath these theoretical referents, I would argue, the category of ‘paganism’ has always been lurking as the implicit, common, but usually unnamed and certainly under-theoretized ‘other’ of established Western identities.²⁸ In cases such as the explicit ‘Neuheidentum’ of the ‘Cosmic Circle’ in Munich, or (for that matter) phenomena such as the popular ‘neopaganism’ that emerged since the 1960s from Gerald Gardner’s new witchcraft or ‘Wicca’,²⁹ we are dealing with movements of rebellious opposition that embrace ‘pagan’ values in a deliberate rejection of mainstream, bourgeois Christian as well as Enlightenment values. But if we wish to understand the cultural relevance of ‘paganism’ on a deeper level, we must recognize that this familiar story of opposition and mutual rejec-

²⁷ Ficino: Dedication of ‘De amore’ to Giovanni Cavalcanti. Facsimile in Marsilio Ficino: Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon (transl. and ed. by Raymond Marcel), Paris 1956, p. 135. English translation: Author, *Under the Mantle of Love* (note 26), p. 187.

²⁸ Author, *Esotericism and the Academy* (note 12), pp. 369–371 and passim.

²⁹ Ronald Hutton: *The Triumph of the Moon. A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, Oxford 1999.

tion is only one side of the coin: in very important respects, paganism has been an *integral part* of Western culture since the first centuries of our era. Of course it is true that as an independent cultic practice, popularly associated with idolatry, it could hardly survive under Christian conditions. However, a variety of intellectual traditions that were officially ‘philosophical’ but implicitly religious were assimilated from pagan Hellenistic culture into Christian doctrine since the first centuries – mostly in the form of Platonism. It was only after the enormous revival of such pagan philosophies in the Renaissance – when all the relevant texts became available, first in their original languages and then in Latin, and were circulated on an unprecedented scale thanks to the invention of printing – that theological hardliners began to perceive Platonism as a threat (perhaps even *the* major threat) to Christian doctrine.³⁰

The results were far-reaching, as I have tried to show in my ‘Esotericism and the Academy’; but for our present purposes we need only look at the earliest stage of the Renaissance reception of paganism as Platonic philosophy. I would suggest that Ficino’s circle can be described as an original case of what might be called ‘incognito paganism’, as opposed to an explicit paganism that openly opposes its non-pagan opponent. Such explicit ‘oppositional paganism’ was still impossible in Ficino’s time, for obvious political reasons, but had become at least a theoretical option during the later 19th century. The Cosmic ‘Neuheidentum’ of Klages and Schuler is a clear example of such explicit oppositional paganism: it openly attacked the Christian and rationalist values of bourgeois culture and modern society, and set itself up as an alternative. But interestingly, George’s Platonic alternative still belongs to the incognito type exemplified so clearly by Ficino. Although George’s rejection of establishment culture and society was ultimately no less radical than that of Klages and Schuler, his spirituality resulted from a radicalization of those pagan tendencies that were already present *within* the mainstream.

This leads us back to the quotation at the opening of this chapter, from a conversation in which George told Edith Landmann that he did not understand anything about Christianity ‘except in its pagan form’. Accordingly, in these conversations, he spoke of the need for ‘liberating the ancient wisdom from Catholic (and dogmatic) crusts’: “Die antike Weisheit von katholischen (und dogmatischen) Krusten befreien”.³¹ Gundolf once remarked that only people

30 On the integration of ‘pagan’ philosophy in Christian culture starting with the Patristic apologists and the anti-Platonic reaction starting in the 15th and culminating in the 17th century, see author, *Esotericism and the Academy* (note 12), chapters 1 and 2.

31 Landmann, *Gespräche* (note 1), p. 144.

with a Catholic background could understand George – “Man muss aus katholischer Atmosphäre kommen; man muss katholisch gewesen sein”³² –, and we may now conclude that if there is any truth to that statement, it has to do with the ‘incognito paganism’ inherent in Roman Catholicism rather than with anything specifically Christian. It is, of course, a commonplace of Protestant polemics that Roman Catholicism is a pagan religion at heart; and since the end of the 16th century, a whole tradition of anti-Catholic criticism had been arguing that Platonism was the essential core of this endemic paganism. Plato was the name of the pagan virus that had infected the healthy body of Christianity during the first centuries, and that had slowly but surely overtaken it during the course of the Middle Ages, finally turning the church of Christ into the church of Antichrist.³³

With only slight exaggeration, then, George’s circle may be seen as a clear case of ‘Roman Catholicism minus Christianity’. Having renounced almost all of the doctrinal content and theological baggage of Christianity, along with much of its mythology (with some exceptions, notably the mytheme of salvation by a ‘divine child’), George was left with a potent residue of Platonic paganism. This made it possible for him to create his own ‘inner church’, with himself in the role of *Pontifex Maximus*. Poetic frenzy, ritual sacrality, and semi-divine seership, all in the service of a religion of homo-erotic love defined as desire for ultimate beauty: just like Marsilio Ficino’s Platonic Christianity, this is what Stefan George’s religion was all about.

³² Hermann Glockner: Heidelberg Bilderbuch, Bonn 1969, p. 29; here quoted according to Karlauf, Stefan George (note 6), p. 308.

³³ Author, Esotericism and the Academy (note 12), chapter 2. See for example the case of Giovanni Battista Crispo (pp. 90–93) or Mark Pattison’s apt characterization of Protestant perspectives of church history (p. 97).